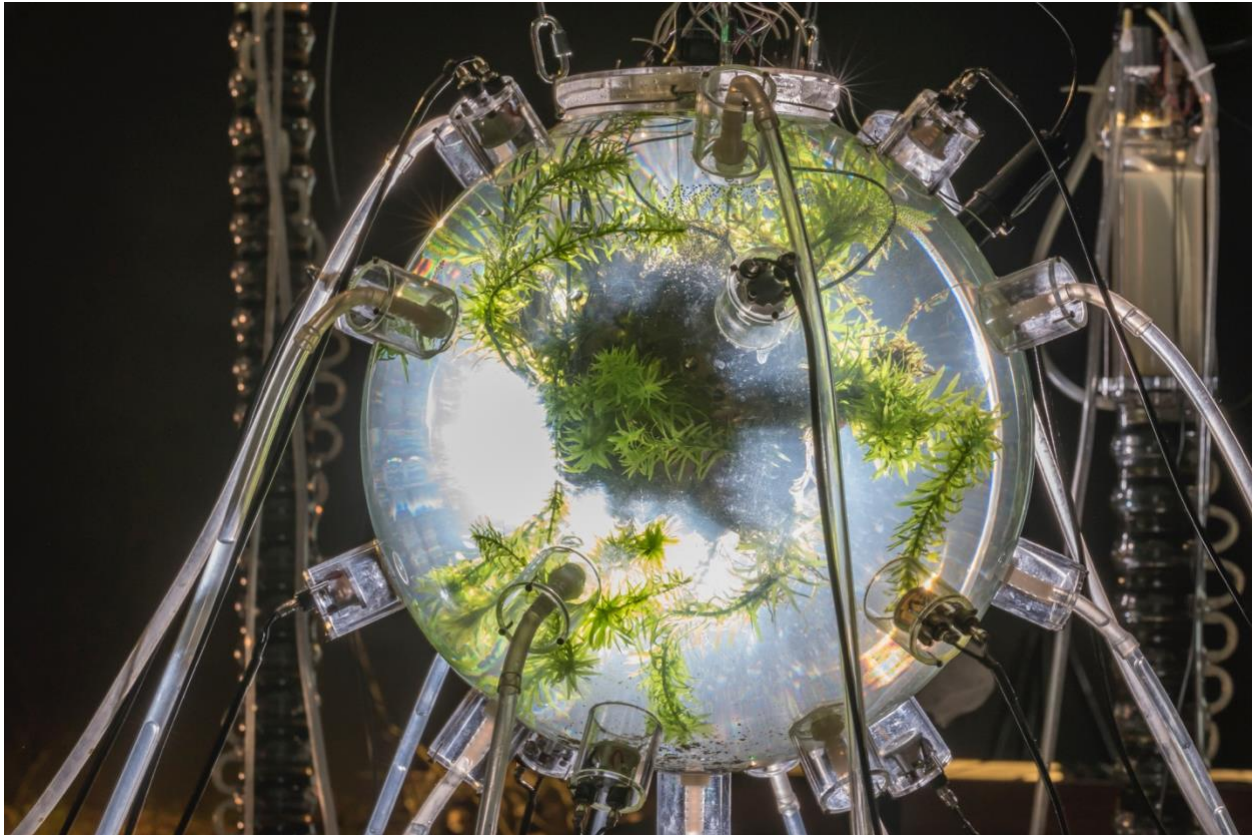


Symbionts: Contemporary Artists and the Biosphere
October 21, 2022–February 26, 2023



Gilberto Esparza, *Plantas autofotosintéticas [Autophotosynthetic Plants]*, 2013–14 (detail). Polycarbonate, silicon, stainless steel, graphite, electronic circuits, local wastewater, natural pond water with microalgae and microorganisms, plants, shrimp, fish, sound, 157 × 157 in. (400 × 400 cm) overall. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Axel Heise

The MIT List Visual Arts Center announces *Symbionts: Contemporary Artists and the Biosphere*, a major group exhibition representing a new generation of practitioners within bioart.

Bringing together fourteen international artists, the exhibition invites us to reexamine our human relationships to the planet's biosphere through the lens of symbiosis, or "with-living."

Symbionts are organisms of different species that are found together and that thrive through their interdependent relations. They include mutualists such as the bee and the apple blossom as well as microbial organisms that circulate in the atmosphere, oceans, and soil to make the oxygen we breathe.

The artists in *Symbionts*—whose works engage living entities such as fungi and bacteria—represent a new generation of practitioners within bioart. Whereas the code-driven works of bioart in the 2000s often centered the artist's authorial manipulation of genetic sequences, the

artists in *Symbionts* are not interested in being masters of code. Instead, they explore what it means to be interdependent or collaborative by not only “using” living materials, but welcoming them as teachers, partners in creation, and fellow form-makers, even allowing them to transform their works over the course of the exhibition.

Kiyan Williams, for example, enlists fungus to compost a human effigy formed by mycelium, soil, and crude oil, while Nour Mobarak engages fungus to digest a monumental “painting” made from paper, hair, and semen that forms a “speculative spread-sheet” of the artist’s potential impregnators. Other works look toward organisms found in human secretions: Candice Lin’s work uses distilled urine excreted by exhibition staff to feed an edible fungus believed to aid memory, while Jenna Sutela sculpts images of flowers in “gut flora” reliefs made from a mix of clay and mammalian dung that are glazed with breastmilk.

At times, our sensory system is engaged: in Pamela Rosenkranz’s work, a pooled deposit of sand and cologne containing synthetic pheromones alludes to *toxoplasmosis*, a neuro-active parasite that triggers attraction, reminding us of how invisible symbionts can shape desire and kinship. Some collaborations with living things are as slow and subtle as germinating seeds: Špela Petrič’s contribution documents a durational performance in which the artist stands over a bed of sprouting cress for 36 hours (her shadow affecting its growth pattern), in an attempt to enter the patient rhythms of photosynthesis and explore “vegetal otherness.”

Other artists deconstruct the Enlightenment-era legacy of the vitrine and related practice of isolating non-human lifeforms, insisting instead on cohabitation and interdependence. In a work by Pierre Huyghe, common cellar spiders are introduced to the supposedly hermetic and sterile gallery space; in pieces by Anicka Yi, aquaria become wall works, hosting “contaminants” such as algae; and in the delicate mazes of Jenna Sutela, a vitrine’s glass is etched with shallow tracks for form-making collaboration with a “many-headed” slime mold. Elsewhere, vitrines are embedded in the gallery wall to foreground the chromatic staining of human cancer cells, and their unwitting extraction from Henrietta Lacks, whom Crystal Z Campbell commemorates in their work. The *in-vitro* imaginary is also detoured, as test tubes extend into closed systems of exchange, hosting synthetic human hormones and bio-pigments in the sculpture of Jes Fan. Even tropes of the mad scientist are cleverly reversed: in the room-sized installation of Gilberto Esparza, aquatic plants are housed in a cyborgian generator, or autophotosynthetic machine, which allows energy, light, and sound to be produced from sewage water.

Engaging and critiquing bio-remediation as an environmental, aesthetic, and political process, the artists of *Symbionts* underscore how we play at being “administrators” of plant-animal systems, but we are *in* them. Claire Pentecost’s pivotal installation imagines a post-capitalist currency based on the value generated by soil-makers, while Alan Michelson illustrates how problems of domestication also migrate up the food chain to the endangered apex predator, *Canis rufus*: while rats take over the suburbs, the red wolf is confined to a sanctuary and denied its role in keeping ecosystems healthy. In a newly commissioned video installation, Miriam Simun shows us that developing robotic bees to one day serve as pollinators in the wake of bee colony collapse does not absolve us of the crimes forcing the Sixth Extinction.

With experimental practices that blur the boundaries between artist, medium, and collaborator, while also underscoring the intersections of biological, social, and economic systems, this new generation of bioartists unveils the critical interactions that give shape to our world and the interspecies entanglements that evolve it. By attending to art that pulses with these rhythms, we can learn to replace competition with collaboration and, critically, halt our anthropocentric drive toward species extinction by understanding ourselves as part of an interlinked planetary ecosystem.

Participating artists: Crystal Z Campbell (b. 1980, United States); Gilberto Esparza (b. 1975, Mexico); Jes Fan (b. 1990, Canada); Pierre Huyghe (b. 1962, France); Candice Lin (b. 1979, United States); Alan Michelson (b. 1953, United States); Nour Mobarak (b. 1985, Egypt); Claire Pentecost (b. 1956, United States); Špela Petrič (b. 1980, Slovenia); Miriam Simun (b. 1984, United States); Pamela Rosenkranz (b. 1979, Switzerland); Jenna Sutela (b. 1983, Finland); Kiyon Williams (b. 1991, United States); Anicka Yi (b. 1971, South Korea).

Symbionts: Contemporary Artists and the Biosphere is curated by Caroline A. Jones, Natalie Bell, and Selby Nimrod, with research assistance by Krista Alba.

PUBLICATION

Symbionts: Contemporary Artists and the Biosphere is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue-reader designed by Omnivore (Julie Cho, Alice Chung, and Karen Hsu) and published by MIT Press. Newly commissioned essays by Caroline A. Jones, Sophia Roosth, Bruce Clarke and Scott Gilbert, Leah Aronowsky, and Anna Tsing are complemented by excerpts of previously published texts by Evelyn Fox Keller, Lynn Margulis, and Robin Wall Kimmerer. Additional texts on each artist, authored by the exhibition curators, round out the publication, alongside an edited roundtable conversation on the themes of symbiosis, reciprocity, and Indigenous epistemologies, and a robust glossary of terms. The book is printed on innovative eco papers by Gmund and Favini (with separate sections comprised of algae, citrus or coffee "mash," and upcycled leather paper). It will be released MIT Press in October 2022 and is [available for preorder now](#).

SUPPORT

Symbionts: Contemporary Artists and the Biosphere is made possible with the support of Fotene & Tom Coté, Audrey & James Foster, Idee German Schoenheimer, Joyce Linde, Cynthia & John Reed, and Sara-Ann & Robert Sanders. The exhibition and publication are also supported by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the Carl and Marilyn Thoma Foundation, the Richard Lounsbery Foundation, Frame Contemporary Art Finland, and the MIT Center for Art, Science, and Technology. The publication is also made possible through the support of the Jane Farver Memorial Fund at MIT List Visual Arts Center.

General operating support for the List Visual Arts Center is provided by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT); the Council for the Arts at MIT; Philip S. Khoury, Associate Provost at MIT; the MIT School of Architecture and Planning; the Mass Cultural Council; and many generous individual donors. In-kind media sponsorship provided by 90.9 WBUR. The Advisory Committee Members of the List Visual Arts Center are gratefully acknowledged.