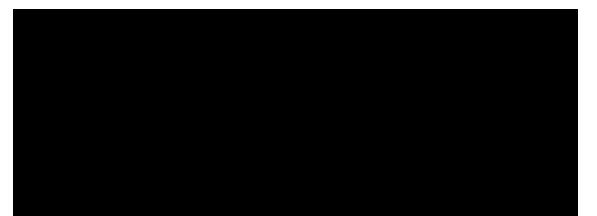
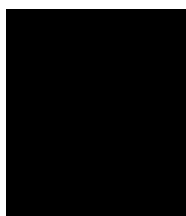
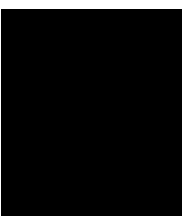




Sympoiesis

By Darian Razdar

YYZ Artists' Outlet



How to make art on a damaged planet? How to make art that attends to the experience of living and dying during the sixth mass extinction, one primarily caused by our species? How does an artist create in such a context – neither before nor after the planet’s end, but from right inside its never-ending dance with entropy?

Such are the questions underlying Eunice Luk’s exhibition *Sympoiesis*. The exhibition at YYZ Artists’ Outlet, a gallery known to give artists free reign over their shows, Luk uses this exhibition to consider the relationships between humans, insects and plants. By populating the gallery space with insect-like critters made out of wire, silk, dried plant material, and wood-fired ceramics, Luk invites visitors into a hybrid fantasy world where everything is more than meets the eye.

As an artist long fascinated by environmental themes and processes—especially the botanical—Luk is no stranger to ideas of hybrid, multi-species relations. The exhibition presents the artist’s approach to making art on a damaged planet by way of *making with* more-than-human biotic and abiotic bodies as collaborators in the creative process.

Making with, or *sympoiesis*, is a concept elaborated by Donna Haraway in her 2016 book *Living with the Trouble*. In her work overall, Haraway embraces Darwinism as a primordial way of telling the story of life and death on Earth. While embracing Darwinism and the subsequent Modern Synthesis between biology and genetics, Haraway draws from what she calls the “Extended Synthesis” to respond to questions of artistic practice on a damaged planet. The Extended Synthesis, as she puts it, is a transdisciplinary biology that employs cyborg technologies to fold together “human and non-human ecologies, evolutions, development, history, affects, performances, technologies, and more”.

A leading figure in extending evolutionary theory herself, Haraway references the legendary evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis as the forerunner of the Extended Synthesis. Haraway credits Margulis and her longtime collaborator Dorian Sagan with imbuing contemporary biology with symbiogenetic imaginations and materialities that make new ways of living and dying on a damaged planet possible. In turn, the paradigm shifts from a focus on individual organisms and their discreet relationships to the perpetual reciprocal processes of doing and undoing that make life possible.

What are these processes, and how might we learn from them?

Students of symbiosis learn about being together in a variety of ways: mutualism, commensalism, parasitism. We might take inspiration from the symbiotic relationships between individual organisms like bees and flowers, barnacles and baleen whales, or even ticks and deer – respectively.

While symbiosis often comes loaded with the positive affect of *living well together*, the truth is that cohabitation and symbiosis are not always cute. Take this stark example of parasitism: the genus of fungus, cordyceps, that plants itself on the exoskeleton of unwitting insects, envelopes

its host in its rhizomatic tendrils until penetrating the protective exterior and digesting the arthropod’s precious nutrients.

We may choose to read such severe cases of symbiosis, and thus sympoiesis, beyond the binary of antagonism and hospitality. We can read these relationships as the assembling of multi-species lifeways, of hybrid creatures making-do since life first emerged on this planet and until its uncertain end. Time may seem up for the host insect, but life goes on in the form of the cordyceps. The cycle continues: bug becomes fungus and the fungus becomes bug – just as our lunch becomes us and we become our lunch.

Artists like Luk have begun to grapple with insights generated through the Extended Synthesis – namely, that no life is individual, that we are never alone, that anything is everything else.

Take for instance the symbiosis between cnidarian polyps and photosynthesizing dinoflagellates called zooxanthellae that live inside coral tissue. Corals have shaped themselves to accommodate these creatures, which in turn share their digested marine nutrients with their hosts. Without this relationship—without the coral architecture allowing for these specific organisms to inhabit coral bodies—coral life would not be possible, nor the reefs that provide the basis of the ocean’s most biodiverse ecosystems.

Parallels can (and have been) drawn between coral symbiotics and the human gut microbiota, which is packed with bacteria that not only help us absorb energy from our food, but also regulate our mood, protect against pathogens, and promote a general level of homeostasis. The human microflora even gives us a sense of intuition – the aptly named *gut* feeling. What senses might other host species gain from their symbiotes?

Symbiosis creates the conditions for life to exist, even thrive. Without it, life would not exist as we know it. It is precisely from this kind of making-together that M. Beth Dempster coined *sympoiesis* in her 2000 essay “Sympoietic and Autopoietic Systems: A New Dimension for Self Organizing Systems” in response to Margulis’s Gaia Theory—the idea that the Earth is not a mere host for life, but that Earth is a self-contained and alive (aka “autopoietic”) system.

Developing Dempster’s concept into a comprehensive theory, Haraway locates sympoiesis in the multi-specie storymaking practices of Indigenous communities from the Arctic Inupiat to Madagascar’s Malagasy, and the Hopi-Diné-Navajo nexus at Black Mesa. In each situation, “critters–human and non-human–become with each other, compose and decompose each other . . . [in] earthly worlding and unworlding”².

Luk’s *Sympoiesis* links Haraway’s ideas of multi-species co-constitutive processes with her artistic practice, interfacing with both the Earth’s material and mystical realms. By assembling the raw material of her artwork—wood-fired ceramic, foraged plants, fabric and fibres—Luk animates what we would

normally consider inanimate. Drawing from her many years spent living and making art in Japan, Luk’s alive objects connect with Shinto philosophies that imbue living spirits in the supposedly life-less world of things.

Entering *Sympoiesis*, nothing is what it seems. Bug-like critters pass time together on the wood floor while maple keys flutter as moths toward an invisible light where two walls meet. Stepping into the gallery is walking into a fantasy landscape frozen in time. One readily imagines the creatures’ movements, their chatter and gossip like the call and response of life in the forests not too far from the gallery. The longer one spends in Luk’s arrangement, the greater one appreciates the vitality imbued into the raw materiality of these object-beings.

Luk’s careful arrangement is based on a process of deep listening. By listening to material, Luk allows it to exert its own agency. She has allowed the bugs to go where they must – to find their friends, to be multiple at once together. Luk asks visitors to pay attention. With attention, we start asking questions.

We might ask: What are the bugs *really* made of?; Are those shells made of calcium or clay?; Are those dried plants or eyes? ears? antennae? parasites?; Are those roses for feet!?!; Are those maple keys or flying critters?; Did the maple learn to fly from the bugs, or did the bugs find flight’s possibility from that tree?; What even is a bug? a tree?; Did they learn to fly together?

Each question takes us deeper and deeper into the unknown. Each question is the *effect* and *affect* of Luk’s work.

We ask and Luk provides no answer. As in the artist’s previous work, especially their editions *Bodies of Water* (2024) and *Tending to the Weeds* (2024), questions surrounding ecology, care, and attention get asked by the material elements of the work itself: the texture of ash and glaze on wood-fired ceramics serving as arthropod bodies; the arrangement of dried foraged plants in those bodies as they make an unlikely home; the scene of hybrid bodies mingling on each surface and in every corner of the gallery.

Everything begs questions and Luk is rightly not so forthcoming with answers. Asking without answering brings us closer to the mystery of life and death on a damaged planet. Yet, Luk provides a key to approaching the scene, the arrangement, the assemblage: *Sympoiesis – making together*.

NOTES

1 Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble : Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) 63

2 Haraway, 97.

DARIAN RAZDAR is a writer, artist, and independent scholar. His practice is embodied, ecological, collaborative, and research-intensive – often working with the mediums of poetry, image, textile, and print. >>> darianrazdar.info

EUNICE LUK is a sculptor, artist-publisher and educator. She uses installations, sculptures, and multiples to reflect on vegetal agency, environmentalism, and the interconnectedness between all living things. Eunice’s practice is concerned with how humans can live with and honour nature to better support one another.

Luk has participated in group exhibitions internationally and nationally – including at Susan Hobbs Gallery (Toronto, ON), Junbicyu (Tokyo, Japan), LVL3 (Chicago, IL), Critical Distance (Toronto, ON), Kamloops

Art Gallery (Kamloops, BC), Walter Philips Gallery at the Banff Centre, and The Prince Takamado Gallery at the Embassy of Canada (Tokyo, Japan).

She created the imprint, Slow Editions as an extension of her artistic practice. Since 2014, Slow Editions has collaborated with artists to realize artworks in the form of artist books and multiples. Slow Editions has organized exhibitions, curated performances, and participated in art book fairs in various cities, diffusing our work to audiences around the world.

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