

### *Terramatter: The Art of Living on a Damaged Planet*

In his manifesto for the twenty-first century, Rasheed Araeen imagines that it is artistic *imagination*, not art objects, that can enter this life and not only offer it salvation, but put it on the path to a better future. Artists play a critical role in shaping the stories, knowledge and representations that help us make sense of what that future may look like in a time of accelerated environmental and ecological destruction.

In *Terramatter*, artists Helga Jakobson, Gillian King and Whitney Lewis-Smith have developed a site-specific, interactive installation that functions as both laboratory and research space, reconnecting with nature and other living beings through *sympoiesis*—the term coined by Donna Haraway to challenge our ideas about bounded individuality and autopoiesis (isolated acts of self-making).<sup>[1]</sup> What emerges out of a system that instead recognizes the codependency of all living things? What happens when we consider the possibilities of collaborating with non-human kin? How can this “making-with” or “becoming-with” all of the living beings of our entangled world allow for deep connection, reverence, responsibility, and ultimately, resilience?

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#### **Sub Terra/Past**

What is being, lying or operating just beneath the surface: these are the elements that have supported the creation of the artists’ work, the barely perceptible processes that come to form and inform them. Jakobson has designed three wooden plant chambers, positioned throughout the space at various levels and featuring specific plants used in the process-based nature of the work of both King and Lewis-Smith. The inclusion of species that are older than recorded human histories, as in the case of ferns, stand in as transhistorical reminders of the resilience of different ecologies.

King’s painting practice is founded on processing plant and vegetal matter through intensive processes of dyeing and printmaking, using techniques that can be traced back to early cave paintings and the first human forms of mark-making. Lewis-Smith takes up a comparable position in relation to the history of photographic methods, focusing on the analog processing of plant material using an 8x10 camera, or more recently, producing large-scale héliogravure prints toned with plant-based inks and tree resins. The long exposure necessitated by these antiquated processes allows for the subtle movement and growth of plants that are a part of the elaborate sets the artist constructs and maintains.

#### **Terra/Present**

This layer comprises the three plant chambers, as well as large-scale photographs, paintings, and a plant interfacing system—the elements which are most immediately sensed and felt in moving through the space for the duration of *Terramatter*.

Jakobson has installed a system which connects directly to the leaves of the plants in the chambers, outputting to a synthesizer system designed around the architecture of the space. Through watering, exposure to light and unexpected moments of connectivity, bioelectric capacitive sensors will trigger MIDI notes to play, creating an ambient atmosphere. For the duration of the exhibition, the artists will be present to tend to the plants, retune, extrapolate data from the plant sensing system, and interact

with the flow of visitors. As a whole, Jakobson's work is entirely responsive to her companions in the space—artworks and plants alike—as a means of practicing rational compassion.

### **Supra Terra/Futures**

A continuous, polyphonic soundscape resonates through the space, creating an echo and reverberation of the symposium between the artists and their subject, the plants seen in the digital-cum-analog photographs, and the paintings created through King's hand processing—the other literal embodiment and record of the plant's lived experience. Throughout the course of the exhibition, the artists' presence will continue to deepen the connections between human and non-human.

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Jakobson, King and Lewis-Smith frame this exhibition as a triptych, divided into three layers based on geologic time and layers of the earth. When we look at the stratification of earth, of geologic time, the layers operate as separate and distinct while, of course, in intimate relation to one another—inextricably bound by the forces of compaction. In working together, Jakobson, King and Lewis-Smith embrace the entanglement of their processes as a way of being in the world and being in relation—learning new techniques from one another (cyanotype, liquid tinting) and supporting the material exchange between their works through working with plants they have cultivated and cared for. They have extended the invitation to collaborate not just to one another, but also to their plant and vegetal others.

Through working symposiumally, all three artists embody and advocate for new ways of being and becoming-with, practicing the all too urgent need for reimagining, re-worlding, and storytelling that Haraway asserts is necessary as a condition of living through climate crises. It has become increasingly difficult to hold ourselves accountable to a planet that seems beyond repair, but the game's not over, not yet. If stories, knowledges, and representations help us make sense of the world, it is because they foreground aspects of a phenomenon while backgrounding others. Elizabeth Grosz suggests that “concepts do not solve problems that events generate for us[;] they enable us to surround ourselves with possibilities for being otherwise.”<sup>[2]</sup> In *Terramatter*, the exhibition space is filled with possibilities for being otherwise, for prefiguring different kinds of relations with non-human kin.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

<sup>[2]</sup> This version of Elizabeth Grosz's quotation is drawn from *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, by Astrida Neimanis. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 168.

-- Katie Lawson