

ponds among ponds

featuring works by

Agency

Anne Duk Hee Jordan *with*
Pauline Doutreluingne

John Feldman *with*
Lynn Margulis

Mao Chenyu
Maximilian Prüfer
Zaanheh Project

an exhibition of
threshold behavior
& nested life

curated by

Anna-Sophie Springer &
Etienne Turpin
(*Reassembling the Natural*)

25 March – 29 May 2021

ICA 上海

NYU SHANGHAI
上海 纽约大学

ponds among ponds and related events are part of the
2019–2021 artistic research program, *The (Invisible) Garden*,
organized by the ICA at NYU Shanghai.

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ponds among ponds
an exhibition of threshold
behavior & nested life

Viruses teach us that we humans are really little more than a multi-species ecosystem among multi-species ecosystems—ponds among ponds.

—Tobias Rees ¹

ponds among ponds reconsiders the relationship between organisms and their various endo- and exo-somatic ecologies, while proposing an alternative approach to natural history. Instead of beginning from the assumption that the organism is the basic unit of evolution, what if we consider the multi-scalar, nested ecologies of life as symbiotic webs that challenge linear ideas of competition and survival of the fittest?

To unfold this perspective, we explore the work of the American evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis (1938–2011) who, starting in the 1960s, pioneered an understanding of symbiosis in evolution. Working as a microbiologist on the development of eukaryotic cells, or cells that have a membrane and a nucleus and are thus more complex than prokaryotic cells (e.g., bacteria), Margulis first recognized the role of endosymbiosis, or mutualistic relationships, in the earliest ancestral forms of complex life on the planet. Eukaryotic cells are the basis for chloroplasts and photosynthesis and relevant for phytoplankton, green algae, and other organisms that have produced the earth’s current atmosphere of carbon-fixation and oxygen production for millions of years. Animals, plants, and fungi all would not exist without their eukaryotic cell structures; diving deep into the minuscule scale of microbial and biochemical science provokes big philosophical questions about the role, boundaries, and identity of the biological individual. Life—considered from this point of view that relationships and exchange processes are foundational to the existence of any organ, body, or organism—becomes an ever-changing web of nested entities rather than a static series of fixed form.

Following previous curatorial interventions in natural history museums, where *Reassembling the Natural* confronted necroaesthetic display strategies about competition and progress with interventions that emphasized ecological mutuality and shared precarity, *ponds among ponds* is assembled at the ICA at NYU Shanghai to relay other symbiotic stories about interdependence and coexistence across temporalities and scales.

This exhibition is an invitation to reimagine ecological systems as intermingled processes because this view changes how one conceptualizes the impact of anthropogenic biodiversity loss and climate change. Notions of inside and outside are superimposed. The books and references gathered at the curatorial station “Reassembling Symbiosis,” introduce the inspirational life and work of Lynn Margulis and her collaborators, such as her son Dorion Sagan, filmmaker John Feldman, and colleague Scott Gilbert, co-author of “We Have Never Been Individuals.”² A series of works by international artists address ecological kinship and co-dependencies. In its performance-installation, Brussels-based Agency calls forth from its list *Thing 000773 (Pseudomonas)*: for thousands of years cow dung slurry has been used in India in rituals to clean houses, but in 1971, microbiologist Ananda Chakrabarty grew bacteria (of the *pseudomonas* family) by genetic transfer, which he hoped would be used to clean oil spills.

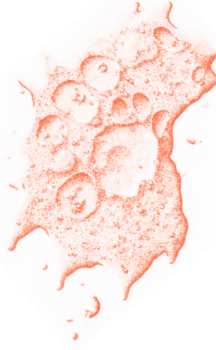
⌘ In 1972, he filed for a patent application, raising the question: are “living things” patentable subject matter? Inspired by the writings of Isabelle Stengers, Vinciane Despret, and Lynn Margulis, Agency is dedicated to fundamentally questioning the power structures expressed in ownership and intellectual property while opening space for collectivizing practices; by drawing attention, in this performance and installation, to the role of bacteria in the commodification of life, visitors can witness and discuss the legacies of microbial agency. Maximilian Prüfer’s video *A Gift From Him* (2018) is the result of a long journey to the Chinese province of Sichuan where he documented the process of plantation laborers becoming anthropogenic pollinators, thereby manually replacing extinct insects in the web of life. This is not a video narrative from a speculative, dystopian future but a contemporary reminder of the real fragility and cascading collapse of ecological co-dependencies. Berlin-based artist Anne Duk Hee Jordan, in her collaboration with Pauline Doutreluingne, developed a multimedia wedding bed-installation, *Diasporae* (2021), which follows the speculative botanical allure of the long sought-after nutmeg spice and its various metabolic promiscuities. A multilayered, sensuous, and wild work, the protagonists of *Diasporae* are not the colonial explorers and capitalist patriarchs but rather those entities and forces desiring otherwise.

Shanghai and Yueyang-based artist Mao Chenyu’s video *I Have What? Chinese Peasants War: The Rhetoric to Justice* (2013) insists on an understanding of the agricultural worker, especially the peasant farmer, as a decisive ecological and political agent; the premiere of Mao’s most recent film *Anti-Rural China* (2021)—a meditation on Fei Xiaotong’s once-banned though now widely-read study of Chinese rural society, *From the Soil* (1947)—will also take place as a final screening event during the exhibition. In both works, Mao insists that agrarian politics and history are necessary, indelible aspects of ecological thought and practice. With *Neighborhoods* (2021), Monika Lin, an artist, educator, and member of Shanghai-based Zaanheh Project, designed four original walking maps to key areas around the city that extend the exhibition and invite visitors to think with the emergent ecologies of the local watershed. This work also re-sites the exhibition itself as a negotiation between the art gallery and its urbanized “surrounds.”³ Although the exhibition space is enveloped by a bespoke curtain design—a semi-transparent membrane populated with key drawings adapted from Margulis’s publications—the vibrant slice through its surface, with an aperture to the outside, serves to remind us that barriers don’t only separate; instead, these lively thresholds connect many scales and many worlds.

In his recent essay “The Universal Right to Breathe,” Achille Mbembe writes of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, “Since it was imposed upon us, this cessation derives not from our will. In many respects, it is simultaneously unforeseen and unpredictable. Yet what we need is a voluntary cessation, a conscious and fully consensual interruption. Without which there will be no tomorrow. Without which nothing will exist but an endless series of unforeseen events.”⁴ Such a consensual interruption to business-as-usual would require that we take a far more subtle, sensual account of our nested relations and our multi-scalar kin, and thereby attend more carefully to our mutual, multi- dimensional liabilities. Such a voluntary cessation of our illusory biological individualism would also accord with the poetic intention of Fred Moten and Édouard Glissant as we “consent *not* to be a single being.”⁵

² Text by Anna-Sophie Springer & Etienne Turpin, 2021.

The (In)visible Garden IV
(看不见的花园系列第四卷)



1. Tobias Rees, “From The Anthropocene To The Microbiocene,” *Noëma Magazine*, 10 June 2020, <https://www.noemamag.com/from-the-anthropocene-to-the-microbiocene>.

2. Scott F. Gilbert, Jan Sapp, and Alfred I. Tauber, “A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals,” *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 87, no. 4 (December 2012): 325-341, <https://doi.org/10.1086/668166>.

3. AbdouMaliq Simone, “The Urban Surrounds: From Extinction to Abolition,” Inaugural Urbanism Lecture Series, University of Sheffield (November 2020), <http://urbaninstitute.group.shef.ac.uk/sheffield-urbanism-lecture-series-2020-available-on-youtube>.

4. Achille Mbembe, “The Universal Right to Breathe,” trans. Carolyn Shread, *Critical Inquiry*, 13 April 2020, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-universal-right-to-breathe>.

5. Fred Moten’s recent trilogy includes *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), *Stolen Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), and
- The Universal Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); the series title, *Consent not to be a single being*, is borrowed from Édouard Glissant, *L’intention poetique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

R E L A T E D - E V E N T S

WATCH

Symbiotic Earth

20 March –29 May

⇒ Online

English with Chinese subtitles

The documentary film *Symbiotic Earth* (dir. John Feldman, 2018) explores the life and ideas of evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis, whose unconventional theories challenged the male-dominated scientific community and are today fundamentally changing how we look at ourselves, evolution, and the environment. The film is available for screening online one week prior to and throughout the exhibition period.

TALK

Roundtable with curators, artists, & scientists

Sat, 27 Mar, 16:00–17:30 CST

⇒ Online

Chinese and English

Join the curators and artists in conversation with scientists from NYU Shanghai, DONG Ningning (Fudan University), Sascha Krause (East China Normal University), PAN Yan (Fudan University), and ZHANG Minhua (East China Normal University), as they discuss the exhibition *ponds among ponds* and film *Symbiotic Earth*. The film is available for screening online one week prior to the roundtable discussion, starting on 20 March.

PERFORMANCE

Agency

Agency is an international initiative founded by Kobe Matthys that has offices in Brussels. Since 1992, Agency constitutes a growing “list of boundary things” mostly derived from judicial cases and controversies involving intellectual property. Agency calls these boundary things forth via varying “assemblies” such as exhibitions, performances, and publications. For *Assembly (ponds among ponds)*, Agency calls an assembly where a group of concerned from various backgrounds related to the case will be invited to respond to the controversy it raises. This assembly is not meant to re-enact the judgment, but rather to evoke the hesitation experienced in court.

Assembly (ponds among ponds)

Sat, 17 Apr, 16:00–18:00 CST

⇒ Online

English with Chinese interpretation

Agency calls forth from its list *Thing 000773 (Pseudomonas)*. For thousands of years cow dung slurry has been used in India in rituals to clean houses. In 1971, microbiologist Ananda Chakrabarty grew bacteria (of the *pseudomonas* family) by genetic transfer, which he hoped would be used to clean oil spills, and in 1972, he filed for a patent application. The case eventually appeared before the highest court in the US, raising the question: are “living things” patentable subject matter?

Assembly (ponds among ponds)

Sat, 15 May, 16:00–18:00 CST

⇒ Gallery (limited seating)

Chinese

Agency calls forth an assembly for a newly researched case, which has been developed specifically for *ponds among ponds* at the ICA at NYU Shanghai. Please register by 7 May to reserve a seat.

WATCH & TALK

Anti-Rural China

22–29 May (virtual screening)

⇒ Online

Sat, 29 May, 15:00 CST (in-person screening)

⇒ Gallery (limited seating)

Chinese with English subtitles

Sat, 29 May, 16:00–17:00 CST (conversation)

⇒ Online & Gallery

Chinese with English interpretation

Watch the premiere of Mao Chenyu’s newest film, *Anti-Rural China* (2021), followed by a conversation with the filmmaker, curators, and theoretician Lu Xinghua. In response to Fei Xiaotong’s once banned and now widely-read study of Chinese rural society, *From the Soil* (1947), Mao questions *From the Soil*’s legacy, asking how to think about the rural reality of China today and open up thinking for the future?

Anti-Rural China is available for screening online one week prior to the conversation. Online viewers are welcome to join the 29 May conversation via live stream.

The film will also be screened in person, in the ICA gallery, followed immediately by a conversation with the filmmaker. Please register by 21 May to reserve a seat.

STUDY SESSIONS

Thu, 8 Apr, 13:00–14:00

Thu, 29 Apr, 13:00–14:00

⇒ Gallery (limited seating)

English

Join a discussion group, focusing on one work in one hour, facilitated by ICA curators using an art mediation method called Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). Rather than exhibition tours, ICA Study Sessions are guided conversations based on curious exploration, critical reflection, and collective meaning making. Participation is limited to ten people per session. Please register by 17:00 on the day before each event.

To participate in any event, including virtual screenings, please register through the ICA website or scan the QR code on the next page

This Spring 2021 Season

To help prevent the spread of COVID-19, and in accordance with NYU Shanghai health and safety guidelines:

Our Gallery is OPEN to the NYU Shanghai community only; CLOSED to the public until further notice.

Our Events are OPEN to all when online; OPEN to the NYU Shanghai community only when in the gallery.

Our Website is OPEN to all to visit the 360VR exhibition tour and to view virtual screenings.

The (In)visible Garden ponds among ponds and its related events are presented as the final season of *The (In)visible Garden*, a two-year artistic research program that inquires into the garden as a method that shapes our understanding of Nature and our relationships to other species. From Fall 2019 through Spring 2021, the ICA at NYU Shanghai presents artists, thinkers, and practitioners, through exhibitions and events, to consider the garden and ask how might we denature Nature?

About the Curators Anna-Sophie Springer & Etienne Turpin are the principal co-investigators and co-curators of the international exhibition-led inquiry *Reassembling the Natural* (2013–2021); they are also the co-editors of the *intercalations: paginated exhibition series*, published in the context of Das Anthropozän-Projekt (K. Verlag and the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2015–2021), and *Fantasies of the Library* (MIT Press, 2016). With support from the Stiftung Kunstfonds, their forthcoming co-authored book, *Productions of Nature*, assembles a decade of research, including fieldwork, archival and collections research, methodological reflections, and conversations with various artists and institutional collaborators. reassemblingnature.org

Credits & Acknowledgements *ponds among ponds* is the final iteration of the international exhibition-led inquiry—*Reassembling the Natural* (2013–2021)—into the role of natural history in a time of climate crisis and biodiversity collapse. *ponds among ponds* was curated by Anna-Sophie Springer & Etienne Turpin, and was organized by Michelle Yeonho Hyun with Zhu Sicong, who were assisted by Chen Yijiao, Wang Yuxin, Chen Yindi, and Qin Xiaoyan. Additional assistance by Lina Jin from NYU Shanghai Teaching Labs and He Zhugang from the Biological History Museum of East China Normal University. Design by the curators in collaboration with Wolfgang Hüchel and The Exercises / Lu Liang with Selina Landis. Additional support generously provided by the Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany Shanghai, Flanders Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Media, and Taipei Fine Arts Museum. We are most deeply grateful to the artists and scientists who inform and inspire us.