

“FUNGI: Anarchist Designers”

Filipa Ramos



View of “FUNGI: Anarchist Designers” at Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, 2025–26. Photo by Aad Hoogendoorn.

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Last autumn I met a friend for dinner in a residential neighborhood in Tokyo. He placed our order in Japanese, and soon after we were brought a wooden block holding a long, charred mushroom. “Matsutake!” he exclaimed. “Anna Tsing’s mushroom,” he insisted, translating his enthusiasm into a language I would understand.

You know that a book published by a university press has entered the wider cultural imagination when it makes a food famous. Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) is one of the most influential works of anthropology and cultural theory of the century, inspiring projects from Francesca Gavin’s “Mushrooms” at Somerset House in London (2020) to Merlin Sheldrake’s bestselling *Entangled Life* (2020) and Yasmine Ostendorf-Rodríguez’s *Let’s Become Fungal! Mycelium Teachings and the Arts* (2023). In the eleven years since Tsing’s book came out, fungi have become unlikely cultural protagonists.

So a fungi-themed exhibition co-curated by Tsing offers an opportunity to observe both how the anthropologist’s research has evolved and how its insights—into global commodity chains and the resistance of vulnerable life forms in the “ruined” landscapes of contemporary capitalism—can be materialized in the dimension of art. Co-curated with Feifei Zhou, Tsing’s

longtime collaborator in Feral Atlas, a transdisciplinary research project "involving scientists, scholars, artists, poets, and vernacular and Indigenous observers of the Anthropocene," the show attempts to express complex ecological entanglements in a format legible to museum audiences.¹ The density of the research is palpable: the question is whether, and how, it translates into an exhibition.

"FUNGI" opens and ends with poems written by women and printed on long strips of white paper hanging from the ceiling. Welcoming visitors is Sylvia Plath's 1959 "Mushrooms" ("Our kind multiplies: / We shall by morning / Inherit the earth"), and closing the show is Adrienne Rich's 1995 "What Kind of Times Are These" ("There's a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows uphill [...] I know already who wants to buy it, sell it, make it disappear"). If Plath's animistic reverie suggests the dreamy ways in which fungi permeate the world and our imaginations, Rich's verses remind us that thinking about nature today inevitably leads to reflection on the postliberal order.

With the exception of these poems, and various other texts and manifestos, "FUNGI" is largely an exhibition *about* mushrooms, presenting artworks, design prototypes, and models that illustrate the strategies used to represent, control, and domesticate them. Following Plath's words, visitors enter a simulated kitchen—a collaborative effort by Tsing, Zhou, Marloes and Wikke, and Juliette Mout—to find a resin replica of a slice of bread covered in green mold on the counter, an open dishwasher with a couple of dirty dishes, and black mold on the wall. More than foregrounding the remarkable powers of fungi (as you presume is the intention), the installation verges on caricaturing the apartment of someone too rushed to finish breakfast, too broke to repair a leak, too lonely to fill a washing machine.

Facing it, Anicka Yi's wall sculpture *With Whose Blood These Eyes Were Crafted?* (2019) offers a sharp contrast. If Yi's best-known artworks are technically and formally exuberant, this elegant, small wooden box framing a 3D-printed replica of the fungal lattice of a veiled lady mushroom seems better fitted for a collector's apartment than for this intellectually ambitious show. It also reveals the challenge facing the curators: that fungi must be simulated here as both a tribute to the impossibility of taming them—health and safety conditions mean that they can't be brought into the museum—and an admission of the limits of exhibition-making. The anarchic, *feral* qualities celebrated in fungal life (to use a term popularized by Tsing) encounter the sterilizing demands of the museum environment. What is missing is precisely what visitors dream of encountering: the living organisms themselves.

Which is why the less formal projects in the show are the most compelling. Take Liu Yi and Shiho Satsutake's black-and-white, hand-painted animated film *Matsutake Lead the Way* (2025), which tells the history of Japan from the perspective of the mycorrhizal networks of matsutakes and their responses to human disturbances of forest ecologies. Or Matteo Garbelotto and Kyriaki Goni's video installation *We shall by morning inherit the earth* (2025), which situates Plath's prophetic line between scientific research and speculative fiction. In it, the environmental scientist (Garbelotto) and the artist (Goni) work together to reveal how the timber industry is accelerating the proliferation of the infectious *Heterobasidion* fungus, which, they argue with Plath, may eventually reshape the planet.

David Dunn's *The Sound of Light in Trees* (2006) adds an important sonic element to the show. This hour-long recording of the scratchy and bubbly sounds made by bark beetles feeding inside a conifer tree is at once difficult and important. By making these sounds audible to human ears, Dunn helps to disclose the complexity of a world that is systematically ignored and uncared for. But he also elucidates one of the great problems of environmental theory: natural phenomena outside the range of human perception are difficult to approach, share, and understand. What we are left with are subtle practices of attunement and more obvious exercises in translation.

"FUNGI" attempts to navigate between both. It is most effective when it foregoes visual representation in favor of sensory and epistemic adjustment. Yet the exhibition also exposes the tension between research-based ecological inquiry and the representational constraints of the museum. If its ambition is to reach both general and specialized audiences, its value lies less in what it shows than in the questions it leaves suspended—continuing to ask, with Rich, "What Kind of Times are These?"

Notes

¹ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al., *Field Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene: The New Nature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024) 48.

Category

Nature & Ecology, Posthumanism

Subject

Human - Nonhuman Relations,
Poetry

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