

Barbara Kastelec

INVISIBLE COMPANIONS

24 February–10 March 2021

artKIT

The Grammar of Microorganisms

For Barbara Kastelec, talking about life means taking a look under the microscope. Literally. *Elaeomyxa cerifera*, *Badhamia utricularis*, *Trichia decipiens* are not only Latin expressions for slime moulds, but also titles of some of her works at the exhibition *Invisible Companions*. The artist reveals something very self-evident and at the same time invisible through the fantastic world of microorganisms, thus emphasising their central role in our ecosystem. With this in mind, let us jump for a moment into the theoretical »wormhole« of Donna Haraway, who thinks that instead of the concept of the humanities we should be using the more appropriate concept of the humus. Yes, humus as the top layer of the ground that contains a lot of decomposed organic matter. By asking »what happens when the best biologies of the twenty-first century cannot do their job with bounded individuals plus contexts, when organisms plus environments, or genes plus whatever they need, no longer sustain the overflowing richness of biological knowledges, if they ever did« and »what happens when organisms plus environments can hardly be remembered for the same reasons that even Western-indebted people can no longer figure themselves as individuals and societies of individuals in human-only histories,«¹ Donna Haraway rejects the appropriateness of understanding the current period as the Anthropocene and points out the importance of the knowledge of non-human beings. With her staging of life, Barbara Kastelec also pushes the anthropocentric perspective to the background, thinking about the »future of species and the survival of our planet, which might be afflicted by grave ecological problems precisely due to the quick technological development, scientific experiments and genetic modifications.«²

In her work, she starts from the biological, physiological, ecological, anthropological, philosophical and graphic characteristics of microorganisms and therefore often cooperates with scientists. The connection with science can be seen not only in the Latin titles, but also in her drawing on microscopic photos and in the round formats of her paintings. When she adopts shapes from microscopic photos, the artist focuses on a colourful representation of individual small parts that are colourless or black-and-white in the originals. The round formats are reminiscent of petri dishes, usually used for the cultivation of bacteria. The artist emphasises this format even more in the video *Mould Growth Observations*, which was made in 2019, during her art residency at La Cité internationale des arts in Paris. In the video, two petri dishes with images of *Penicillium* mould taken from French cheese are juxtaposed. One is black-and-white like in the original and

¹ Haraway, Donna (2016), *Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene*. *E-flux Journal* #75 – September 2016. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67125/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-chthulucene/>, 12 February 2021.

² Kastelec, Barbara (2021), *Practice*. <https://www.barbarakastelec.com/practice>, 12 February 2021.

the other is the artist's colour version. The video introduces movement and emphasises the rhythm of micro life. The cycle *Life* presents different states of microorganisms, from the resting types of spores to the spherical, rod-like and spiral forms. The artist focuses on representing yeast, various moulds and fungi and explores the so-called pharmakon or the phenomenon of certain microorganisms enriching everyday life, while others decompose it. In form and content, the cycle refers to her previous cycles, especially *Plant Cells*, a cycle of paintings she started working on in 2018 and in which she represented plants that heal and nourish, but also threaten.

The artist remains loyal to the original form of microorganisms throughout, but leaves the background to her own imagination and searches for morphological parallels that could be detected in the universe. With such a translation into the language of painting, Barbara Kastelec intertwines the microcosm from which she starts and the macrocosm that she imagines. The intertwinement of micro- and macrocosm becomes more evident when we can follow it visually and that is precisely what the development of the resolution of the micro and macro images (microscope/telescope) enables. One of the numerous examples that vividly illustrate this is Charles and Ray Eames' video *Powers of Ten* (1979),³ in which we follow camera shots moving from humans to the universe and back and then further on to the atom. Although, in her work, the artist does not point out such a reach of contemporary technologies, her works are nevertheless based on the blowup of the photographed microorganisms, which are visible to us only thanks to the electronic microscope. Like Charles and Ray Eames, the artist equates or connects micro-particles with space landscapes through the medium of painting. In her painting, as she herself says, she is looking for the »origin, perhaps even by searching for godliness or the divine within the mundane reality that surrounds us. It seems that simultaneously with searching for the origin of plants, animals and other beings that co-exist with me, I constantly search for my own origin, which I either dissect with surgical technical precision or allow it to overflow me in the form of the numinous and the sublime through the symbolism of plants, food and the tremendous intertwinement of Eros and Thanatos.«⁴

Invisible Companions brings a selection of works that emphasise the cyclicity, but not the linearity of life and suggest forms that emerge. In this sense, Barbara Kastelec observes emerging forms and translates them into the painting medium, which enables precisely the creation of new forms. When, at the beginning of the 20th century, Paul Klee thought about the artistic observation of nature, he wrote: »Through the experience that he has gained in the different ways and translated into work, the student demonstrates the progress of his dialogue with the natural object. His growth in the vision and contemplation of nature enables him to rise towards a meta-physical view of the world and to form free abstract structures which surpass schematic intention and achieve a new naturalness, the naturalness of the work.«⁵ Similarly, Barbara Kastelec follows the life of microorganisms and searches for the system of their interrelations, while at the same time creating new painterly micro- and macrocosms. It is precisely these painterly worlds that acquaint the unknowing spectators with beings from the soil, which only the curious and the attentive recognise. On the other hand, especially due to the large scales, her painterly worlds are worlds in which imagination creates the directions of movement and in which not knowing is welcome.

- Irena Boric

³ Powers of Ten and the Relative Size of Things in the Universe, <https://www.eamesoffice.com/the-work/powers-of-ten/>, 12 February 2021.

⁴ Kastelec, Barbara (2021), Practice. <https://www.barbarakastelec.com/practice>, 12 February 2021.

⁵ Klee, Paul (1923), Ways to Study Nature. Obelisk. <https://arthistoryproject.com/artists/paul-klee/ways-to-study-nature/>, 12 February 2021.

BIOGRAPHY



Barbara Kastelec (1976) graduated in painting from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design of the University of Ljubljana with Prof. Emerik Bernard and Doc. Dr. Nadja Zgonik. In 2004 under the mentorship of Prof. Gustav Gnamuš and Dr. Aleš Erjavec, she received her master's degree in painting. Since 2006 she has been a freelance cultural worker. In addition to her independent practice, since 2005, she has been a mentor of painting courses for children, adolescents, and adults. Since 1997 she has exhibited both in Slovenia and abroad. Her artistic practice includes painting, illustration, and video.

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