

KLAUS VON NICHTSSAGEND GALLERY

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The Drunken Canal, February 2021

I Contain Multitudes at Klaus von Nichtssagend gallery

a review by
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That refrain from Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself, 51' *I Contain Multitudes* is here used to describe lively attention to the microbiome. Jane Bennet, in *Vibrant Matter, a Political Ecology of Things* has articulated the call for attention to what we tend to consider as inert, mechanical, automatic. Through this attention we may come to recognize the invisible swarm as animated, willful, and constantly permeating our bodies, environments, and plans with a mysterious agency we must learn to respect.

Artists Jules Gimbrone, Tiffany Jaeyeon Shin, and Jennifer Sirey co-produce with animated material. The parameter of success is the quality of collaboration. Tiffany Jaeyeon Shin, in her piece *Vestibule (between the teeth, lips, and cheeks)*, means to continue her interrogation of colonialism by bringing in fermentation and scholarly text. On a small table rests a museum-like glass case in which there is a few inches of brown liquid upon which float some pieces of photocopied readings (a format I associate with the handouts from college courses). There is a little bit of scum, and upon bending over you'll see the white-ish flesh of a SCOBY (symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast), the fermenting body that produces Kombucha. Time is a key ingredient to this work. Yet the moment of growth Shin decides to preserve is a murky one, the SCOBY limp and stringy, sitting to the side of the tank, the texts basically unaltered. I am reminded only of a stagnant pond.

Sirey, by contrast, shows a fluency of interaction with her chosen bacterial colony; the acetobacter, 'Mother of Vinegar', grown with different alcohols, vinegars, and supports over the period of months. One of her pieces, *Indian Pipe*, after the ghostly plant of the same name, was grown over the period of six months, with Sirey coaxing the bacteria up the glass enclosure with silicone, wax, and transfusions of sake and vinegar. The bacteria has been dormant in its current state since Sirey first sealed it in 1998. Her other piece, *Sanguine35*, was made only last year. The evolution of Sirey's collaboration over the years is evident. The piece is at once rigid in the sections which look like thick grafts of skin, and other parts are wildly blooming, immediately recalling a sensation of spontaneous, ravenous growth; a shade of nature we often flinch in the face of (and perhaps best articulated in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy).

Seeing Sirey's work immediately recalled flashpoints of 'scientific' display: seeing a baby shark preserved in blue alcohol, the human capillary system on display in the Body Museum. Of course, Sirey's work comes without the immorality of these scientific/entertainment pieces. Fetuses carved out of pregnant sharks caught in commercial fishing nets, capillaries stripped from Chinese prisoners. Though one's imagination is sparked. Does the bacteria enjoy its immortal sleep? Is it good? What bodies do we allow ourselves to display? Her work is lively indeed.

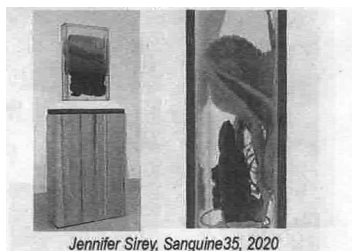
Gimbrone works with an aspect of the skin's microbiome, sweat, in their piece *Trans as Indicator Species*. The rig of the piece is complex, meant to be an apparatus of some sort. From an infrastructure of pipes the following are suspended and rigged: a long copper sheet, a bundle of t-shirts sweated into by Gimbrone's trans friends are wrapped around a block of ice, a projector that reflects its image onto the copper sheet, heat lamps which melt the ice, thus sending the sweat onto the copper sheet. There are tactile transducers which jolt the copper with the tempo of Gimbrone's own heartbeat, shaking the collected water and sweat into a wooden box, which is also the platform that the whole rig lies within.

An indicator species is called thus because its own flourishing or struggle can signal the health of the ecosystem it lives within. Gimbrone posits that trans people are an indicator species of social ecosystems because their transformative work biologically, spiritually, and socially is the first to be violently pushed back on in moments of wider social regression. Yet, in *Trans and Indicator Species*, the complex rig is doing a lot but seemingly measuring nothing.

Concerning this piece they say, on their personal website, like a virus, we spread ourselves. With this added context, we might understand the apparatus is not meant to measure but to evaporate the sweat of their trans friends into the air. Perhaps the concept of indicator species here can be applied by seeing the health of species to be the allowance of this piece to influence and permeate without disturbance. That this motive is placed outside the gallery context feels either purposefully sneaky or just poorly thought out. Gimbrone played wonderfully with the agency-through-permeability of spawning microbiome. Still, the piece is overly saturated—am I interpreting their meaning or hunting, trying to make unlike pieces fit together?



Jules Gimbrone, *Trans as Indicator Species*, 2021



Jennifer Sirey, *Sanguine35*, 2020



Vestibule (between the teeth, lips, and cheeks),
Tiffany Jaeyeon Shin, 2021