

Suzanne Anker & Frank Gillette: Strata

Curated by D.J. Hellerman and David Ross

by Taney Roniger



Installation view: Suzanne Anker: *1.5° Celsius*, Everson Museum of Art, 2019. Photo: Raul Valverde.

ON VIEW

Everson Museum of Art

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Syracuse

“It is worse, much worse, than you think.” So begins David Wallace-Wells’s new book on climate change, tellingly titled *The Uninhabitable Earth*. So thoroughly have we now altered the planet, the author tells us, that even if we were to dramatically change our lives right now the future that awaits us is more devastating than we’ve imagined. But all is not lost. The good news, if we can call it that, is that we still have a choice—albeit one between, as Wallace-Wells puts it, “the merely grim and the apocalyptic.” For in our ignoble Anthropocene, leaving nature to right itself is no longer an option; we broke it, we own it, and now its fate lies in our hands. Can our species make the shift to become an agent of healing? And equally pressing for our field, is there a role for art in the gravity of our moment?

As part of a program celebrating its 50th anniversary, The Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse has offered a powerful response to both questions with a show of two pioneering artists long engaged with the crisis. A married couple who’ve not collaborated until now, Suzanne Anker and Frank Gillette share a passion for nature that has been a propelling force in their careers since decades before the word “Anthropocene” even entered the public lexicon. While Anker’s work has been pivotal in the Bio Art movement, Gillette’s has its

roots in early video, a medium in which he remains a seminal figure. For both, the interruption of nature by human culture has been an abiding theme. Crucially, however, neither artist succumbs to a moralizing didacticism. Replete with complexity and a fierce visceral beauty, their work is a testament to art's power not just to move, but indeed to transform.



Installation view: *Suzanne Anker: 1.5° Celsius*, Everson Museum of Art, 2019. Photo: Raul Valverde.

Sprawling across the museum's second floor, the show is divided into three parts, with two rooms of Anker's works, two of Gillette's, and two corridor-like "bridges" featuring a collaborative series. Aside from some discreetly placed placards viewers can peruse if they wish, pedagogical text is conspicuously absent. Left on our own with the work, we can slip free of discursive thought altogether and settle into a slow, spacious, contemplative silence.

The show's most salient tensions are palpable throughout. In each room, the lavish beauty of nature collides with, is encased by, or otherwise filters through a range of technological interventions. Monitors, projectors, and camera stands; slick arrays of custom-made vitrines; a persistent grid-like arrangement of series—all exude human reason and its impulse for order. With much of the work involving capture technologies, the lens itself becomes a thematic refrain. Hovering like a specter even in absentia, the mechanical eye might be a metaphor for our objectification of nature. It also invokes, and not incidentally, the eye of the viewer.



Installation view: *Frank Gillette: Excavations and Banquets*, Everson Museum of Art, 2019. Photo: Raul Valverde.

This implication of the spectator in the show's conceptual scheme is established in the first two pieces we encounter. Made in 1973, Gillette's *Track / Trace* is a pyramidal arrangement of monitors across which real-time footage of the gallery space cycles at various intervals. The piece rouses a growing sense of unease; what begins with the surprise of seeing oneself gives way to the recursive dizziness of watching oneself watching oneself watching oneself watching. A more indirect self-encounter awaits in *Riverrun* (2016 – 17), also Gillette's, a haunting three-channel video projection with a drone-like soundtrack. Here, in a non-narrative progression randomized by an algorithm, slowly moving images of the natural world—a landscape devoid of human presence, tortoise shells and animal skulls set against deep black voids—are interrupted by the appearance of a mysterious mirror. Laden with symbolic references to the self and itself a kind of frame, the mirror renders ambiguous just what it is that's being reflected back on nature. From here Gillette's work moves into darker terrain. Forming something of a mini-retrospective, the second room features a series from across the decades that are alternately mournful and foreboding and incandescent with rage. Ranging from small paintings and collages to Polaroid photographs and digital prints, the works are anchored in a sensibility in which dense layers of imagery seethe with semantic content. In some series, such as *Post Apocalypse* (2017 – 2018), references to the natural world collide with artifacts of human technology in riots of color redolent of destruction. In others, the mood is more contemplative and suggests a keen attunement to the rhythms of nature. (Perhaps most moving among these are several early Polaroid series, in which recorded changes to natural sites revisited over time form constellations that read as rich painterly abstractions.) Giving us a sense of the artist's process, also on view are two vitrines containing a selection of objects Gillette references repeatedly: the vertebrae of an elephant, some sea sponges, the breast bone of a swan. Presiding over these is the dried carcass of a *Limulus*, the 400 million-year-old arthropod that serves as the artist's avatar. Immersed in Gillette's work, one gets a deeply felt sense of a life lived inside nature, and one for whom writing its threnody has been an artistic calling.



Installation view: Frank Gillette: *Excavations and Banquets* , Everson Museum of Art, 2019. Photo: Raul Valverde.

While death and destruction hold sway in Gillette's work, Anker's abounds in evocations of renewal. Suffused with a warm glow of fuschia, the first of her rooms teems with all manner of flora—both refigured through the lens of technology and, in one case, actual. The centerpiece of the space and the source of the exotic light, *Astroculture (Eternal Return)* (2015) is an array of stacked aluminum crates inside which a garden of live plants grows under artificial light. Inspired by methods used by NASA for growing food in space, the piece attests to the potential of “augmented nature”; here, the red and blue LEDs that create the sumptuous fuschia mimic natural light to stimulate photosynthesis. But even without knowing the science that inspired it, the piece moves with its presence alone; both lush and beautiful and eerie in its otherworldliness, it evokes a future in which the natural and the artificial are no longer fixed categories. In a similar vein, a towering image projected on the gallery's wall shows a tank of artificially grown coral that Anker photographed in a research lab. Viscerally stirred by the beauty of the coral, we only slowly realize that the image is moving. Exquisite in its subtlety, the rhythmic sway of the plants suggests a pulse, eliciting questions about how we might define life in our genetically engineered future. In Anker's second room, several elegant series of sculptures further evince the prospect of technological regeneration. Here, large Plexiglas tables, shelves, and vitrines house collections of natural specimens altered, augmented, or otherwise rendered synthetic through various fabricating technologies. Surrounding one especially prodigious display, a mural-sized grid of richly saturated photographs presents a series of micro-landscapes Anker created inside Petri dishes. At once symbolic of human manipulation and growth, the dishes contain kaleidoscopic arrangements of found objects from dead insects and flower petals to scraps of fabric, a button, a rubber duck, or a string of beads. Strangely seamless in its eclecticism, *Vanitas (in a Petri dish)* (2014–18) suggests a future in which, collage-like, biotechnology may remake our world. But even above Anker's address to technology, what we come away with most from her work is a profound sense of biophilia: the innate impulse of living things to connect with all life. In a time when our estrangement from nature has made us agents of our own destruction, our recovery of that impulse may be a matter of our very survival.

In the show's final series, Anker's sanguinity about the future meets Gillette's brooding pessimism in their first-ever collaborative project. Made to resemble blueprints, the eight works that make up *Strata* (2019) combine architectural diagrams of celebrated monuments with intricate renderings of cells, organisms, and geological features in densely layered compositions. Evoking the kind of imaginative design we'll need for the future, the works are also a poignant encapsulation of where we stand today: in our relentless pursuit of mastery, the human animal has left its mark on every last bit of the earth. But seeing the Parthenon, the majestic cathedrals, and all the grand facades of the past, we're reminded that that animal is also capable of great genius. The question, as always, is how we will choose to use it.

Whether we can achieve it, the shift in consciousness necessary for real change is sure to have a strong affective dimension. In this, shows like the Everson's could prove pivotal in raising public consciousness. For if the singular value of art is its capacity to move people on levels of the psyche inaccessible to rational thought, it may be one of our most powerful means of effecting the transformation. At the very least, such shows might serve as spaces for bearing witness. With so many of the major museums at the mercy of the market, regional institutions in particular face a rare opportunity. Will we see more of them rise to the occasion? Either way, one can only hope that should we live to see another "cene," we will have gained the wisdom—and earned the dignity—to call it something like the Biocene.

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<http://artforum.com.cn/archive/search=suzanne%20anker/12093>

by Xin Wei

Growing

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2019.03.21-2019.06.30

New Time Media Arts Center | CHRONUS ART CENTER

A tiny fly flies across the light in a thick glass cover, which is too small and too fast, making people suspect that it is dazzling. The artist Suzanne Anker gave birth to flies in a glass cabinet filled with Petri dishes. It's all succinct and barren, and it's constantly imagining what the earth that just emerged looks like, perhaps at that time, the relationship between life and non-living is not as extreme as we know today, just as in the exhibition. In the foreword, the curator Zhang Ga directly questioned the Aristotle-style taxonomy and the concept of life derived from its framework.

The work titled "Immortal Cities" (2019) casts a questioning suspicion for the exhibition "Growth." Under the huge glass cover, 270 Petri dishes are neatly arranged. The Petri dishes contain daily air-dried foods, Chinese herbal medicines and metal paper clips, as well as small items with traces of life or industrial production. Over time, gray-green colonies were cultivated in the confined space - if carefully observed, the small fly that initially attracted attention, completed the ministry of the "city" between the colonies on the Petri dish; One stroke: life as a participant and definer of space. In the life of the artist, the artist used the metaphor of "composite soil" - the reality we live in already contains various artificial and synthetic techniques. Under this scenario, we will once again consider the multiple ethical relationships between synthetic biology and ecology.

If "Immortal Cities" provides a microscopic perspective of "non-natural ecology," Liang Shaoji, who also pays attention to the process of production, regards silk as the result of silkworm in the "Time and Eternity" series (1993-2018), traces of survival with a more realistic metaphor. The silkworm spins on the barbed wire to form a triangular pyramid with a ghostly texture. The artist then brings this structure to the buildings that reflect the peak of human civilization throughout the world. These images unambiguously ask: Are we still different after we leave the context of civilization? In the context of rethinking human supremacism, do we reach a new, organic relationship with other living beings - or is this reflection simply a moral expression that is unique to human beings?

The works of Suzanne Anker and Liang Shaoji are constant reminders of the experiment of Biosphere 2. The original purpose of this utopian experiment was to test the feasibility of maintaining a basic ecosystem in a closed space, with the aim of studying the ecological networks generated by the interaction of various organisms, biomes, and human activities without prejudice to the Earth.

After Biosphere 2 announced the failure of the "closed-door living" in 1994, the world's illusion of controlling the living environment did not stop there. Tissue Culture and Art Projects (Oron Catts & Ionat Zurr) and Devon Ward in the book *Care and Control Containers: Composting Incubator 4* (2016-) directly answers the subtle, self-sufficient life fantasy of the "biosphere": life itself is not as independent and controllable as in the laboratory. On the contrary, the charm generated in life, its beauty, and the criticality of life are more likely to be reflected in the finer technical control. As the artists in the exhibition have shown, the normative, restrained and versatile forms of work spill over tiny but vigorous, uncontrollable lives.



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生长

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2019.03.21-2019.06.30 新时线媒体艺术中心 | CHRONUS ART CENTER

一只极小的飞蝇在厚重的玻璃罩中从光下一划而过，实在大小又太快，让人怀疑是眼花了。艺术家苏珊·安卡尔 (Suzanne Anker) 摆满了培养皿的玻璃柜中孕育出了飞蝇。这一切简洁而贫瘠，让人不断地想象刚出现生命的地球长什么模样，或许在那个时候，生命体和非生命体之间的关系并非如同今日我们所认知的那般极端，正如在展览前言中，策展人张对亚里士多德式的生物分类法和其框架之下所衍生出的生命观念提出了直接的质疑。

这个名为《永生的城市》(2019) 的作品为展览“生长”抛出质疑的引子。巨大的玻璃罩下整齐地排列着270个培养皿，培养皿中装纳了风干食物、中草药、金属回形针这种日常，同时具备生命痕迹或工业痕迹的细小物品。随着时间推移，密闭的空间中培养出了灰绿色的菌落——如果仔细地观察，一开始吸引注意力的飞蝇，在培养皿上的菌落之间完成了这个微缩“城市”的最后一笔：生命作为空间的参与者与定义者。在产出生命时艺术家用了“复合土壤”这个比喻——我们所处的现实早已包含各种人造和合成技术。在这种场景之下，我们将再度考虑合成生物学与生态的多重伦理关系。

如果说《永生的城市》是提供了一个“无自然的生态”的微缩视角，那么同样注重生成过程的梁绍基在“时间与永恒”系列 (1993-2018) 中将蚕丝视为蚕的生产结果和生存痕迹，带有更加现实的比喻。蚕在带刺的铁丝上吐丝，形成有着幽灵般质感的三角锥体，艺术家再将这个结构带到全世界各处体现人类文明高峰的建筑前，这些画面毫不含糊地诘问：与蚕同为生命体的我们，脱离文明语境之后是否仍有不同？在反思人类至上主义的背景下，我们是否与其他生命体达成一种新的，有机的相处——抑或这种反思单纯是一种属于人类特有的道德表达？

苏珊·安卡尔和梁绍基的作品让人不断地想起生物圈二号的实验。这个乌托邦式实验的最初目的是为了测试在闭合空间中维持一个基础生态系统的可行性，旨在研究各种生物、生物群落以及人类活动相互作用而产生的生态网络，在不伤害地球的前提下，对生物圈进行研究与控制。

在生物圈二号1994年宣告密闭环境住人测试失败之后，世界对控制生命体环境的幻想并未就此停止。组织培养和艺术计划 (奥隆·凯茨和伊奥纳特·祖尔 [Oron Kattis & Ionat Zurr]) 与德文·沃德 (Devon Ward) 在作品《护理与控制的容器：堆肥孵化器4》(2016-) 中直接对“生物圈”那精妙，自给自足的生命幻想给出了答案：生命自身并不是如同实验室中那样独立与可控制的。恰恰相反，生命中生成的魅力、其美感，以及生命的关键性更可能在精细的技术控制之外体现。正如展览中艺术家们所展示出的那样，规范、克制并方整的作品形式之下溢出了微小但蓬勃，不可掌控的生命。

一文/ 辛荣

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