



## Together Forever

Caroline A. Jones discusses “Symbionts,” biology, and mutual responsibility



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*Art historian Caroline A. Jones and curators Natalie Bell and Selby Nimrod have organized “Symbionts: Contemporary Artists and the Biosphere,” an exhibition on view at the MIT List Visual Arts Center through February 26, 2023. The fourteen included artists explore what it means to be interdependent or collaborative through their engagement with living entities such as fungi and bacteria. The exhibition grows out of research and conversations with a panoply of artists, scientists, and philosophers and is accompanied by an extensive catalog, published with MIT Press, that includes newly commissioned essays, reprints of important writing, and a roundtable discussion on symbiosis, reciprocity, and Indigenous epistemologies. —Brian Sholis*

**Frontier:** Language is an important aspect of ideas gaining widespread acceptance. In the catalog, you talk about how [Anicka Yi](#), one of the most well-known artists in the show, is a prolific phrase-coiner, and about how many of the exhibition’s keywords—plants, culture—have multiple meanings.

**CAJ:** I’m in the neologism corner myself, though I recognize we should be sparing with coining new words. Anicka and I have productive arguments about this. Language is, above all, something that brings us together—and can bring us *along* together. It’s fascinating—and sometimes distressing—to watch how words get pushed and pulled into new uses. For example, global companies still use vegetal words for purely industrial agriculture—hogs are “ripened” before being “harvested” and “processed.” We’ll need new words to help us understand how things are connected on a planetary scale. I think words associated with life should remain the purview of the living. *Bios* should be yoked to the biosphere.

**Frontier:** The artworks in the show are presented individually, as per display convention. But because several are enacting biological processes during the show, is there a situation in which the artworks might commingle? Could that also be a metaphor for ideas and for creativity?

**CAJ:** That would be cool, though hard to track. Could a spore in one artwork “contaminate” another? If one of [Kiyon Williams](#)’s microbes starts growing on one of [Nour Mobarak](#)’s spheres, does she recognize it as being from Kiyon’s work?

I’ll say, one giant pressure when mounting this exhibition was the justifiable concern of MIT’s environmental-health-and-safety team. Anytime the word *fungus* is introduced, anxieties flare up—as was so beautifully expressed in Mary Douglas’s 1966 book *Purity and Danger*. There’s another reference to the ’60s.

What’s interesting here is that these artists are willingly collaborating with unknown entities. That requires a tremendous amount of care, of forethought. I’m grateful to the artists, their collaborators, and all the teams at MIT who helped make the show happen. Their efforts are in some sense an example of the openness and connectedness we hope the show models.