

Entangled Relations— Animated Bodies

A project by Sonja Bäümel, commissioned by the
MAK – Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna

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**More info can be found in
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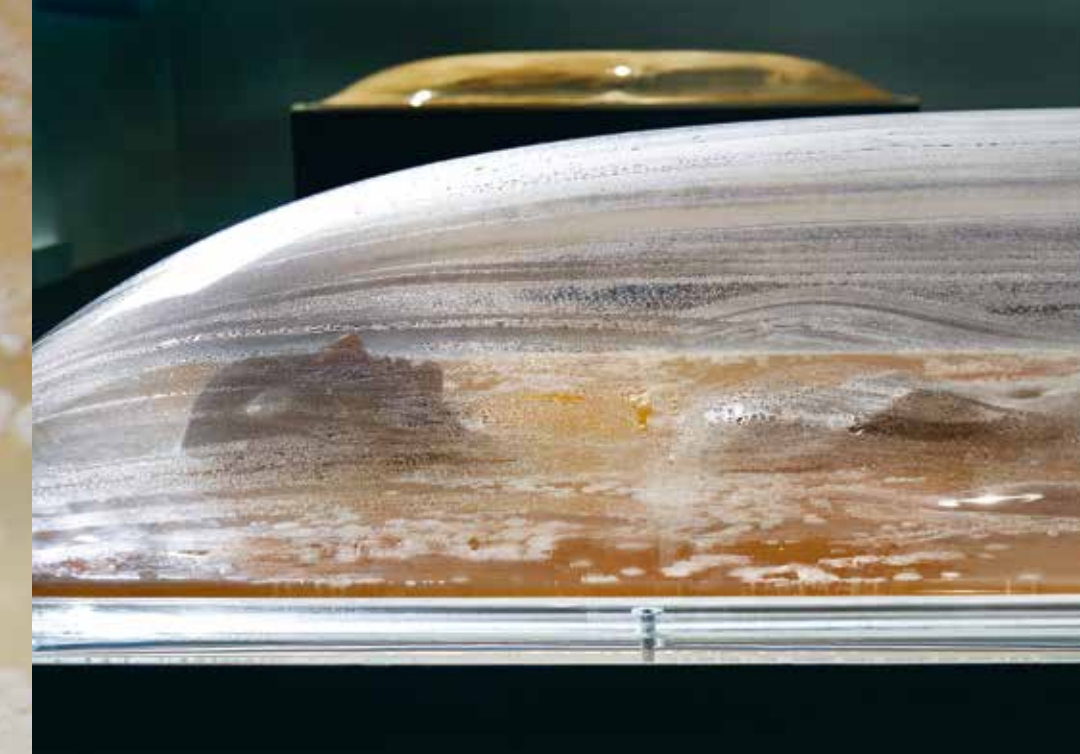
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**Entangled
Relations
Animated
Bodies**

Unknown Unknowns
An Introduction to Mysteries

Official Austrian Contribution to the 28th
Triennale Milano International Exhibition

Triennale
Milano

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Official Austrian Contribution to the
23rd Triennale Milano International Exhibition

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Austria's official entry for the 23rd Triennale Milano International
Exhibition 2022 with the theme *Unknown Unknowns. An Intro-
duction to Mysteries* was commissioned by the MAK – Museum of
Applied Arts, Vienna, and funded by the Federal Ministry for Arts,
Culture, the Civil Service and Sport.

The performed and multisensory installation *Entangled Relations—
Animated Bodies* by the artist Sonja Bäümel aims to stimulate the
cultural imagination via the potential of microorganisms. It seeks
to alter our perception of the limits of human bodies and explores
what the microbial paradigm shift may mean for cross-being
boundaries. Exploring the vital relationships, bonds, and intercon-
nections between our bodies and the microbes that cohabit them,
it invites visitors to wonder, observe, and understand what it might
mean to embody the human in a more-than-human world.

Magnified 40,000 times, a larger-than-life sculpture of an amoeba
makes the human body appear small and fragile and expands in
multiple directions, linking piece by piece with the transparent
fragments of a human figure riddled with microbial inclusions. The
dynamic projection of a real amoeba overlays the installation and
is accompanied by sound transmitting the bubbling vitals of the
microbial world. The installation will be brought to life by choreog-
rapher and performer Doris Uhlich on several occasions.

By unfolding, shifting, and fragmenting the so-called "body bound-
aries" of human bodies, the work draws attention to the interde-
pendence between moving, seeing, and touching bodies and their
constant exchange with microbial milieus, revealing unrecognized
forms of movement, intelligence, and communication.



Entangled Relations— Animated Bodies

Text by Sonja Bäümel

One of the central paradoxes of anatomy [is] the
use of dead bodies to teach about living ones.¹

When looking at the history of anatomical depiction over
the past centuries, we notice a radical change in what
"being human" means, in a medical, biological, social, and
cultural sense. Analyzing anatomical images allows us to
see how conceptions of the self, ideas about what it means
to be a person, and related knowledges or overall beliefs
have changed over time [fig. 1]. Furthermore, the study of
anatomical models helps us decipher how historically spec-
ific conventions of collaboration and correspondence, as
well as mutual rejection or opposition, between artists and
anatomists have provoked epistemological and ontological
shifts in understandings of human embodiment. While early
illustrations in anatomical studies [fig. 3]² showed a rich en-
semble of imaginary figurations and artistic adornments that
contained humor, playfulness, and allusion, "today's scien-
tific imaging [fig. 2] sticks to a straight and narrow path that
does not allow deviations or correspondences between the
anatomical body and the moral, political, and social world,
fun and pleasure."³ Images of the self are closely related to
a person's inner reality, to one's sense of self and others,
and to the intimate perception of one's own body. However,
images of human bodies are also dependent on emergent
market practices and social identities, cultural definitions of
the private and the public sphere, and ongoing processes of
state formation and community building. Modeling bodies
in a mental and physical sense is also a way of modeling
community.⁴

[When] I think about my body and ask what it
does to earn that name, two things stand out.
It moves. It feels. In fact, it does both at the
same time.⁵



fig. 1
Illustration by Megan Diddle, 2017
© the artist



fig. 2
From: Paulsen/Waschke, *Sobotta
Atlas der Anatomie* [Sobotta Atlas of
Anatomy], 24th edition 2017
© Elsevier GmbH, Urban & Fischer,
Munich



fig. 3
From: Juan Valverde de Amusco (ca.
1525 – ca. 1588), *Anatomia del corpo
humano* [Anatomy of the Human
Body], Rome 1560, 64

How, then, can anatomical models be modeled, shown,
seen, and experienced so that they represent the *living
body*? *Entangled Relations—Animated Bodies* attempts to
shape alternative corporeal models to unsettle representa-
tions of the static body and to celebrate the ephemeral and
the animated body, while illustrating the collapse of epider-
mic and trans-species boundaries.

The project is animated by amoebas' ability to alter their
shape by extending their liquid skin and by their ability
to blur what is and what is not an "individual." "Amoeba
colonies have the ability to morph from a seemingly un-
coordinated group of genetically identical single cells into
an aggregate 'slug' with an immune system, muscles, and
nerves with ganglia (that is, simple brains) and other orga-
nismic functionalities characteristic of multicellular species
with different roles played by identical cellular units. Social
amoebas queer the nature of identity, calling into question
the individual/group binary."⁶

Why should our bodies end at the skin,
or include at best other beings encapsulated
by skin?⁷

Hundreds of thousands of microorganisms of different
beings [fig. 4], including bacteria, archaea, eukaryotes,
viruses, yeasts, and parasites live in, on, and around a single
body and keep it alive [figs. 5 and 6]. Humans are walking
biotopes, which depend on the cooperation of these
different life forms in, on, and around the body for survival.

How can we think of bodies beyond the singular, as always
multiple and many? No matter how much we try to dis-
tance ourselves from the multi-being world by sterilizing
and isolating our bodies, we must finally accept that we are



fig. 4
Sonja Bäümel, *expanded self II*, 2015



fig. 5
Sonja Bäümel, *expanded self*, 2012



fig. 6

just a tiny interdependent part of the environment, within a
constantly adapting and fluid co-evolution [fig. 7]. It appears
that we are slow to understand that we cannot escape the
vital relations and entanglements between bodies and their
ecosystems, rooted in "more-than-human sociality"⁸ and
microbial heritage. That said, there is an urge to awaken
human bodies [fig. 8] in order to rethink, reshape, and
deepen the comprehension of elementary aspects of our
being-in-the-world.

Inspired by Jules Sturm's concept of the absence of bodies
in bodily representations, I am convinced that the human
body can only be represented in and through aliveness and
movement. Hence, performance appears to be the most
suitable approach for actualized, contemporary, dynamic
corporeal "models." Sturm uses the concept of bodily
absence as a tool to analyze the correlation between the
bodies' absence in images which *de*-pict them.

If viewers are confronted with the negative
aspect of visual presence in art, they become
aware of the constructed relation between living
bodies and their representations. [...] The idea of
absence disrupts the seeming coherence of this
relation, and helps to develop alternative ways
of imaging or imagining those bodies that have
been subjected to representational stereotyping
and pictorial neglect.⁹

What if we imagine the human body as a locus of muddled
and entangled relations, "thinking against categories such
as species, sex, [...] as a locus of social and biological
categories in motion and in transition?"¹⁰
Through this performed installation, *Entangled Relations—
Animated Bodies* aims to make the inseparable and



fig. 7



fig. 8
Sonja Bäümel, *microbial
entanglement*, 2019
© Robert Schittko

seemingly invisible entanglements and relations among
bodies and their ecosystems (human and more-than-hu-
man) visible, tangible, walkable, wearable, recognizable,
readable, and changeable. The focus of the artwork lies
on the dynamic play with the viewer's perception through
which the "anatomy" of a human body cracks and breaks
open. Within such a context, the boundaries of the human
body dissolve and skin becomes blurry and fluid, suggesting
that the human figure is never to be considered singular,
but continuously shaped by and interdependent on its
environments.

By unfolding, shifting, and decomposing the so-called
"body boundary," the artwork exposes the relations be-
tween the responsive, moving, seeing, and touching body,
and its perpetual exchange with its sustaining milieus,
revealing unknown forms of movement, intelligence, and
communication.

In this way, *Entangled Relations—Animated Bodies* expres-
ses the potential for *enlivening* the anatomical model as a
performative walking biotope, engaging the imaginary and
the factual in a mutual dialogue. By doing so, the project
creates an environment that inspires the visitor to reflect
about, yet also to wonder, feel, touch, enjoy, and understand,
what it might mean to embody "the human" today.

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October 2015 until October 2016 and
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