

# Rotten Energy

## *Spaces with Consciousness*

### Daniel Lie

Over a span of several years, I have been in a constant process of making installations that deal with the state of matter in transformation. In this essay, that process is revealed through a careful and intimate look at my practice and the fundamental questions it has raised, especially with regard to the other-than-humans—who may be fungi, plants, virus, bacteria, deities, spirits, entities, animals... Below I write about how four specific artworks have contributed to these thoughts.

#### Part 1—Cohabiting *Observations from Practice*

*PODRERA*  
(Kampnagel, Hamburg, Germany, 2016)

With experimentation and observation as my main sources of study, I have tried to understand energy generation processes based on rotting. A turning point happened while I was building *PODRERA*, a monumental installation, in Germany. ‘Podrera’ is a Brazilian-Portuguese slang word that means large-scale putrefaction—or also a very bad situation.

Inside a pavilion with black linoleum flooring, without direct incidence of sunlight, this work was completely composed of organic elements. A ten-meter-long tubular sack of burlap fabric filled with straw that was covered in mud, was suspended three meters above the ground; it surrounded a standing totem pole made of a tree trunk completely covered in hand-tied flowers. White cotton fabric connected the suspended ring to the base of the totem and to two large hay rolls. On the surface of the jute ring flax seeds were sprouting.

At some point during the assemblage, we had to move one of the large hay. That roll had been standing there for a few days, and its lower part, which was in contact with the floor, had a little bit of soil mixed in with it. When we shifted the roll an expansive heat made us jump back. It felt like something completely unexpected—a phenomenon.

The shock caused by that experience got me thinking:  
*How did this soil heat up by itself? What caused this?  
What processes were we witnessing?*

These were the kinds of questions that were sparked and led me to further investigate the relationships with otherness, which I discovered are mainly caused by the presence of fungi.

*Between the Bless and the Curse*  
(Biennale Jogja XIV, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 2017)

The following year, in Indonesia, this research developed further. I carried out a practice of collecting fungi from rotten rice, then mixing it with sugar water to create a living liquid.<sup>1</sup> I then added the liquid to dry rice and distributed it among 127 ceramic pots that were the central elements of the installation. 127 is the number of people comprised in seven generations, which in some spiritual beliefs that are related to the context of Asian cultures is said to be the amount of karma<sup>2</sup> we carry throughout our lives. Beyond these vases, the installation consisted of flags with portraits of my ancestors hanging from the ceiling, made with the traditional Indonesian *batik* technique. The walls were painted with horizontal bands of vibrant rainbow colors.

The exhibition space was a hot room, with no natural light or windows, and most of the time during the assemblage, it would be dark—the perfect conditions for fungal life. My expectation was that as the fungi propagated, they would come out of the pores of the ceramic vessels, demonstrating their colors on the surface—thus making their existence noticeable to human eyes and human understanding—and that, with time, these living beings would exude some kind of mild odor, hopefully a pleasant one.

However, the result was quite the contrary: the room was filled with a stench—a total, inescapable, and enveloping presence. It was a smell like human feces, and it created an invisible spatial layer we could only perceive through our noses. By this a condition of entry and permanence, like a permission, or maybe some kind of imposed authority, had been established. In order to stay there in the space, one had to endure the stench.

1 I would cook rice and let it rest in the soil, covered by leaves, at the base of a banana tree, for about three days; after that, I would uncover it to find colored fungi in pink, yellow, black, and white; I'd collect the yellow and white ones and deposit them in a bucket filled with a watery solution saturated with sugar; two days later, the surface of the liquid would be taken up by a living membrane.

2 'Karma can be understood as a dynamic and conscious action that results in an effect. According to this belief, our actions, our past actions, affect us in a positive or negative way, and our present actions will influence our future. Actions that lead to good karma are based on compassion—generosity, kindness, sympathy, and wisdom. On the contrary, acting with greed and hatred will result in bad karma. The key understanding of this belief system is that eventually we are in control of our final destination.' Text

From that point on, what mattered the most was to observe the relationship of the visitors with the space. I watched people entering and immediately leaving in a hurry, making retching sounds. Other people, probably interested by the graphics of the bright colored walls of the installation, would take a self-portrait (a selfie), which created a paradox between beautifully posing for social media while being embraced by the fetid smell of the space. One person in particular caught my attention: they entered and stayed longer than the average person would stay, so I was able to witness their near-catatonic reaction: looking at everything around them in detail—the ceiling, the walls and the floor—their facial and body expression seemed as if they were overwhelmed by an invasion of information that was being received simultaneously through the eyes, nose, and the whole body.

From these observations, I came to realize the degree to which these fungi regulated how long we humans could be there. If we wanted to spend time in such a space, we needed to respect and accept the conditions of existence of those beings. Once the barrier of stench was surpassed and one got used to its smell, it was possible to stay longer. From this experience, the following questions emerged:

*Does the smell of rotting remind us that everything deteriorates?*

*Is the aversion to the smell a reaction of fear that this process will also happen to us?*

*Once we face this possibility, what are the barriers to be crossed?*

*What do we need to change in order to transmute these existential struggles?*

*Quing*

(Jupiter Artland, Scotland, United Kingdom, 2019)

In Scotland, we created a space called *Quing*, which is a word that relates to royalty, but not in a binary gender logic: it is neither a queen nor a king. This space, within my exhibition *The Negative Years*, had as a protagonist, as a partner of

from the Archaeological  
Museum of the Buddhist  
temple of Borobudur,  
Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

3 The organic compost would produce temperatures up to 60/70 degrees Celsius through biodigestion, an anaerobic decomposition process; we inserted plastic pipes in it, in order to create a closed stream of water that would perform as a heating system: as temperatures rose inside the compost pile, they heated the water inside the pipes, and the circuit would carry the energy throughout the room to huge copper tubes that emanated and modified the ambient temperature.

creation and authorship, an other-than-human realm of interconnected beings.

One length of the space shared a wall with the outside, and on the outer side of this wall more than a ton of organic compost was decomposing, set there to work as a bio-heater.<sup>3</sup> This was a direct outcome of one of the initial questions posed in *PODRERA*: how to generate energy from rottenness? Through the heat these other beings produced, they demonstrated their presence and their agency, which could be understood as a form of communication.

Inside the facility, this energy, the heat, also helped other lives to develop. Large tubular translucent plastic structures and ceramic pots were containers for fungi and bacteria. Invisible-to-the-eye fungi spores in the air, specific to that place, appropriated the ceramic vases and presented themselves through the porosity of the vessels. The large plastic tubes were filled with damp straw and mycelium of fungi (*Pleurotus salmoneo-stramineus*). Small holes in the transparent plastic membrane allowed oyster mushrooms to develop their pink-and-white fruiting bodies, while mold grew on the ceramic vases hanging from the ceiling. As in my previous installations, the other-than-humans demonstrated their presence through the communication channels that we humans are able to feel with our own bodies.

One day, while setting up the installation, the power of this presence became strikingly evident. In an intense process of more than 40 days building up and assembling this exhibition, I'd spent several hours every day inside the gallery, with these organisms already in full development. On this day, a visitor approached to ask me about the work's creative process, but as soon as I started to talk, the protagonism of that space turned on me—the air quality changed, my throat started to close, as if something was tightening my neck and thus making it difficult to talk and breath. I knew all along that several spores of these fungi were in the air, but in that shortness of breath, I understood that I was surrounded.

(Right now, as you read this, there are several of these fungi particles around you that are invisible to the naked eye. They are practically an omnipresence.)

The realization that while I was working for the installation, I did not feel any problem, nor bodily reaction, showed me that I was allowed to be there. But once that protagonism started to come back at me, the permission was revoked.

This feeling was amplified the day I completed the construction of the installation. As I prepared to leave and turned off all the lights in the space, I suddenly felt my stomach turning upside-down, as if my insides had been tightened and twisted—a sensation I'd never felt before. At that moment I understood that those presences were clearly demonstrating through my own body how long I could be in that space. After that, I left as soon as possible.

One last experience when the exhibition opened confirmed this even more. It was my final day in that country, and for every one of the five spaces I'd set for this exhibition, I took a concentration moment to thank and meditate on having managed and been allowed to bring those concepts to materiality. *Quing* was the main installation, and I left it for last. However, when I went there to say goodbye, due to some confusion I had locked myself out and was unable to enter the space. The frustration of not being able to have the final farewell moments with this work just emphasized how much those who were present, that conscience, did not allow my own presence to be there anymore.

I believe the hierarchy implied in the name *Quing* made its meaning very explicit: the space was not subjugated to anyone. If during the work *Between the Bless and the Curse* there was a feeling of an authority imposing itself through the fetid smell, in this one it was part of the space's personality—and I could only feel as a vassal of this ambience.

### *Âmago*

(São Paulo, Brazil, 2008–2011)

During *Quing's* assemblage, I followed the development of the fungal life with great excitement. Looking at it through the translucent membrane of plastic, I could see water droplets from fungi white matter on the straw emitting a humid breath.

The first time a pink body emerged from one of the breathing holes, I initially thought something had gone wrong and that there was an infection, but once I approached and looked closely, I realized that the neon pink thing was actually a mushroom. From that point on, its size would double every day and more and more different mushrooms would appear, revealing complex shapes and the splendor of their bodies. The fungi columns were over two-and-a-half meters high and were suspended vertically, so that these mushrooms could be seen from various angles.

One day, looking at a group of these beings, I realized that it strongly reminded me of a series of mandala-like<sup>4</sup> drawings that I'd been obsessively making ten years before, called *Âmago* (the core).<sup>5</sup>

In a process of four years, while graduating in Fine Arts, I made this image in several media and sizes: as engravings, free-hand drawings, murals, and filling pages and pages of sketchbooks. Each drawing would start from a small round shape, teardrop-like, which I would then reproduce countless times, expanding the movement from the center to its margins, until it became an abstract figurative design.

To draw these mandalas was a visual meditation: at a certain point the concentration and focus on it would silence all thoughts. Now, ten years later, remembering those drawings as I looked at the shapes of the mushrooms in the *Quing* installation, I felt the moment as a break in the linearity of time, an anachronistic crossing between memory, communication and energy.<sup>6</sup>

I had already asked myself exactly when my relationship with fungi and other-than-humans in research and communication began. Until then, I believed it was when I was surprised by the presence of heat under that hay roll in Germany. But finding resonance between these similar shapes—the mushrooms and my drawings—made me wonder whether the fungi were already communicating and offering me images and access to thoughts long before that. This disruption of time felt as if an agent of the beyond-human from *Quing* had timetraveled to 2008 to offer me the first glimpses of ideas to create that very same space.

4 The Sanskrit word 'mandala' is a compound deriving from *manda*, which means 'essence,' and the suffix *la*, meaning 'container' or 'possessor.' Consequently, 'the etymology of the word "mandala" suggests not just a circle but a "container of essence".' Source: [newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/mandala#cite\\_note-5](http://newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/mandala#cite_note-5) ('Sacred Art and Geometry: Buddhism Mandalas. Religion Facts. Retrieved October 4, 2008').

5 *Âmago*, in Brazilian-Portuguese, means the deepest and most intimate component in one's being.

6 Another possible dimension of those drawings is that they offered me an abstract floor plan for what was to come: the snake was biting its own tail, like the Oroboros mythological creature, proving that ends and beginnings are not separable.

Part 2—Tuning and Calibrating  
*Spaces with Consciousness*

Throughout my work experience, I have been invited to create installations for places that had been used for other reasons in the past—such as warehouses, abandoned homes, animal shelters, old school buildings... In each location, as my first encounter with the place, I open myself, becoming receptive and seeking to attune to the resonances expressed through its architectures and histories: what happened there before and what memories it holds. It's a process of introducing ourselves to each other.

When the elements of the installation are offered to the place, this is the moment in which the collective processes of other-than-human existence choreographed for that space activate. The memories of these spaces echo through the actions of these others.

If a space has many elements that are decaying, changing, and transforming, many possibilities of living entities are there—beyond the visible and invisible. It is like its own ecosystem: the conjunction of these beings together in one ambience, the relationship among them and the negotiation for their coexistence.

*Does this unique configuration, this conjunction of many coexistences and mechanisms of communication, constitute a collective consciousness? And is survival one of their objectives?*

I believe that humans/humanity—in the interest of our own survival—should search for better means to relate with the plurality of these other-than-humans, in the many ways they exist. If we take a careful look, live together, and respect them, they can activate us and give us agency too. By demonstrating other forms and possibilities of existing, they become teachers with whom we can learn and unlearn.

Part 3—Liberating  
*Rotten Energy: Expanding Decay*

Plump, ripe, glossy, fresh, juicy. At a supermarket, or when a tree offers its fruit, there are natural criteria on how to choose what's fit for consumption. Aesthetic and sensorial elements give us tips on how this will taste later, but as soon as we find a disruption on it—like a bruise, marks of a bird's beak or the presence of mold—the selection process is abruptly interrupted and we reject that fruit. The criteria of what's suitable or not suitable for us, involves many subjective values that ultimately add up to yes or no, eat or not.

If we were to analyze the values behind this spontaneous selection, we might come across the *presence of others* as being one of its main reasons: a bruise might mean that this fruit was not properly taken care of before our encounter; a bird's beak mark that it has already been eaten by something else; and in the case of the presence of mold, a variety of values could be found in this microscopic abundant life. In all these instances, the time to be eaten by humans or other animals is perceived as having already gone by.

At the same time, animals and life forms that feed on rotted matter are in popular culture considered to be the ones that feed from death.

*In this sense, is mold in food a vision of death?*

When we are performing the simple act of selecting food on a daily basis, aren't we actually applying the choice criteria between life or death? 'This apple looks alive, this carrot looks semi alive, that banana is way dead...'

Above all, this reflects one thing only: how in our daily mundane activities we are persistently rejecting death. In any image of it, in anything that makes our programmed minds remember the linear narrative of 'birth/growth/aging/death' we are constantly imprinting these values—even in simple tasks such as choosing a fruit to eat.

My proposition at this moment is one that may allow us to make peace with this process, which is not only present in ourselves but will ultimately arrive for all of us: the



transformation of the body. Before automatically hitting the discard button the next time we are choosing something to eat, take a close look at the life that is going on there, and think about possible narratives:

*Can we picture how the bird that ate the fruit was?  
Does the bite tell us the size of this animal?  
Was this fruit enough to satisfy its hunger?*

Then, move on to the one we might fear the most: the rottenness in the mold.

*Look at its colors: how many life forms are present there?  
How is the rotting process changing this single element, this fruit, into something more?*

More than a fruit, more than a vegetable—now there are other lives present.

Look at their formation and perceive how they might resemble forest photographs taken from above, or how they might present as something completely different from what you've seen before—possibly because we were constantly told to not even look at these processes.

Now take a step back, and look at this fruit as if it were your own body: also a living being, made of organic, perishable matter that will deteriorate one day. Digesting food in our stomachs requires an ecosystem of elements to break down the organic matter. From acids to bacteria, the complexity in our digestive systems that provides nourishment to keep us alive is the same one that will eventually start to decompose us. A few moments after corporeal death, the bacteria present in our stomach will start to eat our own flesh. We have within ourselves the key components to rot us.

Rottenness comes from within. It is always present in us.

*Now let's look again at the fruit: does the fruit also contain in itself the intrinsic elements for its own decay?*

As it perishes, a fruit becomes many things: the home and shelter for flies to multiply, food for bacteria and fungi, substrate for the soil. All these possibilities were already constituents of the fruit when it existed—and likewise they are constituents of us.

*In what ways can we stop refusing these processes in ourselves?*

We are also going to be the houses of these others, we too will expand our bodies into the landscape.

The idea of dying is polluted by concepts that narrow it down to just considering that our egocentric existence will cease. Looking for other possibilities of death, many agents can contribute to this experience, decomposing us so that we materially integrate with soil, air, and water.

The power of decay can be used as a portal. To break human concepts that trap us in the rejection that our own selves have a path of expansion into the environment.

*As my ancestors have already perished, can a rock be my relative?*

*When we die, do we cease to be humans and instead become other-than-humans?*

The idea here is to expand the concept of rotting beyond the binary of life and death, and to understand that within this process there is no start or end. It has always been present—this is the *Rotten Energy*.

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