



PRESS RELEASE

The Frankfurter Kunstverein meets the Senckenberg Naturmuseum

Trees of Life—Stories for a Damaged Planet

10/10/2019–19/01/2020

With: Sonja Bäumel, Edgar Honetschläger, Dominique Koch, Studio Drift, and exhibits from the Senckenberg Collections

Press tour: Tuesday, October 8, 2019, 11 am
Opening: Wednesday, October 9, 2019, 7 pm

From October 10, 2019 to January 19, 2020, the Frankfurter Kunstverein, in cooperation with the Senckenberg Naturmuseum, will present *Trees of Life—Stories for a Damaged Planet*, an interdisciplinary exhibition project that leads our gaze from a historically cultivated, anthropocentric worldview to a systemic understanding of humans as a part of the evolutionary process.

The invited artists include Sonja Bäumel (Austria, lives and works in Amsterdam), Edgar Honetschläger (Austria, lives and works in Vienna, Rome, and Tokyo), Dominique Koch (Switzerland, lives and works in Basel and Paris), and the artist collective Studio Drift (Netherlands, lives and works in Amsterdam). An entire room is devoted to each of the participants. Artworks are spatially juxtaposed with exhibits from the collections of the Senckenberg Gesellschaft für Naturforschung.

Today, our image of nature is governed by mathematical and economic perspectives and interpretive models. Numbers, facts, and measurements—today often compiled under the heading “big data”—are gathered with the help of computers and subsequently translated into models. This knowledge is vitally important for gaining insights, understanding complex relationships, and conceiving ideas regarding greater causality. At the same time despite the subjectivity of the individual and their existential experience of finitude surely deriving meaning from this information, our minds are unable to ascribe knowledge to the subjectivity of being purely through facts and figures. The concept of an “ecosystem,” for example, may seem abstract and distant. Yet how many individual entities, how many individual fates, which mutual relationships and reciprocal processes are actually covered by this term? It is these narratives and their entanglement with the greater whole that bind and merge the abstractions of vast numbers with individual existences.

The belief that both art and science possess the ability to render expanded forms of knowledge tangible gave rise to the idea for the exhibition. Surprising configurations of contemporary art in

dialogue with exhibits from the Senckenberg Collections await visitors to the Frankfurter Kunstverein.

The exhibition encompasses all of the Frankfurter Kunstverein's exhibition spaces and is curated by Franziska Nori, Director of the Frankfurter Kunstverein, in cooperation with Philippe Havlik from Museum Development at Senckenberg. Numerous Senckenberg researchers have contributed their scientific expertise to the collaborative project. The exhibition developed out of several years of discussions between Volker Mosbrugger, Director General of the Senckenberg Gesellschaft für Naturforschung, and Franziska Nori, Director of Frankfurter Kunstverein. A recurring question in these discussions was how factual knowledge from the sphere of numerical abstraction can be translated into an experienced reality.

For more than two hundred years the **Senckenberg Gesellschaft für Naturforschung** has been working to study and understand nature in its infinite variety of life forms, in order that it may be preserved and used sustainably as the basis of life for future generations. Senckenberg's main undertakings are integrative research into "geobiodiversity" and the mediation of research and science. The three nature museums in Frankfurt, Görlitz, and Dresden reflect the diversity of life and Earth's development over millions of years.

In understanding art as an intermediary between specialist knowledge from numerous research fields, theoretical positions, and real life, **Frankfurter Kunstverein** has favored working with artists who address questions of digital culture, natural sciences, and humanities as the starting point for their research for many years. With its unique freedom, art can open up other perspectives and search for broader contexts that ask questions about meaning for both people and society. The encounter with the work in the space creates aesthetic experiences for the viewer, which not only enables them to understand, but also to feel through the power of poetry.

The exhibition project is accompanied by a series of **panel discussions** in which authors, scientists, economists, and politicians explore this thematic spectrum together.

Professor Volker Mosbrugger, Director General of the Senckenberg Gesellschaft für Naturforschung: "The collaboration between the Senckenberg Naturmuseum and the Frankfurter Kunstverein aims to strengthen interdisciplinary exchange and increase public awareness of the dialogue between science, art, and society."

Professor Franziska Nori, Director of Frankfurter Kunstverein: "At the center of the first joint exhibition, *Trees of Life*, is the ever changing—yet always conflict-ridden and ambivalent—relationship between humans and nature, and how our own understanding of our species and our actions must change in order to not inflict even more damage on our planet."

Curator: Franziska Nori

Scientific Consultant: Philippe Havlik

Header image: Dominique Koch, Holobiont Society, 2017, Copyright: Dominique Koch

Additional press material:

Comprehensive texts about the curatorial concept and information about the exhibits from the Senckenberg Gesellschaft für Naturforschung, the artists, and their works can be found on our press page. Press images are also available to download: <https://www.fkv.de/press/trees-of-life-erzaehlungen-fuer-einen-beschaedigten-planeten/>

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PRESS INFORMATION FOR THE EXHIBITION WALKTHROUGH

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The exhibition

The journey through the exhibition presents its own narrative thread that places artworks and scientific exhibits in relationship to each other.

Every era and culture has produced its own schools of thought and narratives, which are then discarded, developed further, or even forgotten about and subsequently rediscovered. Knowledge is situational, observes the historian **Donna Haraway**. Concepts of reality are bound up with the state of knowledge at a given time within a given culture, which lends our convictions their form of expression. At the same time, they also generate power structures and moral categories.

A selection of **visual metaphors** form the exhibition's opening act on the ground floor: from the Aristotelian Scala Naturae, a hierarchical arrangement of living beings, drawn by Charles Bonnet in 1781 with humankind at its pinnacle superior to all other creatures, to Charles Darwin's 1837 diary entry outlining evolution as the origin of creation for the first time in opposition to the divine principle. From Ernst Haeckel's Tree of Life (1884) to David Hillis' circular visualization representing thousands of species and their phylogenetic connections without any hierarchy in the twenty-first century. These **trees of life** visually capture how (Western) humankind has viewed itself as part of the structure of the world over centuries.

Visitors are led through the exhibition to a 225-million-year-old **fossilized tree**. Part of the collections of the Senckenberg Naturmuseum, the 1.7-ton trunk is from the Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona. Standing in the room at a height of over two meters, the trunk was fossilized under to specific conditions and is now a magnificently colored sculptural fossil. The exhibit

establishes a physical relationship between us and a temporal dimension that we can quantify but are unable to grasp or understand emotively.

An entire room on the first floor is dedicated to **Sonja Bäumel**. Her artistic work draws on a critique of so-called human exceptionalism as she brings the privileged position of humans into question. Bäumel's work emerges against the backdrop of current scientific findings, which state that 50% of the human body consists of microorganisms: it coexists with them in complex symbiotic interactions. A comprehensive display was conceived with the artist for the exhibition at Frankfurter Kunstverein, in which several of her works are presented. The materials for her artistic works are microorganisms from her own skin that she uses to create living exhibits.

In the adjacent exhibition space, Frankfurter Kunstverein presents the film *Symbiotic Earth*, which celebrated its world premiere at the University of Oxford in 2017. Microbiologist **Lynn Margulis** helped to substantiate James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis with her microbiological findings. With an academic background as a philosopher who came to biology through evolutionary genetics and worked at various universities, Margulis defended a different interpretation of evolution, as the result of symbiogenesis: the fusion of two living beings into one organism.

In the exhibition, the film about Lynn Margulis is placed in a spatial dialogue with **stromatolites** from the collection of the Senckenberg Naturmuseum. The fossils were formed over 560 million years ago out of layers of primeval cyanobacteria. In the film Margulis points out that cyanobacteria is the primordial cell of all life and also a source of free oxygen in the atmosphere. Countless numbers of these bacteria can be identified in the cross section, testifying to a centuries-long sequence of growth and decay.

The Trier University of Applied Sciences has developed an immersive installation with the Senckenberg Gesellschaft für Naturforschung. Visitors enter a digital world in which a **drop of water** and the life contained therein—radiolarians, cilia, euglena, and rotifers—can be experienced in a larger-than-life manner. The work will be shown for the very first time in the exhibition.

Edgar Honetschläger (*1968) is an artist and filmmaker. In his artistic practice, he concentrates on questioning cultural givens and humankind's relationship with nature. Honetschläger decided to raise his voice not only as an artist, but also as an activist as he no longer operates solely in the symbolic space of artistic production. He created the nonprofit organization GoBugsGo in 2018 and is committed to finding fellow campaigners worldwide. Against the backdrop of the past twenty years of drastic development that has seen the number and variety of insects dramatically decline globally, Honetschläger acts with a view to restoring habitats and permanently securing them as collective property, whether through donation or purchase, in order to transform them into spaces free of people. The exhibition presents GoBugsGo in Germany for the first time, dedicating a space to Honetschläger, where his activist project is presented alongside a historic **insect collection** from the the Senckenberg Gesellschaft für Naturforschung. The collection was created in Heidelberg in the nineteenth century and presents species from all over the world strung in 42 individual boxes. In their aesthetic display, the objects represent a human-conceived way of approaching nature.

On the upper floor is the work of the artist collective **Studio Drift**, founded by Lonneke Gordijn and Ralph Nauta in Amsterdam. Their works examine the relationship between people and the

things and technologies they have created. The exhibition presents the work series Materialism, which physically deconstructs everyday objects that symbolize our consumer driven society, such as the iPhone or a Nokia mobile phone. The numerous individual parts are then further broken down into the raw materials they are comprised of. Two other objects that play a central role in armed conflicts worldwide are part of Studio Drift's investigation. The M16 and AK 47 machine guns (both with cartridges) are among the best-known weapons in the world. All the objects were deconstructed and reverse engineered, first into their individual components and then into their chemical elements. We can no longer see the artifacts in their man-made form as industrially manufactured objects. We encounter them in their essence, in their reduction to their essential matter. Industrial products stand before us as pure raw materials that have been synthesized into abstract cubes; geometric forms that refer to the formal language of classical modernism and its principle of deconstruction.

In close proximity the exhibition presents the source of all the elements on our planet: the cosmos. On display are **moldavites and a meteorite** from the collection of the Senckenberg Gesellschaft für Naturforschung. Meteorites were formed 4.56 billion years ago at the birth of our solar system. Meteorites contain the chemical elements that make up our entire solar system and from which ultimately all life on our planet developed. For example, the water in our oceans comes from comets, the calcium and phosphorus in our bones from supernovae explosions, and the hydrogen in our cells is a primordial element from the Big Bang. An immersive **VR station** allows visitors to experience the force of a meteorite impact for themselves.

Dominique Koch concludes the journey through the exhibition. Her work represents a debate currently being led in numerous disciplines on the need to critically reexamine established hypotheses on the basis of knowledge. The film Holobiont Society is a montage of found footage with audio recordings of interviews with three internationally renowned scientists: Scott Gilbert, Maurizio Lazzarato, and Donna Haraway, as well as electronic music by Tobias Koch. The film begins with biologist Scott Gilbert's thoughts on so-called genetic determinism and then leads to Lazzarato's critique of capitalism and exploitation as its central theme. In third position, Donna Haraway challenges the idea of the privileged position of humankind. Koch manages to find a unique aesthetic form in which she emotionally charges fragments of discursive knowledge models.

Curator: Franziska Nori

Scientific Consultant: Philippe Havlik

Header image: Dominique Koch, Holobiont Society, 2017, Copyright: Dominique Koch

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