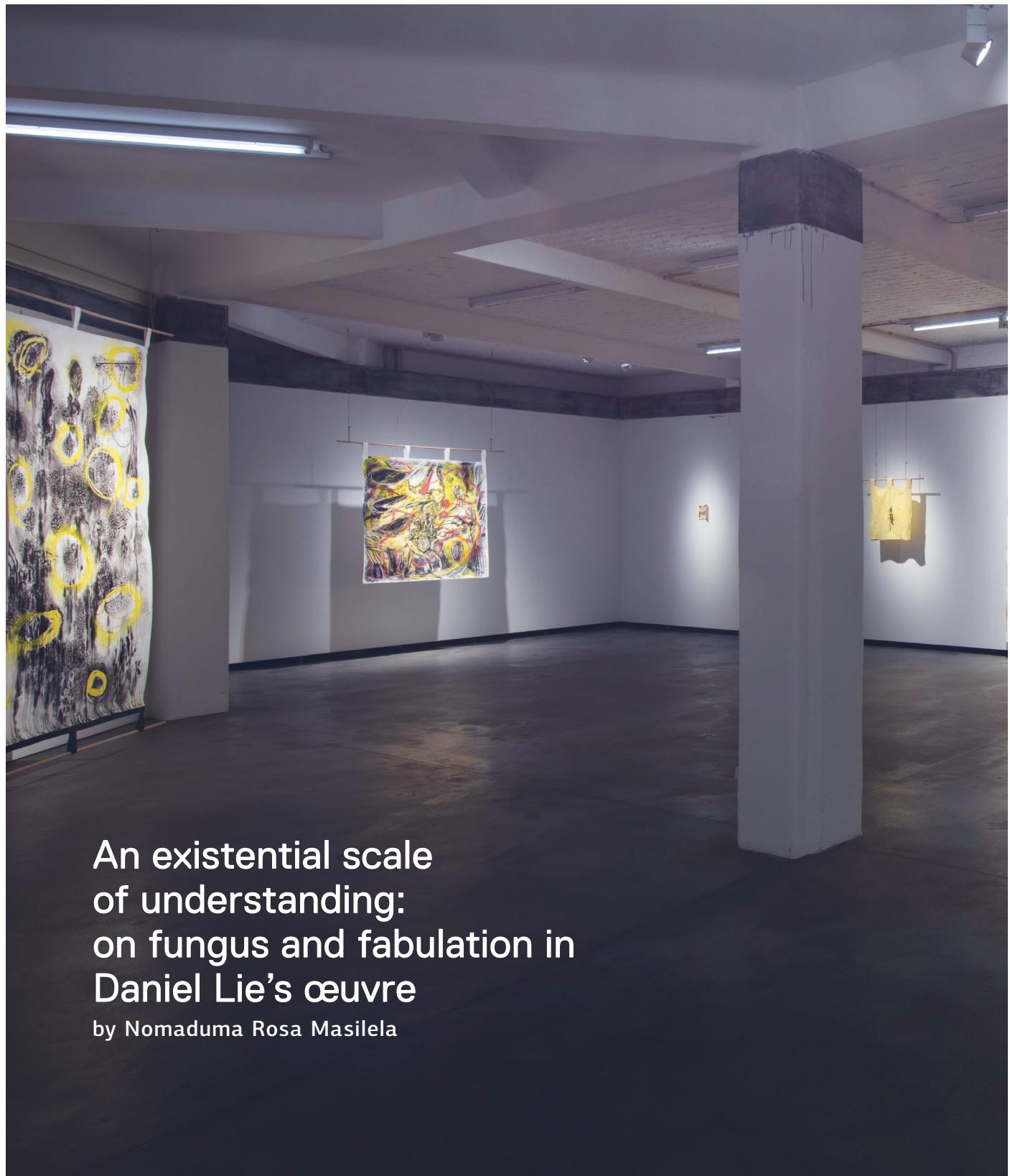


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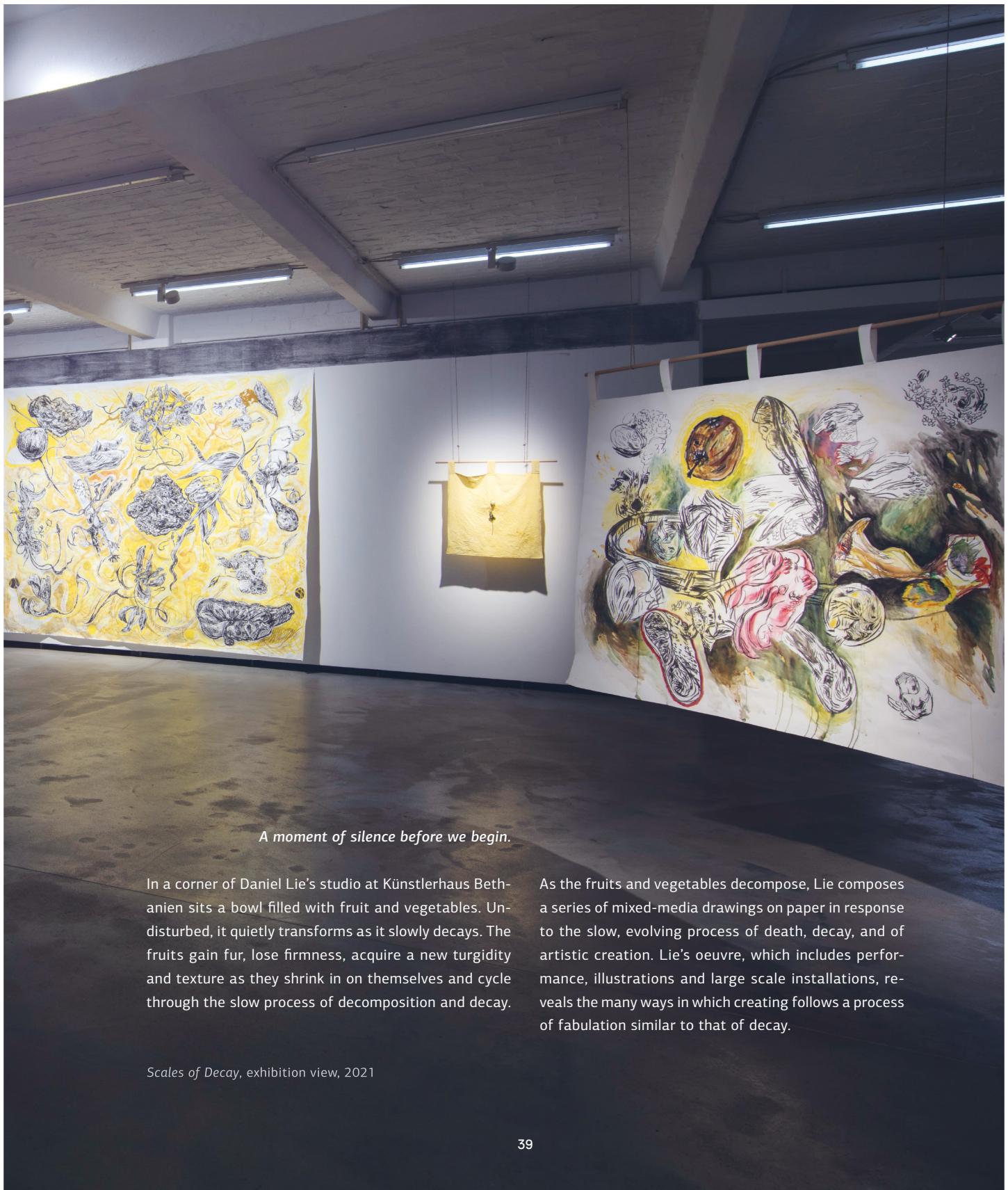
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An existential scale of understanding: on fungus and fabulation in Daniel Lie's œuvre

by Nomaduma Rosa Masilela



A moment of silence before we begin.

In a corner of Daniel Lie's studio at Künstlerhaus Bethanien sits a bowl filled with fruit and vegetables. Undisturbed, it quietly transforms as it slowly decays. The fruits gain fur, lose firmness, acquire a new turgidity and texture as they shrink in on themselves and cycle through the slow process of decomposition and decay.

Scales of Decay, exhibition view, 2021

As the fruits and vegetables decompose, Lie composes a series of mixed-media drawings on paper in response to the slow, evolving process of death, decay, and of artistic creation. Lie's oeuvre, which includes performance, illustrations and large scale installations, reveals the many ways in which creating follows a process of fabulation similar to that of decay.

A pastel and watercolour field of green and yellow serves as the background for a scattered cacophony of charcoal shapes, both figurative and abstract. *Scales of Decay* (2020) is a large-format multimedia work on paper that hangs from the ceiling on a wooden rod, like a banner, a hanging sheet, or a reinvented “jammer”. The work depicts a bowl of decomposing fruit exploded across the picture plane – a détournement of the core elements of a traditional still-life painting through a combination of dynamism, incompleteness, and a flurry of gesture and movement. Lie’s détournement of still-life stasis reflects a core philosophy of their practice which engages the decayed and rotten as expansive vectors through which to critically fabulate processes of life and death, loss and existence, narrative and enunciation, both within the experiences of human life and within those which Lie calls “other-than-human”.

Is silence an absence?

While on residency and living in Indonesia for an extended period of time for the first time in their life, Lie learned of the power of silence, which they described as not simply an absence of noise, but as another form of communication with matter. During this time, acclimatising to an unfamiliar country that their ancestors had called home, Lie had to “access the power of a specific silence. [...] Living here has been a process of rebirth, [...] to develop a new form of accessing my body.”¹ The rebirth that Lie experienced during their year in Indonesia was also fuelled by an online art and archival project which explored the history of their grandparents, who emigrated to Brazil from Indonesia in 1958. Titled *Toko Buku Liong* (2020), the project was web-hosted by the Cemeti Institute for Art and Society, and was a collaboration between Lie and curator Adelina Luft. It operated

as an effort to put together the biographical fragments of Lie’s family history before their immigration to Brazil and the archival remnants of the comic books that their grandparents produced through their family-run bookstore in Semarang, Indonesia, in the 1950s.² Combining personal narratives, artworks, as well as historical and archival research, the project was an affective archive that served as a “strategy to recover my Indonesian roots, undernourished due to 60 years of migration and 17,790 kilometres of distance”.³

Toko Buku Liong unfolded over four multilingual and multimedia chapters, operating as an exhibition, publication, and artwork which proposed an “alternative route from mainstream history and hope[d] to further generate conversations on authorship, subjectivities, and the role of Indonesian comics in the construction of a cultural identity”.⁴ Lie’s grandparents Lie Djoen Liem and Ong King Nio ran the Liong Bookstore throughout the 1950s, when the newly independent nation was forging a cohesive identity. A number of new and specifically modern forms of culture emerged in Indonesia and were popularised in the service of articulating a sense of nationhood – comic books in particular played an important role in shaping postcolonial subjectivity in both Indonesia and numerous other newly independent countries in the mid-twentieth century. Curator Okwui Enwezor wrote about the socio-political importance of comic books in independent African nations, describing them as “sites of subjectivity because they are symbols and signs for collective public speech” and concluding that “the comics are fundamentally embedded in the discursive and political structures that make new publics and counter-publics simultaneously”.⁵

1 Daniel Lie, Juliana Dos Santos, “60 years of migration and 17,790 kilometers away”, in *Terremoto*, Issue 19: *Planetary Solidarity – Ancestralità*. November 03, 2020 (<https://terremoto.mx/en/revisita/60-anos-de-migracion-y-17-790-kilometros-de-distancia/>, last accessed: May 19, 2021). Text translated from Spanish to English by Isabel Ruiz.

2 *Toko Buku Liong*, web-hosted by Cemeti Institute for Art and Society, Yogyakarta, Indonesia (August 4 – September 4, 2020) (<https://tokobukuliong.com>).

3 Daniel Lie, Juliana Dos Santos.

4 *Toko Buku Liong*.

5 Okwui Enwezor, “Rapport des forces: African comics and their publics”, in *Africa Comics* (on the occasion of the exhibition *Africa Comics*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, November 15, 2006 – March 18, 2007). New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006, pp. 18–19.

While comics shaped public opinion, they were also reflections of political schisms and contention. The *Wiro, Anak Rimba Indonesia* comic series that Lie's grandparents produced in 1957–58 (illustrated by Kwik Ing Hoo) chronicled the Tarzan-like adventures of a fair-skinned, Java-born teenage boy named Wiro. All of the ten volumes were conservative in their representations of racial and gender relations (i.e. patriarchal and imperialist), but this aspect possibly served as a veil to hide the producers' own increasing precarity and estrangement within an Indonesian national identity whose cohesion was predicated upon exclusion. As Lie explains: "Back then, comics were as influential as social media is today. In the process of creation of a new national identity, they purposefully excluded those of Chinese descent, like my family. It is ironic to think that the work that my ancestors created also reproduced the ideology that excluded them."⁶ Enwezor writes of similar fears (and realities) of political repression within comic production in colonial and postcolonial Africa, stating that "repression can force speech to strangle the speaker literally, because such a mode of expression can be taken as an excess of speech, as speech that exceeds the limits of its tolerability."⁷

In a way, Lie applies a principle of excess to his own oeuvre, such as in the large-scale drawing *Micro/Macro* (2020). The work on paper is an expansive efflorescence of movement and colour resisting any stable orientation; some white markings appear to delineate a form, while others appear to hover on the picture plane, referencing not only the decay of the central form represented, but the possibility of the eventual decay of its substrate, the paper. This double decay recalls scholar Achille Mbembe's theorisation on the double nature of the image in Cameroonian comics, which has the "ability to annex and mime what it represents, while, in the very act of representation, masking

the power of its own arbitrariness, its own potential for opacity, simulacrum and distortion."⁸ With *Micro/Macro*, Lie adopts the visual language of comics and expands it beyond the storyboard field of representation and into the experiential and somatic register of affect, similar to an earlier series of illustrations Lie produced for their *Toko Buku Liong* project, which reimagined a more politically complex and multivalent afterlife for the character in their grandparents' comic book. One such work, *Wiro and the consequences of patriarchy* (2020), offers a more metaphysical and affective narrative for Wiro that moves beyond the patriarchal, monocultural and exclusionary binaries imposed by the government and represented within the original Wiro comics.⁹ These works reflect Lie's interest in the scalar relationship between personal cosmologies and greater historical/experiential phenomena. Similarly, *Micro/Macro* and *Scales of Decay* are simply representations of objects rotting in a studio in Berlin as well as critical fabulations of existential quandaries.

Is absence a loss?

The cacophony of forms swirling around the central composition in *Scales of Decay* appear as though lost at sea, recalling the multilayered works of artist Ellen Gallagher, whose paintings similarly deploy a combination of abstracted representations of microscopic (sea) organisms and clear figuration to examine the complicated relationship between epistemology and power in narratives of the Middle Passage as well as to mark the immeasurable loss of life and memory caused by the Atlantic slave trade.¹⁰ Quite obviously, Lie and Gallagher do not share the same subject-matter; however, they share a similar concern for plumbing the depths of

8 Achille Mbembe, "Chapter 4: The thing and its double", in *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2001, p. 142.

9 These works can be found in "Jilid/Chapter IV: The specters of Wiro" of the *Toko Buku Liong* project (<https://tokobukuliong.com/the-specters-of-wiro/uncle-wiro/>).

10 See Ellen Gallagher's series *Watery Ecstatic* (2001–ongoing) and the work *Bird in Hand* (2006).

6 Daniel Lie, Juliana Dos Santos.

7 Enwezor, p. 19.

lost, unacknowledged and erased histories and sensibilities, which requires a narrative-making methodology like “critical fabulation”, a concept developed by scholar Saidiya Hartman. In response to the innumerable erasures of Black women within the archives that chronicle the Middle Passage, and with an acknowledged need for the construction of a narrative in the face of such profound epistemological and human loss, Hartman proposes a method which centres on speculative and subjective arguments in order to construct a narrative which can exceed the bounds of a traditional archive that is predicated on maintaining the inequities of power which constituted its existence in the first place, as well as one which “can embody life in words and at the same time respect what it cannot know”.¹¹

Toko Buku Liong was such an attempt, a concrete effort to create an affective archive mining the “countless might-have-beens” of “anachronism escombros [shadows]” left through dislodged, marginalised and forgotten histories.¹² With this work, Lie and their collaborator were able to make narrative reparation by crediting their grandmother as a co-author of *Wiro*, as she had consistently been effaced from authorship.¹³ There is a necessary and ethical imperative to this act of reparation; Hartman also reflects on the longing that such an erasure and loss engenders, and while she warns against certain actions which are simply about filling the void within the archive, she insists on “writing at the limit of the unspeakable and unknown” – a creative and historical methodology that is centred around the intention “both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling” in order to interrogate modes of knowledge production and assumed knowl-

hows rather than attempt to replace that which has been lost.¹⁴

Through loss, a presence.

Daniel and I both lost our fathers in the past year. A dedication written in ghostly pencil along the back of *Scales of Decay* reads “In memory of Lie Liang Khing * 01/12/1957 – Semarang / Indonesia – 17/04/2021 São Paulo / Brazil”, commemorating Lie’s father. The work memorialises their father not only in this written line, but in the formal relationship of the work to the comic storyboard, which connects to an at least three-generation lineage of illustrators within the Lie family: “Since [the] passing of my father I remembered this memory [of] asking my father to draw a large-scale popular comic book character, he glues some pieces of paper carefully and sketched calmly and paying attention [...] – for me that was one of my first introductions [to] being an artist.” At the same time, they also had a clear memory of the love felt by a child towards their parent.¹⁵

Micro/Macro visually represents the varying scales of existence – from the microscopic and singular to the expansive and cosmic. The work is based on a numerical tally of the exponentially increasing rate of the generational expansion of humans, which points to a central tenet of Lie’s practice, which has been ongoing since at least 2008. In that year, he produced a drawing titled *Âmago* (English: core of one’s being), which deployed a similarly abstracted microscopic mode. Another example is the collaborative performance created in 2018 with Juliana Dos Santos and Bruna Amaro titled *Ablution*, which drew on the Buddhist belief that we carry the lives of seven previous generations within us.¹⁶

11 Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in two acts”, in *Small Axe* (2008) 12(2), p. 3.

12 Daniel Lie, Adelina Luft, “Jilid/Chapter I – Escombros”. *Toko Buku Liong* website (<https://tokobukuliong.com/escombros/>).

13 “Daniel Lie on family, heritage, and the myth of origin”, in *Sugar Nutmeg* podcast, by Ruth Feriningrum and Alexandra Kumala, recorded 02/04/2021, 1hr 38 min (<https://play.acast.com/s/sugar-nutmeg/edbc6eaa-eb52-42e6-982f-b081abea6fd3>, last accessed: May 21, 2021).

14 Hartman, pp. 1 and 11.

15 Private message from Daniel Lie to author, sent on Wednesday, May 5, 2021.

16 *Ablution* was performed by Daniel Lie, Bruna Amaro and Juliana dos Santos on Saturday, April 28, 2018, at De Single, Belgium (<https://desingel.be/en/programme/festivals/daniel-lie-bruna-amaro-juliana-dos-santos-ablution>, last accessed: May 19, 2021).

Lie describes their time in Indonesia as one during which, “through searching for my ancestors’ stories, I found my own story and the process of understanding lead to an existential scale of understanding”.¹⁷ This “existential scale of understanding” is not predicated solely on anthropocentrism, but based on the inextricable and rhizomatic relation between life and death. As Lie explains: “When we die we become part of a group of beings that I recognise as other-than-human. [...] When their bodies disintegrate, they expand in the world, in the same manner that all of our mothers and ancestors have disintegrated. The rock can be my ancestor as well as my great-grandmother.”¹⁸ Their work exposes our close relationship to other non-human beings, described by Thich Nhat Hahn as “interbeing”, while also expanding the possibilities of a deeper relationship with the interrelated nature of life and death, and the cosmologies which frame our understanding of existence writ large. My own father, Dr. Ntongela Desmond Joseph Masilela (1948–2020) passed away from cancer; the same had befallen his father, and throughout much of my life I watched my father struggle with the impending possibility of a similar fate curtailing his life’s work. In her *Cancer Journals*, the poet Audre Lorde writes of her own fight with cancer and her fear of death, highlighting the immense process of releasing herself from the European ideas of death as abjection or as a cancelling of existence, and arriving at a deeply considered relation that allowed for a vigour and life force to empower her energies – i.e. her life’s work, regardless of how much time there is left to live. As she writes: “Yet once I face death as a life process, what is there possibly left for me to fear? Who can really have power over me again?”¹⁹ In conversation with the writings of Hartman and numerous other Black radical thinkers, the sociologist

Ruha Benjamin reflects about an alternate life force: “Yes, subordination, subjugation, subaltern, literally ‘under the earth,’ racialized populations are buried people. But there is a lot happening underground. Not only coffins, but seeds, roots and rhizomes. And maybe even tunnels and other lines of flight to new worlds, where alternative forms of kinship have room to grow and to nourish other life forms and ways of living.”²⁰ This belief also guides Lie’s practice, which addresses human and other-than-human realities. While Lie clearly is aware of the conceptual practices of artists who view art as shamanism, like Tunga and Joseph Beuys, they have been more ethically influenced by their mentor Mônica Nador, whose work focuses on building a sense of communion. The heart of Lie’s practice and oeuvre thus far have been large-scale installations that viewers can enter and that engage with alternative forms of kinship and ways of living, such as *Death Center for the Living* (2017), which was presented at Performeum as part of the Wiener Festwochen.

Composed of soils, minerals, plants, rotting fruit, flowers and two centrally placed *Cannabis indica* plants, *Death Center for the Living* invited visitors to settle on straw mats and fully immerse themselves in the visual setting, the smell of fermenting rice in ceramic vases, and the sound of a deep base composition produced by the musician Vivian Caccuri.²¹ It operated as a hybrid space of installation, performance and ritual site filled with invisible layers and fields of emotion evoking the rotten and decayed, allowing visitors to develop an altered relationship to the transience of time and to perceive death not only in terms of abjection and loss, but as a site of regeneration and possibility. A later installation presented at the 14th Yogyakarta Biennale, *Between a bless and a curse* (2017), further elaborated

17 Daniel Lie, Juliana Dos Santos.

18 Ibid. This concept can also be seen in an animated video of a poem by Lie, titled *The Ruins Are my Home* (2020), in “Jilid/Chapter I”, Toko Buku Lióng website (<https://tokobukulióng.com/escombros/the-ruins-are-my-home/>).

19 Audre Lorde, “Breast cancer: power vs. prosthesis”, in *The Cancer Journals*. United Kingdom: Penguin Classics, 2020 (1980).

20 Ruha Benjamin, “Black AfterLives Matter: Cultivating kinfulness as reproductive justice”, in *Making Kin Not Population* (eds. Clarke, Adele E. and Haraway, Donna). Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018, p. 47.

21 Video documentation can be found online (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nb7N6PO_HTs&t=220s).

the possibilities and tensions of communion and smell. This full-room immersive installation was composed of 127 ceramic vases filled with fungi and fermented rice along with other natural materials, forming several pyre-like structures throughout the room and creating an intense, possibly excessive olfactory geography for visitors. Its extreme effect illustrated that “smell is the presence of another in ourselves. Hard to describe, yet vivid, smell leads into encounter – and indeterminacy.”²²

... a field of emotion.

In deploying the fungi, bacteria, mushrooms and other beings in various stages of decay, Lie reimagines new possibilities inherent in the process of decomposition, such as creation and regeneration. As they point out, “in my experience it was very strong to understand that fungi are beyond life and death. This concept is very small for this entity.”²³ Rather, Lie views fungi as incredible sources of power and energy, as exemplified by their solo show *The Negative Years* at Jupiter Artland, Scotland, staged in 2019 after more than two years of research. *Quing* (2019), part of a series of large installations, featured a bio-heater that worked by mixing bacteria and fungi with straw, soil and manure and that served to heat water flowing in pipes through the installation room. This mechanism required the right temperature so that the pink oyster and winter oyster mushrooms and other “unnamed entities” in the installation could flourish.²⁴ Lie described the process of creation as a collaboration with “other-than-human” entities, including the fungi queendom, bacteria, plants, elements, spirits and deities. This work shows the ener-

gy potential of decomposition, not only in terms of the electric energy created, but also in terms of emotional energy: “We’re using the word ‘mystical’ and I like to use the word ‘energy’ too, but we’re talking about a certain type of energy. [...] maybe we can call this kind of energy a field of emotion. But these words are not enough.”²⁵

This brings us back to the necessity of excess, of speculation, of fabulation to overcome the limitations of cosmologies, politics and words that are not enough. When thinking about the frames of reference of this work, the aforementioned shamanic practices resonate both with the communion-focused work of Nador and with the traditions of art-making in the name of political and ethical liberation as practised by a number of Brazilian conceptual artists, in particular Lygia Pape, Hélio Oiticica and Cildo Meireles, who had consistently expanded the possibilities of artistic creation in resistance to political oppression. Working within and beyond this tradition, Lie adopts the ethics of understanding that “this expansion process is a process of liberation.”²⁶ Lie points out that art institutions are often unable to contend with the living beings that their installations introduce, e.g. by exuding smells that offer a way to liberate viewer conventions within public museums.²⁷ In a similar act of expanding words that are not enough, Lie transforms the concepts of king and queen into something that is “neither-nor”, queering the assumed binaries: “This is also the search for the experience of non-binary life, not only in the place of gender, but also to broaden that view and deal with life from a non-binary point of view. That is, looking at it in at least a third way. Then we expand to a fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh way.”²⁸

22 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 46.

23 Daniel Lie, Jonas Van, “Rotten pedagogies: exercises from the process of organic matter transition”, in *Usure Presse* no. 1 (2020), pp. 20–26.

24 Further reading: Wong Binghao, Madeline Murphy Turner, Daniel Lie, “A version of reality: conversation with Daniel Lie”, in *Post: Notes on Art in a Global Context*, MoMA (NY), June 23, 2021 (<https://post.moma.org/a-version-of-reality-conversation-with-daniel-lie/>, last accessed July 1, 2021).

25 Daniel Lie, Ross Simoni, “Interview with Daniel Lie”, in *ArtReview*, March 15, 2018 (from the September 2017 issue of *ArtReview*, <https://artreview.com/ar-september-2017-simonini-daniel-lie/>, last accessed May 19, 2021).

26 Daniel Lie, Jonas Van, “Rotten pedagogies: exercises from the process of organic matter transition”, in *Usure Presse* no. 1 (2020), pp. 20–26.

27 This training is explained by Susan Cahan in “Visitor behavior”, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. New York: Art Resources Transfer, Inc., 1993.

28 Daniel Lie, Jonas Van, p. 23.

This sharp awareness is also essential to a critical fabulation that exceeds the knowledge systems limiting our capacity for existence. A narrative reparation for the fungus, a means of communication with these other-beings, a politics of enunciation that goes beyond the postcolonial offer of a “third space” and explodes into multitudes of spaces, allowing for multiple lives and afterlives: “Is it possible that transitioning, like decolonizing, demands a form of care which is solvent, that is to say: a form of care which mediates the deterioration of things, which accompanies the duration of the ruin, which deepens the crack of the horizon, and which settles into lava the world of sense, formulae, figures, and oeuvres of power which any transition, just as any decolonizing process, demands to see burn.”²⁹ This is not fast work, but rather slow, generous work of surrender, which recognises that the fungus queendom operates within its own process and logic. Lie’s practice opposes stasis and does not desire to be concretely “known”, as it refuses to systematise the beings and epistemologies that their work encounters, instead embracing their opacity.³⁰ At the same time, Lie emphasises the deliberate limited temporality of the work: at the end of exhibitions, Lie returns the soil and fungi and fermented matter back to nature as best they can. The ephemerality of the work does not negate its enduring resonance: “The ephemeral does not equal unmatterality. It is more nearly about another understanding of what matters.”³¹ As Lie concludes: “My challenge is to make something that one day will also have a life of its own, and its creation will be a contribution to this world, the very contributing being a rupture in the fog produced by heterosexual, patriarchal cisgenderism that insists on blinding us from the possibilities of a

deeper relationship with existence.”³² Lie’s latest large-scale installation, *Sopro (Sigh)* (2021), is a public outdoor sculpture commissioned by the Berlinische Galerie soon after the death of their father. Built as an expression of a process of grief and release, it has been left out in the open for a few months. Now, things begin to grow.

Dedicated to our fathers,
our mothers and us who survive them,
and the countless other-than-human
entities
that surround us
cacophonously.

29 Jota Mombaça, “For an ontological strike”, in *We don’t need another hero* (catalogue for the 10th Berlin Biennale for contemporary art). Germany: Distanz Verlag, 2018, p. 47.

30 See Edouard Glissant, “For opacity”, in *Poetics of Relation*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

31 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2009, p. 81.

32 Daniel Lie, Juliana Dos Santos.