

DANIEL LIE

In Relation to Rot

BY CLARA TANG

Spoiled milk, an overripe apple, or moldy lettuce—decaying food in our homes is often met with disgust and an urge to dispose of the rotten specimens. In Daniel Lie’s studio, however, decomposing produce will often find a safe place where microbiology and other forces may take their course freely. “Instead of discarding rotting material, why not look closer and realize that there is increasingly more life that springs from decay?” Lie asked me in a recent Zoom conversation about their practice, which comprises performances, illustrations, and large-scale installations based on longterm research into topics around time, our fraught understanding of death, and its underlying binaries and taboos.

The conversation happened amid a busy schedule for the Berlin-based artist who just finished “The Unloved Ones,” a solo presentation in a communal church in Berlin, while working on their next exhibition, “Das, was nicht geerbt werden kann / Aquilo que não se herda (What is not inherited),” with the artist Juliana dos Santos, slated to open July 1 at Kunstverein Braunschweig.



Portrait of DANIEL LIE. Photo by Camilla Svenson. Courtesy the artist.



Installation view of DANIEL LIE's *Unnamed Entities*, 2022, turmeric dyed flags, jute fabric, cotton fabric, mud, seeds, terracotta ceramic vases, plant-based organic matter, water, flowers, natural fiber ropes, oyster mushrooms, and unnamed entities, dimensions variable, at “Unnamed Entities,” New Museum, New York, 2022. Photo by Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum.



DANIEL LIE, *Member 6*, 2022, turmeric dyed cotton fabric and wooden stick, 300 × 111 cm. Photo by the artist. Courtesy the artist.

In April, Lie was also awarded two prestigious German art prizes: the Preis der Nationalgalerie and the Ars Viva Prize for Visual Arts, that include newly commissioned work and exhibitions throughout 2024.

Born in São Paulo in 1988 to a Brazilian-Indonesian family, Lie makes work that is inextricably entangled with experiences of marginalization, realities of patriarchal social structures, and memories of diasporic displacement. “Coming from generations of migrants, not belonging to one territory was always a part of me,” Lie remarks. After graduating with both a Fine Arts and a Teaching Fine Arts degree from São Paulo State University, Lie became increasingly interested in time-based installations and the changes that their works could undergo in the short span of an exhibition period. An early example of the artist’s approach to organic transformation is *Scrotum* (2014), an installation of plants and fruits suspended in yellow rope, counterbalanced by a heavy quartz stone in a pulley system. The work was produced during a residency in São Paulo, and, titled after men’s genitalia that translates to a curse word in Portuguese, investigated rigid systems of masculinity through the lens of inevitable organic shifts—the plants, among them a *monstera deliciosa*, also known as “Adam’s rib,” changed height as the bunches of suspended rotting fruit lost weight in the seesaw-like-balance of the installation.

In the course of the years-long research of living organisms, Lie shaped their relationship with what they now call “other-than-humans”—organic beings that exist alongside humans in our ecosystem, such as bacteria, fungi, and viruses, but also ancestral entities and deities. “The term came from the need to decenter the human as the protagonist of the planet,” Lie told me, “and to question what I have been calling the ‘human supremacy’ that objectifies and inferiorizes every other being in our ecology.”

Informed by interdisciplinary encounters with scientists and nontraditional practitioners, as well as a diverse register of religious and shamanic practices, the artist’s installations are situated in the interstice of ritual, performance, and ambient environments. To the production of their large-scale works made up of mud, jute fabric, flowers, fungi, spores and other microfauna that ferment and decompose over time, the presence of the artist is essential—Lie is often found applying layers of earth on jute hangings, sowing linseeds, or making offerings to audiences during the exhibition periods: “A lot of my practice is informed by performance,” they said.

At the 14th Biennale Jogja in 2017, visitors experienced firsthand what an open-ended communion between the artist and “other-than-humans” could look and, more importantly, smell like. Lie exhibited *Between a Bless and a Curse* (2017), an installation of 127 ceramic pots surrounded by banana leaves, earth, a clove sack, and suspended ochre textile flags, dyed in batik technique, that featured portraits of Lie’s ancestors. Exploring olfactory sensations over time through the fermentation of fungi, sugar water, and rice, the space was soon filled with a trenchant smell that had audiences stop in their tracks. To Lie, it marked an assertion of presence by organic and celestial entities: “It was the moment I realized that ‘other-than-humans’ had agency, and that they were communicating with me through the odor.”

The threads of personal stories and ancestry in Lie’s oeuvre are laced into larger narratives of time and history. Prying open the spaces between deep-seated dichotomies, the work of Lie, who herself identifies as non-binary, addresses the need to shake up much broader dualisms through the concept of “rot”—not only life and death, but also the limitations of gender and boundaries of cultural identities. “My interest in rotteness is a non-binary stance,” Lie asserts in our conversation.

Lie returned to Yogyakarta for over a year between 2019 and 2020 with a fellowship program for traditional Indonesian dance. The stay bled into the beginning of the pandemic and led to what is arguably Lie’s most autobiographical work, the web-based project *Toko Buku Liang (Liang Bookstore)* (2020) that was produced in collaboration with the curator Adelina Luft. Named after their grandparents’ renowned independent comic book publishing house in the 1950s, the extensive digital archive is a multilingual journey through the artist’s fragmented memories and family history rooted in China and Indonesia. Guided by their grandparents’ comics, family photographs, and speculative essays, Lie retraces their complex and long-lost family chronicles that fell through the cracks of exclusionary national narratives and provides a complex portrait of Indonesia’s emerging cultural identity after the end of the Dutch colonial rule.

The pandemic presented an incisive shift in the artist’s personal and professional practice, when, in 2021, their father died from Covid-19 in Brazil. “After years of researching rituals and codes of death, not being able to say goodbye with a proper farewell ceremony was an extremely brutal and violent experience. I realized how the topic of death is taboo in Western societies,” they recalled. “Just like eating or sleeping, death is a condition that makes us who we are. Not considering it as an essential part of our ecosystem renders our existence shallower.” In resonance with their traumatic experience that year, Lie titled their installation of new fabric works at the 58th Carnegie International biennial *Grieving Secret Society* (2022). Consisting of eight textiles dyed in turmeric and stained with mold and mud, the ghostly drapes were part of the cyclical work series *Living/Dying Installations* (2022), where each iteration of the amber-colored fabrics is recycled from previous, disassembled works—a regenerative *modus operandi* the artist likens to the process of grieving.

More recently, Lie also started producing the digital series titled *Rotten TV* (2021–), broadcasting online conversations and exchanges between artists, thinkers, and

cultural practitioners that perforate existent binary systems of knowledge with the help of interdisciplinary explorations of rotteness and ecological renewal; Lie’s interrogation of rot also saw a return to drawing—a practice that accompanied them from childhood and throughout university—in the 2021 exhibition “Scales of Decay” during their Berlin artist residency at Künstlerhaus Bethanien. In large paper works such as *Dife and Leath* (2021), the artist proposed alternate, gestural depictions of transient states of perishing food in charcoal, turmeric, watercolor, and soft pastel.

Naturally, Lie’s continuous exercise in disrupting humanmade hierarchies also challenges institutional frameworks in which their works are shown: “Conservation in a museum is to remove all possibilities of life from an object.” For their work *Unnamed Entities* (2022) exhibited at the New Museum last year—a monumental, evolving ecosystem of suspended hemp fabric, hay bales, ropes and thousands of flowers, spores, and seeds in the institution’s Lobby Gallery—Lie led many conversations with the museum on the meaning of conservation, resulting in an equitable, collective agreement of the work’s guardianship: “Now I understand that it is not only mine but a shared responsibility with the institution to care for ‘other-than-humans.’”

As part of the nutrient cycle, Lie’s works are given back to earth, donated, or transformed into new installations at the end of each exhibition. “It might take me 20 more years to fully grasp the potential of this collaboration with ‘other-than-humans,’” the artist mused. To them, the continuous relationship with “other-than-humans” is a source of knowledge beyond human limitations, an unlearning that becomes a tool for sustained, shared existence at a planetary pace, allowing new spaces for grief, remembrance, and, ultimately, living. In a gesture of embracing the unfamiliar rhythm of rot after our conversation, I placed a bowl of brown spinach leaves close to the kitchen window—grieving its state of decay but stirred to watch “them” grow.



Installation view of DANIEL LIE’s *Dife and Leath*, 2021, linseed gel, linseeds, charcoal, oil stick, watercolor, and soft pastel on paper, 300 × 350 cm, at “Scales of Decay,” Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 2021. Photo by the artist. Courtesy the artist.