Press Release

THE SHAPE OF A CIRCLE IN THE MIND OF A FISH
NO.4: THE UNDERSTORY OF THE UNDERSTORY

- On United Nations World Soil Day 2020
- Free online Art & Ecology festival investigating life in and under ground
- Two days of talks, debates and performances from around the world
- Fourth in ongoing series on consciousness and intelligence across life forms
- Register to attend at serpentinegalleries.org

12–7pm GMT  Saturday 5 December
12–6.30pm GMT  Sunday 6 December

Images at serpentinegalleries.org/press

Did you know that a mere handful of soil holds 50km of fungal mycelium and 100 billion bacteria?

The Understory of the Understory dives down for two days exploring the teeming, entangled life of ground, land, soil and Earth. This free online festival from the Serpentine’s General Ecology team gathers artists, anthropologists, foragers and scientists to share the lessons and tell the stories of the teeming density present in the substance under our feet.
Sessions include:

- Make your own soil at home with a recipe from artist Asad Raza
- Hear fungal ecologist Lynne Boddy on the beauty and potential of death, rot and decay, and how we can harness this amazing ability to regenerate life, including decontaminating polluted soils and breaking down plastic waste
- Receive insights from techno botanical coven the Coven Intelligence Program on what plants can teach machines about ethics
- Meet pioneering architect Yasmine Lari and Serpentine Pavilion 2021 architect Sumayya Vally, in conversation about building materials, ingredients – the stuff of the earth – and their legacies of uproot, movement and endangerment
- “How to know cow?” – anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena on agricultural industry and biocapital, that hyperproductive alliance between science and economics
- What happens “when I am no longer a human, but nor am I a fish?” asks anthropologist and Karrabing Film Collective member Elizabeth Pavinelli

This is the fourth in the series *The Shape of a Circle in the Mind of a Fish*, an ongoing research project and festival on consciousness and intelligence across life forms. General Ecology is the Serpentine Galleries’ long-running project addressing climate change, the environment, extinction and posthumanism, explored in cross-disciplinary exchanges between artists, scientists, musicians and theorists.

Curators Lucia Pietroiusti and Filipa Ramos:

“The Shape of a Circle in the Mind of a Fish dedicates itself to unpicking those assumptions we make about the centrality and exceptionalism of humanity. What gives us the sense that a forest cannot love or think or sing, if not for the fact that we have obstinately defined love, thought and song in our own image? With *The Understory of the Understory*, we look at the ground and find life at its deepest forms, connected across the animal, vegetal and mineral realms. We encounter biological continuity and co-operation, mycelium distributions, as well as a layered history of settler colonialism, land rights and land use. Over the two days, we speculate, imagine and discuss our complex and profound relationship with the Earth, soil, land and ground.”

Bettina Korek, Chief Executive, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Artistic Director, Serpentine:

“The intersection of art and ecology is a long-running concern of the Serpentine’s and a growing vector of innovation for society. As we build upon our General Ecology series with a festival at the end of a year during which so many foundational ideas and methods of cultural organisations have been challenged—it is appropriate that we turn our attention now to the ground, as the ground is where the foundations of all things rest, where we stand to unearth new discoveries and build toward sustainable futures.”
Participants include: computer scientist Andrew Adamatzky, decomposition ecologist Lynne Boddy, musician YaYa Bones, poet Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, poet Sean Cho A., techno-botanical coven The Coven Intelligence Program (efrán cruz cortés, Margaretha Haughwout, Suzanne Husky), anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena, anthropologist James Fairhead, artist Adham Faramawy, podcast Future Ecologies, artist Elaine Gan, anthropologist Tim Ingold, artists Karrabing Film Collective, poet Asim Khan, theologian Simone Kotva, poet Daisy Lafarge, architect Yasmeen Lari, architect Thandi Loewenson, anthropologist Long Litt Woon, soil scientist Alex McBratney, plant ecophysiologist Angelica Patterson, anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli, science-and-technology studies scholar Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, artist Asad Raza, artist Giles Round, biologist Merlin Sheldrake, artist Ayesha Tan-Jones, artist Leena Valkeapää with Oula A. Valkeapää, architect Sumayya Vally, journal The Willowherb Review and poet Jay G Ying.

The title of the festival series uses as a conceptual starting point the way in which mating male puffer fish draw ornate circles in the sand of the seabed: maybe an image for us humans, looking from above, but also a movement, almost a dance, for this little fish. From that thought extends a reflection on communication, creativity and intelligence across species, towards a deep ecological understanding of everyday life.

Previous editions of The Shape of a Circle in the Mind of a Fish have addressed animal, human and artificial consciousness, language, and interspecies communication (#1, London Zoo, May 2018), interior multitude, swarming organisms, symbiosis and entanglement (#2, Ambika P3, University of Westminster, December 2018) and plant sentience, intelligence, communication with the vegetal world and forms of eroticism, mysticism and healing (#3, Earth Hackney and French Institute, April/May 2019). The Understory of the Understory marks the first time that the Fish series is held online, at specially created site themind.fish, designed by artist Giles Round.

The Shape of a Circle in the Mind of a Fish series is curated by Lucia Pietriost (Curator, General Ecology, Serpentine) and writer Filipa Ramos, with Holly Shuttleworth (Producer) and Kostas Stasinopoulos (Assistant Curator, Live Programmes). Visual identity by Giles Round.

For press information contact Nadja Coyne, nadjac@serpentinegalleries.org
Notes to Editors

United Nations World Soil Day (WSD) is held annually on 5 December as a means to focus attention on the importance of healthy soil. Find out more [here](#).

The General Ecology project was launched in 2018 as a way to embed ecological principles throughout the Serpentine’s programmes, infrastructure and networks. Since then, the Serpentine has continued its research around ecology, climate justice, climate change and more-than-human worldviews.

From the Serpentine's unique position within Kensington Gardens, General Ecology has flourished to include symposia, an ongoing talks programme, exhibitions, publications, study programmes, live events, film and podcasts, with collaborations across a network of individuals and organisations from the fields of art, design, science, literature and anthropology, among others. The project purposefully conducts research across the boundaries that have traditionally separated vegetal, human, non-human animal and artificial intelligence in science.

Themes researched by the General Ecology project echo across much of the Serpentine’s programming in its galleries and connects to recent shows such as Pierre Huyghe’s [Umwelt](#), Ian Cheng’s [BOB](#) and [Emissaries](#), and extends to Emma Kunz: [Visionary Drawings](#), and Hito Steyerl’s [Power Plants](#).

The General Ecology Network, currently in development, convenes individuals and organisations across disciplines to prototype artist-led, environmentally driven systems change and bridge the knowledge/translation gap between culture, creativity and ecology.

In 2020 and beyond, the Serpentine marks its 50th anniversary with *Back to Earth*, a new multi-year project that invites over sixty leading artists, architects, poets, filmmakers, scientists, thinkers and designers, to devise artist-led campaigns, protocols and initiatives responding to the environmental crisis, with the support of partner organisations and networks.

The General Ecology project is curated by Lucia Pietroiusti (Curator, General Ecology) with Holly Shuttleworth (Producer) and Kostas Stasinopoulos (Assistant Curator, Live Programmes).
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