

# Entangled Relations— Animated Bodies

A project by Sonja Bäümel, commissioned by the  
MAK – Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna

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Sonja Bäümel

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More info can be found in  
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the exhibition, available in  
print and online.

Documentation of the live  
performance:  
MAK.at/en/  
unknownunknowns



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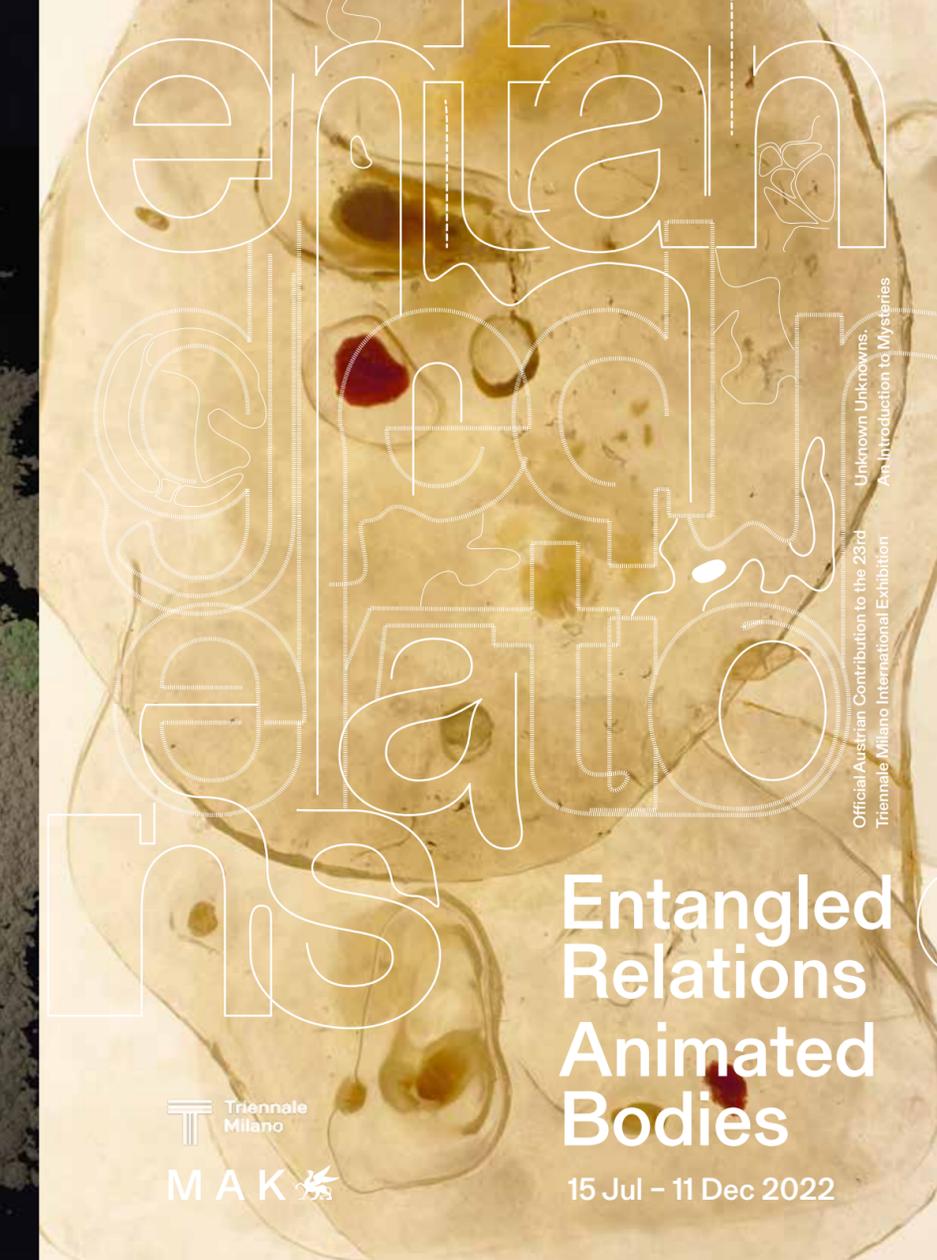
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 Triennale  
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**Entangled  
Relations  
Animated  
Bodies**

15 Jul – 11 Dec 2022

Official Austrian Contribution to the 28th  
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Unknown Unknowns.  
An Introduction to Mysteries

Official Austrian Contribution to the  
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## Entangled Relations— Animated Bodies

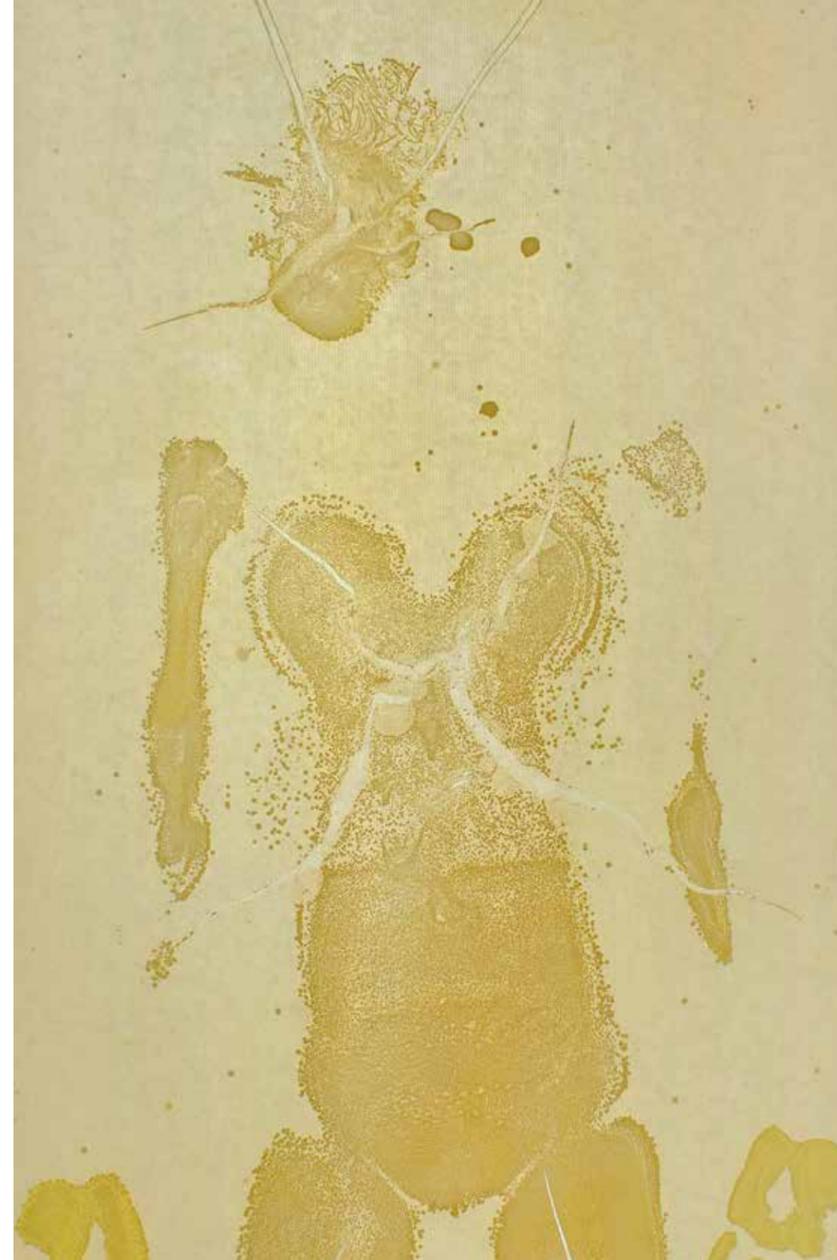
A project by Sonja Bäümel, commissioned by  
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Austria's official entry for the 23rd Triennale Milano International  
Exhibition 2022 with the theme *Unknown Unknowns. An Intro-  
duction to Mysteries* was commissioned by the MAK – Museum of  
Applied Arts, Vienna, and funded by the Federal Ministry for Arts,  
Culture, the Civil Service and Sport.

The performed and multisensory installation *Entangled Relations—  
Animated Bodies* by the artist Sonja Bäümel aims to stimulate the  
cultural imagination via the potential of microorganisms. It seeks  
to alter our perception of the limits of human bodies and explores  
what the microbial paradigm shift may mean for cross-being  
boundaries. Exploring the vital relationships, bonds, and intercon-  
nections between our bodies and the microbes that cohabit them,  
it invites visitors to wonder, observe, and understand what it might  
mean to embody the human in a more-than-human world.

Magnified 40,000 times, a larger-than-life sculpture of an amoeba  
makes the human body appear small and fragile and expands in  
multiple directions, linking piece by piece with the transparent  
fragments of a human figure riddled with microbial inclusions. The  
dynamic projection of a real amoeba overlays the installation and  
is accompanied by sound transmitting the bubbling vitals of the  
microbial world. The installation will be brought to life by choreog-  
rapher and performer Doris Uhlich on several occasions.

By unfolding, shifting, and fragmenting the so-called "body bound-  
aries" of human bodies, the work draws attention to the interde-  
pendence between moving, seeing, and touching bodies and their  
constant exchange with microbial milieus, revealing unrecognized  
forms of movement, intelligence, and communication.



## Entangled Relations— Animated Bodies

Text by Sonja Bäümel

One of the central paradoxes of anatomy [is] the  
use of dead bodies to teach about living ones.<sup>1</sup>

When looking at the history of anatomical depiction over  
the past centuries, we notice a radical change in what  
"being human" means, in a medical, biological, social, and  
cultural sense. Analyzing anatomical images allows us to  
see how conceptions of the self, ideas about what it means  
to be a person, and related knowledges or overall beliefs  
have changed over time [fig. 1]. Furthermore, the study of  
anatomical models helps us decipher how historically spec-  
ific conventions of collaboration and correspondence, as  
well as mutual rejection or opposition, between artists and  
anatomists have provoked epistemological and ontological  
shifts in understandings of human embodiment. While early  
illustrations in anatomical studies [fig. 3]<sup>2</sup> showed a rich en-  
semble of imaginary figurations and artistic adornments that  
contained humor, playfulness, and allusion, "today's scien-  
tific imaging [fig. 2] sticks to a straight and narrow path that  
does not allow deviations or correspondences between the  
anatomical body and the moral, political, and social world,  
fun and pleasure."<sup>3</sup> Images of the self are closely related to  
a person's inner reality, to one's sense of self and others,  
and to the intimate perception of one's own body. However,  
images of human bodies are also dependent on emergent  
market practices and social identities, cultural definitions of  
the private and the public sphere, and ongoing processes of  
state formation and community building. Modeling bodies  
in a mental and physical sense is also a way of modeling  
community.<sup>4</sup>

[When] I think about my body and ask what it  
does to earn that name, two things stand out.  
It moves. It feels. In fact, it does both at the  
same time.<sup>5</sup>



fig. 1  
Illustration by Megan Diddie, 2017  
© the artist



fig. 2  
From: Paulsen/Waschke, *Sobotta  
Atlas der Anatomie* [Sobotta Atlas of  
Anatomy], 24th edition 2017  
© Elsevier GmbH, Urban & Fischer,  
Munich



fig. 3  
From: Juan Valverde de Amusco (ca.  
1525 – ca. 1588), *Anatomia del corpo  
humano* [Anatomy of the Human  
Body], Rome 1560, 64

How, then, can anatomical models be modeled, shown,  
seen, and experienced so that they represent the *living  
body*? *Entangled Relations—Animated Bodies* attempts to  
shape alternative corporeal models to unsettle representa-  
tions of the static body and to celebrate the ephemeral and  
the animated body, while illustrating the collapse of epider-  
mic and trans-species boundaries.

The project is animated by amoebas' ability to alter their  
shape by extending their liquid skin and by their ability  
to blur what is and what is not an "individual." "Amoeba  
colonies have the ability to morph from a seemingly un-  
coordinated group of genetically identical single cells into  
an aggregate 'slug' with an immune system, muscles, and  
nerves with ganglia (that is, simple brains) and other orga-  
nismic functionalities characteristic of multicellular species  
with different roles played by identical cellular units. Social  
amoebas queer the nature of identity, calling into question  
the individual/group binary."<sup>6</sup>

Why should our bodies end at the skin,  
or include at best other beings encapsulated  
by skin?<sup>7</sup>

Hundreds of thousands of microorganisms of different  
beings [fig. 4], including bacteria, archaea, eukaryotes,  
viruses, yeasts, and parasites live in, on, and around a single  
body and keep it alive [figs. 5 and 6]. Humans are walking  
biotopes, which depend on the cooperation of these  
different life forms in, on, and around the body for survival.

How can we think of bodies beyond the singular, as always  
multiple and many? No matter how much we try to dis-  
tance ourselves from the multi-being world by sterilizing  
and isolating our bodies, we must finally accept that we are



fig. 4  
Sonja Bäümel, *expanded self II*, 2015



fig. 5  
Sonja Bäümel, *expanded self*, 2012



fig. 6

just a tiny interdependent part of the environment, within a  
constantly adapting and fluid co-evolution [fig. 7]. It appears  
that we are slow to understand that we cannot escape the  
vital relations and entanglements between bodies and their  
ecosystems, rooted in "more-than-human sociality"<sup>8</sup> and  
microbial heritage. That said, there is an urge to awaken  
human bodies [fig. 8] in order to rethink, reshape, and  
deepen the comprehension of elementary aspects of our  
being-in-the-world.

Inspired by Jules Sturm's concept of the absence of bodies  
in bodily representations, I am convinced that the human  
body can only be represented in and through aliveness and  
movement. Hence, performance appears to be the most  
suitable approach for actualized, contemporary, dynamic  
corporeal "models." Sturm uses the concept of bodily  
absence as a tool to analyze the correlation between the  
bodies' absence in images which *de*-pict them.

If viewers are confronted with the negative  
aspect of visual presence in art, they become  
aware of the constructed relation between living  
bodies and their representations. [...] The idea of  
absence disrupts the seeming coherence of this  
relation, and helps to develop alternative ways  
of imaging or imagining those bodies that have  
been subjected to representational stereotyping  
and pictorial neglect.<sup>9</sup>

What if we imagine the human body as a locus of muddled  
and entangled relations, "thinking against categories such  
as species, sex, [...] as a locus of social and biological  
categories in motion and in transition?"<sup>10</sup>  
Through this performed installation, *Entangled Relations—  
Animated Bodies* aims to make the inseparable and



fig. 7



fig. 8  
Sonja Bäümel, *microbial  
entanglement*, 2019  
© Robert Schittko

seemingly invisible entanglements and relations among  
bodies and their ecosystems (human and more-than-hu-  
man) visible, tangible, walkable, wearable, recognizable,  
readable, and changeable. The focus of the artwork lies  
on the dynamic play with the viewer's perception through  
which the "anatomy" of a human body cracks and breaks  
open. Within such a context, the boundaries of the human  
body dissolve and skin becomes blurry and fluid, suggesting  
that the human figure is never to be considered singular,  
but continuously shaped by and interdependent on its  
environments.

By unfolding, shifting, and decomposing the so-called  
"body boundary," the artwork exposes the relations be-  
tween the responsive, moving, seeing, and touching body,  
and its perpetual exchange with its sustaining milieus,  
revealing unknown forms of movement, intelligence, and  
communication.

In this way, *Entangled Relations—Animated Bodies* expres-  
ses the potential for *enlivening* the anatomical model as a  
performative walking biotope, engaging the imaginary and  
the factual in a mutual dialogue. By doing so, the project  
creates an environment that inspires the visitor to reflect  
about, yet also to wonder, feel, touch, enjoy, and understand,  
what it might mean to embody "the human" today.

### Special thanks to

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