

Nivi Alroy and Hila Amram

Cell Culture Club

Artists' Studio, Tel Aviv

2014

Behind one of the doors at the Tel Aviv Artist Studios, in one of the studio spaces, there thrives an autonomous, one-of-a-kind ecosystem. This system, at odds with any of the known biological classifications, is a joint project by artists Hila Amram and Nivi Alroy. A work in progress, Cell Culture Club offers a sculptural environment that simulates a fully-functioning ecosystem – a compound of both organic and inorganic matter, among them mildew, vegetation, found objects, industrial supplies and raw materials. As in an improvised home lab or a DIY project, the two artists use the means at hand to build and cultivate an indoors wetland ecosystem, like the many that are currently in danger of global extinction.

The wall we encounter when entering the studio was remodeled into a work board. The various data and visual references collected through the project find their way here, as well drawings and renderings that chart the ecosystem's progress. Here are pseudo-scientific chalk drawings, topographic renderings, fantastical landscapes and hybrid objects. Alroy's free-hand drawings, made in an automatic-like flow, echo the eco-sculptural formation gradually taking shape in the studio; they serve both as the projected program and visual record of a work in progress. Amram's hybrids, on the other hand, seem as entirely contradictory ready-made amalgamations – singular mutated objects, totally illogical yet refined and enchanting, like a series of unintended scientific mishaps produced in the home laboratory.

The slowly evolving ecosystem spawns an autonomous sculptural-experimental unit, a unique environment shaped in topographic terraces around an artificial water basin. Housed in the entrails of a regular double-bed mattress, the basin has gradually become a breeding ground for mildew and various fungus species. Looming from the terraced formation is an eclectic mix of everyday objects – disjointed furniture, obsolete lab equipment, books,

clothes, shoes, kitchenware, cleaning agents, urban debris and other commodities. These items are contained in the terraced formation, yet it is unclear whether they are sucked into it or spewed out from it, as from a volcanic crater belching DNA segment of our consumer culture. We also find glass vessels scattered around, containing their own autarchic outgrowths – smaller appendages or extensions of the greater ecosystem, which they equally draw from and help to sustain. Like a pair of alchemists, Amram and Alroy manage to meld the distinct elements into a single composite regardless of their origin – organic, engineered or synthetic, spawning a self-contained system with its own aesthetic, both hybrid and enchanting.

The temporal dimension in its philosophical and matter-of-fact implications plays a key factor in the work of Amram and Alroy. As a clear case of a work in progress, their current project continues to evolve long after the initial infrastructure has been laid, thereby capturing the continued essence of a live organism, which inherently responds to outside feedbacks while adapting itself to changing ambient conditions.

Alroy and Amram's artistic practice encompass a wide range of disciplines and knowledge bases – from biology and chemistry to archeology. Despite the inspirational input they provide, the artists freely temper with their established work procedures and paradigmatic notions, offering instead an intuitive alternative somewhere between the real and imagined, between pseudo-science and hard science, which they freely mobilize to their own artistic ends. Propelled by intellectual curiosity, their research on ecosystems and on their natural resources resulted in an equivocal art installation, harboring a critic on the current state of things.

The attempt of reviving extinct organisms, similarly to the diminishing wetlands, echoes a scientific procedure called de-extinction – a controversial practice which involves genetic engineering and cloning in the aim of re-creating extinct species. Amram and Alroy's hybrid microcosm hints at the potentially dire consequences of such intervention; by emulating a disrupted ecosystem, possibly the result of unchecked scientific tempering, they bring to mind its unpredicted effects. Although it may seem enchanting, this

environment, both familiar and alienated to its immediate surroundings, signals the disastrous risks entailed in interfering with the natural order of things. The recent man-made climate changes, as we are repeatedly told, threaten to tip global ecosystem out of balance, to the extent of placing the human kind at a risk. Amram and Alroy's installation is rooted in the current discourse of climate change and ecological catastrophes. But despite its catastrophic overtones, the cultivation of a singular, independent ecosystem – much like a bio-hacker breaking a genetic code – equally implies the will to preserve existing species, lest they disappear for eternity.

As attested by myths, legends, and cinematic representations, wetlands and swamps have suffered a bad reputation throughout history and up to the present. Zionism too initiated large-scale draining projects, and the negative connotation is surely echoed in the work's iconography. Yet on the whole, *Cell Culture Club* rather addresses the spiritual aura attached to wetlands, which for centuries were regarded as sites of mystery, ghostly apparitions and spook lights. The apocalyptic narrative it draws, in awe of a menacing future, also signals destruction and doom as necessary developments in a cycle of renewal and the rebirth of new life. By the very act of re-creating an ecosystem, it raises questions on life and death, on end and beginning. It therefore encapsulates the dark predictions of doom aside hope and a chance of redemption.