

Art Review:

Contains 8% STANISLAW LEM; 5% ALEX HARTLEY;
25% FLUORESCENT PANTONE 801; 1 PARTICLE PHYSICIST



Theaster GATES

Anthropologist, urbanist, activist –
the 21st-century artist

plus

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EVE SUSSMAN & THE RUFUS CORPORATION

OUR DESIGN CRITIC HAS SEEN THE FUTURE, AND – IF WE'RE LUCKY – IT'S FULL OF FRIENDLY BACTERIA

Advances in human civilisation can be charted according to our ability to distance ourselves from the stickier aspects of our biological nature. The more sophisticated we become as social beings, the less we seem to enjoy facing up to our other identity as organisms in a finely interconnected web of natural relationships. As we have moved from agrarian to industrial to postindustrial social models, we have increasingly barricaded our minds and bodies against waste products, decay, death and dirt.

It could be argued that much of the grim environmental trouble that we've got ourselves into is rather the result of this, but what to do? In space-rich farmland, an inquiring relationship with our own dirt might lead to a progressive symbiosis between man and bacterium. In a cramped city, such a liaison is more likely to lead to outbreaks of cholera, typhoid and E. coli infections. It is a measure of our advanced state of civilisation that we scrub to get the dirt off our skin, chop food on antibacterial plastic boards and flush our waste with a killer dose of bleach.

Away from the fevered world of hand sanitisers and Cillit Bang, however, icky goo is having a bit of a moment. Some open-minded design teams are looking to the potentially reactive microbial sludge that represents the earliest manifestation of life on earth for inspiration. In Eindhoven, the design team from electronics giant Philips recently presented a prototype microbial home, in which food was cooked using the methane from decomposing waste, plastic rubbish was ground and digested by a mycelium fungus starter culture and bioluminescent bacteria provided soft mood lighting.

Austrian designer Sonja Bäumel focuses more specifically on the bacteria of the skin – the individual, ineradicable layer of microorganisms that creates an invisible interface between you and your every human contact. Bäumel has

created bacterial self-portraits by lying in specially constructed Petri dishes, and views the microbial layer like a kind of benign, personalised glove that might form the basis – or at least the inspiration – for responsive textiles. Last November the Textielmuseum Tilburg commissioned Bäumel to create a model of her skin flora out of knitted and crocheted wool. The result has the eerie fragility of a grandmother's scarf done out in a colour scheme more usually seen on the unidentifiable gunk that you find at the back of the fridge.

Humanity has, of course, been using microbes for its own purposes for centuries, from the yeasts and lactobacilli in sourdough bread to the rich mix of fungi and bacteria inside a nice warm compost heap. Their ability to react with and transform waste products has also put microbes at the centre of green technologies, including greywater recycling, which allows all domestic water (bar that from the lavatory) to be treated and reused, and anaerobic digestion, which treats biodegradable waste in an oxygen-free environment to create biogas and fertiliser.

Clive van Heerden, who worked on the microbial-home prototype for Philips, explains that the project was largely intended to test how consumers felt about being reconnected with

natural processes. The prospect of cooking with methane from their own decomposing waste did seem to touch a nerve with visitors to the exhibit, but in reality such efficient self-sufficiency is some way off. Much work still needs to be done in developing the technologies to best harness the power of microbes, but van Heerden thinks that if companies are persuaded that consumers can deal with the 'ick' factor, this really could be the dawning of the age of bacteria.

