

Mutual Benefits

Diana Pollicarpo



Curated by Sam Shiyi Qian

In *Mutual Benefits*, an exhibition created specifically for the Rialto 6 space, Diana Policarpo delves into two enigmatic subjects — the human mind and mycelium — investigating their intricate connections to language and the effects of excessive extraction and synthesis of medicinal resources within fragile ecosystems. This exploration unfolds in an immersive landscape where bodies — human, more-than-human, and their remnants — merge in a complex web of mutual interference. Central to this narrative is the eerie vitality of a carcass: *Ophiocordyceps sinensis*, a parasitic fungus that zombifies its host, turning ghost moth caterpillars into vessels for its own survival.

As Policarpo traces the social and ecological life of Cordyceps, another laboring body emerges in *Summer Grass Winter Worm*,

a site-specific installation styled as a shop window: figures on the Tibetan Plateau, bent over rugged slopes, their hands carefully plucking the precious fungus as the seasons shift from spring to summer. In *Fungal Highways*, a 3D animation shows scientific imagery that captures human neurons, abstracted and juxtaposed with the tangled mycelial networks of fungi intertwined with plant roots — mycorrhizal networks — suggesting a profound layer of interconnection. A voice from a speculative near-future space mission echoes through the ether, while the amplified movements of athletes — arms swinging, muscles taut — underscore yet another dimension of the human body as a site for the exercise of biopower (*Adaptogens*).

These vivid fragments, documenting the world's most expensive fungus — renowned for its medicinal, therapeutic, and pharmacological properties — come together in Policarpo's latest solo exhibition.

Featuring six sets of new works in speculative video installations, sound pieces, and color pencil drawings, *Mutual Benefits* marks the conclusion of her multiyear, on-site research into caterpillar fungus, tracing its complex value chain since 2019. The research spans India, Nepal, and, more recently, China, delving into the social, sexual, economic, and political dimensions surrounding the Cordyceps species.

In China, where Cordyceps is consumed the most, Policarpo observed its booming commercial use and examined the key players and institutions driving the global market. *Mutual Benefits* highlights the dynamics of this market, the consequences of over-extraction, and the role of the biotech industry in synthesizing this highly valuable medicine. Since this type of fungus can only be harvested on the Tibetan Plateau and cannot be artificially grown, the demand also significantly impacts the livelihoods of poor local communities in the

Himalayas. Despite its importance to Indigenous mountain communities, there remains a lack of knowledge about the commercial processes involved in Cordyceps collection and trade, particularly its pathways from remote communities to urban markets — and even into space.

As a lifeform thriving on parasitism, Cordyceps epitomizes necropolitics — the death of larvae is both the precondition and the price of its production. This exploitative cycle reflects the looming threat of ecological collapse. Nicknamed “soft gold,” Cordyceps captivates consumers with promises of vitality and longevity. The drive to regenerate Cordyceps for economic profit — whether through extraction or synthetic reproduction — has become a central focus of its research. A two-channel video *Adaptogens* presents a semi-fictionalized tale of a medicinal fungus transported into space in the near future, even as it faces extinction on Earth. The narrative shifts

between various bodies — from a scientist to a parasitic fungus. In a hallucinatory landscape of light and atmosphere, capitalist decadence on Earth intertwines with the astromycologist's body, merging the fungus and extraterrestrial plants into a newly created symbiotic organism.

This theme of pushing bodies beyond fact and fiction extends into the world of sports. In another two-channel video, *29:31.78*, Policarpo references the historic 1993 world record set by Chinese runner Wang Junxia, known as the “Eastern Deer,” who achieved a sub-30-minute time in the 10,000-meter race, as indicated by the title. Her coach, Ma Junren, famously credited Cordyceps as a crucial part of her training regimen, a narrative thread that spurred the emergence of new companies seeking to commercialize this medicinal fungus. However, controversy soon followed. Just two years later, as a wave of athletes began to drop out, scandals

emerged, revealing that Ma's extreme and manipulative training methods were the true foundation of this miraculous performance. As Policarpo employs prolonged temporality and detailed zooming in to counterpoint the stories behind the scenes, she suggests that the very blurring of lines between reality and fiction is, in fact, clarifying the profound connections among biology, labor extraction, and capitalism.

Complementing the artworks, the exhibition is enriched with details where the artist implicitly employs elemental mediums that evoke the atmosphere of science labs cultivating Cordyceps species, inviting viewers to briefly adopt the perspective of a fungus being. The wood chips stuffed into the cushion recall the materials used in artificial cultivation, while the lighting temperature, lending the show an electric vibe, mirrors the controlled illumination of the growth process. The ventilation system,

reminiscent of airborne fungal dissemination, further strengthens this connection.

While Policarpo's use of sensory environments — wood, lighting, and wind — may allude to the consumptive impulse of capitalist seduction, a comparative examination of our bodily presence in relation to these elements prompts a series of critical questions: Who is the parasite? Initially, this question appears to be a cerebral experiment in metabolism, in which relationships dissolve into fluid states of becoming. However, upon further reflection, this assumed symbiosis — blurring the lines between virtual and real, subject and object — is often romanticized as “interdependency,” concealing the underlying dynamics of value exchange, manipulation, sacrifice, and violence that it subtly entails in a capitalist world. In this spirit, Policarpo's speculative narrative urges us to engage our perceptions across various agents and bodies, each acting as a medium

or conduit, to interrogate the power dynamics behind the production of fungal science. Taking into account the factors of scale and power relations, a key question her work raise is: What causes mutualism to dissolve into veiled parasitism, and to what extent can exchange foster mutual survival rather than exploitation?



About Diana Policarpo

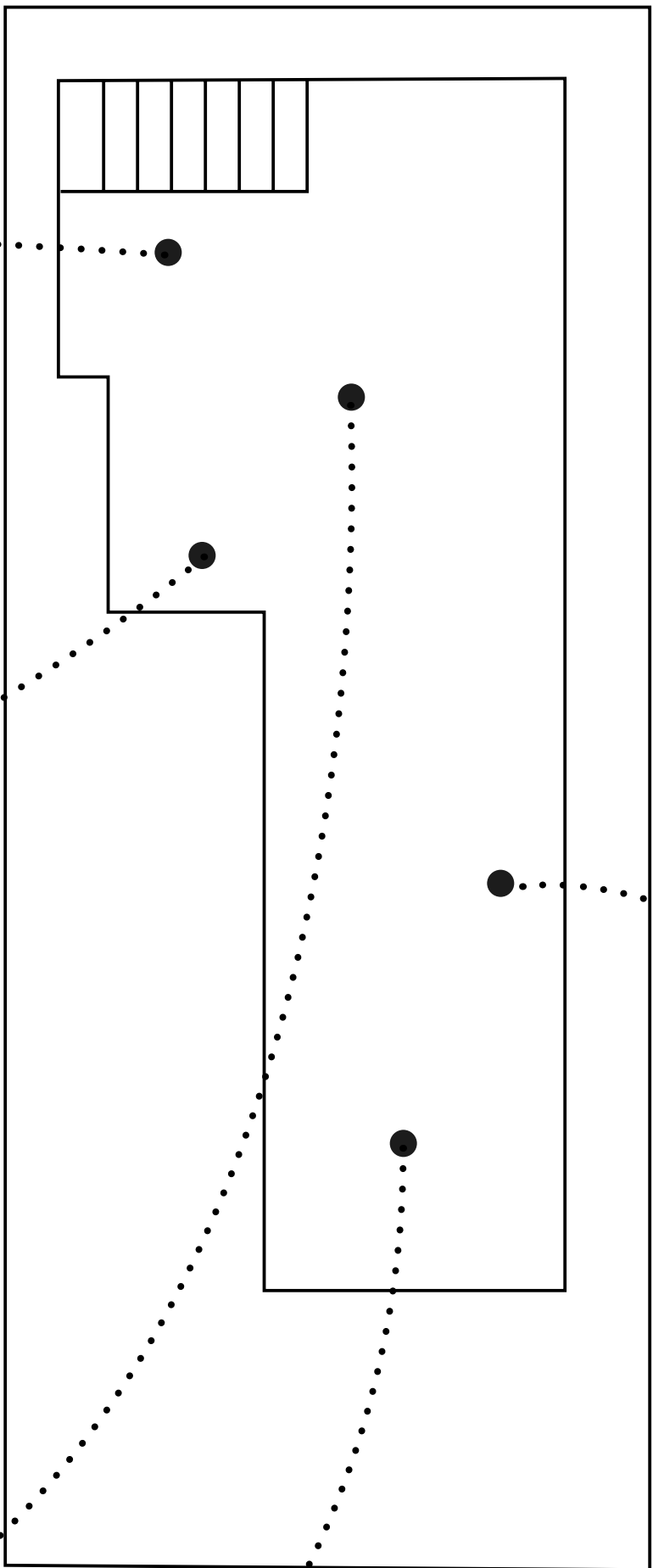
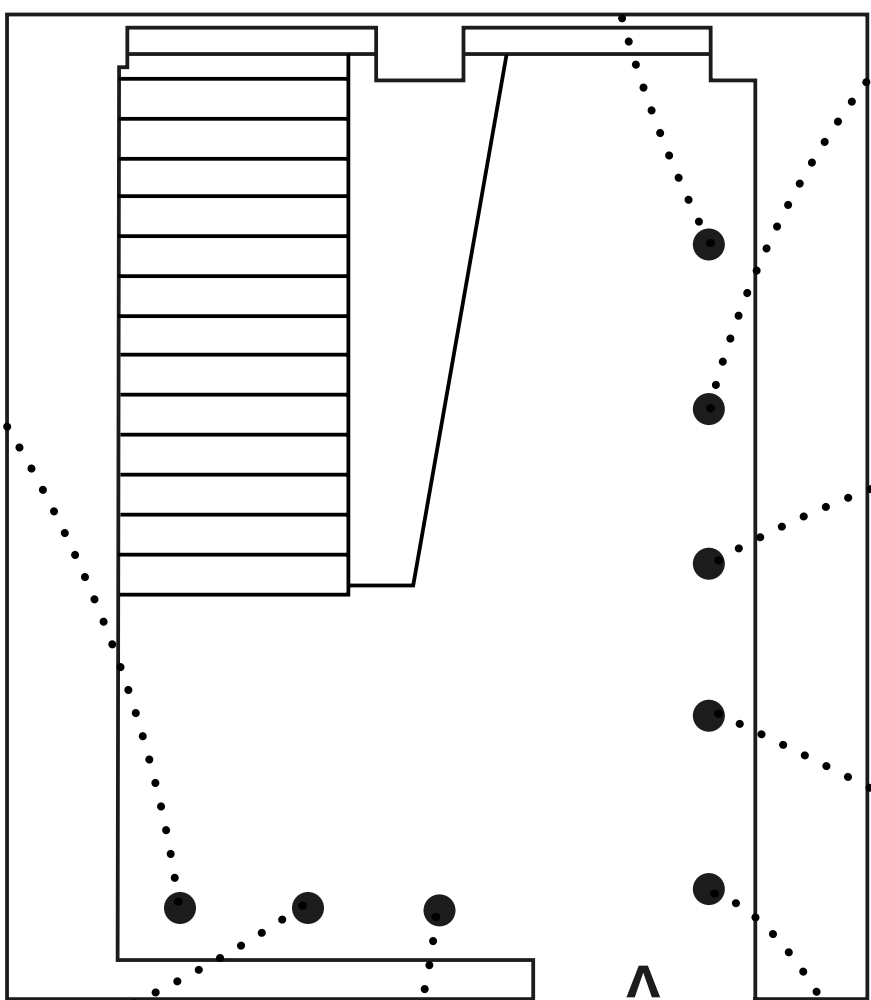
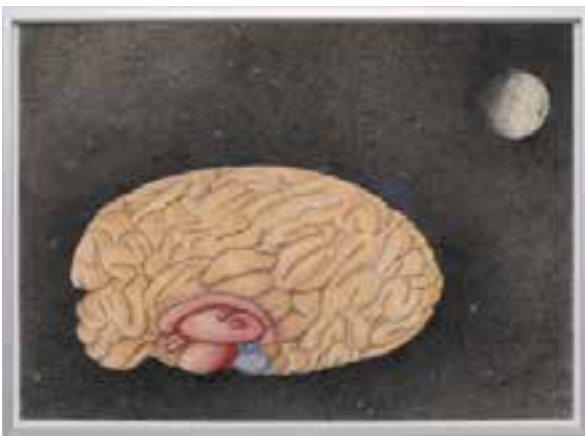
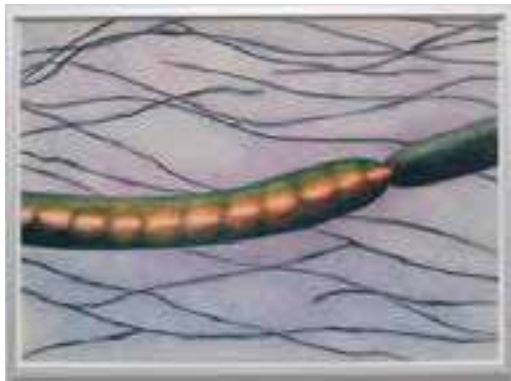
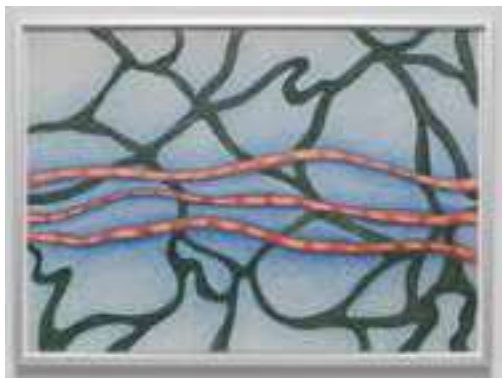
Diana Policarpo is a visual artist and composer, known for her innovative work across a range of mediums including drawing, video, sculpture, text, performance, and multi-channel sound installations. Her practice traverses multiple themes, exploring gender politics, economic systems, health, and interspecies interactions through an interdisciplinary, speculative approach. Her performances and installations serve as poignant examinations of vulnerability and empowerment within the capitalist landscape, offering insightful — reflections on the human experience. Her work has been exhibited in solo presentations at prominent institutions, including Kunsthall Aarhus, Helsinki Art Museum, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin, Ocean Space in Venice, Kunsthall Trondheim as well as ICA and LUX — Moving Image in London, among others. Policarpo has received notable accolades, such as the Prémio Novos Artistas

Fundação EDP in 2019 and the Illy Present
Future Prize 2021.



About Sam Shiyi Qian

Sam Shiyi Qian is a curator based in Shanghai. Her curatorial projects reflect on infrastructure, geopolitics, and speculative thinking through the lens of various environmental media and agents. Her interest extends to the power structures of historiography and knowledge production, as well as the qualities of the ephemeral. Qian is currently a curator at the Rock — bund Art Museum in Shanghai. Prior to that, she served as the curator at Ming Contemporary Art Museum from 2018 to 2024, where she curated “Postscript of Silence” (co-curated with Iris Long, 2023), “Hu Yinping: Weaving Realities” (2022), “Back to Stage: McaM 5th Anniversary Exhibition & Performance Festival” (2021), and “Participation Mystique” (2020). She contributes to the Artforum Chinese platform, Art-ba-ba, and ArtReview China.



13

12

11

10

6

5

4

3

2

1

level 0

level -1

Multimedia Installation

Materials: metal, polymers, spores, substrate, minerals, propylene glycol, paper, wood, video, sound, custom fabric pillows, light.

Dimensions variable.

This installation is composed by different elements, that can also work autonomously:

1.

Summer Grass Winter Worm

2024

Site-specific Installation

HD video, color, no sound,
16:9, 1'27" (loop)

2

Underground Allies IV

2024

Colour pencil on paper,
aluminium, 180 g/m²
40,6 x 55,8 cm

3.

Underground Allies VII

2024

Colour pencil on paper,
aluminium, 180 g/m²
40,6 x 55,8 cm

4.

Underground Allies II

2024

Colour pencil on paper,
aluminium, 180 g/m²
40,6 x 55,8 cm

5.

Underground Allies VIII
2024

Colour pencil on paper,
aluminium, 180 g/m²
40,6 x 55,8 cm

6.

Underground Allies V
2024

Colour pencil on paper,
aluminium, 180 g/m²
40,6 x 55,8 cm

7.

Underground Allies III
2024

Colour pencil on paper,
aluminium, 180 g/m²
40,6 x 55,8 cm

8.

Underground Allies IX
2024

Colour pencil on paper,
aluminium, 180 g/m²
40,6 x 55,8 cm

9.
Underground Allies I
2024
Colour pencil on paper,
aluminium, 180 g/m²
40,6 x 55,8 cm

10.
Underground Allies VI
2024
Colour pencil on paper,
aluminium, 180 g/m²
40,6 x 55,8 cm

11.
Fungal Highways
2024
3D Animation, HD, custom
format diameter 1m, colour,
no sound, 2' (loop); stereo
sound, 12' (loop)

12.
¥€\$!
2024
HD Video, colour, sound,
9:16, 2'7" (loop)

13.
Adaptogens
2024
2-channel HD video,
colour, sound, 16:9, 8'45"
(loop)
Spoken word by Ana Tang;
Soundtrack Diana
Policarpo

14.
29:31.78
2024
2-channel HD video,
colour, no sound, 4:3, 2'
(loop)

Technical Team:

Pedro Canoilas (Pedro, Carla, Lucas) – Exhibition installers

Dino Lima – Textile manufacturing

Mário Espada – Video Editing of Summer Grass Winter Worm, ¥€\$!, Adaptogens e 29:31.78

Rita Lamas – Colour Grading of Summer Grass Winter Worm, ¥€\$!, Adaptogens e 29:31.78

Marcelo Tavares – Audio Mixing and Mastering of ¥€\$!, Adaptogens

André Torres – AV technician

Ricardo Santos (postmodern_b0t) – 3D Animation of Fungal Highways

Bernardo Gaeiras – Collaboration of Fungal Highways' composition

Ana Tang – Spoken word of Adaptogens

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