



MUSHROOMS, MYTH AND MUSIC

Artwork
**DIANA
POLICARPO**

Interview by
**FRANCESCA
GAVIN**

Portuguese artist Diana Policarpo has an undeniable enthusiasm for the spaces where art, science, sound and film meet. Her installations and collaborative work refuse to be contained by media, instead layering textile, projection, sound, text, sculpture and moving image in complex yet delightfully accessible spaces that question the politics of the everyday. Gender, health and economics all are at play here. The past few years have seen a flurry of attention with solo exhibitions at Kunsthall Trondheim, Galeria Municipal do Porto and most recently a show to mark winning the Illy Present Future prize, at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo. She also had a stand out installation at Ocean Space to coincide with the Venice Biennale. Alongside her research-led art practice, she is active in experimental music scene. Meeting in Torino, she is an enthusiastic and intelligent force discussing everything from Bosch to biology.

FRANCESCA GAVIN

What drew you to fungi?

DIANA POLICARPO The whole field trip and the writing and the composing around the mushrooms started 2018. I did a residency in India and Nepal. I was really interested in bringing mushrooms and workers to tell stories about how they are both experts in precarity. In 2018, we started with the cordyceps, which is called "soft gold" in Nepal. There was a massive change going on and in all the Himalayan regions. People stopped working completely to harvest cordyceps. I stayed there for three months in total. I was travelling and trying to find out a little bit more about the whole market system, because there were mostly women working from the picking to the whole process of selecting, cleaning, send it to the markets, it was becoming a really important resource for the last 15 years. People were very much dependent on that economy, but also there was a lot of pollution and changes going on in the landscape because it was so precious. In medicinal terms, it was really interesting, because my Nan was going through cancer. I heard this was such an important treatment for cancer, but also for sexual dysfunctional problems.

FRANCESCA GAVIN

Just the idea of the mushroom, the breadth of fungi, being a capitalist product is really interesting. I think Silvia Federici touched on it at some point. The idea of mushrooms being connected to pre-capitalist female-led economic structure. You found a more contemporary version of that kind of intersection that was happening in the 16th and 15th century.

DIANA POLICARPO

The rituals they perform, before actually starting the trip to the camps to the harvesting, are still super old school. They go in very high altitudes in the mountains, but the rituals they perform are still pretty much the same as from the centuries ago. There's a way of performing and sharing this knowledge that is ancient, but obviously has been updated with technologies and the fact that people rely so much on this income over there to have kids in school to have a car, build houses, etc.

FRANCESCA GAVIN

There's such a huge amount of research that goes into your projects. In your latest film you used biological drawings, early science animation. Do you want to tell me what draws you to archival material?

DIANA POLICARPO

Before I was doing fieldwork, shooting myself and getting all the material. With the pandemic, things really changed. I was meant to continue this project in China, because they started synthesizing and reproducing cordyceps in a controlled environment. I couldn't go to China. Because I was in Portugal, doing all I could to travel to get interviews from all the people who were picking there, and what was the impact in local economies and in the border. I was relying so much in digital collections for the films that were in 'Nets of Hyphae.' I started making a visual narrative with them, while at the same time writing the stories. In a way, I was really interested in this imagery from medieval times. This idea of being in a permanent state of hallucination as a normalised thing, a commodified thing during this time. It's also really interesting how these hybrids and characters appear in sketches or etchings.

"I WAS ALWAYS VERY, VERY INTERESTED IN THE PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE AND MIMICRY, AND ALL THE HYBRIDISATION OF TECHNOLOGIES AND INTELLIGENCE."



I also have had an obsession since I was a child with Bosch's painting, 'The Triptych of St. Anthony'. It's in Lisbon in the Ancient Art Museum. This was something I was constantly revisiting. Going to see that painting, asking my grandmother to take me there. I grew up with that painting. I started talking with some historians and doing my own research about this specific triptych. I understood that this was a very important painting to document ergotism and the demons and the political situation at the time, in the 16th century. All the alchemy in it. I was already obsessed with that painting. Not to just present Bruegel and Bosch, as examples, but this idea of how can you translate the psychedelic experience with something that has been always there. Nature has it all. I really wanted to bring that experience of having nature and archival content to work both ways.

FRANCESCA GAVIN

Sound and music is an important layer in your work. Did the music come before art for you?

DIANA POLICARPO

I studied music before I studied art, and my parents are also musicians. I had music at home. My mom plays piano. Obviously, I didn't want to do anything they did. I tried to be a little brat. My passion was always percussion. I studied violin for three years - I love strings, but it was not really what I wanted to learn. Being self taught in a lot of ways, is what really led me to improvisation and to free music. I was in a couple of punk bands, but I always had this passion for improvisation and movement and listening in general. I was really getting into more conceptual approaches to composing. All the installations I do, I really like to explore the way sound can circulate and each channel having a voice. The composition comes from that constellation.

FRANCESCA GAVIN

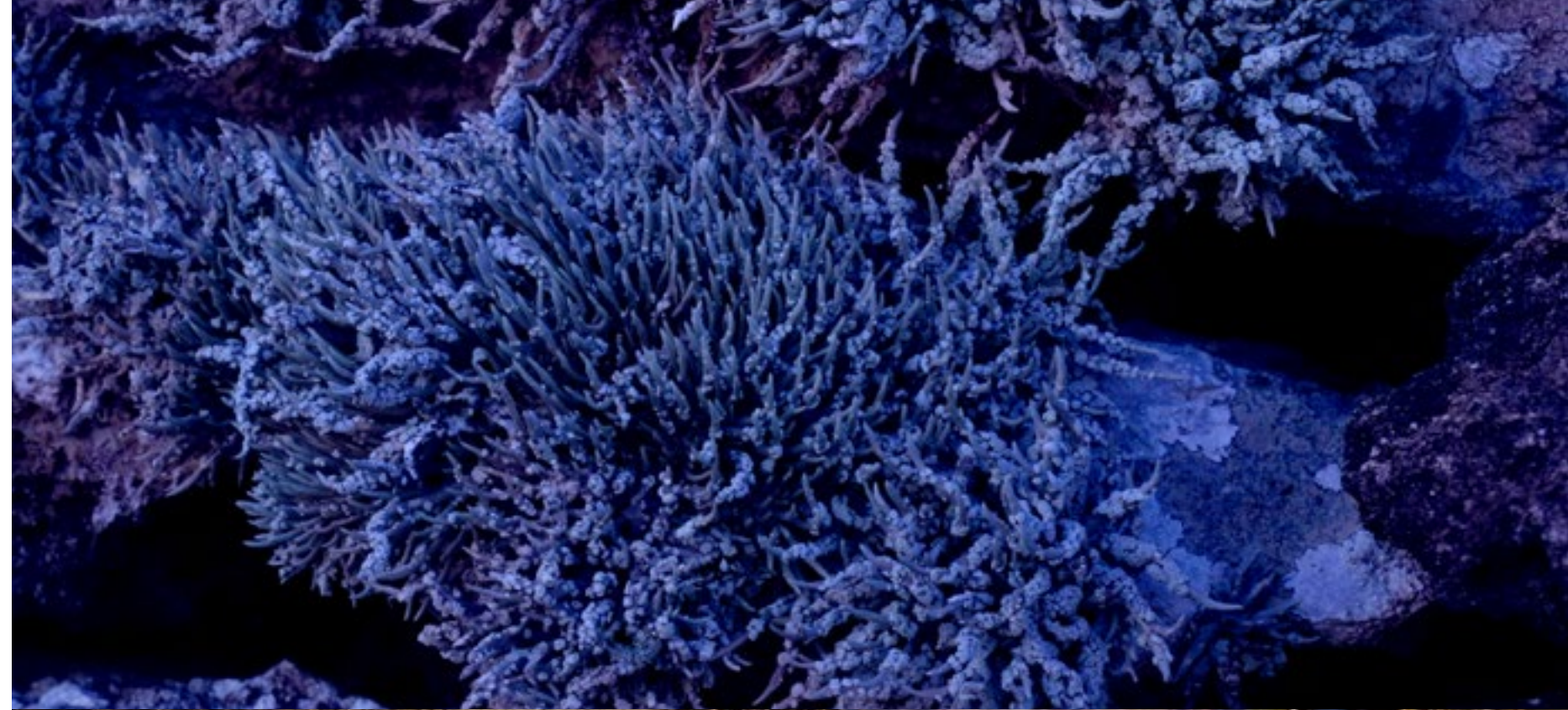
The video triptych at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo is probably one of the most straightforward things you've done compared to 'Nets of Hyphae' in Norway or Venice, where it's much more layering upon layering sculptural objects, as well as multiplicity of like textile and projection.

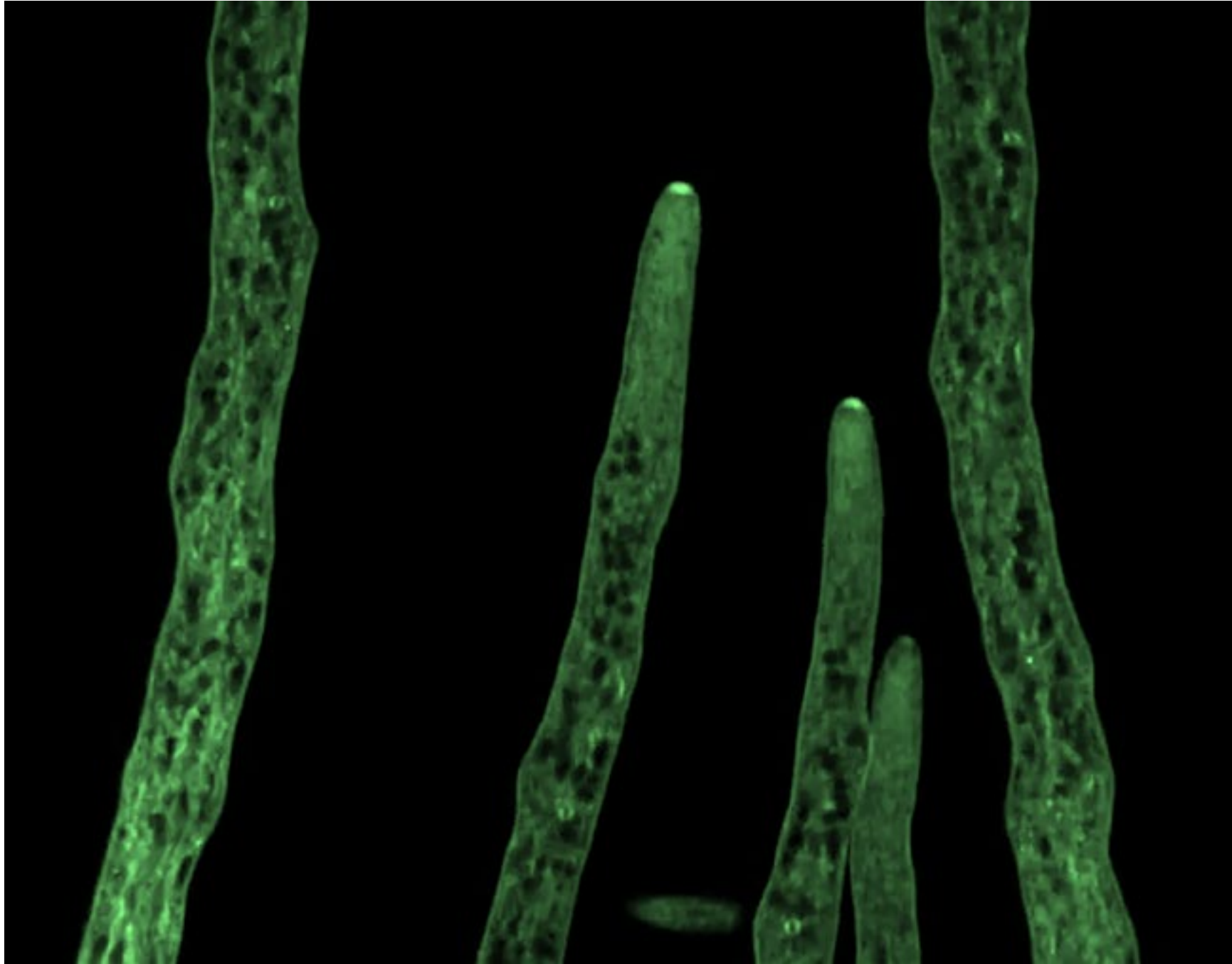
DIANA POLICARPO

I want it to be a chapter because I really see it as an ongoing thing. I was very focused in the context of Portugal and Europe. For example, going to the UK to shoot at the fungarium and in Cambridge with the scientists was really interesting. I really felt like the pandemic was creating limits where I could go or not go for research. I think the publication was really important as a complement to the exhibition. There's an essay from someone in Norway, looking into the Sami culture and witchcraft there. Since I couldn't do the field work, I was very much in the studio composing and writing so that the experience of presenting this work was very much into this audio-visual connection. But I'm very interested in live performance. The fact that you can work with performers, it's something that I've been slowly trying to explore more.

Above and previous, **Liquid Transfers**, Diana Policarpo, 2022. Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin.

Opposite, images from research trip to the Portuguese Savage Islands. Courtesy of the artist. **"The Soul Expanding Ocean #4: Diana Policarpo. Ciguatera"** is commissioned and produced by TBA21-Academy.





FRANCESCA GAVIN

What's the wider attraction about nature as a subject?

DIANA POLICARPO

I was always very, very interested in the psychedelic experience and mimicry and all the hybridisation of technologies and intelligence as a kid. My grandmother and my mom - I talk a lot about them, because they really passed the botanical herbalist connection on to me. I always explored fungi and plants as a kid and learning about medicinal properties - I still do. I was very attracted to the cross languages and technologies that we find and inspired us from nature to pretty much everything we do. We copy them. It's just artificial reproductions of things we learn from nature.

The theme of crossing poison and cure was also very interesting. I really wanted to look into what toxic means and what is toxicity in society. I was fascinated by how Marx talks about parasitism, and how you can translate that into alien parasites and parasite-host relationships of control, of manipulation. I wanted to bring those questions of power and gender and reproduction. In this case, the CIA.

It's like speculative fiction. I really found inspiration from many authors in science fiction that have this connection also with nature, with ecology. I wanted to explore that in different projects. For example, we find of precarity and survival, and modes of creating and producing fungi, in working class or peasantry

histories. 'Ciguatera' [at Ocean Space in Venice] - I still see it in the same family, a continuation of projects. There was a long battle between Portugal and Spain with this specific region, which is the natural reserve. You couldn't access this place because it's a military base. You're either a scientist or you need support to be able to develop work there. They had so many connections with the Atlantic and colonial past. It's still affecting a lot of people today. I was really interested in this idea of singing mermaids and how people wrote about monsters during their trips to Brazil or Africa. The mythological side of it was really interesting.

FRANCESCA GAVIN

As much as you're drawing on natural references, your work really seems to be a portrait of humanity somehow. How we misuse or are misused by things. It seems to be much more about trying to unpick how humanity functions by using nature as a metaphor.

DIANA POLICARPO

Yeah. I do show humans, but I really try to bring more visibility to the other agents, and the other bodies involved. Although it's about humanity, it's about how we are really getting on and living together, having to survive with all what we are facing.

"EVERY SINGLE PROJECT COMES FROM CRAZY MIND GAMES OF CONNECTING DOTS. IT CREATES CHANNELS INTO WHAT IS OBSCURE, WHAT IS OCCULT, WHAT IS MORE KNOWN."

Above, image from research trip to the Portuguese Savage Islands. Courtesy of the artist. "The Soul Expanding Ocean #4: Diana Policarpo. Ciguatera" is commissioned and produced by TBA21-Academy.

Opposite, **Liquid Transfers**, Diana Policarpo, 2022. Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin.

FRANCESCA GAVIN

Part of the joy of what you get to do is you get to take your interests, and dive into this expansive research. Would you say that part of your driving motivation is the opportunity to share that learning?

DIANA POLICARPO

Absolutely. That is central and is nuclear. I love to collaborate. Every single project comes from crazy mind games of connecting dots. It creates channels into what is obscure, what is occult, what is more known. That really excites me. Presenting something is really about questions, trying to think together through material and through content. How current and contemporary you can be with your work, looking into this past narratives and science fiction. It has always been my portals, in a way.

Diana Policarpo is the winner of the Illy Present Future prize, exhibited at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo. dianapolicarpo.com fsrr.org