

Miles Rufelds

Two or Three Saprophytes



Miles Rufelds, *Two or Three Saprophytes*, 2019. Video Still.

In *Two or Three Saprophytes*, artist Miles Rufeld extends his parafictional practice to saprophytes—fungus, plants, and other microorganisms that stay alive by feeding on dead or decaying organic matter. The work turns around the symbol and body of the mushroom, a well-known saprophyte, with the artist’s reflexive cycling of references—Romantic painting, the origin story of coal, the Spiritualism movement, Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*—making strange, somnambulant sense through the interrelationship of video, sculpture, and slides.

Rufelds’ exhibition is rooted in the history of the industrial revolution, with the artist taking up the complicated dynamics that exist between saprophytic life and scientific, technologic, cinematic, and artistic developments since the early 1800s. The revelation in 1860, for example, that industrialists could transform their waste into a *product* brought the pernicious logic of capitalism full circle (like an ouroboros—the serpent curled up, ready to eat its own tail).

Today, armed with the knowledge that mushrooms are able to neutralize noxious wastes (arsenic, uranium, lead, benzene) through digestion, capitalists and environmentalists have mobilized this biological capacity of fungi as a useful, marketable technology. The politics of bioremediation technologies, and the concomitant patenting of mushrooms for dutifully cleaning up pollutants, presents moral quandaries—quandaries that seem all the more pressing at a time when the agency and affects of non-human species is a matter of serious consideration across disciplines.

Like the revolution, the benzene ring is a radial refrain in Rufelds’ work. The discovery of the benzene ring in 1865 marked a major shift for chemical science; that the chemical structure of benzene—where carbon and hydrogen

molecules form an architectural, ring-like structure—resembles a hex nut is a visual relationship that Rufelds extends to playful, parafictional effect.

In this work, parafiction becomes a way for the artist to activate the space between science and speculation (seen in theoretical turns like speculative realism), with the mushroom standing as a biological being particularly conducive to magical thinking. Indeed, mushrooms inspire theories, be they fantastical, empirical, or something in between—take, for example, Terence McKenna’s *Food of the Gods*, which presents an evolutionary theory predicated on the role that psilocybin in hallucinogenic mushrooms played in the development of human consciousness. Rufelds digests historical and modern-day materials, stories, and theories by imaginatively assimilating them in this three-part exhibition, which moves between the three cabinet galleries of the Art Museum.

In the first room is displayed a single-channel video of the same name, which spans a series of sporic tales that exist in tangential relation with each other. The vignettes, some *truer* than others, are like mushrooms popping up around the root of an old-growth tree—or the microscopic spores that those mushrooms release into the air. Rufelds plays with synchronous time and intentional anachronisms, generating a narrative that is dreamy and extra-rational. More cyclical than linear, the video has multiple points of entry for viewers, who can find their own trail through it.

Influences of the video essay genre and experimental doc work by artists like Hito Steyerl and Ha-run Farocki are present, where the narrator attempts to communicate something even as they are aware of the contingency of their

own perspective, the questionable authority of their own speaking voice; this is extended to the context of parafiction, with Rufelds’ deep historical research folded into a factually suspended, polysporous realm. The form of the video embodies larger politicized tension between *production*—the act of making new work as an artist, working with materials and technologies that have fraught histories—and *decomposition* or decay of interest to the artist in this work. Rufelds’ practice of re-working and re-contextualizing appropriated footage, and then folding this footage into new footage that the artist himself shot, becomes itself a remediation practice akin to the remediating capabilities of mushrooms.

In the second room is the installation *Spiral Economy*, which centers on two large containers used for transporting bulk materials to manufacturers. “Intermediate bulk containers,” more specifically, their function is to deliver “transitional substances” to where they are packaged for sale. Prior to their new life in the gallery, these plastic tanks were used to hold bulk *mango pomegranate body wash* in transit: when the artist received them, there was still a bit of the sparkly goop left in the bottom. When I met with Rufelds in his studio, the tank was tipped so the bright-pink ooze could drip from the giant tank into a small plastic bucket below. As we spoke about the aesthetics of alchemy, I could faintly smell the familiar, cloying scent of synthetic fruit.

Rufelds also displays the industry-standard certificates that certify the containers have been sufficiently sanitized so as to be recycled, resold, and reintegrated into the circular economy of global shipping and storage. By displaying these vessels under the cold light of fluorescents, their sterility is in ripe tension with the artist’s invocations of spirality—an ancient symbol

with sacred resonance in goddess mythology, for example, as reclaimed by 1970s neopagan ecofeminisms (the spiral—the shape of a labyrinth someone might walk, barefoot, to root themselves in the knowledge of the ground). Meandering and meaningful, this parafictional work serves as an intervention into the circular economy, rendering the circulation spiral instead.

In the third room is Rufelds’ installation *The Grave Contains Nothing But Dust and Ashes*. Here, two carousel slide projectors become another, circuitous site for parafictional storytelling. The projector is on display as both an image technology and a sculptural object, resembling a kind of benzene ring itself, with its circular form displayed vertically. With the haunting mood of the space, the artist invokes phantasmagoria shows, the relation between magic lanterns and slide carousels haunting the work. Images from art history—like British Romantic Joseph Wright of Derby’s painting that represents the early days of the industrial revolution—are recast in light of this parafictional, mycological meta-verse: what if, when Miravan, the young nobleman of Ingria opens the sarcophagus shown in Wright’s painting, he finds a rare species of fungus? With the title, Rufelds’ installation simultaneously invokes and negates the possibility of the spirit world.

In *Two or Three Saprophytes*, Rufelds reveals parafiction to be a *recuperative* practice—one that spirals outward, and back in again, like an eternal return, still turning...