



*"I am interested in engaging with the energy of things that are very near oblivion - or close to the point of becoming a grain of geological time."*

*"My practice evolves with these unanswerable questions about mutations, epigenetics, trauma. My practice explores our entanglement with our surroundings and the effects of our actions on a vast and minute scale."*

Sankey's installations engage with the viewer's spatial and personal perception. Sankey reworks and recreates space; offering alternative ways to experience and reflect on presence, participation and scale. An important aspect of her practice is its hand-made humble materiality. Her sculpture uses living plant tissue and human supply lines to engage in the geo-feminist conversation about what we gorge and suck out of the planet. It examines mutation and the human extractive machine of supply and power in a multi-species context.


*"I am interested in engaging with the energy of things that are very near oblivion - or close to the point of becoming a grain of geological time. For example fallen trees from local parks and plumbings from scrap yards - other found and fallen objects - elements that make up our built environment; plants, and trees, plumbings, domestic modules. It's from this angle that I prefer to look upon our world, at how we are living on our planet."*

Shannon Carroll, ARC LAB Curatorial Scholar

Katherine Sankey's material hand-making art practice embodies the construction of semi-organic apparatuses that wrestle with the absurdity, humour and horror of our relationship with and perception of our planetary host, Gaia. Her practice draws from a fascination with the dichotomy between the desperately precarious frailty of humans and our compulsive desire to 'take over' and persist.

The title of the exhibition derives from the feminist theorist and physicist, Karen Barad who reminds us that the radiation of the nuclear age made its way into the tiny cells that make up bodies - globally, Barad's provocation that there is an atom-bomb inside each morsel of life shakes up our ability to differentiate scales - and haunts us. Earth, particle physics, biology, technology and nature, were joined to the human experience in a new way by our creation of the atom bomb.

Sankey's exhibition of the same name uses this phrase to bring to light a key purpose and impetus in her own practice. After this point where humans have generated every living cell on the planet our relationship with the world and matter is different. Sankey's practice is a questioning of our position in relation to the others we live among.


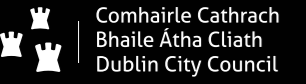



**Katherine Sankey**

*an atom-bomb in each morsel of life*

15th June – 5th September 2023  
Exhibition preview Thursday June 15th at 6pm

The LAB Gallery, Foley Street, Dublin 1.  
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ADMISSION FREE  
Open Monday to Saturday 10:00am – 6:00pm.

**Katherine Sankey**

Katherine Sankey (born in Paris, France) grew up between Sydney, Belfast and Paris and has been based in Dublin, Ireland since 1997. Her recent exhibitions include SANKEY | WALKER a solo/collaborative exhibition with Corban Walker at The Dock, PALLAS P/S AIP and RUA RED. Selected group exhibitions include 'Worlds of Their Own' PLATFORM 21, 4 person show at Draiocht, Blanchardstown; 'Woman in the Machine', Visual, Carlow. She was invited artist in 190th RHA Annual Exhibition (2020), RUA RED Winter Show (won the Solo Award), TULCA – 'Tactical Magic'. She has a forthcoming two person exhibition with Anna Macloud at 5th Tipperary Arts Centre in 2024. Her solo exhibition, 'Conscious', will open at The RHA Ashford Gallery in October.

Sankey was recipient of the Fire Station Artists' Studios Sculpture Award in 2020 and gave a 'Plinth Politics' lecture at the Royal Hibernian Academy. In 2021 & 22 Sankey received the Arts Council of Ireland Bursary. Also in 2021, she received the Agility Award, the DCC Visual Art Bursary and her sculpture was acquired by the Arts Council of Ireland Collection and is in private collections in Ireland and Europe.

**The LAB Gallery**

The LAB was established by Dublin City Council in 2005 as a municipal arts hub, housing gallery, rehearsal and incubation spaces for a range of art forms. The LAB Gallery supports emerging art practices and delivers a year round programme of free events for all ages. In addition to Dublin City Council, the LAB Gallery is supported by the Arts Council.

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15th June – 5th September 2023  
www.thelab.ie

# '55–'63

Nathan O'Donnell

In her 2017 book, *The Second Body*, Daisy Hildyard sets out to articulate 'a way of speaking which implicates your body in everything on earth'.<sup>1</sup>

The book begins by problematising the distinctions we make between our bodies and the worlds around us: the animal world, the machine world, the world of microplastic and waste we have generated. Hildyard is critical of any idea of the self as a contained entity, of the body as a defined boundary. On the contrary, her aim is to find a language to express the interconnectedness – the *entanglement* – of the human and the non-human.

In normal life, a human body is rarely understood to exist outside its own skin – it is supposed to be inviolable. The language of the human animal is that of a whole and single individual. ... Climate change creates a new language, in which you have to be all over the place; you are always all over the place. It makes every animal body implicated in the whole world.<sup>2</sup>

Hildyard refuses to think of the body as a stable container with rigid demarcations. Instead, she proposes that we consider the possibility that we are possessed of a 'second body', an expanded, borderless entity, extending across the globe and into the earth, into water, into the air, through infrastructural and political and ecological systems. This second body allows us to conceive of the multiple – infinite – extensions and interpenetrations of the individual with the world.

1 Daisy Hildyard, *The Second Body* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017), 12.

2 Ibid., 13.

Katherine Sankey's work is full of entanglement. Her sinuously-assembled, sometimes-monstrous sculptural objects are interlocked, plumbed, entwined, looped together. They have a complex internal circuitry that also extends outward, connecting, at certain key points, to the gallery infrastructures around them.

At these circuit points, they seem uncontainable, as if they refuse to be considered separate, inviolate, distinct from the world around them.

The 'bomb pulse' is the name given to the spike in atmospheric Carbon-14 produced by the hundreds of nuclear bomb tests that were undertaken in the post-war period. Beginning in 1945 but intensifying a decade later – and continuing until 1963, when they were banned by international treaty – more than five hundred nuclear bombs were exploded, above ground, in the open air, around the world, creating an atomic pulse that effectively left a time signature in every living thing on earth. Even animals at the bottom of the ocean – deep-sea creatures dwelling in the Mariana Trench – show traces of Carbon-14 in their muscles. This was a historically-specific event, taking place across a brief few year of concentrated intensity, but it is also continuing to play out in slow motion. The full extent of its effects remains to be seen. What is clear is that this radioactive fallout has left an atomic date stamp on every part of life on this planet, as indelible as the carbon rings of a tree trunk.

Particle physicist and philosopher Karen Barad argues that 'matter fell from grace during the twentieth century'.<sup>3</sup> We can no longer separate the material

3 Karen Barad, 'No Small Matter: Mushroom Clouds, Ecologies of Nothingness, and Strange Topologies of Spacetime-mattering', in Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt (eds.), *Art of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 103.

hundred thousand times smaller than the atom), destroys cities and remakes the geopolitical field on a global scale, how can anything like an ontological commitment to a line in the sand between "micro" and "macro" continue to hold sway on our political imaginaries?<sup>6</sup> This folding of micro and macro is a feature of Sankey's practice, her lens ranging back and forth between the molecular and the monstrous.

For the most part, her sculptural works exceed the scale of the human body, offering instead the affordance of habitations, structures to be navigated around, seen through. Sometimes they will offer a tangential invitation; Sanky might incorporate pieces of furniture, for instance, a table, a kitchen chair, with their suggestions of a human occupant or user. Alternatively, the body features as a reference or index. *Breather*, for instance, suggests to me the figure of a supine giant. On my last visit to the artist's studio, this work was laid out on the ground, covered over in a sheet of tarpaulin. It had returned from another show and was ready to be transported to the Lab. It looked like a huge dead body wrapped in a body bag.

It is not only at the level of the particle that entanglement has come to be recognised. Even in the past decade, there have been significant developments in our understanding of the entanglements of natural ecosystems: forest root systems, mycelial networks. As has been recently observed, James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis's famous 'Gaia hypothesis' – the case for viewing the earth as a living, self-regulating organism, much-derided within the scientific community when it was first published in the 1970s – has in some ways been vindicated. Meehan Crist has noted that, in the intervening decades, research has concluded that 'however improbable, teleological, or untestable it [the Gaia hypothesis] may be, it contains

6 Karen Barad, 'No Small Matter', 108.

a nugget of truth more axiomatic than anyone would have guessed'.<sup>7</sup> We recognise today the earth's complex regulatory patterns, a delicate stability built on the manifold interrelationships and feedback-loops between organic materials and environmental conditions, the balancing flows of sea levels and weather systems and so on. There are logics at play that transcend the objections to the Gaia hypothesis, predicated as it is on a belief in the planet's 'sentience'. Ultimately – and perhaps this could be considered a key blind-spot in our conception of sentience itself – we have fallen victim to our own crude fiction of inviolability, our impulse to see ourselves as distinct from the world around us.

Sankey's structures have a mutant quality. They are possessed of an uncanny strangeness, otherworldliness, materials evolving and mutating in apparent symbiosis – bleached wood merging with copper fixtures, porcelain, electric wiring. At a molecular level, genetic mutation can be understood as an evolutionary process, a mechanism for surviving hostile environments, a sort of DNA stress response. Sankey's objects are mutant in this regard – like seismic mutations, forming in response to our own monstrous acceleration, survival mechanisms activated in response to the shifting – deteriorating – ecosystems that sustain us.

There is also something of the cyborg about them, composed as they are of organic and mineral elements, fusing and extending into the infrastructure around them. One of the largest works in the exhibition, *Convergence*, consists of a set of four extending interpenetrating black wood bodies, covered here and there with strips of green and yellow paint, the colour of electrical earth wires or of civic street furniture: poles, bins, seating. Another work, *EarthLab (habitation)*, composed from the same set of branches, stands vertical, about four metres high,

7 Meehan Crist, 'Our Cyborg Progeny', *London Review of Books*, 43:1 (7 January 2021): 11.

from the immaterial. We no longer have access to the idea of some fixed human scale through which to view the world: large and small interpenetrate, become impossible to differentiate. Temporalities are mutable. The earth is now a sort of test-site, an experimental environment over which we have lost control (if we ever had it), an unstable atmosphere in which outcomes cannot be predicted.

In *Earth*, we see a pair of hands, digging in a patch of earth. It is a repetitive quotidian gesture, familiar to anyone who gardens; the grounding interaction of skin and earth, the simple inquisitive act of uprooting a bit of soil in a backyard. This footage is juxtaposed, on a second screen, by a cascade of images of other, more colossal excavations. Bomb craters. Open cast mines. Building sites. The hole in the earth left after a tree has been uprooted.

Sankey talks to me about taking a walk in a park near her home, where the Council were removing dislodged trees. She talks about getting up close to the disrupted tangle of roots and earth and microcosmic life, insects, soil, a whole complex ecosystem, and being struck by a sense of terror, brought face to face with a world-within-our-world that is strange and monstrous to us, an entanglement of species and matter, a knot of ecological wiring which is inscrutable to us and without which we could not survive.

its ends plumbed into the walls and floors and painted over the way such joins and fixes are often painted over, clumsily, not quite concealing the disruption.

From a certain angle, they have a sci-fi aspect too, reminiscent of the Martian invaders in *War of the Worlds*. They feel elemental, even; Sankey describes them as 'chthonic', aligning them with the Greek gods of the underworld. Drawing dark energies from under the earth, these are creatures animated by the unseen – the root systems, the electrical wiring, the water being funnelled and maintained and channelled underground. They are tapped into the infrastructure, fuelled by the natural resources we pump around and through our habitats; monstrous mutations assembled through the sheer kinetic force of the atomic energies – the bomb pulse – we have unleashed upon the world.

*The entire world is entangled with the explosion [Hiroshima], a global dispersal of the bombing. The bomb continues to go off everywhere (but not everywhere equally). The whole world is downwind. ... Histories, geopolitics, nothingness, written inside each cell.*<sup>8</sup>

There is a danger here – a danger of which Sankey is keenly aware – of reducing ecological material to the status of metaphor. This is a point Barad makes too: to reckon with the Anthropocene, and with climate catastrophe, conventional understandings of matter and meaning need to be undone. Sankey recognises this, and reflects upon it within the work, taking what she recognises as settler-colonial practices – the bleaching of branches, the reduction of organic material to sanitised tool – and utilising them as critical commentary. In a way, her work

8 Karen Barad, 'No Small Matter', 108.

*The Manhattan Project not only unlocked the power of the atom, creating new industries and military machines, it also inaugurated a subtle but total transformation of the biosphere ... we need to examine the effects of the bomb not only at the level of the nation-state but also at the level of the local ecosystem, the organism, and ultimately, the cell. ... America's nuclear project has witnessed the transformation of human 'nature' at the level of both biology and culture ... turning the earth into a vast laboratory of nuclear effects that maintain an unpredictable claim on a deep future.*<sup>4</sup>

Sankey's work modulates between different scales, sometimes expansively large, sometimes granular and forensic. The question of scale is a key preoccupation for the artist. It is one of the key collective challenges we face, as we struggle to imaginatively conceive of the Anthropocene, climate destruction, and the entanglement of matter and body. These are concepts that combine an almost astral metaphysical quality with raw political and social urgency.<sup>5</sup> They require thinking across several scales simultaneously and immediately – the human, the global, the cosmic, the subatomic.

This is more than an imaginative exercise. As Barad notes, '[w]hen the splitting of an atom, or more precisely, its tiny nucleus (a mere 10<sup>-15</sup> meters in size, or one

4 Joseph Masco, 'Mutant Ecologies: Radioactive Life in Post-Cold War New Mexico', *Cultural Anthropology*, 19:4 (2004), quoted in Barad, 'No Small Matter', 109.

5 Jodi Dean identifies this paralysing incapacity to conceive of climate change as a 'whole', arguing instead for the adoption of a partisan or 'anamorphic' perspective, a perspective that acknowledges the viewer's necessarily limited position. See Jodi Dean, 'The Anamorphic: Politics of Climate Change', *e-flux journal*, 69 (2016): 5.