

CELLUMONIALS

Rob Dunn

I spend part of each year in Copenhagen, Denmark. It was in Copenhagen where I first encountered Baum and Leahy and their work. It is also in Copenhagen where, traditionally, no one covers their windows with curtains. To cover the windows is to suggest you have something to hide. As a result, in various places in the city, as one rides a bike, one sees people, divided by their apartments, going about their lives. People sitting down to dinner. Lighting candles. Reading. Ironing clothes. On a thousand stages, a thousand pieces of apartment theater play out each evening. Invariably, the characters in these dramas are just people. The collective scene creates a repeating illusion that the world is composed of nothing but humans, or maybe humans, the occasional dog tall enough to be seen through the window, and clumps of house plants. It also creates the illusion that those humans are going about their lives separately, isolated from one another. We humans are isolated from the rest of life and we are isolated from each other, or so the performances seem to suggest. But the isolation that we see among the Danish windows is a kind of lie, perpetuated by our eyes. It is a lie that Baum and Leahy powerfully rebuke in their new work.

Baum and Leahy force us to confront the reality that the world we perceive with our eyes is a dangerous fiction. Our eyes focus our attention, but they also, thanks to the details and limits of their workings, systematically obscure nearly everything. Nowhere is this more clear than in the context of our understanding of microscopic life. Our bodies are composed of a mix of human cells and microbial cells, with the latter vastly outnumbering the former. The microbial cells in and on our bodies carry out many of the core functions on which we depend to stay alive. They are also, simultaneously, in a constant dance with the microbes in the food we eat, in the air around us and on other people. As our microbes change, our identities change. Our eyes miss all of this and lead us to wrongheaded conclusions about our lives and actions. In their new artwork, Baum and Leahy, invite participants to pause, even just briefly, to experience what it is to be connected to these other species and, through them, to other people.

In the pre-COVID version of Baum and Leahy's work, they invited participants to reconsider the daily play of their lives in a physical space in which individual humans laid side by side, not in the dark but in relative darkness, and listened. As they did, they were asked to become more aware of the ways in which life invisibly connects them. The power of this performance is many-dimensional and yet what strikes me in watching it is that the participants,

while they listen, smell and consider their connectedness, are also in a room, side by side with other people with whom, in that very moment, they are sharing microbes. At that moment, the participants are connected. They look separate. They think of themselves as separate. Yet, they are sharing their microbes into the room and then sharing the microbes of the room. Their microbes are touching each other's microbes. We are all ecosystems, connected to other ecosystems, but rarely are we made aware of this reality. Baum and Leahy call upon us to be aware and, in doing so, to realize that we perceive of ourselves and each other is little more than a flimsy fragment, a structure, of the more complete reality, the reality that makes us whole or fails to.