



Mold. White River, Colorado, USA. Photo by Anna Tsing, 2021.

THE DECAY MANIFESTO
KLAAS KUITENBROUWER

This planet has been made habitable by bacteria, fungi and plants, later aided by animals. Humans are a fairly recent species that still has a lot to learn.

Life creates the circumstances for more life, but the planet's life-supporting capacity is diminishing with increasing speed. According to the current logic of dominant economics, the combined interests of all life weigh less than the short-term financial interests of a small group of wealthy humans.

Ecological regeneration is vital to keep this world habitable. For this to happen on a scale sufficient to alter the course of events, humans would need to change the dominant economic logic – radically.

A regenerative economy would be the same thing as a human-inclusive ecosystem. It would be a network of exchange of matter, energy and information that sustains all life, including human life. The distinction between the notions 'ecology' and 'economy' would then lose much of its current meaning. There would be an oak tree economy, a sparrow economy, a fungal economy and a human economy, all intersecting at myriad places and moments, each an active circle, looping, flowing and embedding in the others – together forming the living world.

As a Zoöp (see zoop.earth), the Nieuwe Instituut is working to foster a regenerative culture and regenerative economy. Perhaps a better word than economy – the (human) management of the household, with all its ignored externalities – would be *zoönomy*: 'life's management of life', all bodies included.

One important way in which a zoönomy would be different from what we now know as an 'economy', is that a zoönomy is not addicted to growth. Growth takes place, of course – most living things grow – but in a zoönomy, growth leads to adulthood, old age, death and decay. This is what it means to live. As a living system, a zoönomy embraces death and decay.

In the current dominant economic model and its modernist, progress- and growth-oriented culture, however, decay is not viewed favourably. In this idea of economy, decay is mostly seen as 'already worthless things becoming even more worthless'. It is ignored as a vital process. Humans are the only species that produce waste that is not only entirely useless but often toxic and lethal – not only to other species, but also to themselves!

This manifesto, however, is a celebration of decay. Decay is the loss of form but not of matter! Decay is the process of freeing matter from its actualised, fulfilled form, thereby restoring its potential to form or to be formed in other ways. Fewer, larger forms become many more smaller ones, and then smaller again, until we reach the matter itself. Decay is the alchemical transformation at the heart of a thriving zoönomy. It is the process whereby those bodies whose lives have ended lose their form so that their constituent elements can join other bodies.

Living fungi and mycelia are the main agents of decay. Their hyphae (threads or fibres) can act, more or less simultaneously, as nerves, intestines, skin, bone, somewhat like muscle, and like reproductive organs. Is it their absence of fixed bodily forms that enables them to negotiate the forms of the bodies they encounter so well?

They are endlessly flexible and uncannily clever in tasting and dealing with their surroundings, continuously learning and exchanging strands of knowledge, DNA and chemical behaviours on the fly – always at the beginning and at the end of the forms of other bodies. Their life precedes and follows on the lives of other life forms. They dissolve and compost, to allow others to compose again.

If a zoönomy has banks, then fungi are the bankers and currency changers, transforming the generous detritus of the living into pluriversal, life-enabling potential.

Klaas Kuitenbrouwer is the head of the Zoönomie Institute, and senior researcher in regenerative practices at the Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam. His work is drawn to the tensions between different knowledge practices — technological, artistic, legal, scientific, and more-than-human.

This manifesto is part of *FUNGI: Anarchist Designers*. This exhibition, curated by anthropologist Anna Tsing and architect-artist Feifei Zhou, presents fungi as radical designers in a world beyond human control. On show at the Nieuwe Instituut from 21 November 2025 to 9 August 2026. With the support of het Cultuurfonds, Mondriaan Fonds, Graham Foundation and Iona Stichting.