Living Matter (Berlin, 8-11 Dez 26)

Berlin, Dec 8–11, 2026

Pamela Mackenzie

Living Matter: Metals and Minerals at the Boundaries of Life.

Building on the idea that metals and minerals have life cycles, "Living Matter" investigates what it meant, historically, for minerals to be alive or integrated into living systems. Bringing European, Chinese, and Japanese histories into conversation, the symposium explores boundary zones where mineral and organic matter interpenetrate: minerals that grow, veins that become exhausted or regenerate, bodies that produce stones, and mineral substances used to explain living structures.

Four panels move from the maintenance and exhaustion of the earth to mineral growth and generation, minerals within living bodies, and relationships among mines, bodies, and political realms. Through histories of alchemy, medicine, mining, and microscopy, participants ask when growth, activity, and transformation were understood as evidence of life, and how these understandings shaped practical interventions into matter.
A keynote by artist Ilana Halperin brings contemporary artistic practice into conversation with these historical questions. A visit to the Berlin Museum of Medical History of the Charité with former director Thomas Schnalke connects bodily specimens and medical collecting with the discussion of stones generated within organisms. A visit to the BGR Geoscientific Collections with curator Dr. Angela Ehling offers a complementary encounter with mineral specimens. Together, these visits invite reflection on how preservation, classification, and display shape knowledge of bodily and geological matter.

The fourth symposium in the Metals, Minerals and the Life Cycle series combines precirculated working drafts, paired presentations, discussant responses, collection visits, and extended discussion to develop questions for a collective publication exploring historical distinctions between mineral and organic life.

Registration for the panels and keynote is possible, either in person or online. See website for details.

Tuesday 8 December 2026
Room 265, MPIWG

09:00–10:00 | Registration and welcome
10:00–10:30 | Coffee Break
10:30–12:00 | Panel 1 Mineral Growth and Generation
Presenters: Sergei Zotov and Sarah Lang. Discussant: Francesco Luzzini.

12:00–13:30 | Lunch
13:30–15:00 | Panel 2 Sustaining and Exhausting the Earth
Presenters: Hailian Chen and Amelia Hutchinson. Discussant: Tina Asmussen.

Wednesday 9 December 2026
Berlin Museum of Medical History of the Charité

Charitéplatz 1, 10117 Berlin; museum entrance: Virchowweg 17 (Campus Charité Mitte)
10:00–12:00 | Museum visit with former director Thomas Schnalke
13:00–14:00 Lunch, MPIWG
Main Conference Room, MPIWG
14:00–16:00 | Keynote Ilana Halperin
Extended artist talk and discussion on mineral processes and living systems.

Thursday 10 December 2026
Geowissenschaftliche Sammlungen der Bundesanstalt für Geowissenschaften und Rohstoffe, Berlin. With curator Dr. Angela Ehling.
Address: Wilhelmstraße 25–30, 13593 Berlin-Spandau.
Harnack House, Lynen room

09:30–11:30 | Visit to the BGR Geoscientific Collections
13:00–14:00 Lunch, MPIWG
Room 265, MPIWG
14:00–15:30 Panel 3 Minerals in Living Bodies
Presenters: Simon Siemianowski and Pamela Mackenzie. Discussant: Duygu Yıldırım.

Friday 11 December 2026
Harnack House, Lynen room

9:00–10:30 Panel 4 The Mine the Body and the Realm
Presenters: Tillmann Taape and Joshua Batts. Discussant: Joshua Schlachet.
10:30–11:00 Coffee Break
11:00–12:30 Final Open Discussion
12:30–13:30 Lunch
13:30–14:30 Internal Discussion – Publication
14:30–15:00 Coffee break
15:00–17:00 Internal discussion – Writing Session

Reference:
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