



Essay
The Molecular
Accelerator

MAX HOOPER

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SCHNEIDER

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Since Max Hooper Schneider defines his work as a set of “vibratory exchanges” with his ecosystem, it seems to me to be logical to begin by drawing up his ID card as a living organism, for all artists are bodies through which matter is filtered, distributed and reorganized. How have their intellectual training, culture and the environment in which they grew up created their predispositions, or their specific way of feeling and thinking? From the initial conditions of birth, biography boils down to an accumulation of faculties, knowledge and reflexes that bear witness to an agency: what the German scientist von Uexküll called the *Umwelt*, or an individual’s personal, sensorial environment. Born in Los Angeles in 1982, his mother being a professor of urban studies and philosophy (and specialist in Spinoza) and his deceased father an equine veterinarian, Hooper Schneider has been fascinated by aquariums ever since high school; he studied urban design and biology, before taking a master’s degree in architecture and marine biology. He has been Pierre Huyghe’s assistant. He likes meeting specialists from the most varied fields, filming dangerous chemical reactions in research institutes, or else talking with welders, silk makers or zoologists. He keeps an electric eel at home and would like to tap its energy. He tells how, one day, a mouse got into one of his sculptures, and that he has no desire to know what became of it. Finally, whenever I talk to him on the phone, he’s in a desert in New Mexico, or somewhere in the Arctic...

So much for his biography. But, far from being summed up as a “cultural identity” (as in the post-modern times), today a human organism can be seen as a marshalling yard, run through with geology, computing or chemistry. The human figure, as though dissolved by climate change in a *solution* (in the chemical sense), or a catastrophic *precipitate*, exists only through its connections. The human anatomy comes over as a set of porous organs, with prostheses plugged into them. While anthropoid forms seem omnipresent in modern art, they also tend towards what is vegetal, atmospheric or mechanical.

However, Max Hooper Schneider does not operate like a reprocessing plant, but instead like an orbital station. In motion, he samples living elements, invents spaces to house fragments of them and produces assemblages. There is always something extra-terrestrial about his compositions, as if they come from a non-human viewpoint.

1. Art is biology

The landscape described by Max Hooper Schneider is that of organic life. “Architecture is biology, art is biology,” he states. “The dead skin cells currently forming a microsoil in my computer keypad is biology. A plastic toy is as natural as a tide pool and given

enough time the tide pool will become the plastic toy and vice versa.” His works are composed like complex circuits, which attempt to capture the forces contained within forms in a raw state. Mention should also be made of a sort of energetic design, which may include all the transformation processes of matter: rotting, fragmentation, fossilization, mechanization, changes of smell and of color... While Pierre Huyghe seeks to “intensify the presence of what is,” Max Hooper Schneider tries to accelerate a vital process and display its catastrophic dimensions. And if his works often seem like science-fiction nightmares, this is because he applies to science the procedures of fiction.

One of the things that fascinate me about art today is its *power of translation*, and Max Hooper Schneider is a genuine polyglot: he seems to equally understand the language of coral and seaweed, of digital debris and wild plants. Whatever the case, his works form coherent sentences, using all these silent tongues. Quite clearly, contemporary visual culture has become rearticulated around the living world: it does not separate one object from another, but instead insists on keeping them together. Given that a plastic lamp and a slick in the sea come from the same material—oil—why not unite them? In this way, Hooper Schneider reveals the bonds that exist between things, the vital adhesive that assembles them, and at the same time the powers of decomposition. In his proliferating sculptures, which are often presented in transparent containers, as though protecting the public from the dangerous elements they contain, he presents us with a cellular, bacterial, parasitic, hormonal life. Renaissance painting depicted angels, who were messengers, or points of contact between worlds, but Hooper Schneider shows us their contemporary equivalents: the factors in the metamorphosis and re-composition of the visible. In an intentionally hysterical form, his work redistributes the continuities and the discontinuities that exist between humans and non-humans, life and death.

2. Art is containment

What characterizes the space-time of the Anthropocene is the discovery of the porosity between various aspects of the universe: we live in total promiscuity, as next-door neighbors of pangolins and tropical forests. Nothing is impenetrable anymore, and space is made up of a more or less distant, but real, chain of contacts. The imaginary of a catastrophe is thus often accompanied by a dream of isolation and being sealed. Hence the importance that can now be seen in contemporary art of various versions of a container. Hooper Schneider sees this as being the dominant image of our times: “Whether it is an aquarium, terrarium, paludarium, refugium, house, resort, hospital, summer camp, Marxism, Monism, or Scientology, we all find the containers that suit us best.” All systems are an aquarium, or a protection. Being an artist today, and visually

thinking through our times, means focusing on the vanishing points of these closed systems. “Even something that is vacuum-sealed will leak,” he says. “There is no closed system; nothing is impervious to molecular highways.” Nor is anything definitively dead: as fatalistic as he is deeply vitalist, Hooper Schneider associates *leaks* with life itself.

His most recurrent idea, which appears in his work in numerous forms, is both ironic and optimistic: life always emerges from ruins. His vision of the future is clear and precise: “crabs on trash.” It is this apocalyptic obsession that has made him fascinated by *extremophiles*, those resilient life forms that are capable of prospering on human waste which has accumulated over centuries. Or else *epizoans*, those organisms that live on the bodies of other species, without destroying them. He can, for example, cover a cactus or some aloe vera with a copper solution, or plunge oranges into a tank full of a toxic liquid. Containers have replaced frames. The frame of an image is always arbitrary, while the limits of a container are the physical bounds of an ongoing experiment in an artificial microclimate.

But, with him, there can also be found boundless, uncontained forms, genuine *vanishing lines*: for example, his film *Son*, shot along Arizona’s Route 66 during lockdown, follows a journey through a world that has been emptied of any human presence. It depicts a body-built shark in search of its lost son, which recalls Gregg Araki’s follies or Z movies from the 1950s. After all, post-war monsters, like Godzilla, were born from an atomic explosion.

3. Art is an atomic assemblage

For Max Hooper Schneider, the activity of an artist, for whom the visible is just one *effect* among others, turns out to be that of an atomic transformer: he works using uranium, elaborates chemical compounds and picks up all kinds of waste. The reality that he attentively observes is a molecular one, lying upstream to the fictions produced by the system, which is covered by the labels given to human beings in order to give them a better view of their milieu. Contemporary art has its gestures: atomization, decomposition, *lysis* and *analysis*. Mounds of matter, objects in a state of chemical decomposition, invisible particles, micro-organisms... Félix Guattari called for the “molecular sabotage of dominant social subjectivities,” and Max Hooper Schneider is working on it. His works’ uncertain scales contribute to their visual power: the huge and the minuscule seem to co-exist in the same object, forcing viewers to abandon their *human* stare and change scales. Depicting the contemporary landscape entails showing the collapse of dimensions and scales. Between Franz Boas’ anthropological dioramas and Jason Rhoades’ monumental potlatches, between surf aesthetics and an insect’s view, Max Hooper Schneider is composing a long track of death metal, from the remains of the biosphere.

Dolphin Boy, 2018 (p. 196) A Star Is Not Born In Isolation, 2022 (detail) (p. 200) Rainforest Café, 2022 (detail) (p. 201) Those Once Loyal, 2022 (detail) (p. 202) Estuary Holobiont, 2021 (detail) (p. 203) Mi Casa, Su Casa (Victorian House), 2022 (p. 204) Estuary Holobiont, 2021 (p. 205) Mi Casa, Su Casa (Farmhouse), 2022 (detail) (pp. 206-207)

Keep On Rotting in The Free World, 2022, installation view, MO.CO. Montpellier (pp. 208-209) Eocene Epizoan: Crystal Bacteriophage, 2021 (details) (pp. 210-211) Roadside Reliquary (Doughboys), 2021 (detail) (pp. 212-213) Roadside Reliquary (Turtle Fossil), 2021 (details) (pp. 214-216) Transfer Station, 2019 (details) (pp. 217-221) All images Courtesy: the artist, High Art, Paris/Arles and Maureen Paley, London/Hove





















