Open Studio

Advice on Being an Artist in the Capitalocene

We recently bought a book called *Inclusions. Aesthetics of the Capitalocene* by Nicolas Bourriaud. Within a diagnosis of the role of art in our age of crisis, we found what was, for us, a rather aspirational depiction of the contemporary artist. Bourriaud states that in our present era, which he calls the Capitalocene (Capitalism + Anthropocene), artists are the new anthropologists and as such they play a role which is vital for the future of mankind.

Who are these vital anthropologists? What do they do? Well, according to Bourriaud, these artists/anthropologists have become busy collapsing the false distinctions between nature and culture. How do they do this? By exploring and exploding the interdependent relationships between organisms, their ecosystems, and all the visible and invisible forces that influence them— human and nonhuman alike. You see, according to Bourriaud, they work at the molecular level and their art is one of immersion. So, these are not really artists anymore, and not run-of-the-mill anthropologists either, they are molecular anthropologists.[1]

Therefore, we asked ourselves, how can we become molecular anthropologists in the age of the Capitalocene? What steps should we follow to obtain the power of molecular vision? Bourriaud gives examples of some artists who in his opinion fit this mold, but without giving any clear instructions—which is what we were actually looking for when we bought the book.[2]

Be that as it may, with the examples we took from the book —while also extensively looking at these artists' websites — we had more than enough to move forward. And move forward we did. For the past couple of months, we got busy penetrating the molecular field. It was much harder than we thought. The project took on a life of its own and we had to adjust our expectations to fit its demands. For one, our initial idea was to present our results in our studio at the Künstlerhof Frohnau during the open studio weekend. However, we had to implement certain experimental parameters that make it impossible for us to have an open door. The risk of contamination is too high.

Therefore, seeing as we can't really show you what we've done, we decided to look back on our experience and use it to create our own initial guidelines for those who wish to enter the molecular field.

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[1] Not only that, he also draws parallels between the contemporary artist and the shaman (and also the witch and the sorcerer). This gets hard to follow since Bourriaud says that all these comparisons are not equivalent. The molecular anthropologist is not really a shaman but a kind of shaman and not really a sorcerer or a witch, but he does have access to a new kind of magic that makes evident all the contradictions of our capitalist present. Basically, the molecular anthropologist is a post-capitalist wizard.

[2] We thought it would be more of a handbook.

First of all, you will need a studio that you can turn into your laboratory. You shouldn't really call it a laboratory though. That would be too presumptuous. Yet, by no means should you call it a witch's covenstead or a wizard's lair. Whatever you do, needs to have the veneer of experimental research. It should look like you are carrying out experiments following a clearly defined methodology. You should appear meticulous and informed. Even though your end product needs to have an otherworldly aura, the process should not look magical. Your audience should understand exactly what you did even if they have no rational explanation for why you did it.[3]

The next thing to do is to find a science fiction story (J.G. Ballard or Phillip K. Dick seem to be endless springs of inspiration) and then bring to life some aspect of the story. One problem you will have with trying to materialize these stories is that as a molecular anthropologist you're not really supposed to make objects anymore. You're supposed to create experiences. But how do you create experiences if you're an artist and all you know is how to make things?

Well, if you go to a molecular anthropologist's exhibition, it will still be full of objects, but if you look at them through the molecular perspective, you will see that these are not objects anymore but autonomous agents that are alive and interconnected. They are nodes within a larger network, exchanging energy and information. In fact, you will see that they are actually the structures, tissues, and organs of a living organism and that you are inside the organism, witnessing its inner workings.[4] So, the trick is to make non-objects that feel like parts of an organism that has swallowed your audience.[5]

To be honest, we don't really read science fiction, but we've seen plenty of science fiction films and also quite a few horror films. In many of these films, there's usually some sort of menacing entity that grows and spreads and that by its very nature poses a threat to our human ideas of individuality and self. A thing without eyes or limbs or even a brain, gooey and amorphous but somehow sentient.

Now the question is, where do you find such a creature. One problem you will encounter is that a lot of creatures that could fit the part have already been cast in other molecular projects. It can feel like all of the menacing creatures are already taken. But just like an ethnographer needs to find a tribe to be his object of study, you will need to find your own particular organism.

In our case, as luck would have it, YouTube has plenty of videos of strange growing organisms. First, we found some time lapse videos of mold growing. That led to a few days of watching videos of different types

[3] One of the best things to do is to gather data. All kinds of data. The more data you gather the more your process will feel justified and meaningful.
[4] Of course, if you are a collector, it seems like you are allowed to buy the individual organs much like a butcher will sell you individual cuts of beef instead of demanding that you buy the whole dead cow.
[5] This is a surefire method for collapsing the subject-object distinction: create an object that can swallow the subject.

of fungal growth. Adding search words such as “horrifying”, “swallow”, “blob” and “alien” to “fungus”, led us to Myxomycetes, which is a type of slime mold. It turns out that slime mold is a misnomer since it’s not a fungus, although for many years it had been considered one. It’s also not an animal, or a plant but actually a protist, which is just a way of saying that it’s a eukaryotic organism that doesn’t fit within any of the other natural kingdoms. It’s so peculiar that it can only be classified by what it isn’t.

This type of slime mold is called plasmodial slime mold because it has different life cycles and when it is in a feeding cycle, it takes the shape of a giant amoeba (a plasmodium). The plasmodium is a protoplasm with thousands of nuclei and a single cellular membrane that crawls in search of food—bacteria and other microorganisms. In other words, it’s a giant single cell that looks like an otherworldly crawling, growing amorphous mass. So clearly a perfect candidate for us.

One of the most popular kinds of plasmodial slime mold is *Physarum polycephalum*, commonly known as “The Blob”. The Blob is a big online video star. Usually, you would find The Blob growing on decaying logs in the forest but since it can perform tricks, it has found steady employment in front of the camera. The Blob, like many other slime molds, is quite clever. It doesn’t have a brain but it shows intelligent behavior, like picking the most efficient route from one point to another, storing memories, learning and anticipating changing conditions. Because of this, scientists really like to make The Blob crawl around obstacles and solve mazes. In one case they put The Blob on top of a map of the Tokyo rail system and placed oats (it likes to eat oats) on each one of the spots representing the major cities surrounding Tokyo. What they saw was that The Blob created paths between the cities that closely resembled the real train network. Basically, proving that The Blob could design a whole transportation network—something which took humans decades—in a day.

We knew that we didn’t want to use The Blob to do more of these tricks. We felt sorry for The Blob. The poor creature was being exploited to plot efficient solutions. The machinery of efficiency and productivity had trapped The Blob. We thought we should liberate it somehow. Then we stumbled onto a video of The Blob eating a wild mushroom and it suddenly clicked for us. We had to feed The Blob magic mushrooms. We thought that if we gave The Blob enough psychedelic mushrooms perhaps it would stop choosing the most efficient path. Perhaps it would refuse to solve our human puzzles and regain its freedom.

We quickly realized that in order to have enough supply we would have to grow our own magic mushrooms, which is one of the reasons why we can’t open the door. We had to create optimal conditions for the mushrooms to grow.[6] Also, we didn’t want our little “Dog Vomit”[7] (our nickname for our slime) to be

[6] Research has shown that low sounds have a positive impact on mushroom growth, so we found a stream on YouTube that plays heavy rain and thunder sounds 24/7 and we play it for the mushrooms. We imagine The blob likes it too.

[7] We decided to call our slime mold Dog Vomit instead of The Blob. The Blob seemed too generic and obvious. Dog Vomit is actually the common name for a different species of slime mold, *Fuligo septica*. It’s called that because that’s what it looks like

disturbed while it went on its personal journey of discovery. Mushrooms are very susceptible to contamination when they are not in the wild, so we have to keep a very clean cultivation room. Which brings us back to the issue of difficulty. You should know that it's very hard to blur the boundaries between the human and the non-human world. If you want to be a molecular anthropologist, you have to be aware of the investment of time and money that will be required. We basically had to build a room within a room inside our studio to achieve an environment with adequate levels of light, temperature, and humidity. We had to put sensors everywhere. All of our free time goes into monitoring the slime mold and the mushrooms.

Sometimes, at night, exhausted after a day of babysitting our organisms in the studio, we lie in bed and talk about how maybe Dog Vomit chose us instead of the other way around. The thing is so clever, perhaps it had planned all along to find a couple of artists with studio space, so eager for personal advancement, that they would devote themselves completely to its growth and wellbeing. We thought we were freeing it, meanwhile it was enslaving us.

Our relationship reminded us of zombie-ant fungus (*Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*). Maybe you've heard of it. It's a type of parasitic fungus found in tropical forests that infects carpenter ants and takes over their behavior through spores that penetrate the ant's exoskeleton. The fungus grows through the insect's body feeding on its innards and controlling its mind. Once it takes control of the ant, it commands it to climb up a plant stem to a leaf where it has the optimal humidity and temperature for it to reproduce. Then it forces the zombified ant to bite down and lock its jaws into the leaf as it dies. After this "death bite" a long stalk bursts from its head, which becomes a capsule full of spores that then rain over the unsuspecting ants below, which will soon become zombies themselves.

It's hard not to feel like a zombie ant when you're this exhausted. Some say slime mold can even dream. We can only hope it's getting enough sleep.

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when found in the wild. We couldn't get any of this dog vomit slime mold for our experiment so we decided to use The Blob but just call it Dog Vomit since we liked this name more.