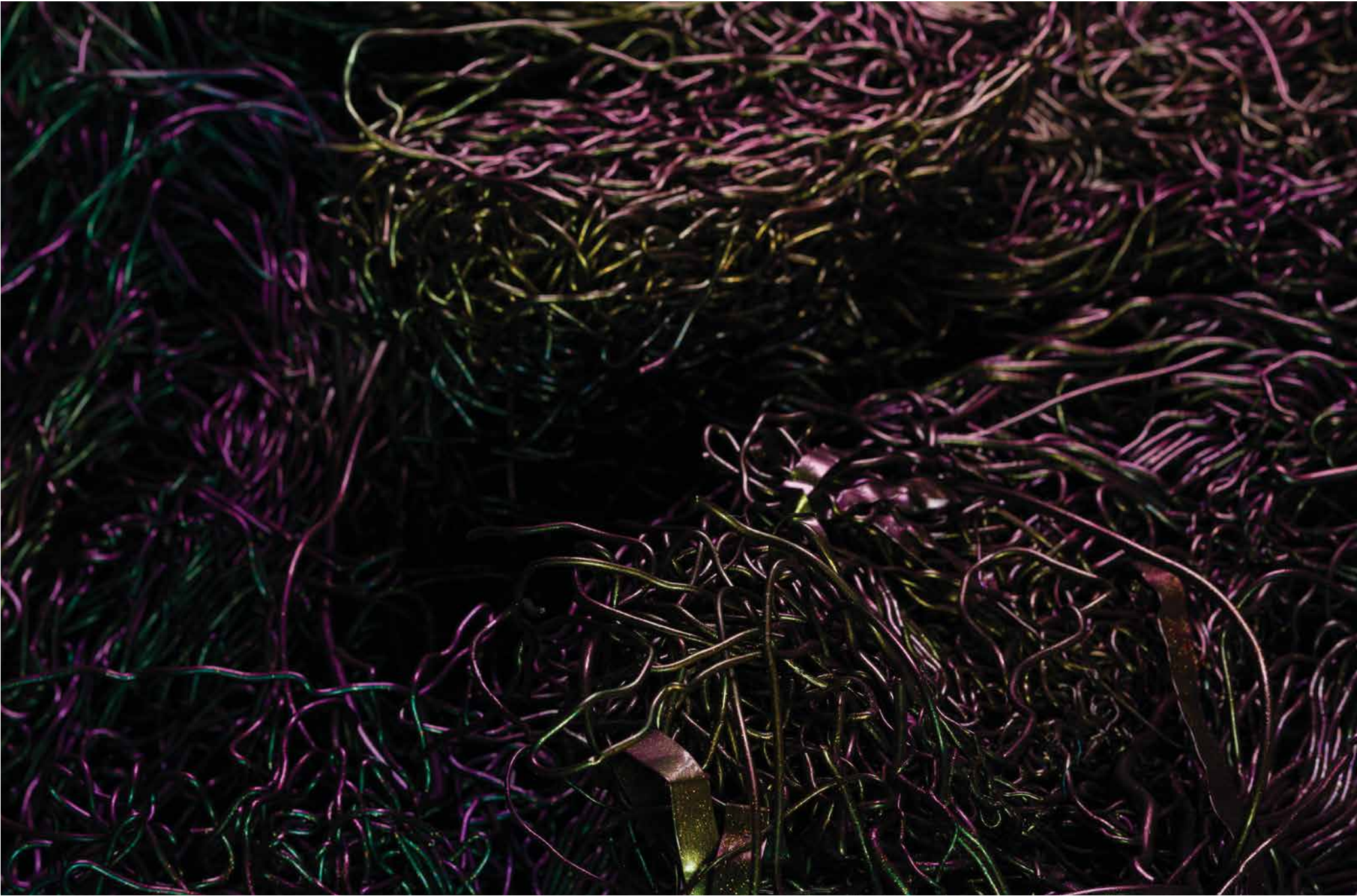


Essays by
TODD VON AMMON
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CECILIA ALEMANI

Portrait by
MICHAEL UNDERWOOD

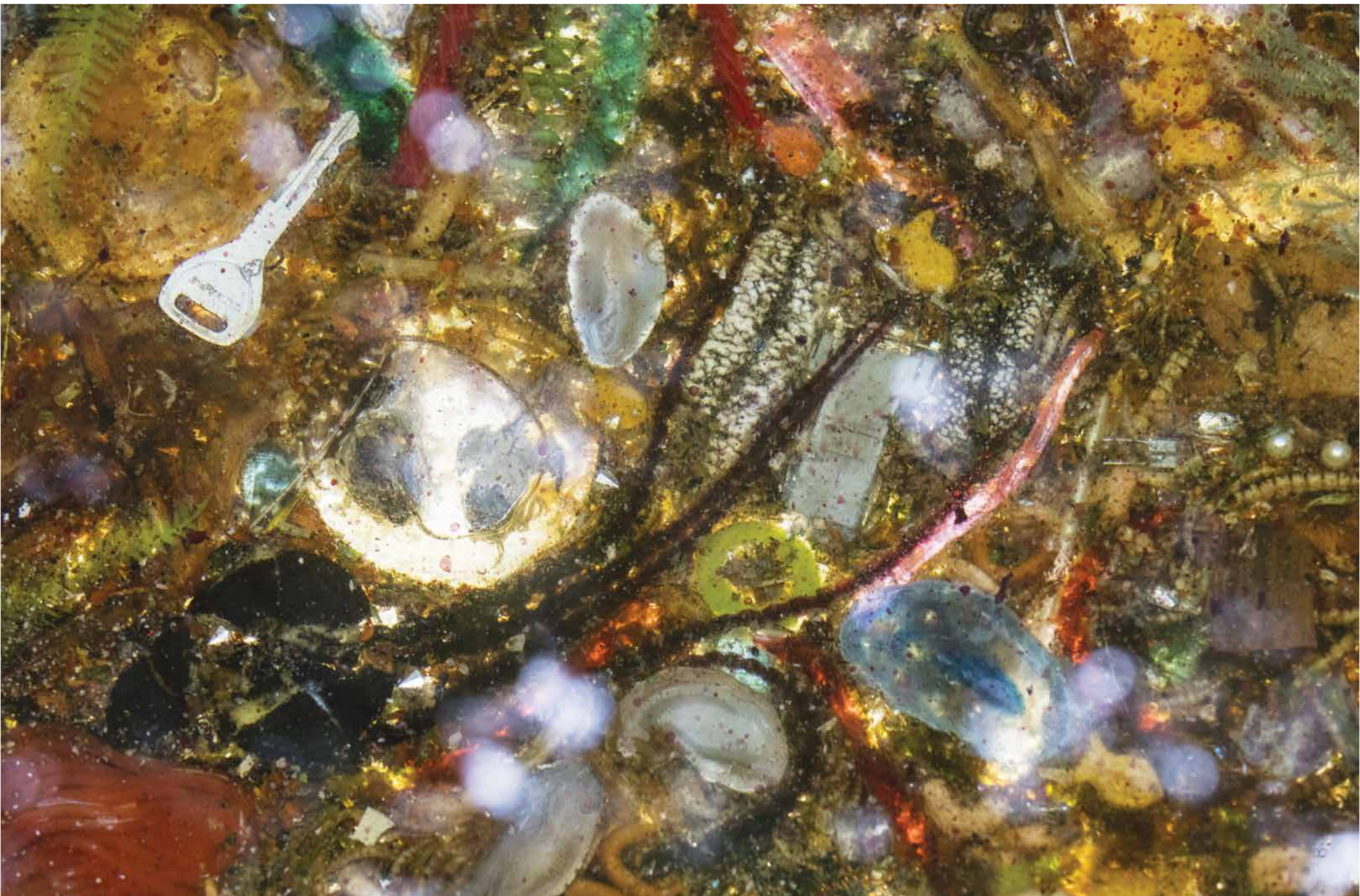
MAX HOOPER SCHNEIDER











SECTION OF INTERTIDAL LANDSCAPE (HAIR METASTASIS)

BY CECILIA ALEMANI

Visitors walking on the High Line in these summer months find a somewhat unusual object that stops their walk in the park: it is a large aquarium, about 3 meters long, sharp on the horizon, overlapping the view of the Hudson River in one of the most scenic spots of the famous promenade at the level of the 14th Street. This is the work by Max Hooper Schneider, *Section of Intertidal Landscape (Hair Metastasis)*, a new sculpture commissioned by High Line Art, the High Line's public art program.

Upon carefully observing this strange ecosystem, the visitor realizes that, instead of containing the usual tropical fish found in fish tanks displayed in thousands of restaurants and waiting rooms in dentist's offices, this diorama is full of strange floating shapes that interweave and sway like algae or exotic aquatic plants. Hooper Schneider's algae, however, have a glossy, silky quality and twirl in a spiral like the curls of a complex rococo hairstyle: in fact, these mysterious aquatic creatures are sculptures made with synthetic and human wigs and hair, which the artist has been collecting for years in the neighborhood where he has his studio in Los Angeles, just a few steps away from dozens of factories and laboratories where wigs and hair extensions are made.

The bottom of the aquarium is covered in what look like geological formations from another era: the ruins of a future apocalypse that has produced a new post-human age—all in all, an era not too different from ours. Encrusted in crystals and minerals on the bottom of the aquarium, there are several overlapping layers of scrap and metal wreckages, including old used batteries, rusty razor blades, the tips of a fork, scissors, scalpels and other medical instruments on which colored resins and other artificial concretions have been laid. The game of lights and colors recall a stained glass window of a cathedral, but here the marquetry of shapes appears miniaturized, like the pulsing cells on a microscope slide. Or, more prosaically, this buildup of items recalls the collection of some patient archaeologist-wannabe bricoleur.

This description perfectly fits Hooper Schneider himself too—one of the most interesting artists to emerge from the Los Angeles scene in recent years. Looking like Michael J. Fox in *Back to the Future*—ripped leather jacket, tight jeans, basketball sneakers and all—Hooper Schneider plays with the stereotypes of the crazy scientist and the eternal amateurish sci-fi fan, creating works and assemblages in which there are mixed references to Land Art and to supermarkets displays, overlaid with memories of a restless metalhead teenager and the jargon of biology and landscape architecture scholars, two of the disciplines in which Hooper Schneider graduated at Harvard.

This unlikely mix—which recalls the sculptures' very concentration of heterogeneous materials—casts its roots in a very American tradition, in which the strict geometry of minimalist sculpture opens up to include much more sordid materials, from

Robert Smithson's *non-sites* to Jeff Koons's *Equilibrium Tank* showcases, in which saline solutions keep basketballs in suspension. Paul Thek's so-called "relics" are not too far off either—small showcases where the American artist placed his wax sculptures which mimicked decomposing flesh. Even Joseph Cornell's miniature theatres don't appear too far away from Hooper Schneider's chamber landscapes, in which Cornell's Victorian memories are replaced with memories from some sort of night of the living dead.

Like Romero's famous film, Hooper Schneider's sculptures evoke the imminent end of the society of affluence, and it is definitely not by chance that among the artist's unrealized projects there is a gigantic environmental intervention aimed at transforming a shopping mall into a ruin in which flora and fauna slowly reclaim the spaces that man had tried to seize from the control of nature.

It is exactly due to these end-of-the-world visions that the observation of Hooper Schneider's sculpture on the High Line offers other interesting keys to interpretation. Not only is High Line itself an industrial ruin—a finding of the first technological revolution, that of the steam train and engine, transformed into a perfect public space for the latest revolution, that of immaterial and digital communication—but it is also a unique observation point from which to contemplate the transformations of the city of New York, a model of urban and anthropological mutations worthy of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. In this scenario, Hooper Schneider's sculpture evokes at once biological and industrial processes, correspondences and differences between nature and culture, similarities between artificial concretions and geological sedimentation.

One of the most frequent comments from viewers of Hooper Schneider's sculpture on the High Line is that the aquarium is somehow connected with the waters of the Hudson River and functions as either a cleaning system or a proof of the level of pollution of the waterway that separates New York City from New Jersey. In either case, Hooper Schneider's work seems to connect immediately with the discussions—heated more than ever in the Trump era—on the state of global contamination and overheating. This is perhaps one of the most unusual aspects of Hooper Schneider's work: its ability to connect with current events and even topics usually handled in politics, activating a personal reaction from the viewer, even when involving objects or situations that are not immediately understandable. But this, after all, is the typical function of science fiction literature and utopian thinking, i.e. to create extreme situations through which art may teach us to live with tragedy and the impossible.

Section of Intertidal Landscape (Hair Metastasis), 2017. Part of Mutations, a High Line Commission (April 2017–March 2018). Photo: Timothy Schenck (pp. 68-71). Courtesy: Friends of the High Line





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