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# MAX HOOPER SCHNEIDER



# RHIZOSPHERES AND HAUNTOLOGY

Hauntology is a term usually seen in discussions on music, film and literature but rarely in contemporary art.

The concept (a portmanteau of *haunting* and *ontology* coined by Jacques Derrida in 1993) can be applied to nearly every aspect of Max Hooper Schneider's oeuvre, and particularly his recent *Rhizosphere* works.

Hooper Schneider's *Rhizospheres* are gluts of steel tendrils extracted by diggers from scrapyards in Los Angeles. The gluts are then painted using color-shifting iridescent paint, giving the simple but heavy tangles of steel a numinous, spectral presence.

Hauntological works are preoccupied by a nostalgia for futures that never arrived—previously discarded cultural movements “haunt” the objects of the present, foregrounding a feeling of temporal disjointment, the spectral presence of a failed proposal for historical advancement.

We may detect aspects of hauntology in several of Hooper Schneider's previous projects, most saliently the *Extinction of Neon* series (tomb-like terrariums piled with neon segments from discarded commercial displays—an aesthetics of moribund technology soon to be totally replaced by digital display) and the entirety of his 2014 solo show at Jenny's, aptly titled *The Pound*.

The show consisted of a solemn showroom of technological misfits: obsolete exercise equipment of browned plastic; piles of concrete and rebar seized periodically by kinetic death knells. *The Pound* looked like a mausoleum of lost futures.

Hooper Schneider, when asked about the sources of his work's content, frequently alludes to a realm “out there”—out of time, out of place, eerie in its spectral non-logocentrism.

The violent pulsations of capitalism—delirious feasts followed always by famine—produce a by-product which less resembles a monster than a hologram, mirage or ghost.

Urban succession—the throbbing of building development—has begotten hauntological art, and is a central concern of Hooper Schneider's art. In cities like Los Angeles (where the work is made and most of its materials sourced), the brutality of this succession has suppressed the creation of new ideas to nearly-absolute-zero—the cost of living in this neoliberal environment has equated creativity itself with suffering or famine.

The exoskeletons of new development—rebar, concrete, chain link fencing—represent this brutality perfectly: after serving a necessary purpose, these once-erect

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materials are quickly condemned to a scrapyard burial in late capitalism's unseen (non-)places: the industrial edges of the city.

When exhumed from deep within the scrap pile, these materials appear like *rhizospheres*, or the root structures hidden below the earth at the bases of tree trunks. When a tree is torn from the earth, the elegant and complex rhizome structure seems denuded, pathetic and sometimes repugnant—like a glut of annelids. Each *Rhizosphere* is an object lesson in hauntology, as it related to the cyclic self-annihilation of the modern city: each sphere's uncanny resemblance to the vital foundations of trees gives each its cadaverous aura. In a culture where art often keeps pace with this same urban succession, the only shadow large enough to shade it all is that of the echoed past and the falsely promised future. In the contemporary city of spotless esplanades and indistinguishable grids of condominium housing, the *Rhizosphere* reminds us of the complex hidden world just below the surface.

The artist tends to vary the modes of display of the *Rhizospheres* to either disgrace or dignify their non-memory—some hang from meat hooks, other sit on statues plinths. Both the corpse and the statues harken to a lost or hidden past—both are non-entities representing a disjointed notion of time.

An object cannot haunt without a measure of eeriness, which necessitates a brief discussion of the works' achievement of eeriness. H.P. Lovecraft often employed imagined non-Euclidean space to inspire horror in his fictional characters (a two-sided triangle is far more unnerving than a witch or a vampire, in that it dismantles our comfort in natural order). The *Rhizospheres* exploit a similar anxiety, but one springing from the uncanny phenomenon of iridescence. The *Rhizosphere* is completely coated in iridescent, color shifting paint—one detects none of the steel's original texture. Iridescence—residing thinly on natural matter such as insect wings, oil slicks, fish scales and soap bubbles—is the demonstration of a single light wave doubling, shifting phase and interfering with itself. The purpose of iridescence in biology is usually to confuse a predator or seduce a mate—never to faithfully describe a surface. To iridesce is to intensify and vanish in phases, depending on the angle of observation. The *Rhizosphere* cannot be felt or seen, and is thus divorced from its own presence, living on as a fickle mirage—an after-image in real time. It is haunted by an implacable past and is itself implacable in space. It affords its viewer no reassurance beyond his or her own subjective uncertainty. The *Rhizosphere* does not reside in the present but in the haunted, disjointed past.

Rhizosphere (Sedentary Conformation), 2017 (detail) Photo: Michael Underwood (pp. 56-59) Courtesy: the Hammer Museum and Jenny's











# WELCOME TO THE UNSEPARATED WORLD

French philosopher Dominique Quessada coined, after Peter Sloterdijk, a very thought-provoking concept: “l’inséparé,” the “unseparated.” He uses it to present the politics of the world today, which would be leaning towards a form of dangerous oneness. This intuition, on which much can be debated politically, is very promising metaphysically: we may think that we are separated from everything, that we do not have any direct relation with what surrounds us, but in fact it is not true. With climate change, with the sheer abstraction of our lives, we are reminded naturally as well as existentially that we are not separated from any other thing in the world—atomism.

Max Hooper Schneider’s work encapsulates the concerns brought by the illusion that we rule over the world, that we are, as Descartes once said, “like masters and lords of nature.” He shows how ecosystems can be destroyed; how nature confronted to humans can be severely contaminated; how this contaminated nature might not need to be criticized or argued against, but in fact offer a premise for a serious reconsideration of where and how we stand in the world; and to do that with a great sense of joy.

The solution might well be brought to us by another philosopher, Emanuele Coccia, who teaches us that, at the end of the day, the utmost fulfillment of humanism might not be a fascination for nature, nor the now defunct illusion of unquestionable centrality. It lies, literally, in “living like a plant”—the roots in the ground, the leaves to the sky, porous to everything.

Max Hooper Schneider’s works are no statements for hardcore ecology. They are *ecopoetic* creations: they are works of art, illusions, fictions, and are not built to convey a message. They are marvels, parts of an updated *Schatzkammer* of sorts, conceived to invite us to appreciate the beauty of these contaminated environments, where nothing is pure anymore. Kept in boxes, they seem separated from us, they appear to exist in their own universe, in front of us; a world we could not enter, we could simply watch. The box of *Refuse Refugium* is shaped like a pyramid: it is a structure as well as a container, and its significance as a geometrical form seems to oppose us; and yet it invites us in. It stands in what seems to be nature—albeit already culture—, seems to be located in it, and somehow is part of it; it is a form of garden—*hortus conclusus*, as the artist calls it—and it is part of a larger garden.

This work, as in Max Hooper Schneider’s process, places us against our illusion of separation. But as we watch it, we understand that we are not separate, that its world is ours, and that it is simply a metaphor for the world. Each of his boxes be-

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longs to the tradition of the Renaissance courts, where the kings and dukes would gather extraordinary natural objects—minerals, fossils, etc.—equally with some of the most remarkable human-made artefacts: between a jewel and a stone, no difference; between a sculpture and a piece of animal bone, no difference. Max Hooper Schneider provides us with their 21<sup>st</sup> century version—polluted, and yet so marvelous. What is living is not divided from what is not, what is ‘natural’ is always also ‘cultural,’ they are permeable, as are *Refuse Refugium*’s day and night life.

A good word to describe them would be “ominous.” They carry the signs of the meaning to come: they are the *omina* of a world we deemed godless. And yet... His works invite us to consider them as laboratory images of our surroundings and that they show nothing but a heightened, brighter, jollier version of our lives. They shine, they are complex architectures made of all sorts of things. Humans are absent from Max Hooper Schneider’s boxes: and yet they are everywhere to be sensed. Humans are the atmosphere of his works—not poisonous viruses or bacteria, but humans. They make it possible, and thus is their ecosystem. His work is not *ecosophic*, in the Guattarian sense. It is no mere invitation to be wise with our home; it is an invitation to enjoy its changes, to rejoice in them, and then think. It is an innocent invitation to dance in the garbage we have formed, in the garbage we are, eventually; it is a new form of poetics of our new house, *neo-ecopoetics*.

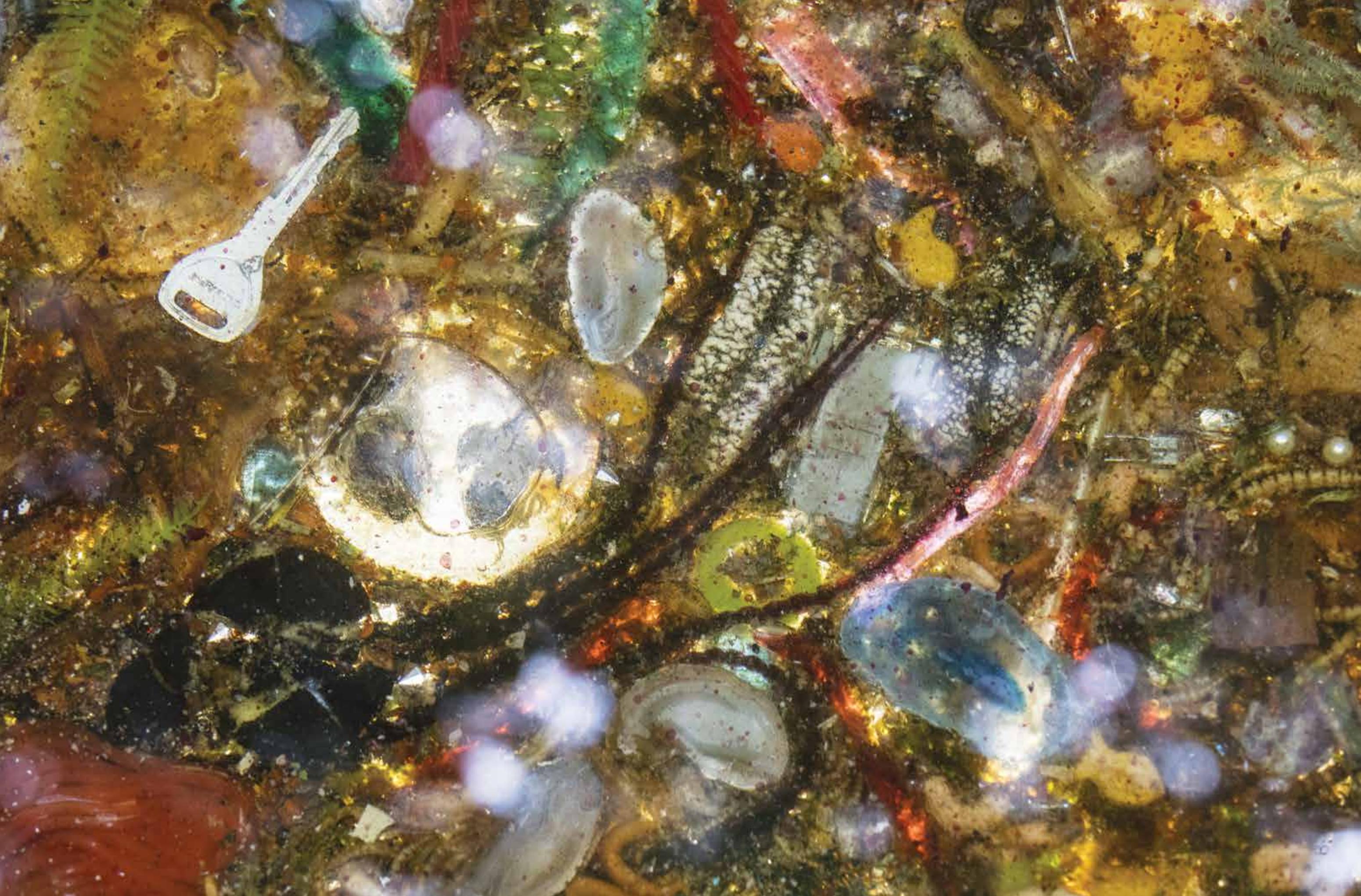
There is no nostalgia. The artist is looking ahead, to the many changes to come. He is inviting us to engage with them, in their evident horror, and their certain beauty. He is also stating our power as human beings, as individuals from this so destructive, albeit extremely creative species. He, as a human being, can, on his own, with pieces of the world, remnants of stuff, build something, construct an elaborate device for thought. Anyone can do it, if we get to work. This unseparation is as true of our relation to the world around us as it is of creation and consumption, action and patience. Like the air we inhale and exhale as we breathe, our possibilities are open, from the moment they meet our awareness. Living like a plant, living like an artist might be synonymous the one with the other: this is the learning of Max Hooper Schneider’s work. As we contemplate, day and night, his *Refuse Refugium*, we are confronted with an imperative: literally, to refuse refuge, separation, shelter, and to enter, fully, the pollution, the lights in the day and the expectation at night, of our whimsical and dangerous, unseparated world.

Refuse Refugium, 2017 Photo: Anders Sune Berg  
(pp. 62-65) Courtesy: AROS Aarhus Museum and High Art











## SECTION OF INTERTIDAL LANDSCAPE (HAIR METASTASIS)

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 14<sup>th</sup> 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

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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









Diller - von Furstenberg  
Sandeck