

The Wet Zone Revisited: Polymathy in the Age of Bio Media

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Abstract

This article revisits the exhibition Biotopia- Art in the Wet Zone (that the author curated in 2010 for the Utzon Centre in Aalborg, Denmark) and the companion essay “Bio Media Art: Art in the Wet Zone” (presented as a keynote at UCLA Art & Science Lab) (2011) to propose a renewed conception of polymathy suited to negotiate the ecological, political and epistemic challenges of the (effects of the) Anthropocene. Drawing on Bruno Latour’s Politics of Nature and Gaia framework, as well as Michel Serres’s notion of the parasite, the paper argues that expertise is no longer the province of solitary “Renaissance” geniuses but a joint effort of emergent collective forms of practice distributed across human and non-human actors. The analysis traces how the exhibition’s living installations blurred disciplinary borders, fostered distributed authorship and foregrounded ethical negotiations around biosafety, care and agency. It then shows how the 2011 essay translated those curatorial insights into a call for “art in the wet zone,” inspired by Roy Ascott, where the medium’s vitality continually disrupts neat categories of art, science and politics. By situating these two projects within intersectional debates—especially those informed by feminist and de-colonial critiques—the article contends that polymathy must become inclusive, reflexive and responsive to structural inequities. Ultimately, the paper advances a model of “disruptive collectivity” in which parasitic interruptions, Gaian entanglements and community laboratories co-produce knowledge, aesthetics and ethics. Such a model, the article concludes, is indispensable for addressing techno-scientific controversies, ecological precarity and the urgent need for democratised, participatory forms of expertise.

Keywords: Bio art; Polymathy; Bruno Latour; Michel Serres; Politics of Nature; Gaia; The Parasite; Intersectionality; Collective practice; Anthropocene