

Fabian Schäfer

Concrete Ecologies: A Temporary Lichen Lab

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The project *Concrete Ecologies* was developed during the ten-day residency **Zoöp Connections**, in collaboration with **De Ceuvel** (Amsterdam), the **Goethe-Institut Netherlands**, and **EUNIC Netherlands**. It draws upon the core idea of the Zoöp model: actively involving non-human actors in social decision-making processes and experimenting with new forms of ecological responsibility.

At the heart of the residency were lichens—symbiotic communities of fungi and algae—that function as both biological and political metaphors for mutual dependence, coexistence, and resilience. Schäfer approaches lichens as communicative structures that invite us to rethink relationships: between species, between matter and meaning, between the city and its ecosystems. In a temporary studio aboard an old boat, Schäfer created a hybrid space—a cross between laboratory, archive, and experimental setup. Using monotype printing techniques, microscopic structures of lichens and fungi were transferred onto fragments of concrete. These prints are not mere reproductions but artistic interventions: tactile traces of life inscribing themselves into the porous skin of the concrete. In this way, *Concrete Ecologies* becomes both a repository for speculative ecologies and a living archival body.

Artistic Practice

During the residency, Schäfer explored forms of ecological coexistence within urban spaces. In the structures of lichens and in his concrete print graphics, he evokes a symbiosis of art, matter, and non-human life—a poetic proposal for a regenerative future beyond the Anthropocene.

In *Concrete Ecologies*, Schäfer conceives of inanimate matter—particularly concrete and paving stones—as carriers for a poetic, artistic infiltration. His work is grounded in the specific context of De Ceuvel, a former industrial site contaminated with oil, gasoline, and heavy metals. Schäfer works with the materials and traces that are integral to the site's history.

Central to Schäfer's work is an experimental printing process: using offset inks and gasoline, he produces monotypes on delicate Chinese paper. These inks—like the site's own toxic residues—are petroleum-based products and thus part of the same material history of contamination. The materials Schäfer uses embody the contradictions and ambivalences of the Anthropocene. In direct contact with the gasoline, the offset inks liquefy, dissolve, and form uncontrollable, organically appearing structures.

This work poses the question: in a world shaped by humans, how can we still establish genuine resonance with non-human life? How can we learn to attune ourselves to what exists beyond our language, beyond our control—and yet remains deeply connected to us? Schäfer's artistic practice seeks to cultivate an attitude of attentiveness—not driven by appropriation, but by listening, observing, and translating. It is about perceiving the quiet, often overlooked voices of the more-than-human world—in the microbial textures of lichens, in the cracks and pores of concrete, in the material residues of the Anthropocene. Not as mere relics, but as transitional spaces.

To borrow from Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “we have no choice but to look for life in the ruins.” These ruins are not simply the material remnants of a supposedly outdated modernity; they are active zones of becoming: in the interplay between decay and renewal, hybrid life forms, precarious co-existences, and new relational modes emerge—modes that resist the logic of capitalist linearity.

Likewise, Bruno Latour calls for a radical rethinking of human-world relations. In his oft-cited appeal *Love your monsters*, he argues that the technical and infrastructural “monsters” created by modernity should not be rejected, but rather embraced as part of our shared ecological fate. His concern is not a nostalgic critique of technology nor a retreat to supposedly “natural” states, but rather the active co-creation and repair of the world we have made—with all its contradictions, contaminations, and ambivalences.

Lichens

Lichens, symbiotic alliances of fungi, algae, and bacteria, embody cooperation, slowness, and resilience. They colonize the most remote places on Earth—including urban niches—clean the air, break down stone, and create new soil. As living archives of coexistence, they stand as paradigms of an ecological way of thinking grounded in relationality and mutual dependence.

Cities as Ecological Assemblages

“Understanding place as a relationship”—Cities are not spaces divorced from nature, but complex ecological assemblages where humans, plants, microbes, infrastructures, and memories are intricately interwoven.

Grey Concrete

Concrete is often seen as the material of the Anthropocene: durable, heavy, seemingly neutral—the very foundation of our cities and, at the same time, a global symptom of our estrangement from the non-human world. Embedded in its grey surface are centuries of extraction, colonization, and technological domination. And yet, grey is not simply the absence of color. As Peter Sloterdijk suggests, grey is a state, a transitional space where polarities dissolve into one another, where new readings, entanglements, and alliances can emerge.

Bioreceptivity

In architecture and materials science, bioreceptivity refers to the ability of building materials to be colonized by microorganisms—not as a sign of decay, but as an ecological benefit. Concrete can be designed to attract life forms such as algae, lichens, or mosses—a technical and ecological receptivity to life.

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DE CEUVEL

