MICHEL COMTE

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E L & Us

When I was asked to create an artwork dedicated to molecular science, I was first fascinated by the idea but little did I know about Engineering Life and science that supports that universe. Almost three years went by and many visits to the laboratories in Basel, I started to have some kind of understanding on the interdisciplinary field of molecules. I took my images and ideas in the micro-macro world and put together my artistic vision. Supporting the delicate question of extending life and ethics. With our advance technology and means, the sky is the limit. Just like Artificial Intelligence, Engineering Life is probably the most powerful tool for us to have a better, longer and healthier life. My vision is abstract and esthetic in the same way. I tried to make some sense in a never ending world of questions. Do we have the right to interfere with nature and God? Art has always been the platform of explanation and freedom. This is my vision.

Michel Comte

a conversation between two worlds

Michel and I met in Ticino in 2019 where we had been invited by the Locarno Film Festival to discuss our work. We connected easily by sharing an immediate fascination for each other's professional fields and agreed to meet again soon to discuss the idea of an art-/science collaboration. About one week later in a café in Zurich the idea of *EL and Us* was born.

The NCCR MSE (National Center of Competence in Research Molecular Systems Engineering) in Switzerland is a cutting-edge combination of chemistry, biology, physics, bioinformatics and engineering, allowing deep interventions into living organisms that are now on the verge of substantially impacting human health and disease treatment. Progress in the field of Engineering Life (EL) is rapid and raises fundamental ethical questions which ideally should be discussed and answered at the same pace. The complexity of this transdisciplinary research, however, impedes such a discourse significantly, not only amongst the natural sciences and other disciplines like e.g. the humanities, but also and foremost amongst the public. Society at large needs to get involved when scientific innovation is about to burst the status quo of ethics and morality that leads to fundamental, paradigmatic changes – which undoubtedly holds true for the field of engineering life.

In order to trigger this discussion on par it is – as I am absolutely convinced – the scientist who has to take the first step; who in his/her role as a world-changer must "ask the world" whether it needs and desires to be changed. But how can we communicate on an eye-to-eye level if we lack a common language and understanding of a highly complex research such as molecular systems engineering? Over the past years, the NCCR MSE has developed a framework for ethical discourse which aims to bridge the communication gap between the stakeholders taking part in this discourse. We call this ethics tool *Art of Molecule* (AoM). Step by step, AoM has opened the doors of NCCR MSE labs across Switzerland and asked the interested public to come inside. A prominent role in this process has been taken by numerous contemporary artists who we invited to discuss, challenge, interpret and (re-)form our scientific goals. One of the major contributions to our efforts to trigger ethical discourse is Michel Comte's art-science project *EL and Us*, which has become a significant tool in our efforts to open new communication channels to foster debate about engineering life.

Michel not only helped to open the doors of our scientific ivory towers; he himself walked through them, thereby serving as a mirror to our self-perception as scientists and as a reminder that a responsible research community needs to remain rooted in the middle of society.

Michel is truly a fascinating artist. He is also, as I like to call him, a most welcome intruder to the field of molecular systems engineering.

Ralf Stutzki
Head Ethics NCCR MSE