Martin Roth on collaborating with nature

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2647 words.

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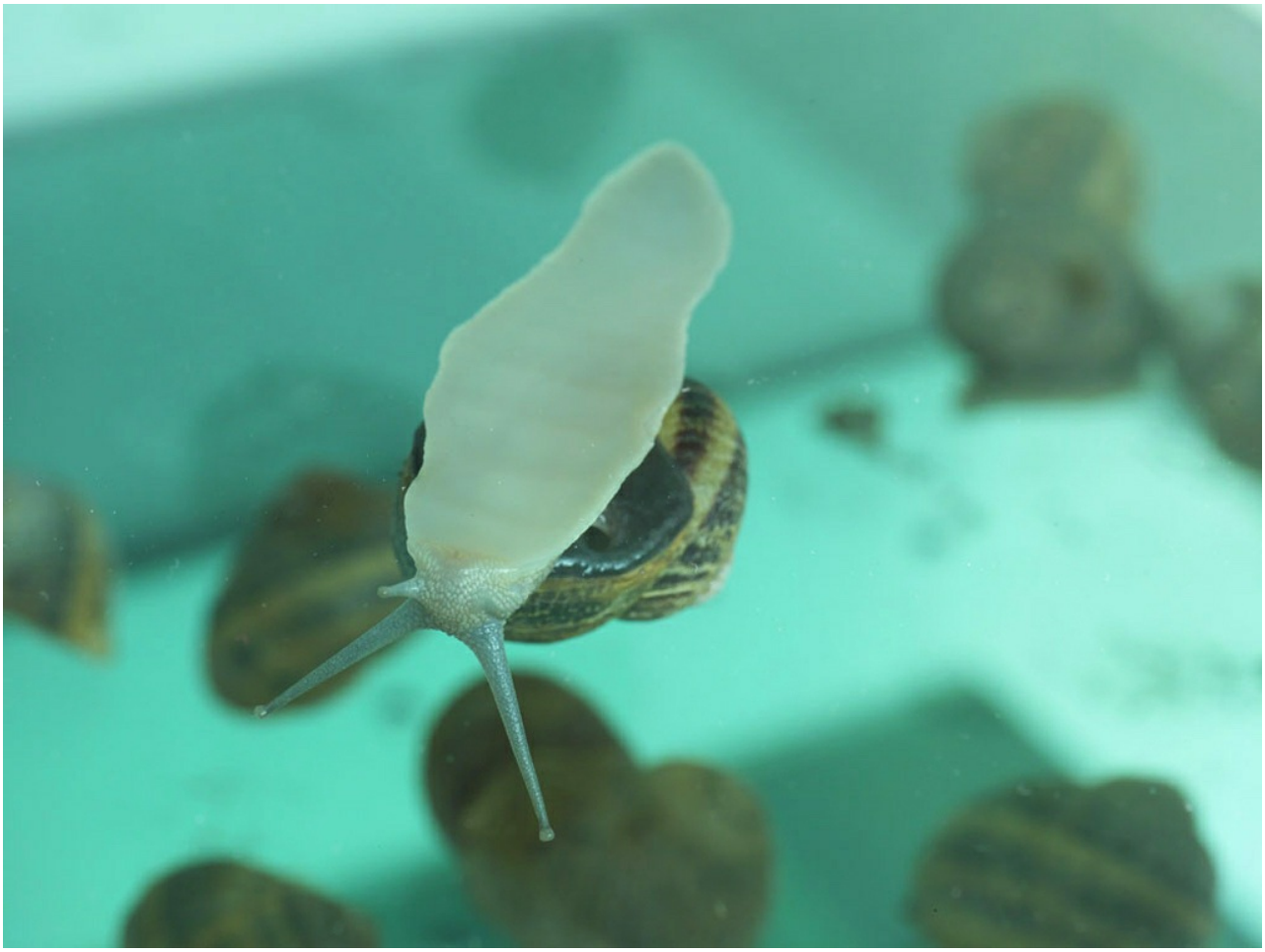
Your work almost always involves nature in some capacity, whether it be growing plants or having live animals in the gallery space, or you going out and doing/performing things in the natural world. Was that always the case?

It started while I was a student. I used to make these three-dimensional paintings, but I always wanted to incorporate natural elements somehow. People would often look at paintings and talk about the energy within the work, but for me that always felt like it was missing something. By working with something that was living, changing, growing, I felt like there was actual energy in the work. I slowly made a transition to the work with animals and plant life while I was still a student.

Did you grow up surrounded by nature?

I grew up in Austria. I was surrounded by nature. My playground would be going into to the woods. Living in a cosmopolitan city ever since then, I'm interested in this idea that we're so removed from nature, and the nature we know has been so intensely cultivated. Public parks. The simple idea of a lawn. These things that people think of as a garden, but obviously it's not really a garden at all. I think that's my fascination, how far we're removed from nature. We live in an image of nature instead of interacting with nature itself. I'm interested in this space between natural and artificial.



Re-conceptualizing a natural object has so much meaning for people who don't have any kind of relationship to it.

For a lot of people, nature is an app or something that they listen to in order to fall asleep, a digital recording of a rainforest or something. My work creates a strong reaction, because, of course, you don't believe that grass or trees or lavender could live inside a gallery. When I did the piece where I grew grass on Persian carpets, the moment I liked the most was when people would touch it and realize it's actually living and growing, that it's alive. The idea that something could be alive is shocking if you live in an urban center, because everything is so clean and so closed off.

One of the reasons I started doing this kind of work was that galleries were typically these super sterile places where you would never see something like sand or dirt. This idea to engage with something living became a driving force.

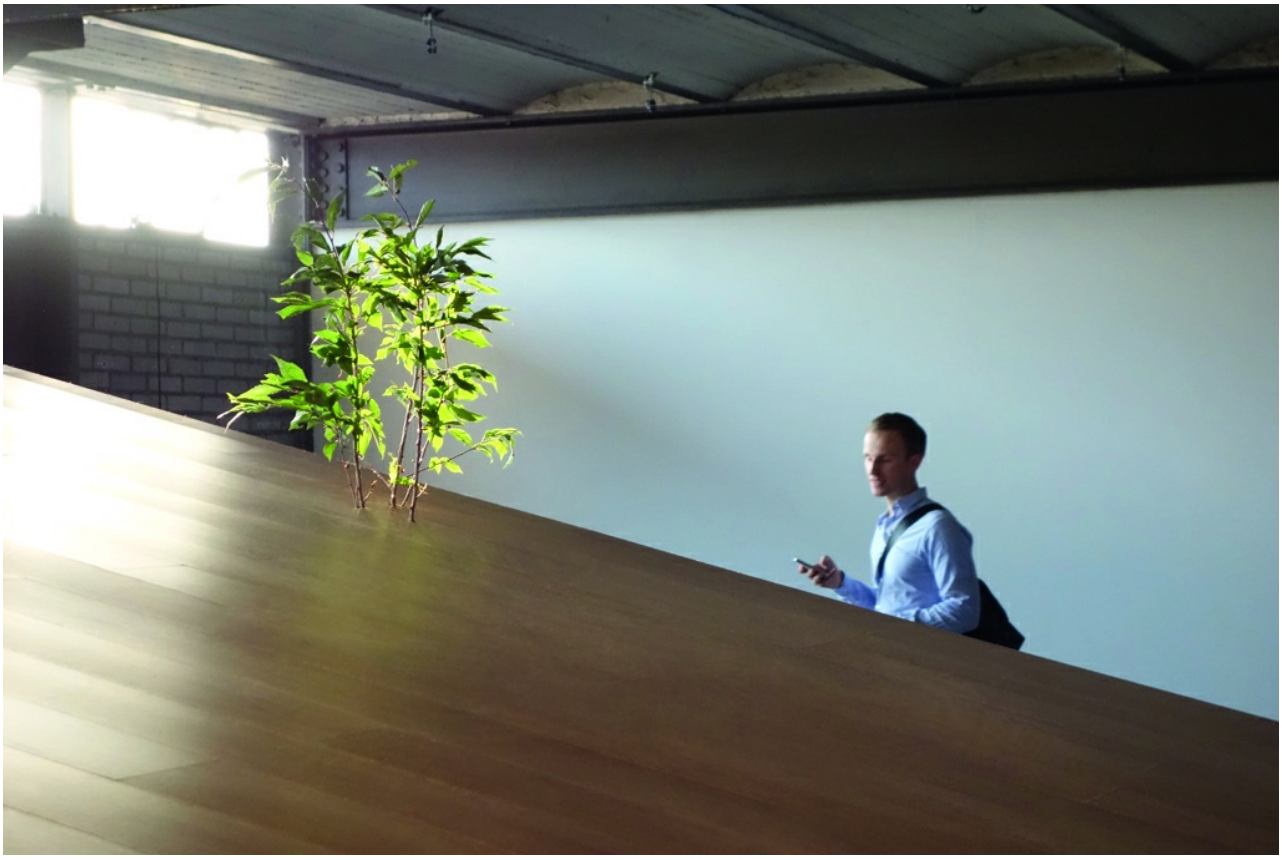
I raised ducklings in my studio. My fellow students would look at what I was doing and say, "Okay, but when are you starting to make some art? When are you doing something?" This act of just nurturing something, taking care of something, which I made a big part of my work, for them was not in any way an action of an artist. To me, it was. That was a long time ago. These days you can go to galleries and see a lot of plants and maybe more animals. It's become a more accepted material for artists.

Do you have the kind of studio space where you can test things out? When you're making work that involves plants, water, living creatures, it must involve a fair amount of trial and error.

No, I don't. The work is really dependent on where I'm going to show it. Often these projects really grew out of seeing the space and then reacting to the architecture of the space. I test things in certain ways, but on a smaller scale just to make sure it works. The work is always created in the space. It's important for me that the work is created throughout the exhibition. It's an ongoing work.

It's almost like the opening is just the beginning of the process. I set up a certain condition that I put a living thing in—either a plant or an animal—and then I try to control the elements. I call them my collaborators, basically. They're not my performers. I can not tell a bird what to do or grass where to grow. I can just hope it will grow in a certain pattern or do something interesting. As an artist, I have to step back and let nature take over. Throughout the show, it evolves into something different.

So I do have a studio space, but the work really happens in the [gallery] space. In the studio I'm actually not working on projects. It's just a space to think. In the studio I have two desks, a lot of pieces of paper, a lot of books. I crystallize ideas by writing. It's more a thinking and writing space, my studio.



Do you have trouble with spaces letting you do what you want? The logistics of creating these things seems very complicated.

Yeah. Unfortunately. I often feel that 90% of my job is negotiating to do the piece. 90% of that is me saying things like, "No, water can stay in this place for a month, and it will not create mold in the walls. No, I can bring in eight tons of soil without ruining the floor, really!" This is hard. People understand and trust me more now than they used to. I've actually been very, very lucky. It's a dream for an artist to be able to be invited to a space and for people to have enough trust in me to say, "Yes, if that's what you want to do in this space, we support it."

I was enamored with the piece you did with snails, mostly because our mascot/spirit animal for The Creative Independent is a snail. We contemplated getting snails for here for our office, but I was afraid that we would get them and we wouldn't be able to take care of them correctly, that something would happen to them.

Yes, it's a big responsibility. The forgotten part about my work, the part that people don't see, is not the "performance," but the care and nurturing required. For that piece where I used snails, we had almost 100 snails, which I got from a cooking supply place. Many times the animals—the collaborators—are things like feeder fish, crickets, things that might otherwise be sold as food.

With the snails, I had to give very explicit instructions to the gallery. Every day the snails' boxes—these Donald Judd pieces—had to be opened, cleaned, and be moisturized. The responsibility was with the gallery, but I still brought someone in to take care of it everyday. You think, "Oh, it's just a snail. Throw in a piece of lettuce occasionally and it will be fine!" But no. Snails do not like to go over the same path they've taken before. It leaves a path of slime and it will not cross it's own slime trail. So it was kind of a big production to have someone there for an an hour every day to clean out all of the boxes and mist the snails and feed them, but when the conditions were right those snails were thriving in their boxes.

When using any kind of living creature in an exhibition, I want them to have a healthy experience during the show and then to go on to a much, much better life afterwards. I want them to end up in a better place than they would have otherwise. I have to take full responsibility for them as living beings. This is also true for the plants. I used fruit trees once in a show, so when the show ends I still have the responsibility of what is going to happen to them. Nothing gets thrown away. I have to find a place where they can be planted and grow.

For example, I did a piece where I had these fruit trees break through a wooden surface. They actually grow through it. I always dreamed that the trees would grow, bear fruit, and that the fruit would ripen and fall from the tree, rolling down the installation. Of course, no space would allow me to keep a piece there for seven to 10 years when that moment would happen, but I'm always dreaming that there would be this ongoing exhibition.

In a sense, my pieces are happening 24/7. The crickets and frogs in my exhibition don't stop being alive at night when the gallery closes—they're still making sounds even when no one is there to hear them. The work is 24/7, and in the best case scenario the exhibition is ongoing forever, it would be some type of installation that's just there for the next 100s of years.

It really is a totally different thing when you are working with living creatures. Plants are one thing, working with, say, birds is more complicated.

Oh yes. The birds were special. Usually you only have about a week to install something in a gallery, but I couldn't do that with the birds. Most of them were adopted from different people who couldn't care for them any more and most of them had lived their whole lives in cages, so they couldn't fly. I wanted them all to learn how to fly, which actually doesn't take too long. They have to redevelop their muscles first, but then they have to learn coordination in order to fly and actually land on something. In cages they're usually just hopping from branch to branch, not actually flying. So I had to allow enough time for them to learn how to fly, but also time for them to get used to the space. I had to make sure they could orient themselves and were flying into the glass or anything.

The bigger issue for me—before even started to do the show—was making sure there was a place for 30 different birds to go after the show was done, a place they would live. If I have these birds flying freely in a gallery space, it would be incredibly cruel to catch them and put them back in a cage. Most of them went to a sanctuary called Bird Paradise where they can live in an open space. So, it felt good to me that I was maybe able to save some of these little birds who were up for adoption after their owners couldn't care for them anymore. They collaborated with me on a project for one month, then later they get to go live out their lives in a place that's much better than where they came from. Still, it's a very fine line in regards to the ethics of using animals in your artwork. I don't deny that at all. Still, that's a big part of it—I want the exhibitions to raise these kinds of questions. Is it problematic? Is the bird fine here? Is that snail happy?

What advice do you have for visual artists who might be trying to work with these kinds of materials?

You can never give up. If you have a certain vision, you have to fight for it until you see it come through. It's funny, I make a Photoshop mock-up of the exhibitions before I make them, and then when the exhibition actually opens I'm like, "Oh my god, this actually looks exactly how I envisioned it." Still, if you are working with nature or unpredictable materials, you have to continue to fight for the show during the duration of the exhibition. Your work is ongoing.

For example, I did a show that involved growing lots of lavender in a gallery space. I had to bring all of the lavender indoors before the exhibition so that it would all be blooming at the right time. You are to feel that you are walking through this contained field of blooming lavender. So I had it indoors and everything worked great for the first month and a half, then suddenly it seems like 80% of my plants are dying, for some reason I couldn't figure out. It rapidly came to the point of almost blooming, and then, within a week they were almost all dead.

I couldn't halt the show after all this work had been done, so all I could do at that point was make every effort I could to revive them. The show was opening a month later. I couldn't open with just 30 plants. I needed 200 plants. I was lucky that I could figure it out. When they had too much water, the roots would rot. Not enough water, they wouldn't bloom. Basically, I had to keep watering them, but at the same time, have an industrial dehumidifier to take off all the water in the air. So, it's like this thing that you constantly have to fight for your idea to come through.

Your work reminds people how powerful and how important it is to be in close proximity to nature. Is that why you do it?

Maybe, yes. Perhaps subconsciously, in a way I don't realize, it's a way to be around animals, and plants for my work. I might not get to work in a lavender field, but I can create one. For a couple of months I can feel like I'm working the land.

I know that due to the constraints of gallery spaces, a lot of your work has a limited life span, but do you imagine a time when the work won't be so ephemeral? Is the goal to make pieces that can grow and evolve and essentially live forever?

Yes, but it's tricky. You have to try and guarantee in some way that the pieces would be taken care of in the right way, which is a hard thing. For example, the pieces I made with the grass and the Persian carpets. You need to love them. You need to take care of them. If you don't, as a collector, then all you have is just an old dirty, wet carpet. It was always this idea of not just me collaborating with nature or with animals, but me collaborating in a sense with the collector, or whoever the collector hires to keep the work alive. It's a living thing, so of course, somebody will still need to keep nurturing it, and suddenly they would be involved.

My hope is that one day I could engage with an institution to really take care of my work. It would be a collaboration with a curator and then they also hire gardeners, so it would be a team of three or four people every day being engaged with the work. That would be a dream for me. Maybe the collector or the curator checks the work in the morning, "Oh, how are the birds? Should we call the artist, one of the birds put their nest up there is that okay?" Should the number of birds always be the same? What are the parameters for growth? I hate the idea of art as being these

static, inanimate objects, but I love the idea of there being a living relationship with the work. It’s something you tend to, pay attention to, care for, not just some collectible thing that’s kept in storage somewhere just to accumulate wealth and dust.

Martin Roth recommends:

I am mostly inspired by traveling or just life around me. I like very old books with classifications of insects or flowers.

Name
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Vocation
Artist