

On getting to the root of this



Artist and researcher Ari Melenciano discusses following through on curiosity, letting herself be a novice, and knowing who's in her community.

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As told to Sania Khan, 1930 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Research](#), [Dance](#), [Process](#), [Independence](#), [Collaboration](#), [Politics](#), [Identity](#).

As we collectively contend with the artificial intelligence zeitgeist we're in, I appreciate how you engage with technology in a way that is deeply intentional, spiritual and liberation-driven. Did you anticipate which worlds you wanted to explore through technology or did that unfold in the process?

Everything really just continues to unfold on its own. Every single day, I'm practicing. I don't even know what I'm practicing for! That's a lot of what my life is. It's like I'm just practicing for things that eventually make sense to me in 5, 10, 20 years. For instance, I had this video camera when I was a child and I would practice talking into it for hours. Now, I'm always public speaking. I'm very intentional about the different ideas that I want to explore, but I can't plan it out. I just follow the inklings and lean into my curiosities.

I appreciate leaning into curiosity as an instructive practice. When your curiosity piques, do you naturally move toward it or do you notice yourself moving through any blockages first?

There are times I can feel completely liberated to go towards it. And then if I don't feel necessarily liberated to go towards it, it becomes a whole new lane of curiosity as to why I feel discomfort in exploring something and really getting to the root of it. So much of my work asks: what's the root? I'm just constantly thinking about what's at the core and how I can create an experience around that. My arts practice is the shell that's really just a conduit to get to the source, but it's a curiosity at the core.

Yes! I also feel that much of the work of living as a conduit is creating the capacity for what wants to move through us, so it's interesting to hear that you have an accepting relationship with both your discomfort and your curiosity. I wonder if this involves cultivating a capacity to maneuver both depth and expansion?

So much of my work is about realizing just how expansive the world inside of you is. It's so important to make the time and space to go insular within your own world, excavate all the things inside of you and create from there. I just finished this piece that's probably one of my favorite pieces, called "[The Periodic Table of Emotions](#)." When people ask me where it came from, I tell them it came from experiencing all these different emotions and not running away from anything. I allowed myself to just sit with my feelings, and from there I got curious about why I was feeling this way. It's important not to really worry about consequences when creating. Of course, naturally you're going to worry a little bit, but I think of what I'm creating as something I get to release.

With a creative process that is so intuitive, how do you sustain conviction in where your curiosity is taking you?

I think it's helpful to understand that being curious just means that you trust the validity of your interests and your inklings. It's trusting that there's something significant about being interested in *anything*. When you

trust that, and you give yourself the time and space to keep going in that direction, a lot can unfold. For instance, when I had the opportunity to be in a motion-capture studio for the first time, I immediately just started moving around. For months, I would just blast music and dance. Dance has always given me permission to just exist in my body and not have to contain myself. I eventually came home back to New York City with a hard drive filled with files of me dancing and just spent the summer creating stuff with these files. Eventually, it turned into these different animations to which I was like, "Oh, cool. Okay. Let me try this and this and this." I put it all together into this film and it turned into my film, *Cosmeage*. I think the more you squeeze out of something and leave little juice left, you find so many possibilities. Then when you put it out to the world, people that are aligned with it are going to call you in, and then you have all these places to continue doing what you already love. So I think conviction is trusting the way that you exist in the world.

***Cosmeage* was what initially drew me to your work; I'd never seen anything quite like it. I was instantly fascinated by how you'd rendered these improvised dance sequences into stunning, 3D digital animations and sounds rooted in pan-African rhythms and instruments... I'm particularly fascinated by how dance became embodied data in your research. Can you speak more to the process of communicating from that place?**

Embodied data—I love that phrase! I've been using the term "Embodied Mathematics" and expanding its definition with dance works like *Cosmeage*. I think for so much of my practice, there's both materialization externally, but also materialization internally, and it's happening simultaneously. In order to connect both, *flow* was the main thing that I was focused on when I was in the studio. Dance is so powerful; moving your body in a kinetic way really unlocks and alters parts of your consciousness. When I got into dancing every single day for hours on end, I could feel the women in my ancestry moving through me and I began thinking about how our bodies hold memories from experiences that we have not lived through. That became the core of my inquiry. I couldn't have reached that place without flow, so I think flow is so important in creative practice because it signifies clarity and a trust in your clarity.

I've noticed that your work also explores other forms of sentient intelligence. I'm thinking in particular about "*Celestial Florilegia*," where you explored both human intuition and botanical wisdom. Did you notice any points of connection across human and plant consciousness?

Absolutely. I'm a deep admirer of the natural world. I'm constantly looking at how the natural world operates. When I was exploring AI, I created this analogy around humans, ants, bees, trees, and natural order. Ultimately, humans are trying to use technology to expand and compound human capability; it's a natural evolution. But it's a matter of *what* we do with this evolutionary capability. For instance, when I learned of the technology that could allow me to convert electromagnetic energy from plants into things like sound, that was a really exciting path for me to explore. Through "*Celestial Florilegia*," I wanted to show people how much plants impact our bodies, even shifting our senses and the way that we understand the world. By removing the mundanity from our connection to plants by placing them in a very surreal world, I wanted to heighten human perceptibility and connection to the natural world.

It's hopeful to think about how technology, when explored with ethicality and intentionality, can illuminate new points of connection that humans may overlook. It seems like you're relying a lot on cybernetic principles in all aspects of your creative practice. What do you notice about the function of feedback in your process?

One thing that I'm thinking about as you're asking that question is how cybernetics has its limitations. For instance, if you're exploring the cybernetics of soccer, you're thinking about how to kick the ball to the right person, put it in the goal, pass to all these people—that's the cybernetics. You're not thinking about how to pick up the ball and dribble it and shoot it into a hoop. So I think once it's understood that your cybernetics is formulated for a certain objective, you're only going to include what aligns with that objective, and you're going to discard what doesn't.

One of my favorite examples of someone who disrupted that limitation in cybernetics is Octavia Butler. When Octavia Butler studied slime mold, she entered into a field that she was not necessarily trained for, and so her cybernetic field was much more expansive because she wasn't limiting herself to thinking of only certain possibilities. She brought in alternate forms of sexuality, pronouns, all sorts of things that most people

trained in that discipline would not even think about.

That's why I think it's so important that people let themselves be "novices" and give themselves the permission to engage in trained disciplines, because the people that have been trained to be in that discipline have cultivated this idea of cybernetics in a constrained way. Octavia Butler was a human. A person who had every reason to feel doubtful about even engaging in something new, but she let herself do it. She trusted herself, and because of that she impacted traditional scientists to think about slime mold differently because she let herself be imaginative and curious.

Oftentimes, people can doubt themselves out of pursuing their curiosities, and so they shut off their cybernetics of curiosity. But if we choose to follow through, we never know the impact our curiosities might have on the world.

One of your most impactful works is Black Metal, which was a collective inquiry into speculative liberated futures alongside other brilliant artists and thinkers. What were some impactful learnings from your experience in interdependent world-building?

For one, it's really important for me to know my own collaborative style and boundaries. That's something I've learned a lot even in building Afrotectopia. I was 24 years old when I created Afrotectopia. I was very early in my political consciousness. At that time, my idea of kinship was very flat. I think that's a really important thing to understand, is that just because people have certain identity markers that are similar to you, that doesn't mean that those identity markers also signify that they're related in every other way. There's different ways to think about shared alliances that are much deeper than how I was thinking about it initially.

I'm very invested in empowering Blackness and creating a space for us to be Black in a really expansive way. But to juggle all the factors that I was juggling as the founder and director of Afrotectopia, working with hundreds of people, sometimes thousands—that's a lot of different mindsets, values, and all sorts of things to work with as one person who is handling it all on her own. *Black Metal* was such an incredibly special experience and an important shift in interdependence for me. For this incubator, it was really important for me to curate a group of people who shared similar values but were still individual thinkers. The way that I had designed our collaborative process was to give everyone the space to have their own kitchen. We're not going to cook the same meal in the same kitchen, but we'll come together at the dining table every night and share our meals with each other and be inspired by the recipes that each of us created. That approach allowed us to create from a place of autonomy and then teach each other and learn from each other. Ultimately, this process of world-building toward collective liberation is about intimately knowing who you're in community with.

Ari Melenciano recommends:

Something From Nothing by Phoebe Gilman

Black Metal by Afrotectopia

Mother Nature's Son by Ramsey Lewis

Little Miss Sunshine

"Love" by Kahlil Gibran

Name

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