

Interview with Primer

Lars Bang Larsen

Lars Bang Larsen: It is a unique set-up that an artists' group bases its activities within a private corporation, the way you have done at Aquaporin in Copenhagen. What is Aquaporin and what does Primer do there? How did this, let us call it, symbiotic relationship come about?

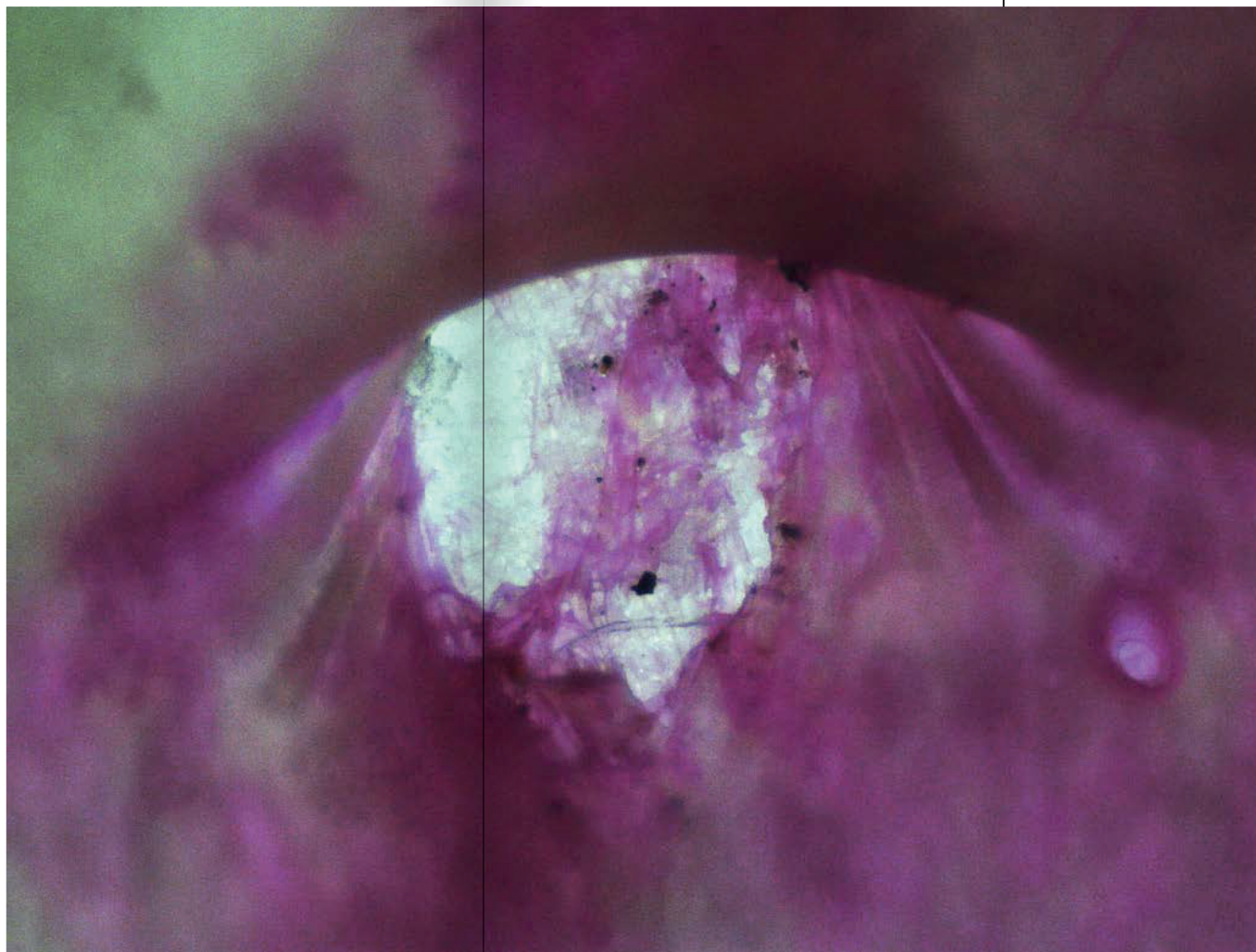
Primer: Aquaporin, which was founded in 2005, is a global water technology company that uses biotechnology to do water purification projects. Aquaporin is also the name of a water-channel protein found in all living organisms. Aquaporin, the company, cultivates the protein through fermentation, harvests it from its bacterial substrate, and immobilizes the proteins onto a polymeric multilayer structure in a flat sheet (imagine a coffee filter), hollow fibers (think of very thin, hollow straws) or a tubular geometry (thick straws). The subsequent technology applications utilize the protein in either reverse- or forward-osmosis applications to either push water through or draw water from a source.

We follow Aquaporin's organizational emergence as a suggestive, associative set of vectors pointing toward several possible futures. We have an interest in how you track and co-develop emerging fields of practice, rather than treating them as settled historical processes to be studied from afar. Opening up the question of what an entity such as Aquaporin is or can be, is therefore a core concern.

Primer is a platform for artistic and organizational development, housed in the headquarters of Aquaporin.

Primer was founded in late 2016 by Diakron, whose members since 2014 have been identical to Primer. We were invited by art consultant Christina Wilson and Aquaporin CEO Peter Holme Jensen to introduce artistic practices into the context of Aquaporin.

This invitation was open-ended, long-term and had no specific requirements for formats, methods, frequency, scope, or output. A central common interest of ours is the separation of scientific, technological, business, and artistic practices and the



Mikroskopisk visualisering av ett platt Aquaporin-membran/
Microscope visualization of an Aquaporin flat sheet membrane

assertion that such divisions are historically specific and contingent developments. Things have been and therefore could be different, and Primer is an effort to develop a new type of organization that explores such possibilities. We believe that renewing

relations between artistic, scientific, technological, and business practices necessitates novel organizational forms. Primer accepts the inherited differences between said practices as a starting point for exploring possible links and unexpected

commonalities between them. Our hope is to create sustained proximity between otherwise disparate fields.

What this will lead to is one of the main questions behind Primer. At present, artists are invited to utilize Primer and Aquaporin at large to develop their practices. For us this entails building a network of people, institutions, and ideas around said practice as it develops during our conversations. Alongside this, Primer initiates thematic projects that take place across multiple formats. Developed for the headquarters of Aquaporin, each project involves an exhibition, conversations, partnerships, research, and events. The work centers on the convergence of climatic, scientific, and technological developments and their societal effects. Furthermore, we are developing our collaboration with Aquaporin around co-funding of PhD and post-doc positions as well as public-private partnership projects.

LBL: Your presentation in *Mud Muses* is the first time you are working in an exhibition context outside of Aquaporin. Can you talk about your project for the show and the ideas behind it?

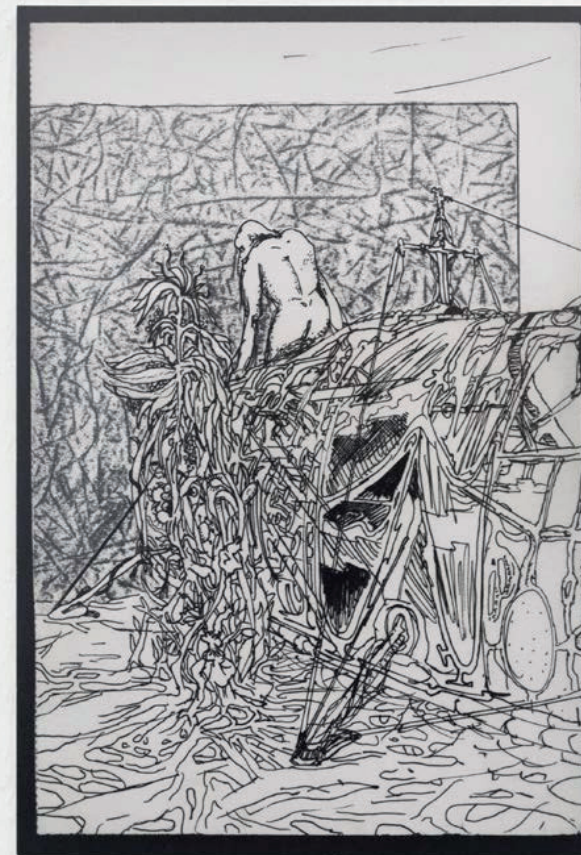
P: Our work for *Mud Muses* consists of a contribution to the main exhibition space and a seminar. For the exhibition we will relocate Aquaporin's first industrial prototype, used to manufacture its biomimetic membranes, to Moderna Museet. Having served its role in the research and development of Aquaporin's current facilities, the machine was set to be sold off, its status resembling that of a shed skin. At *Mud Muses* it will be installed along specific works from Moderna Museet's collection and from other sources. The installation will juxtapose a functional innovation in contemporary synthetic biology with a number of artistic and historical practices that seek to draw out the more associative and unspoken aspects of the former. We are interested in creating a site of mutual influence in which the exhibited objects distort each other and articulate a

new relationship between biology, digital technology, and artistic thinking. Both machine and display system – a bespoke Bosch Rexroth system – are sourced from Primer's context and are to pragmatically extend this practice into the exhibition.

The seminar will explore the shifting relationship between living processes and computational processes designed by humans. While computation has allowed for replication and simulation of information to take place in human-designed silica-based circuits, the twenty-first century looks to be when the human designs of computational arenas move into living processes. The main thread of the program will be a working group of invited contributors with extended moments of public access to their conversations and presentations. The purpose of this format is to allow for new ideas to develop and encounters to generate new questions and modes of collaboration in the context of the institution and exhibition. The events seek to highlight the role of art institutions in supporting the development of new cultural constellations, much aligned with a trajectory of Moderna Museet's history that can be traced back to ideas such as Pontus Hultén and Pär Stolpe's rethinking of the museum in relation to technological development in the late 1960s.

LBL: In relation to what genealogies and art histories would you locate your project? I have heard you refer to forms of organization as varied as startups, activist self-institutionalization, and, specifically, the Art & Technology program that was the context for the making of Robert Rauschenberg's *Mud Muse*. At the same time, Primer is a conversation-driven entity; it seems to me that much of your work – between yourselves in the group and between the group and other collaborators – is carried on by discourse.

P: Our backgrounds include experiences with artistic practices, curatorial practices, social sciences, and action research. Our collaboration began as an occasion to



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think through how we might work with emerging systemic developments – climate change, resource depletion, and accelerated technological innovation – that affect multiple fields at once. In this sense it has always been grounded in an interest in extra-disciplinary situations where it is unclear which kinds of specialized knowledge are valuable and where people articulate new missions and new ways of working. We are interested in constructing fuzzy genealogies that consider art's role in relation to other disciplines, thus drawing on the histories of science, technology, and speculative futurism as much as art history. This also implies building organizational models that have these hybrid histories as their methodological basis.

LBL: One of you observed in a workshop recently that art institutions today are in a “crisis of relevance” that necessitates other types of artistic involvement. I am interested in your analysis behind this statement. For years, if not decades, democratic and cultural institutions globally have been under pressure as part of a larger neoliberal undoing of institutional frameworks. I wonder, what does this crisis of relevance consist of and what are the reasons for it? And what type of agency – whether institutional, artistic, corporate, or civic – is called for to address and work through this crisis?

P: Our general argument is that while artistic practices continue to develop ways to reposition issues, take up concerns, and imagine otherwise, the most common institutionally available formats have not been developed in sufficiently responsive manners. Artistic practices have abundant ways to challenge and reimagine societal dynamics, but too few institutional formats help bring them closer to the reality of such dynamics. This is also what writer Victoria Ivanova refers to as a “need to shift beyond the age-old divide of ‘infrastructures’ versus ‘cultural content’ – the back-end and the front-end of cultural institutional set-up – and to start prototyping strategies that think the two in

tandem. The challenge is to develop cultural intelligences and toolkits that are capable of enforcing this recalibration.”

Our interest in this matter is thus less to criticize existing formats such as the exhibition, publication, performance, or public artwork, but rather to learn from a diverse set of institutional histories, including the art field, to make flexible organizational models that increase where art operates and what it does. This is what we refer to as a general diversification of the field.
