

Alex Donnelly
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Art in the Time of Hyperobjects

“I start the engine of my car. Liquefied dinosaur bones burst into flame. I walk up a chalky hill. Billions of ancient pulverized undersea creatures grip my shoes. I breathe. Bacterial pollution from some Archean cataclysm fills my alveoli— we call it oxygen. I type this sentence. Mitochondria, anaerobic bacteria hiding in my cells from the Oxygen Catastrophe, spur me with energy. They have their own DNA. I hammer a nail. In consistent layers of ore, bacteria deposited the iron in Earth’s crust. I turn on the TV and see snow. A sliver of the snow is a trace of the Cosmic Microwave Background left over from the Big Bang. I walk on top of lifeforms. The oxygen in our lungs is bacterial outgassing. Oil is the result of some dark, secret collusion between rocks and algae and plankton millions and millions of years in the past. When you look at oil you’re looking at the past. Hyperobjects are time-stretched to such a vast extent that they become almost impossible to hold in mind.”

-Tim Morton, *Hyperobjects*.

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Spectral Objects Exhibition Statement

Philosopher Tim Morton in *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People* describes spectral characteristics of objects, including their ability to transmit latent psychic trauma. All objects that comprise the human ecological construct have the capacity to be trauma-inducing and inevitably to point to a developing state of ecological crisis. We cannot unlearn this knowledge, and these significations cannot be washed away from our experience with the physical world around us. Objects have become cross-sectional referents of temporally non-specific concepts and objects, coined *hyperobjects*. Hyperobjects are objects (and concepts) so esoteric in nature and/or massively distributed in time and space as to transcend immediate human spatiotemporal specificity, understanding, and perhaps remediation. For example, climate change, species extinction, Styrofoam and radioactive isotopes are all hyperobjects. When we perceive these objects, we are unaware that we are also subject to the profound psychic implications of our collective awareness of the hyperobject to which they signal. Modern human experience, the entirety of the human ecological space, consists of indexes of hyperobjects. A car, for instance, no longer represents only human progress, locomotion, efficiency, convenience and comfort. It also signals the devastation wrought by human progress, the current ecological emergency and personal culpability.

But what does a spectral object look like? What can a hyperobject be said to look like? What does an index of something unknowable look like? What does latent or subconscious trauma manifest as? *Spectral Objects* makes manifest, through ad absurdum provocations, this sense of trauma. The installations are literalized intersections of human ecology and non-human constitutes. Each piece refers to the semiotic force of objects, speculates about other

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significances contained within, and points to an implied chain of events surrounding their creation, use and destruction that humans may be latently attuned to. If objects consist meaningfully of more than their tangible parts, than they must exist at least partially as apparitions, transmissions that float into human psychic space. Whether we are aware or not, whether we like it or not, *we are haunted by our things*. They are, as Morton says, the “ghostly presence of nonhumans subjected to human metabolism.”

Spectral Objects and Hyperobjects

This textual accompaniment to *Spectral Objects* is not necessarily a manifesto, or at least I wouldn't call it one, though it may read like one in many places. It serves two purposes: firstly, it reimagines the durational, and multi formatted art installation; and, secondly, it unpacks a certain method of artmaking described by Tim Morton as the Objected Oriented Approach, which inspired the work in the installation, to which this didactic a compendium, *Spectral Objects*. (Morton, 2013) (Note: I intend to add a piece-by-piece analysis to this text following the show).

Philosopher Tim Morton, in *Humankind*, posits the idea that the current ecological crisis may be encompassed by what Karl Marx called species-being, that the conditions of the current ecological crisis may be a logical byproduct of human behavior and a byproduct of the success of humanity's greatest projects: agrolistics and industrialization. (Morton, 2017; Marx, Engels, Arthur, 1974) The problem of the current ecological crisis, then, rather than being a special, pathological state of emergency, an accident of modern society, may be a logical, unavoidable extension of the human project. This is to say that production entails extraction and assimilation, and domination. Or, as Donna Haraway has said, “capitalist modes of political economy (and

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their attachment to fossil fuels) [are] drivers of impoverished ecologies.” (Haraway, 2015; Moore, 2013). Perhaps this problem also has something to do with what philosopher John Gray has described as the myth of progress. The unwavering belief in the goodness of this process called progress, he argues, is a humanist tendency and in simplified arithmetic posits that the human is the site of some special and unique value in the world, and that human utility is paramount, even when it violates the utility of non-human’s¹. This axiom gives rise to the economic concept of the right to organization of the human life around enjoyment of other living beings (and the natural world in general). Morton describes problems surrounding human ontology itself, and offers an alternative philosophical theory, Object Oriented Ontology (“OOO”). OOO, for the purposes discussed here, relating to its use in environmental philosophy, is important because it rejects this privileging of human existence over the existence of nonhumans.² (Morton, 2017). The problematic ontology that Morton speaks here of, relates to the prevailing one, the fundamental belief that most modern humans have about themselves, and about our position with respect to, well, everything else: that we are unequivocally superior. This was probably iterated first by Socrates but was reified throughout the Copernican Revolution. It then becomes the foundation of the Cartesian understanding of the position of humans with respect to non-humans and is for the most part the ontological tradition with relation to humans and non-humans that we have inherited. Similarly, according to this logical progression, all that

¹ Refutation of this humanist axiom has been the life’s work of multiple environmental philosophers. See, for example, *Animal Liberation* by Peter Singer for a more extensive explanation of utilitarian ethics.

² Object Oriented Ontology is a very complicated philosophical position that isn’t my major concern here. Its proponents include Graham Harman , Quanton Mellasioux, Jane Bennet, Patricia Clauf, Ian Hamilton Grant, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, Steven Shafiro , Reza Negarastani, and Ray Brazear.

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human's do, in the name of progress, if it is logical and driven by reason, is part of the advancement of the human project. (Gray, 2013) The problem, according to Morton, is that:

“Capital must keep on producing more of itself in order to continue to be itself. This strange paradox is fundamentally, structurally imbalanced. Consider the most basic process of capitalism: the turning of raw materials into products. Now for a capitalist, the raw materials are not strictly natural. They simply exist prior to whatever labor process the capitalist is going to exert on them. Surely here we see the problem. Whatever exists prior to the specific labor process is a lump that only achieves definition as valuable product once the labor has been exerted on it.”

(Morton, 2013)

Marx said that “the source of value in capitalism is living labor,” This is true. We humans are most of the producers, but increasingly machines are producers as well. If futurists are to be believed, the modern flip-side of living labor is intelligent labor (as in any kind that is artificial). The system of capitalism is increasingly becoming mechanized and efficient in extracting from the non-human world. This never ending and expanding circuitry of production is resource driven, hence our massively prodigious project of resource extraction. The very idea of industrialized human progress cannot be decoupled from extractive tendencies. Marx said, “once adopted into the production process of capital, the means of labor passes through different metamorphoses, whose culmination is the machine, or rather, an automatic system of machinery.” (Marx, 1939) Therefore, as is currently the case with bitcoin (a prime example of the technologizing of society), we see nearly every element of capitalism being either mechanized or automated or augmented. Either way, these multipliers of production require

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related magnifiers of computation, which tend to be immensely resource driven, and often extremely demanding on the environment. See for example all the environmental stressors and environmental injustice issues following in the wake of the increasing power demands of bitcoin miners.³

What is also apparent, is that most humans are aware, to one degree or another, of the possibility of a contemporary ecological crisis. What is lacking is consensus as to the role of human's in initiating this crisis. We live in what Ulrich Beck describes as a risk society: "a society in which growing scientific awareness of risk changes the nature of democracy itself." (Morton 2013) More specifically, this risk assessment accounts for the process by which "environmental threats are routinely produced in contemporary capitalist societies" and the "public anxiety about environmental risks" arising from the "inability of institutions to diminish hazard production." (Mythen, 2004) Tim Morton would describe many of these hazards that develop a sense of anxiety either as what he has termed hyperobjects or as forces arising from Hyperobjects. Hyperobjects being objects (and concepts) so esoteric in nature and/or massively distributed in time and space that their operation and externalities tend to transcend immediate human spatiotemporal specificity, understanding, and perhaps remediation. Global climate, capitalism, human history, species extinction, Styrofoam and radioactive isotopes are all examples of hyperobjects.⁴ Morton calls this "the time of Hyperobjects" and "a time of weakness, in which humans are tuned to entities that can destroy them". (Morton, 2013)

³ <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/03/09/bitcoin-mining-energy-prices-smalltown-feature-217230>

⁴ Visit Tim Morton's blog for additional information on hyperobjects nad videos:
<http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/2011/05/materials-objects-envir%20onments.html>

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Everyday objects, all objects, Morton claims, are localized manifestations of hyperobjects. These objects emit a form of liminal trauma derived from a subconscious awareness of whatever hyperobjects the local object points to. For example, a water bottle now represents an expression of an “extended phenotype” which, among other things, signals to the problem of plastic particulates in water supplies, or the double-Texas size plastic barge in the Pacific, the various environmental justice issues surrounding access to water, the general burden of plastic on the environment, or all of the above at once. (Morton, 2013) These emissions form objects, in so far as they are psychic, are latent, or subconscious and probably exist within a larger context of conscious associations with the object, i.e. “I am thirsty and want water or where does this water come from?”. (Morton, 2013) Freud proposed a similar idea, Object Cathexis or *Besetzung*. Taken from the Greek word for ‘holding’, cathexis denotes the accretion of mental energy (positive or negative) around an idea, memory or object which the person is not self-aware of. (Freud, 1995) Similarly, Christopher Bollas’ coined the term unthought known which describes such an experience both known and not explicitly thought of in a conscious way as, “in some way known to the individual, but about which s/he is unable to think. Unthought known refers to preverbal, unschematised experience/trauma that may determine one's behaviour unconsciously, barred to conscious thought.” (Bollas, 1987)

Now the critical problem, Morton argues, is that something specific happens to individual and public will to act on objects or systems related to hyperobjects: such a crescendo of dread develops around these concepts that people build cognitive blockages around them to avoid trauma associated with relating to these problems. The stifling, ever-present trauma induced by objects that point to hyperobjects prevents our collective agreement on their existence. This is to say that the process of understanding the relationship between human behavior—itsself a

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hyperobject—and other hyperobjects, is psychologically painful, esoteric and arduous. (Morton, 2013) Without “approaching” hyperobjects, we cannot address or reverse the effects of their effects. For example, if we cannot come to understand global warming, or collectively acknowledge its existence, we also cannot understand the complex web of human behaviors (capitalism is itself an hyperobject) that have interfaced with the hyperobject of global climate to create the hyperobject of global warming. *What visual culture can do and which I am trying to do in Spectral Objects is represent the hyperobject through its referent, human-scale object. I believe this type of access is arguably unique to art. Through art we may be able to get closer to the psychic pain of hyperobjects by approaching them through emotion rather than analytics, and in approaching them we might learn to live with them and to accept their existence and better understand their esoteric operation.*

Art in the Time of Hyperobjects

This section starts with how what Tim Morton describes as the Object Oriented Approach to art making might work and concluded with an analysis of the way the work in *Spectral Objects* functions within the Object-Oriented Approach. What Object Oriented Artwork seems to do for Morton is allow society to become familiarized with hyperobjects, which otherwise might not be approachable due to their vast spatiotemporal scale and esoterism, and “tendency to withdraw irreducibly from understanding”. Therefore, approaches that employ statistical analysis and hard science, “mapped” approaches according to Morton, may not get us any closer to letting these objects (and their implications) into our lives in a meaningful way. (Harman, 2005; Morton, 2013). I have attempted with this work to, as Morton says, “restore to the aesthetic dimension a trauma and a pain that we edit out” of our lives with respect to the hyperobject. I

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agree with Morton that environmental artwork that attempts to “return back-to-Nature is doomed to fail, because there is no balance that existed to return to in the first place” (Cronin, 1995). Instead, imperfect coexistence or “ecological being-with” is a state we should progress towards. (Morton, 2013)

What Object Oriented Art can allow us to do is reflect on painful elements of the present, to live within these problems, if briefly, to feel them, and even to admit to them. It “acts as a device...to imprint” the viewer “with the shadow of the hyperobject.” This proximity to the hyperobject speaks to a way in which “care for hyperobjects” can be achieved through facing them, through bringing them “into human aesthetic– causal (social, psychic, philosophical) space.” (Morton, 2013) Care in the sense of the gallery is to curate, but taken in a more general sense, this means to care for the knowledge of the hyperobject, to admit its existence and to acknowledge personal and collective responsibility. I can say it no more eloquently than Morton, who says that the curators of hyperobjects must call into question the:

“...very nature of democracy and society— Whom does it contain? Only humans? Whom, if any, can it exclude? The attempt to care for hyperobjects and for their distant future guardians will strikingly change how humans think about themselves and their relationships with nonhumans. This change will be a symptom of a gradually emerging ecological theory and practice that includes social policy, ethics, spirituality, and art, as well as science. Humans become, in Heidegger’s words, the guardians of futurity...”

(Morton, 2013)

When I created the work in this show I was thinking closely about what I described previously as Morton’s distinction between “cognitive mapping” in contemporary environmental

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art, which entails almost an argumentative approach in that relationships between coexisting things are highlighted, and existing bodies of knowledge are employed, versus the approach I have taken which is to make hyperobjects visible through emotion and imagination. I confess that I am unsure how closely I hit this mark, but nevertheless, the work is inspired by these ideas in the sense that my fundamental goal was to avoid simply relaying information, proceeding from rationality, or creating installations that are a machine for upgrading the mind of the viewer. I did not want to parse the data, but to relate the totality of these hyperobjects in an effort not to upgrade the mind but to melt it. (Morton, 2013)

Frozen Processes and Commodity Signs

Spectral Objects, in addition to incorporating signals to the destruction encompassed by many objects works also by acknowledging my species being as an artist in illustrating the relationship between commercialism and the production of visual culture. This tactic acknowledges and points to my responsibility and place within the chain of production and consumption through aesthetic and material choices that collectively point to two things: the commodity systems I have tapped into to make the work and the processes and waste products associated with the making of the work. These two things are sometimes carefully hidden within work. I have personally in the past gone to great lengths to hide these signatures within work, as if they would represent an admission if left visible. Perhaps this was a method of ameliorating my guilt related to their use.

All these choices, pointing to and freezing pieces within specific art-making processes, pointing through the presence of commodity signs to the commercial origins of many of the raw materials in the work, point to a larger question of personal responsibility and self-awareness of

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the ethical implications of the choices surrounding the resource intensiveness required by all our lives. In this way, the show is both intensely personal but also non-specific. Each work points to the artistic process through two mechanical means which breach the traditional, sequestered physical and social space of the gallery and violate the typical mimetic quality of art objects: the freezing of objects within observable artistic processes, and the purposeful, sometimes surreptitious and other times conspicuous presence of materials and objects that would otherwise be considered detritus of the art making process.

The totality of formal aesthetic and material choices are directed by OOO, in the sense that through the inclusion side-by-side of commercial, organic, inorganic and pre and post-consumer objects, the value of each object is therefore normalized, none seeming to be privileged over the other. Each object, therefore, stands as a contradiction in terms, important due to their intentional aestheticism within the gallery and yet strangely nominal due to common or banal components within their compositions.

Artistic Species-Being

Earlier, I talked extensively about the problem of our human species-being, namely that the current ecological crisis we find ourselves in, may be an unavoidable condition of the maturation of the projects of human agrologistics and industrialization. I also talked about rejections of the notion of a return to nature as a solution to the current ecological crisis. What I believe we need to be is self-aware, reticent. Solidarity will logically take on a new, unique modern character. It cannot consist of the pre-industrialization form of solidarity we once had with non-humans, it must be a new iteration. As Tim Morton says, we can't expect ourselves to simply stop using science, technology and producing and consuming things (though this solution

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sounds fascinating to me); we probably cannot, no matter how hard we were to try, stop being resource extractive. With respect specifically to recourse extraction I think that we must restrict ourselves, to self-govern (I think different problems such as human animal-relations are more complicated ontological questions that won't be resolved by how many trees we cut down).

This leads to what is by now probably an obvious question if you have seen the show, and that is the question of the conundrum of my making a show full of stuff, and even a significant amount of nasty stuff like resins, plastics, flocking, etc., in a show with environmentalist aims? This was a contradiction I had early on, the answer to which became clear when I understood the work in terms of the Object Oriented Approach. In fact, I have made a choice to use as much non-organic, non-ecofriendly material in the show as possible. My defense is this: I wanted the materiality of the show to reflect the personal and collective problem of species-being of something being both beautiful, evocative and environmentally problematic. Each object is saccharine, shiny, toxic, full of materials selected for their problematic signaling. Therefore, it was paradoxically important to use the most environmentally irresponsible materials in a show urging personal and collective responsibility. This was important to me because *I believe the work needed to embody, rather than just be emblematic of the problem of modern human species-being; the exhibition had to consist of materials that illicit a charnel reaction.* These objects both refer to and consist of spectral objects. This makes sense if literally everything we consume has some problematic attachment or nasty externality we can only hope to avoid. I hope that the problem will be clear in these objects, that they will be enticing and oddly beautiful, at yet somehow traumatic and anxiety inducing.

A Method of Environmental, Philosophical and Scientific Communication

The goal of this show has been to explore the use of the contemporary art gallery space and experience as a means of communicating specific environmental, philosophical and scientific information. Though I don't consider this installation citizen science, per se, as it does not entail data collection or any qualitative features whatsoever, it certainly shares some of the more general goals of citizen science, to "involve the public more deeply in dialogue and decision-making around issues related to risk and environmental threat." (Bonney et al., 2015) This thinking led me to explore an exhibition framework which could be said to contribute in a meaningful way to work being done in environmental philosophy.

What I propose doing might be considered an expansion of the type of information that gallery goers are asked to consume. I am also proposing expanding the mode and type of exchange of ideas that is typical of contemporary art⁵. For example, I think of the other components of the show as part of a didactic or learning process, but also as components of what I characterize as a broader, durational experience that could be defined as the creation of a discursive space for environmental philosophy. Therefore, I hope this show represents an organizing principle for strategic fulfillment of specific learning outcomes in the gallery. For example, one of the specific outcomes I hope to achieve with *Spectral Objects* is to have visitors familiarize themselves with Tim Morton's books and theories.

⁵ I choose here not to engage in a detailed comparison of this installation versus other environmental art projects and practices, and I by no means am asserting that this is the first environmental project designed to disseminate information. On the contrary, these practices are typical of many projects and artists, and I owe these artists a debt of gratitude for their efforts and for influencing my thinking regarding what art can do.

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