

## **Within the context of environmentalism and its histories, critically appraise a contemporary practice through which a collective has been formed and agency enacted.**

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In 2007 the IPCC<sup>1</sup> established a scientific consensus on the fact that we now live in a world of anthropogenic global warming, namely that climate change is occurring as a consequence of human degradation of the environment. It predicts a coming world, half uninhabitable, which will undoubtedly provoke geopolitical challenges regarding environmental justice, resource distribution between the so-called “developed” and “third-world countries.”<sup>2</sup> In vision of this forecast practices of sustainable development have been advanced globally. Yet this very definition, though implying a shared responsibility for safeguarding humanity’s biological inheritance, situates the environment as valuable largely from the perspective of economic needs. Nature ends up being objectified as a category divorced from social, political and technological processes, whose future lies in the hands of mankind.

This anthropocentric worldview has characterized continental philosophy since the Romantic period. Contemporary French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux has defined it as, “correlationism.”<sup>3</sup> The latter presupposes that we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered independently. Humanity thus appears at the centre, and reality as the correlate of human thought.

The first wave of 20<sup>th</sup> Century continental thought could be associated to Heidegger’s phenomenological enquiry into the essence of things. In the 1970s Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault began to problematize the tradition of *logocentrism*, which prioritises speech over writing as a means to posit a full or pure ‘presence’ as the supreme value by which all reality can be judged.

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<sup>1</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

<sup>2</sup> Demos, T.J., ‘The Politics of Sustainability: Art and Ecology,’ in *Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969-2009*, 2009, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Bryant, Levi R., *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, Melbourne, Australia: Re.press, 2011, p.3.

In the 1990s Deleuze and Guattari propose the concept of the rhizome whereby knowledge is no longer seen as a hierarchical transferal of notions, but rather as a process of both vertical and linear connections, with infinite entry and exit points.<sup>4</sup>

Though attempting at disclosing the essence of reality as independent from human thought, these trends still remain entangled in texts, discourses, social practices and human finitude, thus seeming unwilling to step outside the human-world correlation.

Within the context of anthropogenic global warming and given the increasing infiltration of technology into the everyday world, the need to turn once more towards reality and de-centre humanity has become of critical importance. The exploration of this very possibility has resumed at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with the development of “Speculative Realism.” This develops out of a re- assessment of Heidegger’s phenomenology and turns to “object-oriented-ontology, ” or “OOO.” This concept, coined by Graham Harman, posits that Heidegger’s tool-analysis, for which an object is defined by its function, the way one uses it, relates to it, and by all other things within its context of use, has been misread. He argues that, ‘the key point is that the hammer can break, this means that it is not fully exhausted by any of its current uses or even of its possible uses. The hammer is partly withdrawn from every network.’<sup>5</sup> Thus, to be real, an object exists by itself and from itself and is irreducible to the whole of relations that relate to it. The reality of a thing is its withdrawal.

Timothy Morton appeals to OOO as a means to draw the trajectories for a new ecological thinking, one which challenges, ‘our sense of what is real and what is unreal, what counts as existent and what counts as non-existent.’<sup>6</sup> In *The Ecological Thought* (2010) he argues that in order to assume direct responsibility for global warming the idea of Nature - an ideological barrier - needs to be abandoned. Only by acknowledging the fact that there is no ontological (i.e. real) difference

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<sup>4</sup> Bryant, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, p.2.

<sup>5</sup> Gratton, Peter and Graham Harman Interview, ‘You can’t have Realism without Individual Objects,’ in *Society and Space*, 25 April 2015.

<<http://societyandspace.com/material/interviews/interview-with-peter-gratton/>>.

<sup>6</sup> Morton, Timothy, *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 10.

between the subject/object relation and the object/object relation can the emergency of climate change really be addressed.

Within this broader philosophical framework and drawing also from Michel Serres' notion of "natural contract,"<sup>7</sup> this essay will address the work of The Otolith Group, an artists' collective founded in London in 2000 by Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun. This group takes its name from 'otoliths', the calcium crystals suspended in the endolymphatic fluid of the inner ear that help us balance and navigate through space. Through an eclectic range of materials (films, texts, documents, photographs, paintings, sound and music), The Otolith Group explores the nature of perception, and engages in the construction of new temporalities. Through the interspersing of present, past and future, the group aims at destabilising the dominant narratives of Western culture and indicating the inconsistencies of the post-colonial world.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, it will explore how traditional methods of knowledge acquisition have reached a limit, specifically in the context of the climate change crisis, and attempts to generate new ways to articulate discontent in the present socio-political and ecological context.

According to The Otolith Group, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century could be defined as the era of the geologization of society and history; the implications of this process are however not yet known, as if humanity were embarked in an experiment.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Morton argues that since World War II, when the two atomic bombs were dropped in 1945, we have entered 'a geological time marked by decisive human "terraforming" of Earth as such.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Serres's theories are not directly linked to the *Speculative Turn* yet he could be paralleled to Morton and Harman in that he speaks to the fact that all of a sudden things no longer seem as they used to be. The thinking subject is changing and our way of being together is also shifting.

<sup>8</sup> 'The Otolith Group: Fons Audio # 7,' in *Radio Web MACBA*, 25 April 2015.  
<[http://rwm.macba.cat/en/specials?id\\_capsula=803](http://rwm.macba.cat/en/specials?id_capsula=803)>.

<sup>9</sup> The Otolith Group, 'Where are we going, Walt Whitman? An ecosophical roadmap for artists and futurists,' *Conference Festival* at Gerrit Rietveld Academie, 2013, 25 April 2015.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6msLas9sBmg>>.

<sup>10</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 4.

*Medium Earth*, is an essay film which explores the earthquake endangered geology of California and the spatialized unconscious of capitalist modernism. Modern economic structures have not only drastically affected the environment but have had an equally damaging effect on thinking itself. According to the Otolith Group the rapid reformation of cause and effect, means and end generated by the human geologization, requires a new approach to the world of our own creation.<sup>11</sup> *Medium*



*Earth* attunes itself to the seismic psyche of California's landscape and listens to its deserts, translates the writing of its stones and deciphers the sounds of its expansion cracks.

This notebook film aims at exposing how this moment of geological apprehension is, as the group states, 'effectively entangled with the infrastructural unconscious of water, sewage, electricity, transport and communication.'<sup>12</sup> The planetary surface is thus defined by a series of waves that enter into the concrete layer of human architecture, expressing themselves both visually and aurally.

*Medium Earth* exposes those voiceless things, which we have been accustomed to envision as mere décor or surrounding (i.e. the desert's cracks). Instead of leaving nature on the side-lines, the film invites the viewer to recognize the subjective characteristics of the natural world and its interconnectedness - through invisible forces - to our everyday environment.

A parallel could be drawn to Michel Serres' ideas expressed in *The Natural Contract* (1995). He argues that those who share power today have forgotten nature, which, he states 'could be said to be

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<sup>11</sup> 'Medium Earth,' in The Otolith Group Website, 25 April 2015.  
<<http://otolithgroup.org/index.php?m=project&id=144>>.

<sup>12</sup> The Otolith Group, 'Where are we going, Walt Whitman? An ecosophical roadmap for artists and futurists,'  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6msLas9sBmg>>.

taking its revenge but which, more to the point, is reminding us of its existence, we who live in time but never right out in the weather.’<sup>13</sup> Similarly to the Otolith Group, Serres posits that together with the industrial pollution of the present, which exposes weather to conceivable risks, there is also a second pollution, a cultural pollution, an invisible contamination that has brought humanity to relate to objects merely under the form of possession. The reality is that the world could exist today without us whereas we cannot exist without it. Hence Serres proposes that to think ecologically one ought to place ‘things around us and us within them like parasites.’<sup>14</sup> The human/parasite needs to enter into a symbiotic relation with the earth. The latter, due to the excesses that humankind has committed against it, can no longer feed or house us; it reacts to its abuses by taking away that which nurtures us. In this way, Serres argues, ‘nature behaves like a subject.’<sup>15</sup> All scales would thus tend to equilibrium if not only we were to re-establish a symbiotic relationship with the earth, but also if we were to grant nature and objects the same rights to which any other legal subject is entitled to. A natural contract of symbiosis and reciprocity needs to be signed; one in which our relationship to things would set aside mastery and possession in favour of reciprocity and respect. One could argue that *Medium Earth* enacts agency in a twofold manner. On one hand, it proposes a recuperation of the bond that used to connect our ancestors to the world, or in Serres’ terms, ‘binds the time passing and flowing to the weather outside, the bond that allows our language to communicate with mute, passive, obscure things - things that because of our excesses, are recovering voice, presence, activity and light.’<sup>16</sup> In this way, it defies the idealist notion of nature and addresses new imperatives for an ethics of living, which struggles against the cultural pollution that has caused the Earth to raise its voice.

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<sup>13</sup> Serres, Michel, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Serres, *The Natural Contract*, p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

On other hand, it sheds light upon the fact that through the technology used to attune to the seismic psyche of the landscape, distance is not only shortened but eliminated all together. The collective has stated that through *Medium Earth*, ‘we are being confronted with a permanent sliding scar, the San Andreas fault, slicing through suburbs.’<sup>17</sup> This idea suggests that the catastrophe, which could occur in the future, is already, permanently sliding in our present. Temporal distance is eliminated and, as a consequence our way of thinking of and coping with the environment must change.

*I see Infinite Distance Between Any Point And Another*<sup>18</sup> (2012) is a literal evocation of the word sea conveyed through the Lebanese poet Etel Adnan’s reading of the poem *Sea* (2012). The film - largely shot in Adnan’s Paris apartment - could be envisioned as an experiment in concentration, audibility and listening. By being absorbed in the gentle voice of the reader, the mobility of language begins to be paralleled to the movement of the ocean.<sup>19</sup>

The aim of this project, the collective has stated, was to ‘clear out of the way the archetypes with which we make the sea audible. To show the sea without showing the sea. To withdraw the clichés commonly associated to it.’<sup>20</sup> This initiative stemmed from the desire to express a language that would expose the perpetual enigma that knowledge production creates.<sup>21</sup> The more one tries to capture the realism of the sea, the more enmeshed in clichés and archetypal qualities it becomes. A correlationist approach to reality could, in their view, be opposed by disclosing the images’ internal reflection upon their own condition. For as the Otolith Group has stated, ‘an essay

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<sup>17</sup> The Otolith Group, ‘Where are we going, Walt Whitman? An ecosophical roadmap for artists and futurists,’ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6msLas9sBmg>>.

<sup>18</sup> *I See Infinite Distance Between Any Point and Another* (2012) following from *Hydra Decapita* (2010), is part two of The Otolith Group’s trilogy of works on hydropolitics and hydroaesthetics. *The Radiant* (2012), completes this trilogy.

<sup>19</sup> ‘I See Infinite Distance Between Any Point and Another,’ in The Otolith Group Website, 25 April 2015. <<http://otolithgroup.org/index.php?m=project&id=144>>.

<sup>20</sup> The Otolith Group in conversation with Honor Harger, *Lighthouse*, 25 April 2015. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQ\\_pr8ndN2I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQ_pr8ndN2I)>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

film has to find a form of discontent. Dissatisfaction with images in form of an image.’<sup>22</sup> This very dissatisfaction with images as incapable to grasp the sea at its fullest, was proposed through language’s paradoxical ability to make present without making present. Here, language is not used in an-anti realist way to reduce things to their accessibility to us, but rather utilized as a means to embody the sound of the sea, and let the reality of the sea emerge in its very withdrawal from the picture frame.

The distance of the sea - both spatial and temporal - also addresses the notion of non-linearity. For



as the Otolith Group posits, ‘in order to make sense of the present we have to make visible images from another time and another space which seem not to have anything to do with the present but actually have.’<sup>23</sup> The Otolith Group’s desire to think a reality beyond our thinking as a means to make sense of the present could be paralleled to Harman’s OOO.

According to Harman, presence means relationality, thus to consider an object in its being means to consider it in its withdrawal from all forms of presence (i.e. its relation to other objects or humans as something seen, used or spatially present); moreover, he states, ‘all objects withdraw from each other not just from humans.’<sup>24</sup> He furthers his argument by delineating a distinction between real and intentional objects. Real objects withdraw while intentional objects do not withdraw and are encrusted with things that do not relate to their essence. Furthermore, real objects never touch each other while intentional objects pass gradually into one another.<sup>25</sup> Intentional objects are ideal

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Harman, Graham, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*, Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010, p. 125.

<sup>25</sup> Harman, *Toward Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*, p. 127.

projections; namely real objects encrusted with things that do not belong to their essence but serve humanity to perpetuate the illusion of a unified thing. Yet if real objects are always separate, while intentional objects pass into one another (i.e. are defined by their relations), how can things be both separate and linked? Harman forwards the notion of “occasionalism”, for which every being and non-living thing is being attended to by a higher power: the intentional act. The latter is, in Harman’s view ‘ a vicarious medium that contains each of them.’<sup>26</sup> Our intention of an object is in a certain sense one, but in another sense two. The subject who projects its intention is separate from the objects, as the object is separate from each of the component of the act, yet this very act is a unified one. The intentional act is an object like any other for its full depths can never be exhaustively probed. In regard to this Harman states, ‘it is not just the poignantly unique feature of human being that place intentionality on the interior of an object. We cannot know exactly what an inanimate object experiences.’<sup>27</sup> Humans are thus revealed to be passively drawn into the world, they do not rise above the world but dig down into the heart of things by fusing with them. Hence consciousness, Harman argues, is ‘no longer special, but just a special case of the relation between part and whole.’<sup>28</sup>

Reality can be apprehended if intentional objects are stripped bare of their encrustation; they must be pointed at a distance without our relation to them. This process, denominated by Harman as allure, ‘splits the object from its qualities (...) and reveals it as a ghostly power exceeding any of its lists of properties.’<sup>29</sup> The object, pointed at a distance, is in itself and by itself, and no longer in relation to us. Thus the impression of a withdrawn reality arises, one that, in Harman’s words, ‘demands our speculation of its realism.’<sup>30</sup>

One could argue the collective’s attempt to portray the sea without ever showing it, to be alluding at Harman’s process of “disencrustment” of the intentional object. By withdrawing the ocean from its

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

commonly associated qualities (i.e. by never showing it) a process of allure is initiated. One could go as far as stating that Adnan's voice, becomes the intentional sea, while the real sea, in its withdrawal, emerges as a distant, yet to be defined reality. Tension between the sea's non-relational execution and the way it described is thus established. The absolute gulf between reality and relation is emphasized as a means to destabilize human centrality and forward the possibility to speculate on reality as such.

In *The Ecological Thought* Morton posits that 'the more you know, the more entangled you realize you are, and the more open and ambiguous everything becomes.'<sup>31</sup> Drawing from Harman's idea that real objects withdraw both from humans and from each other, Morton sets forth the



concept of "hyperobjects." These are massively distributed both in space and time relative to

humans and given these very characteristics, Morton posits, 'their primordial reality is withdrawn from humans.'<sup>32</sup> Their invisible reality forces us to question what it means to exist, what earth and society actually are and presents us, as Morton argues, 'with intimacy with existing nonhumans.'<sup>33</sup>

*The Radiant* (2012) explores the aftermath of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami that happened on 11<sup>th</sup> of March 2011. The Tohoku earthquake triggered a tsunami that killed thousands of people and caused the meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant on the East Coast of Japan. It is a film concerned in representing the invisible aftermath of nuclear fallout. It tries to offer glimpses into the shape and presence of an

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<sup>31</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Morton, Timothy, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2013, p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, p. 19.

unseen entity and its abstract manifestation through visual phenomena.<sup>34</sup> This unseen entity, which could be acknowledged as a ‘hyperobject’, affects all of us. Radiations are nonlocal for radioactive specks can float thousands of miles away from the locus of the nuclear accident and affect people years later in different countries. As the Otolith Group has stated, ‘the idea of the outsider has collapsed in this kind of situation which affects all of us politically.’<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Morton argues, ‘simply because we’re sentient (...) we’re obliged to address global warming. No proof is required that we caused it – looking for absolute proof inhibits our response.’<sup>36</sup> *The Radiant* thus tries to find a vocabulary to express the very frustration caused by the global nuclear regime. How can Japan have 52 nuclear power plants after having experienced Hiroshima and Nagasaki? This vocabulary of frustration takes the form of a sequence of images that portray the horror, the invisible but ever more horrific horror, that faces us all. This hyperobject is not only abstract in its essence but it has also abstracted its heights. It is always-already there and in this sense, drawing from Morton’s analysis, ‘out of sight is no longer out of mind.’<sup>37</sup>

The radiations looming presence, which the Otolith Group tried to convey in *The Radiant*, compels us to realize that we are all always-already enmeshed within it. For what hyperobjects do, and so *The Radiant* is showing, is that the future is somehow beamed in the present. Through this very phenomena, Morton argues, the metaphysics of presence ends and ‘the very large finitude of hyperobjects forces humans to coexists with a strange future, a future without us.’<sup>38</sup> Through the nonlinearity of art, also expressed in Adnan’s evocation of the distant sea, or *Medium Earth*’s dissolution between temporal and weather time, the strange future is shown to be already within our present. *The Radiant* involves becoming open to the idea of a strange present, open to the idea that we are all involved hence responsible. Fukushima’s radiations, which connect all humanity through

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<sup>34</sup> ‘The Radiant’ in The Otolith Group Website, 26 April 2015.

<<http://otolithgroup.org/index.php?m=project&id=144>>.

<sup>35</sup> Conversation between Sabu Kohso and The Otolith Group, *Conference Festival* at Gerrit Rietvelt Academie, 2013, 25 April 2015.

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRUKI-HhEU8>>.

<sup>36</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, p. 99.

<sup>37</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, p. 36.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

their nonlocal and abstract nature, compel us to think of other ways of relating both to one another and to objects. *The Radiant* sheds light upon the interobjective nature of both humans and nonhumans. Namely that nothing is ever experienced directly, but only as mediated through other entities in some shared sensual space. (For example, radiation is not directly experienced, we might perceive it through the effect it has on deformed flowers). Interobjectivity testifies to the fact that “out of sight is no longer out of mind.” One could argue the Otolith Group to be incubating new ways of thinking that insists upon the painful reality of climate change. As Kodwo Eshun has argued ‘only by forcing yourself to live with bad news everyday, only thus can the possibility of liberation be elaborated.’<sup>39</sup>

The Otolith Group’s work illustrated above, bears upon our present ecological crisis and cultural politics not only in its attempt to find new forms of articulating discontent but also in its desire to elicit new ways of acknowledging our relation to objects. *Medium Earth* does not only metaphorically give voice to the Earth’s “cracks” of protest, but it also sheds light upon the need to face the San Andreas fault as an always-already present catastrophe. *I see Infinite Distance Between Any Point And Another* bears upon speculative realist philosophy in that it attempts at returning to the ocean’s reality without ever showing it. In this way the correlationist tendency to posit humanity at the centre is destabilized. The sea emerges as an indiscernible reality only when we begin to distance it from its archetypal images and associations, or, in Harman’s term, its “encrustments.” This process, which brings forth the irreducible gap between being and appearing, envisions the possibility to speculate on a new reality. It invites the viewer to acknowledge that all objects (human beings included), in order to be objects, are actually deviant. It invites us to accept, as Morton has stated: ‘that things are always what they aren’t.’<sup>40</sup> Through *The Radiant*, this

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<sup>39</sup> Eshun, Kodwo, *Public Assets Conference* at Central Saint Martins, London, 26 April 2015.

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zfs-yQqvIA4>>.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Timothy Morton and Hans Ulrich Obrist,’ in occasion of *Extinction Marathon: Visions of the Future*, Serpentine Gallery, London, 27 April 2015.

<<http://dismagazine.com/disillusioned/discussion-disillusioned/68280/hans-ulrich-obrist-timothy-morton/>>.

collective successfully elicits the interobjective nature of both humans and nonhumans. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings and consequently that nothing exists all by itself, this essay film bears upon democracy for it confronts the viewer with the necessity to take responsibility for that which he cannot see, for that which he does not directly possess but in which he, as well as the rest of humanity, is always already enmeshed.

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