

Speculative Realism
in Contemporary Art:
a look at the work of
Olafur Eliasson and Jessica Houston

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Preface

This text aims to look with curiosity at some of the posthuman/post anthropocentric philosophies that have developed in the last two decades. Specifically, I aim to investigate Object-Oriented Ontology - with the help of some voices from the closely related New-Materialism movement (such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti and Jane Bennet), both subsets of speculative realism philosophy - through the artistic practices of Olafur Eliasson and Jessica Houston, both self-admitted participants of these dialogues. It is my goal to situate the work of the artists within the framework provided by the philosophical currents and to describe parallels that reflect not only the structures of these ontologies but also to emphasise the ways of thinking/making of the philosophers and artists.

It will be clear that the philosophies mentioned often make comments that are very much a shift in paradigm - a simple glimpse of the index will find words usually forbidden in postmodernism, such as a belief in *place* and *beauty* - and although I don't aim to write impartially about the subjects at hand, I will not be actively defending the ontology as much as giving a passionate overview of ideas that have a correlation with the practice of Eliasson and Houston, unless of course, the shifts are paramount to the work at hand. Warning to the reader: subjunctive statements may occur!

Firstly, I will briefly address what is Object-Oriented Ontology and the importance it places on aesthetic events. A similar attempt will be repeated to identify the artists Olafur Eliasson and Jessica Houston. Secondly, parallels will be drawn, bets will be placed, and citations and paraphrasing will attempt to cascade from *Metaphor* - the

situating of object/beholder in Aesthetic phenomenon - to the proposed reassessment of our relation with reality caused by the Anthropocene - the entangled mesh of humans, animals and geological changes to our planet since the Industrial Revolution. Thirdly, a conclusion will perhaps cleverly stipulate the same attitude of this whole paragraph. Fourthly, the reader may finish the paper and check for the existence of a multitude of references and other academic conventions. Fifthly, this numbering of organised sentences may prove to be no match to the chances of life that ensues.

Object-Oriented Ontology

Object-Oriented Ontology (abbreviated as OOO from now on) is a subset of Speculative Realism, of which other philosophies such as New-Materialism are a part of. OOO was pioneered by Graham Harman and adopted by Timothy Morton, Ian Bogst and Levi Bryant - it proposes that it is possible to describe relations outside of the taxonomy of thought/being (correlationism). OOO asserts that objects are independent of human perception and holds that all relations between all objects happen can be described through the same principles. This means that human interactions with other objects are no more valid (and happen through the same proposed mechanisms) than the ones between non-human objects. For an object-oriented ontology thinker, the interaction that takes place between a human and a bowl holds the human experience of the bowl in equal standing to the experience the bowl has of the human, or the table it sits on. The same is proposed for any object such as kangaroos, bacteria, galaxies, tectonic plates, the Dutch West India Company or Dostoevsky's romance, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

«OOO argues that nothing can be grasped, or accessed, all at once in its entirety. OOO also argues that thought is by no means the top access mode - indeed, *there is no top-access mode*. What these two insights give us is a world in which anthropocentrism is impossible, because thought has been extremely closely correlated with being human for so long, and because human beings have mostly been the only ones allowed to access other things in a meaningful way.» (Morton: 2018: 10)

OOO defines *Object* in a wide sense, using it to describe anything that is both irreducible to its components or the effects it provokes. If we invert the claim, then we see that OOO is also asserting that direct knowledge of an object is impossible, for the only two types of knowledge we have are *what a thing is made of* or *what a thing does*. (Harman: 2013)

In its aim to be a theory of everything, OOO starts by rejecting and arguing against four core notions: *physicalism*, *smallism*, *anti-fictionalism* and *literalism*. (Harman: 2018: 25-41)

Physicalism is the belief that *everything that exists must be physical*. OOO argues that some objects are not material, such as in the paradox of the Ship of Theseus where the ship remains the same even after its boards are fully replaced one by one. Its form somehow endured the complete replacement of its material parts.

Smallism is the belief that *everything that exists must be basic and simple and can be broken down to tiny basic elements*. OOO claims here that the basic elements have different properties than the properties observed at the scale of the object they compose, such as how all organic compounds contain carbon but they have independent features from one another.

Anti-fictionalism is the belief that *everything that exists must be real*. OOO claims that a true theory of everything must also have something to say about fictitious realities, or it wouldn't be a theory of everything.

Literalism is the belief that *everything that exists must be able to be stated accurately in literal propositional language*. OOO proposes that objects are never just bundles of literal properties, just as in Aristotle's claim that things are always concrete while

definitions are made of universals. Morton also adds that the subjunctive nature of our experience of reality makes the grasping of such a reality unsustainable.

What all this seems to imply is that in OOO's view objects are, as Timothy Morton puts it, *anything at all*. This last point about *literalism* also gives us a hint to one of the core features of OOO, by rejecting that reality can be engaged in a literal way, it offers to use poetics as a non-literal form of cognition. Experience becomes the structure of interactions between real objects where they make sense of each other through metaphors of themselves. In other words, aesthetics becomes the central point of philosophy and artistic practices.(Harman: 2018: 61-65)

Artists

Olafur Eliasson is an Icelandic/Danish artist. Integrating his interdisciplinary skills as both an architect and an artist, Eliasson often works by making large scale installations and sculptures that often involve the use of natural elements such as water and light. He is an active participant in contemporary



discussions about the Anthropocene and Object-Oriented Ontology, subjects that surround his work and often involve philosophers and scholars in continued conversations with the artist, such as Timothy Morton, Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway.

Jessica Houston is an American artist interested in the entanglements of nature and culture. Having travelled from pole to pole she has a collection of work that involves contributions and testimonies from communities from the Canadian Arctic, Antarctica, Greenland, Iceland, and Italy. As Eliasson often does, she often makes use of light, ice and other natural elements. In an email exchange with the artist, Houston mentions that she is well versed in New-Materialism/OOO in relation to the Anthropocene. In her work, there are specific mentions to Rosi Bradotti, Jane Bennett and Bruno Latour, all key figures in New Materialism and closely related to OOO.



Aesthetics



Olafur Eliasson, *Your uncertain shadow*, 2010

OOO Metaphor

To understand the aesthetic proposition of OOO, let us look at Graham Harman's description of a metaphor in his book *Object-Oriented Ontology, A New Theory of Everything*. The idea goes as follows:

Harman's example of a metaphor is "red-wine sea". We have "red-wine", the sensual qualities, and "sea", the real object. In the metaphor, there is a sense that both of these have an essence that is somehow mixed to form a third object. It is OOO's view that although sensual quality "red-wine" can be grasped by the beholder of the metaphor, there is no direct access to the real object "sea". This is the case because OOO rejects that there is any "direct knowledge" or "top access mode" of any real

object and claims there is always something left to the object besides our form of knowledge of it, this is called *withdrawal* of the object.

In the absence of direct access to the real object “sea”, the sensual qualities “red-wine” must be supported by something else. OOO defends that this “something else” must be the beholder, the only real object available.

The beholder, having taken the place of the real object in the metaphor, will now act theatrically by embodying the sensual qualities “red-wine” and pretending to be the “sea”, as an actor in a play would. By doing so, the metaphor isn’t purely the sincere involvement of the beholder with the qualities of “red-wine”, it is instead the production of a new object, a compound-object or the amalgam beholder-sea (where the beholder poses as a “sea” object) and the qualities of “red-wine”. It is a coupling with an open/not fully knowable object, at no point is there a reduction¹ by the beholder of the human concepts or perceived parts that constitute “sea”.(Harman: 2018: 67-89)

This is the structure that supports aesthetic experience according to OOO, where a world of real objects imply their inwardness through qualities and theatrical involvement, which can either take the shape of a poem, painting, or really any situation at all where there is a sincere involvement with experience by the beholder, who may be at times human, but could also be any other real object. This structure makes it so that making art or interacting with it is “directly tampering with cause and effect” (Morton & Eliasson: 2015: 39min)

¹Reduction here means restricting the object “sea” to the extend of our knowledge of what constitutes it or what relations cause it. In OOO this is called overmining, undermining or a combination of the two named duomining (Harman: 2018: 41-52)

Let us look now at Eliasson's installation *Your Uncertain Shadow* (2010) where five coloured spotlights are lined up on the floor so that when the visitor enters the gallery space their shadow is projected onto the wall by intercepting the spotlights. In a lecture with OOO philosopher Timothy Morton, Eliasson describes a possible interaction with his work:

«...you come into a room with some light, (...), and then you see your own shadow (...) on the wall. And maybe the shadow is of a certain quality that kind of captivates you and it has some colours and is sort of lovely to look at. So then you go like "Oh, that's actually me". (...) Suddenly the shadow is what makes you move, you are moving from the perspective of the wall, the wall is moving you.» (Morton & Eliasson: 2015: 7min)

We can now envision how this may follow a structure akin to the one in Harman's metaphor.

Firstly, we have an installation with shadows (Real Object) and their colours (Sensual Qualities). Secondly, the beholder walks into the installation space and is surprised to find their own shadow(s), and finding themselves in participation with what they see by any movement of their body. This movement, perhaps unintentional at first, soon becomes a conscious commitment to play with the shadow (prompt to act theatrically with the sensual qualities). Olafur then describes a moment when the shadow on the wall moves the beholder instead of the other way around. Let us call the shadow moved by the beholder / beholder moved by shadow, the 3rd object, the amalgam-object of beholder and shadow. It is apparent in this image of play between the beholder and shadow that it is also a play of entanglement and distinction. It may be that the name *Your Uncertain Shadow* is a play on this taxonomy.



Olafur Eliasson, *Your uncertain shadow*, 2010

The example given by Eliasson is of course one of the many possible metaphors within the installation. We can consider how other beholders in the exhibition might contribute their own shadows to the wall, or how the distance from the wall also acts with the shadow and even how the whole installation can be viewed from the outside as a spectacle. All of these are just as possible as the case described by Eliasson, and all they require is sincere participation with experience, a moment of pursuing imagination, to be viewed as part of the metaphorical structure. It is interesting how when we speak of structure it seems almost implied that it is restraint. We would normally think that objects and qualities contained in a structure would be limited or reduced to a function or a result, but it seems that this isn't at all the case within OOO. Objects are left open by default, their qualities don't reduce them and instead imply a reality beyond them, the beholders participate with independent objects instead of squashing all the objects in the room under their intellect - there is a validation of the objects own reality that sparks commitment from the beholder and their imagination to act with another object in a collaborative play of causality. It is an expansive movement that opens definitions and envisions ways of acting with that openness.

Play

The way in which the beholder is described as participating with the artwork also raises questions about the interactive norms that exist within a gallery space. The beholder is no longer just a visitor of a neutral gallery, consuming the artwork by silently moralising or overmining (Harman: 2013) it for its value as a functional or deconstructive concept. Eliasson describes this well, as a reluctance that can happen in an interaction with the work:

«There's a number of trust-generated things that one has to go through (in engaging with the shadow on the wall). Is anybody looking? Am I alone? Maybe that other person is also doing it, it's ok. If I was a child, if I was infantile it is okay, it's easy.» (Morton & Eliasson: 2015: 7min)

By being prompted to act within the artwork, even manipulating the shadows on the wall becomes compromising to the neutrality of the viewer and makes them exposed. This notion seems to posit that by partaking in the amalgam-object of the metaphor the beholder may be made aware of their own open-endedness as a real object. One can then see how this results in a reassessment of the concept of identity and reality held by the beholder. It may even, and perhaps this is the goal of the aesthetics of *Your Uncertain Shadow*, the reassessment of whether the shadow has its own identity if it is real or merely a part of the identity of the beholder. Of course, this isn't about the shadow but instead about the implications that preceded it being real or not.

What is particularly interesting in this image is how it resists a conclusion, something that is characteristic of indirect access to reality. There is a "tentative hesitant subjunctive quality" (Morton: 2019: 1-15) that makes them neither literal while also

not denying that thinking about them is impossible. We can say that the “image of the shadow may be an image of the beholder” and “the image of the beholder may be the image of the shadow”, and we wouldn’t be entirely wrong in each case. The image does not make a conclusion for us, and it seems worth it to reconsider just how many things around us are there that hold inherent contradictions like this one.

This reassessment of concepts through play seems to be a characteristic of other posthuman philosophers outside OOO. In an example of rethinking ethics, Donna Haraway describes how through the play of animals, play can be a good strategy to remain inventive while also avoiding aggression and boring functionality. It is a propositional way to make “possible futures out of joyful but dangerous presents”. It proposes “new abstractions, new lures”. In telling stories about things we care about, such as world conflicts and climate crisis, “play always involves the invitation that asks “are we a ‘we’?”. (Donna Haraway:2015: 255-261)

By questioning who or what “we” is, an openness to re-think it as a collective of humans/animals, humans/matter and humans/objects emerges. A number of entanglements between human and non-human agents are possible, even to imagine a reality between non-humans and other non-humans, the humanistic centre is shifted and new conversations can emerge. If we take the amalgam object of the metaphor as a we Object, then we would be right in thinking that not only is there an I Beholder but also an I Shadow.(Harman: 2018: 77)

In fact, this way of thinking is one of the attitudes that has led to the recent reassessment of the concepts of the Human/Anthropos (Rosi Braidotti), nature/culture (Latour) and even the reassessment of the epoch we live in.

Posthuman

We have already seen how involvement in a metaphor compromises the identity of the beholder, how to engage in theatrical action, imagination and play, all risk changing the beholder's conception of themselves. It is very clear how the beholder can no longer act as a consumer for as long as they are actively engaging with the work of art. It is impossible to maintain the distance implied within the concept of consumer and participating on equal footing with other objects, for if one owns an experience it is reduced and viewed as a commodity that exists only in its relation to humans. (Harman: 2019: ix-5)

Object-Oriented Ontology seems to reimagine our participation in reality in a way that isn't cold and impersonal. Through the use of flat ontology, OOO avoids the taxonomy of human thought separated from everything else. Instead, taking inspiration from Latour's Actor-Network Theory (which seeks to unite the culture/nature taxonomy), OOO proposes to explain elements on either side of the divide through the same principles. By describing links between objects from both sides of the taxonomy this theory strengthens itself and proposes a more complex reality. This is why OOO can claim relations of equal footing between what otherwise would have been art-commodity and beholder-consumer. In the same way, Jane Bennett's Vital Materialism draws entanglements of humans with non-human organisms, non-biological substances, technology and processes, exploring intra-actions between meaning and matter, and how matter assemblages affect human events.(Bennett, 2010)



Olafur Eliasson, *Moss wall*, 1994

In the example above, Eliasson displays Reindeer moss on the wall of the gallery. People feel their way around the wall, touching it, leaning on it and figuring if it is real; but interestingly enough it is the moss that touches us first. We smell it immediately upon entering the room, it starts the conversation. Only after smelling the moss can we look for where it came from. From a distance, the wall could very well be a green carpet. This makes us wonder: What is this smell? I think I may recognise it. Oh, moss! That must be it.

Jessica's collage, from a series called *Entanglements*, aims to explore how meaning and matter are intertwined by making us ask what is left out of the picture in the flatness of the colour. By working with images that are cut or joined together, Houston proposes the questions: "What histories are foregrounded? Who is missing,

displaced or replaced? What are the material consequences of human and beyond human relationships?”(Houston)



Jessica Houston, *Of Which We Are Part*, 2018
Collage, 28cm x 35cm

The way these artworks foreground the participation of non-humans in the artwork situate them within conversations of post-humanism (critique of “Man”) and post-anthropocentrism (the critique of “Anthropos” as species supremacy), Rosi Braidotti claims the convergence of these conversations defines the posthuman condition (Braidotti: 2019: 7min). By making it possible to imagine compounds of shared agency the taxonomies of Man/everything else and Anthropos/every other species are weakened.

Anthropocene

One of the most evident entanglements of our time is our entanglement with changes in climate and ecosystems. The Anthropocene is one of the possible names proposed to describe the geological epoch of when human activity and systems started to have an impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems (Davison: 2019). Some view it as beginning with the invention of the steam engine which served as a catalyst for our ultimate destructive impact on the planet (Morton: 2013).

An idea that has shown OOO's potential ways of thinking about the Anthropocene is Tim Morton's *hyperobjects*. Vaguely describing them, Morton says they are "an entity that is massively distributed in space and time in such a way that you obviously can only access small slices of it at a time, and in such a way that obviously transcends merely human access modes and scales." (Morton: 2018: 64)

The hyperobject of Climate Change, for example, exists over the same timespan as the one of the Anthropocene and is the agglomeration of events, market structures, molecules and any other thing that signals the presence of climate change. It has a larger than human timespan, it happens in more than one place at a time and it is much more than human interactions by themselves. Climate change, Morton argues, has become something akin to the boiling frog effect, whereby it has happened in such a gradual way to our human sensibility for temperature - which can differ from that of an animal at the verge of extinction in an ever-warming ecosystem - that it hides, by gradual normalization of change, that we may already be heading towards a point of no return. (Morton: 2013)



Jessica Houston, *Deployment II*
(*Inserting Letters in Ice*) - Antarctica,
2019

Jessica Houston also mentions how she explores the notion of unfixed time in her work.

«...time is central to my work. *Letter to the Future* creates a scenario where time pulls both backwards and forwards. The present influences the future, and in a way, the future is here now. This idea of taking time 'off a line' challenges notions of progress, and the idea that we are constantly moving forward towards something better. Carlo Rovelli has helped me see time in a different way. He is a contributor to the Letters project which is beyond any one individual, both in time scale and in ideologies, and it is beyond the human. The substances of the planet are vital materials of this work, which asks us to imagine with renewed sensitivity our time and our place in the history of the earth as the messages withdraw into the future.» (Houston: 2021)

The project mentioned, *Letters to the Future* (2018) is what the artist describes as an “1,000 years collaboration with ice”, where people - such as Indigenous Leaders, artists, poets and philosophers - wrote letters (only known to themselves) that have been buried in the Dronning Maud Land ice sheet. This project also sees itself depending on the ice melting in 1,000 years time, when it will



Jessica Houston, *Letters to the Future*, 2019

hopefully resurface at sea. This dependence on the matter of ice, temperature change and time, challenges the notion of a human scale of time and gives matter agency in the artwork.



Olafur Eliasson, *Ice Watch*, 2014

We can also find challenges to human scale and time in Eliasson's *Ice Watch*, an installation of twelve blocks of ice harvested from Greenland shown in the form of a clock. It has been displayed three times, first in Copenhagen (2014) to mark the publication of the UN IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report on Climate Change. Afterwards, it was shown in Paris (2015) during the UN Climate Conference COP21 and lastly, it was on display in two locations in London (2019), outside Bloomberg's European headquarters and in front of Tate Modern.

In this installation, we get to experience time as proposed by the melting ice and the watch suddenly becomes more than an instrument that only humans can read. Morton points out that the Sun is also part of the timescale of the ice melting (Morton:2018: 57), in fact, the matter of ice is in contact with many other non-humans all through its lifespan. It is far from a display for humans only. "Ecologically explicit art is simply art that brings this solidarity with the nonhuman to the foreground" (Morton: 2018: 58). And since an artwork is its own object, every artwork is a nonhuman being. This makes all art ecological, at least to the point where we can say that all art explores race relations or class structure, and we can see how this is a pronounced statement in the works of Houston and Eliasson.

Place and Entanglements



Olafur Eliasson, *Room for one color*, 1997

In the lecture by Eliasson and Timothy Morton quoted earlier, Morton goes on to talk about how a conversation can be influenced by the room it happens in:

T.M. - «We've been in this kind of philosophical, social, kind of ecologically destructive space for a while where we've been thinking to ourselves that we, the fantastic humans get to format things just how we like, (...) pointing out that actually before you have that kind of format kind of fantasy there is this yellow room. It's yellow, it's a room, it's yay big, it has yay size, and you go in this room and you are flooded with yellow. (...) You know you're in that kind of gravitational field of that colour right and from there you start to think and act. All that stuff seems so obvious, doesn't it? But somehow we've kind of convinced ourselves that that's not correct. (...) the trouble is that believing, believing, believing, really strongly that that's not correct actually goes against reality and is in fact part of being ecologically very destructive.» (Morton & Eliasson: 2015: 11min)

The *Room for One Colour* (1997) is an installation by Olafur Eliasson. This room seems to be an attempt at controlling the viewer's experience, by reducing the white colour spectrum to only yellow tones. This means that often, people within the room will have the experience of being in a monochrome room, feeling weird, a sense of being outside reality. Looking at the people around or even looking at one's own clothes becomes an experience with objects that are no longer part of the background of automated experience, they stick out, they are "present at hand" (Morton: 2018: 9-11), there is this period of adaptation to where everything sticks out of order. Even after leaving the exhibition, one can walk around the street with a blue afterimage of the room. The room also becomes a place that accepts many beholders and their many subjective views of the room (Eliasson: 2006: 75), by alluding to the multiplicity of conversations that can arise within and about the room, one is also prompted to think about the room as a complex space that is inhomogeneous to some extent. By being inherently tolerant it can be imagined to speak to the possibilities of democracy.



Jessica Houston, *The Call of Things* (Exhibition View), 2019

«Knowledge is produced across a human and more-than-human spectrum and is embedded in its materiality. *The Call of Things* situates the climate crisis in relation to social justice, questions of sovereignty, Indigenous rights, and political histories of land. It creates a platform for non-anthropocentric experiences, where stories are told through animal songs and sounds of ice.» (Houston: 2021)

Jessica Houston's *A Call of Things* (2019) is a collaborative project that harbours "talking objects", evocative objects taken from the polar regions that have an auditory element to them, such as a voice recording or a soundscape, that can be accessed through the audience's phones. Through the contributions made by a number of voices, from locals to glaciologists, different accounts of the polar regions are present within the exhibition.

The room acts as an *assemblage* of different objects. Each object brings the entanglement it has with the place it has been removed from. From this entanglement, the object can also serve as a testimony to the different personal, political and cultural histories that exist in that place.

This entanglement can be seen (and heard) in the case of the *Eskimo Number Disk*



Okalik Eegeesiak, *Eskimo Number Disk*, 2019

by Okalik Eegeesiak, an Inuit and President of the regional Qikiqtani Inuit Association (QIA), an identification badge (and its corresponding number) that was attributed to an Inuit individual by the Government of Canada is shown in conjunction with a recording of Eegeesiak's personal account as well as a history of the object.

Even scientific and academic entanglements are visible in works such as *Melted Sea Ice* by non-anthropocentric anthropologist Julianne Yip. The melted sea ice inside a plastic sample bottle labelled with a number 8 is coupled with Yip's commentary on how the properties of sea ice can open up conceptual possibilities that can make us think about time scales faster or slower than those of humans, while also looking at the impact of humans as an ecological force.



Julianne Yip, *Melted Sea Ice from the Canadian Arctic Archipelago*, 2019

By having the objects (both the material and audio) the audience is made aware of human impact in non-human spaces, while simultaneously “many voices offer alternative possibilities for stewardship and sustainability.”(Houston: 2021)

Furthering this idea of an entanglement between human and place in an essay called *We have never been displaced* (Morton: 2015), Morton goes on to pronounce that *space* - the purely abstract, disembodied dimension of human thought where time is linear as in Euclidean geometry and space is ever-present like the Spice Islands on a map of a coloniser - has collapsed. It is *place* - a localized and non-human specific, emergent out of the awareness of the complex biosphere humans are a part of after an epoch of globalization, with time scales (and sizes) as different as those of the bacterial world and geology.

«What we are coming to realise is that human places exist within and alongside thousands and thousands of nonhuman places, overlapping, intersecting, interpenetrating with “our” place.» (Morton: 2015)



Olafur Eliasson, *We have never been disembodied*, 2015

The essay refers to the exhibition *We Have Never Been Disembodied* - an exhibition at Mirrored Gardens, in Hualong Agricultural Grand View Garden, China, by Olafur Eliasson - to draw parallels between the concepts of “space” and “place”, situating Eliasson’s work as being concerned with the latter.

In the exhibition, through the recurring shape of spheres, the visitor of the space may find an upside-down image of the space shown by a solid glass sphere, that moves when the viewer moves but does it in an inverted fashion. Other works such as glass spheres with an opaque black section that disallows a clear image, or a black glossy sphere with a matte section, where the mirrored reality comes to a halt suddenly. These images all show what could be interpreted as an obstacle to the image of a “real” conception of space in linear time and space, but it could be suggested that by introducing obstacles in the images one is made aware of qualities from a distinct



Olafur Eliasson, *We have never been disembodied*, 2015

place with a life of its own (distance one feels through an inverted reflection) and with gaps that can't be filled (the black spots that show in the reflection), a world with its own willingness (the refusal of the glass sphere to act as a perfect mirror) and a time of its own (the walking around in circles as a way to grasp the world behind the reflection). Other artworks throughout the exhibition explore this proposed collaboration between the viewer, the space and the artwork by arranging spheres in multiple points to act as a sort of door viewer, spyglass, peephole, viewfinder to another reality of the space that surrounds it.

«Place is like a room filled with a joyful plenitude of geometric shapes (...) as if each shape were a person, with her or his own emotional time zone. By putting beautiful giant spheres of thin glass amid human rubble, Eliasson shows us something uncanny: this pile of discarded things is its own place, not simply an abandoned human one.» (Morton: 2015)

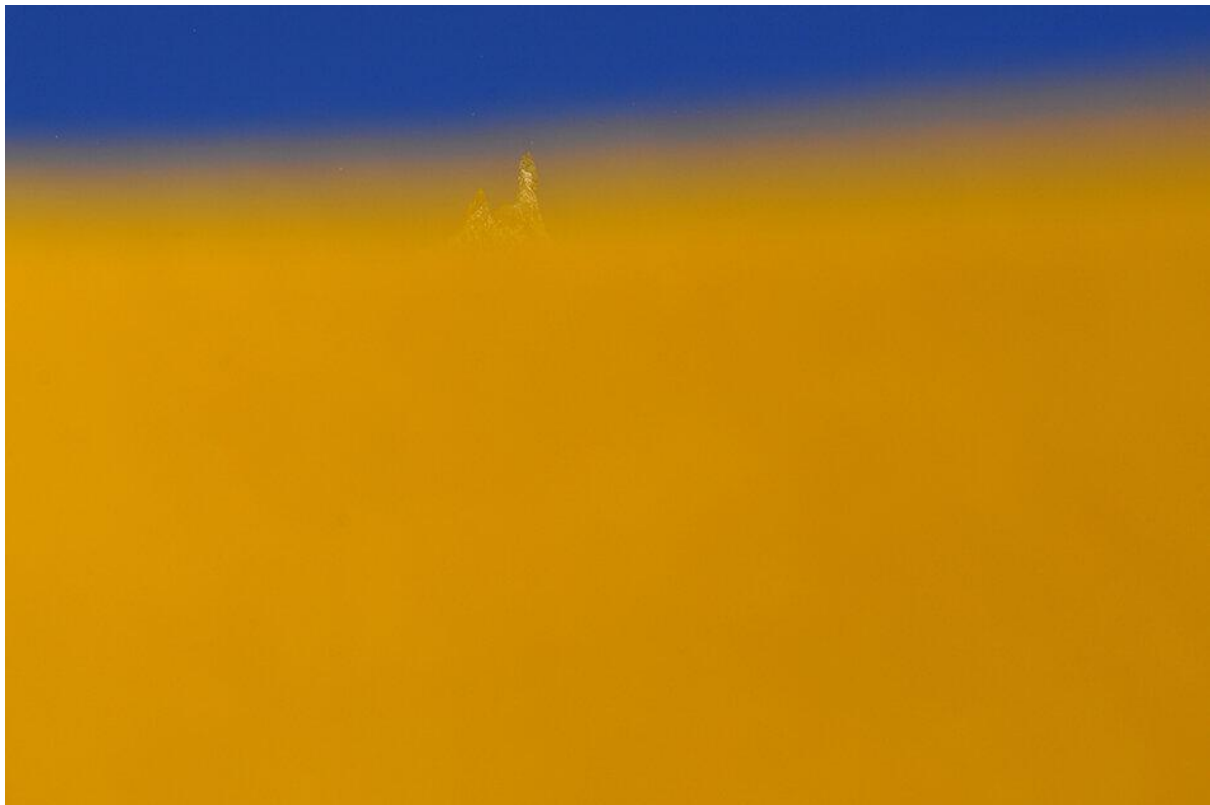


Olafur Eliasson, *We have never been disembodied*, 2015

By placing the glass sphere in between objects thrown away by humans - that have their world of entanglements with the human by being part of a cycle of functional industrial product production and consumption - Eliasson seems to be trying to show that this garbage pile is a place with its own entanglements besides the ones we are a part of. If one follows the example of the spheres within the gallery rooms - where moving around the space and playing with the image that the sphere inverts can lead to an engagement with a place of uncanny qualities - one can treat the garbage pile in the same way and discover all the weirdness and unsuspected logic of a different place suggested by the glass reflection. It is this weirdness that suggests the non-human of the rubble.

Flatness and Depth

In continuing to think about the strategy of using obstacles to suggest the non-human, let us look at Jessica Houston's *Horizon Felt North* series of photographs.



Jessica Houston, *Return of the Sun*, 2015 - Archival Pigmented Print, 56 x 84cm

The image is part of a series of photographs taken while sailing the Northwest Passage, a passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans through the Arctic Ocean along the northern coast of North America. A piece of coloured felt - using the colour of the landscape as a “point of reference” - is held in front of the camera lens.

Through the use of felt, the artist aims to actively flatten the image in one part but maintain its field of depth beyond the felt. Through this fattening of the landscape several qualities arise. Perhaps the most obvious being the tactility of the felt,

merging “touch with sight”. Something else that happens is the *withdrawal* of the image, which the artist describes as making the image a “sight of resistance”.



Jessica Houston, *Place of Many Fish*, 2015 -
Archival Pigmented Print, 56 x 84cm

I suggest that what is happening here is akin to the glass spheres example from Eliasson's work. By intervening in the image and hiding part of the “real” image behind the felt, Houston is, in turn, evidencing qualities that would be absent otherwise. By creating this flatness and hiding the horizon there is a direct intervention in the single point of view humanistic perspective. Through this intervention in perspective, the human scale and time of the image are met with resistance.

The intrusion of the coloured felt makes it hard to scale objects or geological features, their distance becomes a point of contention and they are acknowledged as existing outside their spatial relationship with the beholder. The unknowable of what

is behind the felt, the weirdness of feeling a landscape, the takeover of a single colour from the landscape; all these suggest a viewer being influenced by matter from the landscape, where the chance for human retort is to ask what is absent in these pictures, much like in the *Entanglements* series already mentioned. This makes the image independent from what the human projects onto the landscape (like in a Painting made by Turner, where the painter's emotions are made into brush marks of sea and wind), there is instead a lot of felt and landscape projected onto the human, that is now spotted in weird qualities - uncertainties about what to call an object and where to draw a vanishing point, tingling fingers with anxiety for the cold of ice and the fuzzy touch of felt, eyes reconciling a deep fading landscape with the beauty of a flat solid colour. One feels both *landscapy* and *felty*.

The image proposes a relationship that works both ways, from human to thing and from thing to human. We are left to wonder what happens by being dismissive of this experience, perhaps, the inevitable destruction of our planet's climate.



Jessica Houston, *Perceptible Changes Over Time*, 2015 -
Archival Pigmented Print, 56 x 84 cm

Feeling Weird

In discussing a shift in attitude towards reality, Morton speaks about how “feeling weird” is a paramount part of experience in his book *All Art is Ecological*.

Morton fears that we live in an indicative age where there is no margin for the use of passive voice, abstaining and subjunctive statements. In other words, in an age where there has to be a “yes” or “no” answer (and the lack of response is interpreted as a “no”), there cannot be statements of “something that may be”, it either is or it isn’t. An age like this is intolerant to experience and demands absolute feelings towards a catastrophe like Climate Change, an all or nothing attitude. Morton’s proposes an alternative and argues that the feeling of undergoing a catastrophic event such as being in a car crash, is often felt as a feeling of unreality, hesitation and distortion. Feeling weird is part of going through a catastrophe, ignoring the weirdness makes it impersonal. Perhaps such resolute feelings are part of the problem, and when thinking about climate change and possible mass extinction we should keep the conversation open to the doubts of experience (Morton: 2018: 2).



Olafur Eliasson, *Seu corpo da obra (Your Body of Work)*, 2015

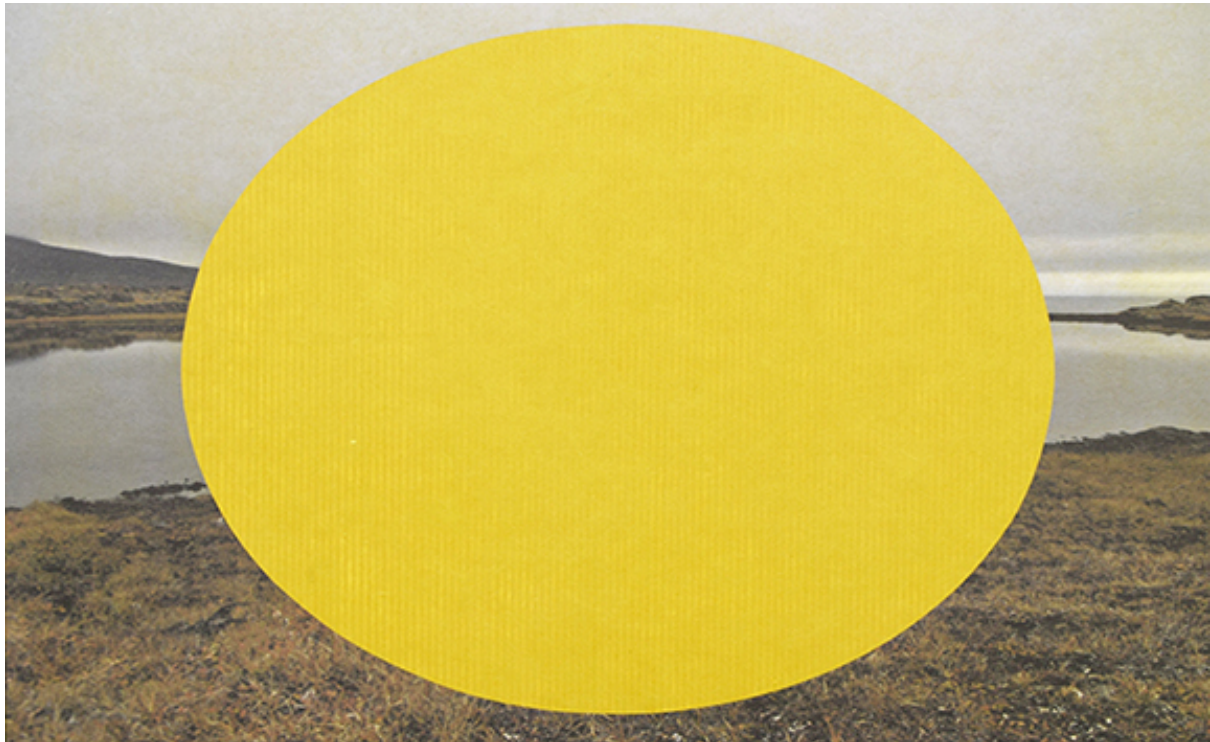
«Figuring (the meaning of a word) is a way of thinking or cogitating or meditating or hanging out with ideas.» (...) «Figures help us avoid the deadly fantasy of ‘the one true meaning’. They are simultaneously visual and narrative as well as mathematical. They are very sensual.” (Haraway & Kenney: 2015: 257)

In art one can think of this as keeping meaning open-ended. The withdrawn essence of things acts out through their *weirdness* and allows for inconclusiveness. These images propose a meditation with our ways to make sense of the world, for weirdness resists hastily judgments of reality. This openness is what is being enacted through the act of playing, both in making and beholding art.

Martha Kenney (Haraway, D. & Kenney: 2015: 261) draws this aesthetic bridge of play “MK: I think playfulness in this context is also an aesthetic playfulness, a playfulness of form, of genre, of style, a willingness to see what these things can *do*.”. It would seem that imagination is proposed by human engagement with the weirdness of reality. We try something and see what happens informed only by the uncanniness around us, slowly trying to come to terms with an image without ever reaching a clear end.

Beauty and Justice

This importance of the openness of experience when engaging with social and ecological issues could also be the reason why beauty is mentioned so often in Houston's and Olafur's work.



Jessica Houston, *The Name It Is Given*, 2017 - Chine Collé Print, 53 x 76 cm

Timothy Morton says that Beauty is “truthfeel”- the feel of un-feelability, of something that is totally vivid yet ungraspable - and what this “truthfeel” is telling you is that things in themselves are open. Open as in subjunctive, weird, uncanny, irreducible. It is telling you that feeling something is ordinary, in the background, not weird or uncanny, is a distortion of the weird nature of things. To experience Beauty is to be pulled by an object and directly access something through your experience, only to find that something is ungraspable. (Morton: 2018: 1-14)

«The structure of perceiving beauty appears to have a two-part scaffolding: first, one's attention is involuntarily given to the beautiful person or thing; then, this quality of heightened attention is voluntarily extended out to other persons or things.» (Scarry: 1999: 81)

Scarry presents us with the idea that there is a forced engagement with beauty. In beauty, interestingly, you don't necessarily act first - like the moss on the wall of Eliasson's installation, it reaches out to you, and when you notice its smell you are already within it. One can see how this is very useful for the purpose of engaging the beholder in meaningful play with their experience, to have beauty in art makes it easier to engage wholeheartedly in the experience of the artwork.

There is also the proposed notion that by interacting with a beautiful object once, the beholder is repositioned to recognise that same beauty in similar objects, proposing an engagement by the beholder with otherwise ordinary things. Here, like in Morton's view of beauty, ordinary objects are challenged and the subject's view of reality is altered somehow. Both of these ideas are akin to Theaster Gates' commitment to beauty in reviving neighbourhoods, where beauty makes people care about the place they live in and how beauty and its effects on revitalizing poor neighbourhoods in Chicago are multiplied over time. (Gates: 2015)

«I think beauty has the capacity to take us outside of ourselves. This process of decentering is invaluable to questions related to the Anthropocene. If we can perceive our world without humans at the center, but in relation to all living beings, perhaps we can calibrate our choices with this set of values. Beauty also invokes awe and wonder, which we need to connect to the majestic aspects of life, and art. (Houston: 2021)

Houston makes a connection between beauty and the decentering of the human (again a change in the subject's position) that is associated with a rethinking of values (like in the ethical play of Haraway) that can address questions posed by the Anthropocene. By deeming beauty as invaluable to address such questions, her work is filled with examples that invite the attention and curiosity of the viewer to the poetics of nature-culture entanglements.

«Vital Materialists will thus try to linger in those moments during which they find themselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that they share with them. This sense of a strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side may induce vital materialists to treat nonhumans (...)more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically.» (Bennett: 2010: 17-18)

The importance of Beauty in ecological settings is perhaps best stated by Jane Bennett without ever mentioning beauty. The importance of addressing issues of justice and the Anthropocene calls for the decentering power of beauty, to be fascinated, for when we find beauty “we willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us” (Scarry: 1999: 112).

Conclusion

We have now reached the end of our cascade. It is my hope that Jessica Houston and Olafur Eliasson can be seen as participants within Speculative Realism and that their work has evidenced the potential of these new ways of being as a strong source of inspiration for the arts. In a conversation with Houston, we talked about how the attitudes proposed by these philosophies seem to be alternatives to intellectual cynicism. By engaging aesthetically with reality we find how we are inevitably involved in entanglements and places with many other actants besides ourselves. Meaning can be pursued by sharing these places - by chasing the openness of things, beauty and engagement - instead of conquering our interaction with reality by means of an intellectual separation. Destructive attitudes towards our planet come to a frame of revision through the art of Eliasson and Houston while at the same time inviting us to reimagine our standing within the Anthropocene.

And perhaps enough has been said. OOO and New Materialism are ongoing conversations. Let things be non-literal, complex and uncanny, and may Eliasson's and Houston's work never cease to be poetic.

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