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Art is Ecological
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uncanny. We haven't been paying much attention, and this lack of attention has been going on for about twelve thousand years, since the start of agriculture, which eventually required industrial processes to maintain themselves, hence fossil fuels, hence global warming, hence mass extinction.

Love, Not Efficiency

Restructuring or destructuring this logistics of the world that has grown out of agriculture, which elsewhere I've called *agrilogistics*, is the one thing that would end global warming, but it is usually considered out of bounds, because it implies accepting a non-'modern' view. Agrilogistics means the logistics of the dominant mode of agriculture that started in Mesopotamia and other parts of the world (Africa, Asia, the Americas) around 10, 000 BGE. Agrilogistics has an underlying logic to do with survival: Neolithic humans needed to survive (mild) global warming, and so they settled in fixed communities that became cities, in order to store grain and plan for the future. They began to draw distinctions between the human and the non-human realms – what fits inside the boundary, and what exists outside of it – that continue to this day.

They also drew distinctions between themselves (the caste system). Very soon after the agrilogistical programme began, all kinds of phenomena we associate with life in general showed up, in particular patriarchy and social stratification, various kinds of class systems. It's important to remember that these are constructs of history, the consequence of nomads and hunter-gatherers settling down and establishing cities based on a certain form of survival mode.

The modern view was established on (although it thinks itself as a further disenchantment of) now ancient and obviously violent monotheisms, which in turn find their origin in the privatization of enchantment in the Neolithic with its 'civilization'.

Ecological awareness is awareness of unintended consequences. Some ecological politics is about trying to light everything up in a totally nonflickery way, to make sure that there are no unintended consequences. But this is impossible, because things are intrinsically mysterious. So an ecological politics like that would be a monstrous situation, a 'control society', a useful term invented by philosopher Gilles Deleuze to describe our contemporary world. An ecological control society would make the current state of affairs, where kids get tested every five seconds for their ability to resemble a rather slow

computation device, look like an anarchist picnic. Even more predictability, even more efficiency. If that's what the ecological society to come will look like, then I really don't want to live in it. And it wouldn't even really be ecological. It would just be this same world, version 9.0.

The ecological society to come, then, must be a bit haphazard, broken, lame, twisted, ironic, silly, sad. Yes, sad, in the sense meant by a character in the British science fiction television series *Doctor Who:* sad is happy for deep people. Beauty is sad like that. Sadness means there's something you can't quite put your finger on. You can't quite grasp it. You have no idea who your boyfriend really is. This is not my beautiful wife. Which means in turn that beauty isn't graspable either, beauty as such – which means that beauty must be fringed with some kind of slight disgust, something that normative aesthetic theories are constantly trying to wipe off. There needs to be this ambiguous space between art and kitsch, beauty and disgust. A shifting world, a world of love, of *philos*. A world of seduction and repulsion rather than authority. Of truthiness rather than rigid true versus rigid false. Truth is just a 1000 dpi kind of truthiness. This isn't the same at all as saying everything is a lie. That's a statement that's trying not to be truthy, which is why it ends up contradicting

itself. If everything is a lie, then the sentence *everything is a lie* must also be a lie . . . and so on.

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Ecology without Nature

Ecological awareness is shaking our faith in the anthropocentric idea that there is one scale to rule them all – the human one. Nietzsche announced that God was dead in the nineteenth century, and this is often taken to imply that humans face a meaningless existence. But this isn't true. It's the opposite. The death of God isn't some empty, desolate wilderness, it's a scary jungle swarming with creatures – literally. It's thousands of equally legitimate spatiotemporal scales that have suddenly become available and significant to humans. We are so habituated to living and thinking on a very small range of timescales that students who train as geologists say that they have to go through a process of acclimatizing to much vaster tracts of time.

Now we know that ecological awareness means thinking and acting ethically and politically on a lot

of scales, not just one. It's not true, however, that this will feel like the kind of powerful thrill you get from playing with one of those online scale tools that zoom you in and out from the Planck length (the smallest currently measurable one) to the scale of the entire universe, or those humbling-yet-empowering clock faces on which humans appear at the last second before midnight; or those floor diagrams some scientist presenter walks across to show how we appear at the last sliver on the bottom right-hand corner. The scale in all of those is smooth and consistent – it's a sort of hollowed-out, blown-up version of the good old anthropocentric scaling, only now we are in a privileged godlike position of omnipresence outside the universe, where every scale is just a toggle away. But it isn't like that at all. That kind of thing confuses time with the *measurement* of time, and further it confuses the measurement of time with just a *few* kinds of measurement – the kinds that are convenient for humans. It's not just true that there is a time for everything, as it says in Ecclesiastes ('a time to reap and a time to sow . . .'); it's the case that from grasses to gorillas to gargantuan black holes, *everything has its own time*, its own temporality.

Psychological research has shown that we are good at narrating the correct sequence of geological events: Earth emerges from a cloud of dust and

gas, microbes evolve, followed by sponges, fish, butterflies, primates . . . But very few of us are able to imagine the right *durations* of geological time without special training. And being able to understand durations is particularly important for us right now, because global warming's effects may last up to 100,000 years. What does that actually mean? We tend to have only two vague temporal categories in our heads: ancient and recent. We use these as a template to conceptualize what we call 'prehistory' (the pre-'civilization' human stuff, and the nonhuman stuff) and 'history' (the 'civilization' stuff). It would be better, more logical and requiring fewer beliefs to see everything – even now – as history and to see history as not exclusively human.

I think we have more in common with the Victorians than we'd sometimes like to admit. Indeed, the decisive emergence of what I call *hyperobjects* on our radar makes the sensibility of our contemporary moment extremely Victorian. Mary Anning discovered a dinosaur skeleton in an English cliff face, and the abyss of deep time opened up. The vast distributed processes of evolution were discovered. The gigantic Pacific weather system El Niño was discovered later in the nineteenth century. Marx traced the invisible workings of capitalism. Freud discovered the unconscious. And once again we stand in

awe of gigantic entities massively distributed in time and space, in such a way that we can only point to tiny slices of them at a time. Once again we find our faith shaken, and now it has clearer contours: it's not about the disappearance of an agricultural-age god. It's much, much worse. It's about the flip side, the unconscious, the unintended consequences of our faith in progress, which far precedes agricultural-age gods, as a matter of fact, and is their condition of possibility. A 12,500-year-long social, philosophical and psychic logistics is now showing its colours, and they are disastrous.

And for the longest time these logistics were called Nature. Nature is just agricultural logistics in slow motion, the nice-seeming buildup to the Anthropocene, the gentle slope of the upwardly moving rollercoaster that you don't even suspect to be a rollercoaster. Agricultural society coincided with the Holocene (our current geological period, which started over 10,000 years ago, marked by the retreat of the glaciers), which was remarkably stable and cyclic as far as Earth systems such as the nitrogen and carbon cycles went. It's controversial, but some geologists actually think that the periodic, smoothly cycling form of the Holocene was in fact a product of the functioning of a certain agricultural mode. This mode began in Mesopotamia and elsewhere on

Earth at the start of the Holocene. If it's true that agriculture contributed to the stability of Earth systems, it makes things even more disturbing. Like when someone has a seizure, and their brain waves become beautifully regular just beforehand. Or before an earthquake, when the same thing happens to the tectonic plates. On this view, what is called Nature – the smooth cycling represented so nicely in feudal symbolic systems – is directly the Anthropocene in its less obvious mode. Then comes the huge Earth systems data spike we see in the ex-American Vice President Al Gore's movie *An Inconvenient Truth*, the spike that starts around 1945, evidence of runaway carbon emissions. Everything starts to go haywire.

The inner logic of the smoothly functioning system – right up until the moment at which it wasn't smoothly functioning, aka now – consists of logical axioms that have to do with survival no matter what. Existence no matter what. Existing overriding any *quality* of existing – human existing that is, and to hell with the lifeforms that aren't our cattle (a term from which we get *chattels*, as in women in many forms of patriarchy, and the root of the word *capital*). Existence above and beyond qualities. This supremacy of existing is a default ontology and a default utilitarianism, and before any of it was

philosophically formalized, it was built into social space, which now means pretty much the entire surface of Earth.

You can see it in the gigantic fields where automated farm equipment spins in its lonely efficient way. You can feel it in the field analogs such as huge meaningless lawns, massive parking lots, supersized meals. You can sense it in the general feeling of numbness or shock that greets the fact of mass extinction. Quite a while ago humans severed their social, philosophical and psychic ties with nonhumans. We confront a blank-seeming wall in every dimension of our experience – social space, psychic space, philosophy space.

Uncannily we begin to realize that we are somewhere. Not nowhere. And we may find ourselves living in an age of mass extinction. I'm all for letting us linger in the strange openness of this uncanny discovery that space was just a convenient white Western anthropocentric construct for navigating your way around Africa to reach the Spice Islands, and so on. Because strangely, this feeling of openness, this uncanny sensation of finding ourselves somewhere and not recognizing it, is exactly a glimpse of living less definitively, in a world comprised almost entirely not of ourselves.

You are Being Tuned

We could talk about our current historical phase in many ways: entering an ecological era, learning how to cope with global warming, and so on. But what all these labels have in common is *transitioning to caring about nonhumans in a more conscious way.* This talk is about that, and as you'll see it's a lot stranger than it sounds.

In November 2015 I participated in *Ice Watch*, Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson's installation outside the Panthéon in Paris. *Ice Watch* was designed to be seen by the delegates representing the nations of Earth in the COP21 negotiations, otherwise known as the global warming summit, which was held over thirteen days. Eliasson and I recorded a public dialogue about it in Copenhagen about one week before *Ice Watch* was installed, at the CPH:DOX film festival. One thousand people attended, eager to hear about ecology and art.

Ice Watch consisted of something like eighty tons of ice harvested from Greenland and shipped intact to Paris, where it was installed in twelve gigantic chunks, in a circle. From above, it readily resembled the little bars that stand for hours on a wristwatch. The chunks of ice were large enough to climb on to and sit in, or even lie in, and as there was no barrier protecting them, this is just exactly one of the things that people did. Part of the project was documentation of all the different ways in which you could access the ice. You could walk past it. You could ignore it. You could touch it. You could reach out towards it. You could talk about it. You could give a conference paper about it at a conference called *Façonner l'avenir.* You could sleep in it. This was especially easy once the sun had melted the ice enough for it to form smooth pockets and contours.

Part of the point of *Ice Watch* was an obvious visual gag: look, ice is melting and time is running out. But that was just the hook. What actually happened was much more interesting, and in a way that seriously stretched or went beyond prefabricated concepts, in a friendly and simple, yet deep way. Watches are things that humans read. But they are also things that flies land on, things that lizards ignore, things that the sun glints off. Dust settles on the glass shell of the front of the watch. A dust mite

traverses the gigantic overpasses and caves on the underside of the watch between the watch and my wrist. And let's return to something I just said about *Ice Watch:* the sun melts it. The sun is also accessing the ice. The pavement is also accessing the ice. The climate of Paris is also accessing the ice.

And the ice was accessing us. It seemed to send out waves of cold, or suck our heat, whichever way around. This kind of access was how Eliasson was thinking about it – the encounter with *Ice Watch* is in a way a dialogue with ice blocks, not a one-way human conversation in a mirror that happens to be made of ice. We've been having that kind of conversation with nonhuman things for thousands of years. It's exactly the reason we are in this mess called global warming. And the climate factoids we hear on the news are echoed by much of the art that tries to address global warming and extinction. For example, several artists have compiled massive lists of lifeforms that are going extinct. But the risk here is of becoming just like those factoids: just a huge data dump. Art is important to understanding our relationship to nonhumans, to grasping an object-oriented ontological sense of our existence. Art fails in this regard when it tries to mimic the transmission of sheer quantities of data; it's not artful enough. This isn't just a matter of effective persuasion. As a

matter of fact, that's the trouble with ecological data art. The aesthetic experience isn't really about data – it's about data-*ness*, the qualities we experience when we apprehend something. (As I mentioned earlier, data just means 'what is given', and isn't only about numbers and pie charts.) The aesthetic experience is about *solidarity* with what is given. It's a solidarity, a feeling of alreadiness, for no reason in particular, with no agenda in particular – like evolution, like the biosphere. There is no good reason to distinguish between nonhumans that are 'natural' and ones that are 'artificial', by which we mean made by humans. It just becomes too difficult to sustain such distinctions. Since, therefore, an artwork is itself a nonhuman being, this solidarity in the artistic realm is already solidarity with nonhumans, whether or not art is explicitly ecological. Ecologically explicit art is simply art that brings this solidarity with the nonhuman to the foreground.

Time Flows from Things

Everything emits time, not just humans. So when we talk about sustainability, what we're talking about mostly is maintaining some kind of human-scaled temporality frame, and this is necessarily at the expense of those other beings, and it's very likely we didn't factor them in at all. What exactly are we sustaining, if not the one-size-fits-all agricultural temporality pipe that has sucked all lifeforms into it like a vacuum cleaner, pretty much, over its 12,500-year run? And in the end, which means already, designing stuff according to that template is going to damage humans as well, in a very obvious way, because of the unavoidable interconnectedness of everything we know and understand, and even everything we can't know or see, too. When the

Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels heard the word culture, he reached for his gun. When I hear the word *sustainability*, I reach for my sunscreen.

Everything we've been exploring in the last few pages occurs to you as ethical and political fallout from the Kantian beauty experience; as wonderfully open-ended, because the kind of futurality a piece of artwork opens up is unconditional: in other words, it doesn't have a rate at which it decays to nothing. You don't ever exhaust the meaning of a poem or a painting or a piece of music, and this is another way of saying that the artwork is a sort of gate through which you can glimpse the unconditioned futurality that is a possibility condition for predictable futures. Art is maybe one tiny corner in our highly (too highly) consciously designed – and way too utilitarian – social space where we allow things to do that to us. What would it look like if we allowed more and more things to have some kind of power over us?

This isn't quite the same thing as saying, along with the socialist William Morris, that functional things should be beautiful. That's because, on this view, things are just lumps without some nice decoration. But we're saying that there are no lumps. There are blocks of ice, humans, sunlight, the Panthéon, polar bears. The goal is not to take existing

things such as sofas and houses and make them pretty in a way that working-class people can afford (for example). That kind of thing suffers from the same syndrome as sustainability: it's anthropocentrically scaled.

Likewise we can't do what we take to be the opposite, which is saying art is beautifully useless and if you can't appreciate it, that's your problem. Again, you are simply allowing its existing function for humans now – aka anthropocentric functioning – to be default. Art is a place where we get to see what it means to be human or whatever, which is why what I do is called humanities. But this isn't enough. One way this becomes obvious is when writing grant proposals that sound like pleading. Please, please don't hurt me, Mr Funding Source, I'm a sort of educated PR guy who is going to decorate this boring cupcake of scientism with these nice human-flavoured meaning-candies. LOL

Realizing that there are lots of different temporality formats is basically what ecological awareness is. It's equivalent to acknowledging in a deep way the existence of beings that aren't you, with whom you coexist. Once you've done that, you can't unacknowledge it. There's no going back.

Concluding Paragraphs

You are a fully embodied being who has never been separated from other biological beings both inside and outside your body, not for one second. You are sensitively attuned to everything happen-ing in your world, which is why you end up blocking some of it, because you are afraid the stimulation might be too intense. You have an idea that there is an inside and an outside of yourself, and perhaps this is the deepest way in which you start to think that being ecological involves some massive change.

Snared in the urgency of ecological awareness and the horror of extinction and global warming, it's so incredibly difficult to miss this key point. I can't tell you how many environmentalist conferences I've been to where the ending atmosphere had to do with some kind of fist-clenching, jaw-clenching desperation to be or do something totally different. What a set-up – once you've established this totally different space, you are already separated from it by a gigantic chasm, and being right or smart in this

kind of world means showing yourself and everyone how deep and wide this chasm is. You've just made sure that you are never going to be ecological. The one thing that could help gets drowned out by the fear of the intensity of our reactions to the data input (oceans acidifying! Climate warming! Species going extinct!).

But you are already a symbiotic being entangled with other symbiotic beings. The problem with ecological awareness and action isn't that it's horribly difficult. It's that it's too easy. You are breathing air, your bacterial microbiome is humming away, evolution is silently unfolding in the background. Somewhere, a bird is singing and clouds pass overhead. You stop reading this book and look around you.

You don't have to *be* ecological. Because you *are* ecological.