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THE VISUAL CONTEMPORARY



SILENT SPRING

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES FOR
THE ANTHROPOCENE AND BEYOND

BERNHARD WILLHELM SIMON FUJIWARA POLINA SEMIONOVA
MARTIN EDER HOLLY CHILDS TIMOTHY MORTON JULIAN CHARRIÈRE
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APOCALYPSE TOMORROW

Art has a historical obsession with philosophy, beginning with Denis Diderot's association with Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 18th Century Paris, and continuing with art's long love affair with Nietzsche, Benjamin and Foucault. In its most recent iteration, contemporary art has developed a fascination with the ideas emerging from Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) that address ideas of nature, existence and anthropocentrism. Timothy Morton is one of its prime exponents, having recently published the books "Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World" and "The Ecological Thought", in which he adopts a critical approach to dominant concepts of nature. He is currently collaborating with the singer Björk as well as the artists Allora & Calzadilla. For the artist Julian Charrière, extinction, time and survival are important concepts – and these also form core concepts of Morton's thought. Klerk brought Timothy and Julian together to discuss dark ecologies, extinction and art after nature.

KLERK: Tim, in your book Hyperobjects you argue for "an ecology without nature". What do you mean?

TIM: Well, when people hear me using that term, they often think I'm saying,"Oh, there's no such thing as coral, that is just a human construct," which is not what I think per se. What I'm trying to argue in Hyperobjects is that yes, there are ecological beings, like bunny rabbits and forests, and that the relationships between these beings are certainly real, but that concept of 'nature' as a thing-in-itself is a fiction.

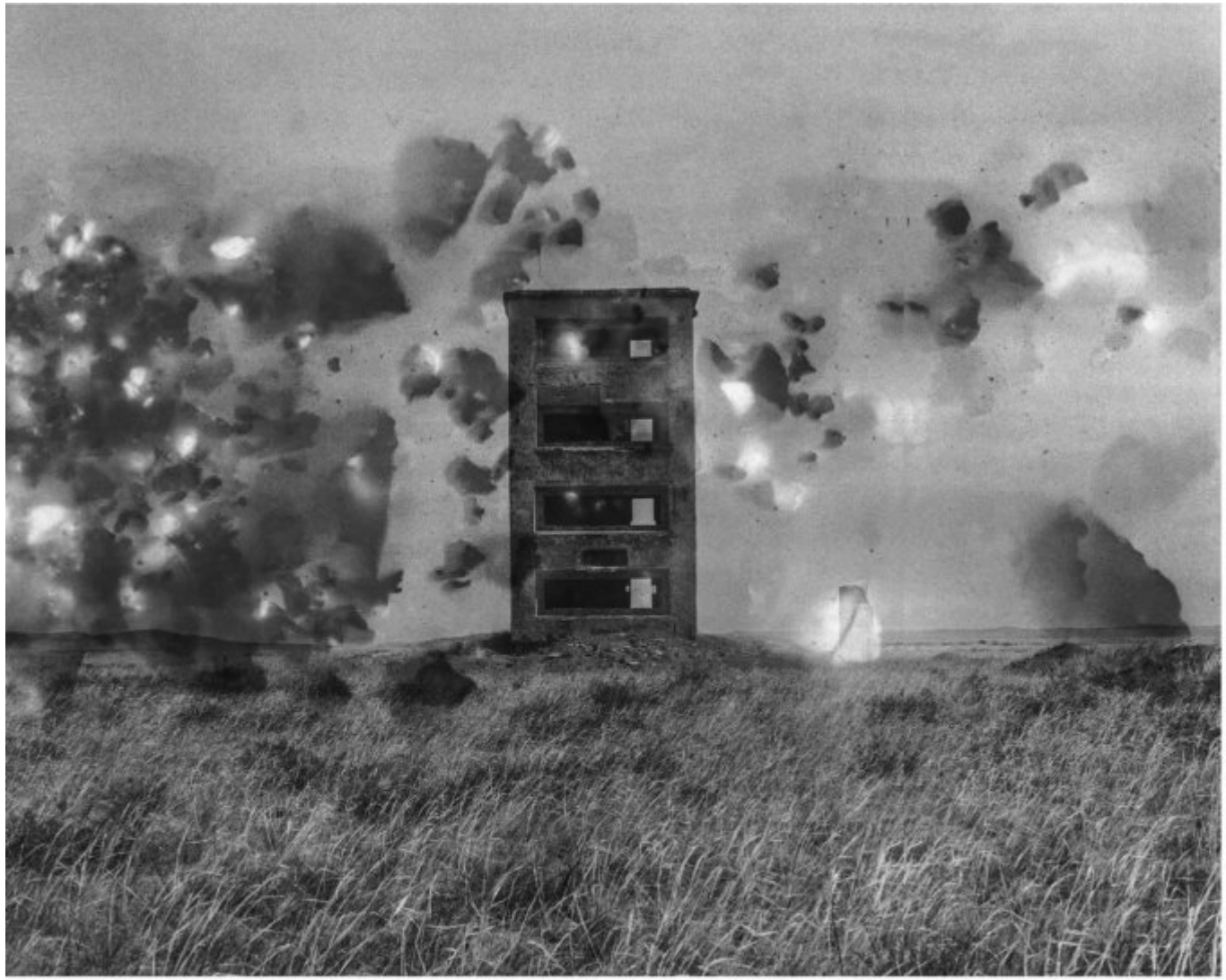
Of course, things like coral do exist, and aren't just effects of human discourse. Nonetheless, 'nature' as a concept is getting in the way of a more realistic relationship between humans and non-humans, and unfortunately environmentalism still heavily relies on this outdated idea.

It seems that from your perspective, there is little that is 'natural' about nature, since humans have interfered with it since the advent of agriculture.

TIM: Yes. That's what I'm trying to describe with my term 'dark ecology', which is about how ecological awareness has a twist to it – a little bit like when Deckard in "Blade Runner" finds out that he's an android, just like the people he's been sent to kill. Like Deckard, ecological awareness tends to consider itself separate from the object of its contemplation, whereas in fact, its also part of it. For example, in 100,000 years there's going to be a layer of electronic instruments and concrete that are part of the geological strata. Therefore this

PHILOSOPHER TIMOTHY MORTON AND ARTIST JULIAN CHARRIÈRE DISCUSS WHY HUMANITY NEEDS TO GET OVER ITSELF AND START TALKING ABOUT NATURE, EXTINCTION AND ANARCHY AS THE WAY FORWARD

INTERVIEW — Tom Kobalka



This page
JULIAN CHARRIÈRE
Polygon, 2014

B&W photograph, medium format, double exposure through Thermoscreen glass, on Ilford Fiber Paper.
Tirage argentique noir et blanc, moyen format, double exposition à travers un verre Thermoscreen, sur papier Ilford Fiber.
Courtesy the artist

Page before
Tropicana, 2014

Mixed media installation, frozen plants, refrigerated showcase
Dimensions variables
Installation view at Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne
Courtesy Christine Bonard, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne, the artist

CURRENT ECOLOGICAL THINKING HAS THE VERY SAME PROBLEM DECKARD DOES IN BLADE RUNNER. DECKARD DOESN'T KNOW HE'S AN ANDROID, AND ECOLOGICAL THINKING DOESN'T THINK IT'S PART OF THE PROBLEM EITHER

TIM MORTON

distinction we've become accustom to between humans and everything else is a bit specious.

Julian, the environment is something that you often use as a material in your practice. Rather than sampling or recording geological and environmental phenomena, you actively interfere with the natural world.

JULIAN: Yeah. In my work, I deal a lot with the cliché of nature as a human construct, as Tim describes it. The piece of ice in "Blue Fossil Entropic Stories" (2013) is actually 30,000 years old. In a sense, it's a huge store of information which is slowly melting, 'dying'. I went to Iceland to make that piece and the aim was to try and accelerate this process with me, standing on an iceberg and melting it with a welder's flame. It was a strange experience. Being in the arctic with all those 'dying' icebergs was like being in a cemetery. But really, the point of the piece is also to try and reverse the Romantic distinction between humans and nature, by showing how interconnected they are. On a very prosaic level, I couldn't even try to 'speed up' the melting of the arctic if I wasn't already standing on it! Talking about how information and the concept of temporality are bound together is therefore another one of my preoccupations.

TIM: I actually trained as a student of Romantic literature and can relate to that concept in terms of art history too. Humanity is currently inhabiting a 200-year process referred to as the Anthropocene – a new geological time period that humans have created by burning coal and oil. It is simultaneous with the Romantic period and in a way, we are still inside it. Indeed, the Romantics didn't just create this distinction between humans and nature; they also created this idea of the need for humans to master nature too.

Our relationship with the natural world has changed throughout history, but at the moment we are still holding onto Romanticism. What is the benefit to ecological awareness of expanding our thinking into timescales greater than a few generations? Is there any use in thinking about what might happen in 100,000 years time?

TIM: The trouble with ecological awareness is that you realise that there are all kinds of timescales. In a way, it's easier to think about the infinite than to think about 100,000 years into the future. Global warming inhabits a timescale that is finite but very big, and I have this phrase "really large finitude" to describe similar processes, such as radiation and pollution, that extend over large timescales. It is possible that human beings won't even be around in a 100,000 years from now. In the face of such great timescales, the idea of 'now' – whether that means today, this week, or this month - becomes a pretty hollow concept.

JULIAN: I think there are objects and places where you can physically encounter different temporalities. Being on the 30,000-year-old piece of ice floating on the sea was certainly one of them. In my work "On The Sidewalk" (2013), I play with this construction of time and its relationship with history.

Yes, that's true. That work is a collection of compressed soil drilling samples taken from

Berlin, each of which begin at street level and end in sand, revealing what the spectator might be standing on every time they walk on a pavement. It looks like one of those colour gradients you see in DIY books. But by using geological remains from the Earth's history, you seem to be referencing these very large timescales that Tim also just mentioned.

JULIAN: For sure. In geology, you have all the earth's information vertically stored within the crust. It is much more objective that this linear, chronological line we call history. In "On The Sidewalk", I am extracting frozen moments from the past. Core samples are taken from deep in the earth, and each sample is still undergoing its own chemical reactions. The samples are cut up and reconstructed to create a 'time collage'. It's interesting to think in some of these samples, you have a portion of a mountain, a sample of concrete or sediment from a river all of which might have once belonged to the same – or at least similar – geological structures. So the work is also trying to illustrate this eternal, cyclical process.

In a way, you are taking these frozen moments from the past, and as you reassemble them, you are creating a subjective, personal version of history.

JULIAN: True. What we call history is highly subjective. 'Now' is a convenient concept that humans have constructed to make sense of their immediate environment. By assembling different temporalities and presenting them in one straight line, I try to challenge that. I play with really old and also really new materials within each core sample. When you look at these works you slowly begin to lose a feeling of continuity, which I think is what you are also talking about when you talk about time, Tim.

TIM: Yeah. On the Sidewalk demonstrates that even something as simple and straightforward as a straight line can resonate with time. There's a certain music that begins to emerge if you place two or three of these core drillings together.

The core drillings act as placeholders for compressed periods of geological time.

TIM: When you look at an object, you are looking at the past. Looking at these core samples, it's like looking at everything that happened in that narrow space that the sample is from. Yet when you start to investigate them, they become mysterious. These core samples are in a place where past and future slide against each other without touching; where you can see that the present isn't a point in time. 'Present' is this resonance between the past and the future, actually.

Julian, in "Tropisme" you play with the tension between past and future. In the piece, you present a large, clear, refrigerated showcase with frozen plants from the Cretaceous period, archived for preservation. The Cretaceous period occurred over 65 million years ago and ended in a mass-extinction event.

JULIAN: Yes, and we find these types of plants in almost every home or office in the western world! They are looked at, watered, and maybe even spoken to, but they are remains of a time dating back from before the dinosaurs.

So these plants are like living fossils. You are freezing a moment from the past, and preserving them for the future. I think this illustrates how humans are constantly interacting with different timescales, even though we might not be aware of it.

JULIAN: For me, it was interesting to think about why we have this relationship with these living fossils. We still have a reptilian brain; those parts of us that remain from another time. Cryogenically freezing the flowers is like taking a picture of a time whose memory has forever escaped us, stopping time and isolating a moment.

TIM: Things from the past exert some sort of causal pressure on us, and this is what I see in that piece.

There is a tension in Tropisme, between possible extinction and potential preservation. It makes me reflect on humanity's fate, as we enter the sixth major extinction event in the earth's history, which is largely a consequence of human behaviour. Is there hope for further human evolution?

TIM: Well that is the trouble. It is not quite correct to think that if we become extinct that everything will be fine. Everything is so intertwined, so if we end up destroying ourselves, we're going to bring down a whole bunch of lifeforms. Actually, we are already succeeding in doing so.

In the face of this destruction, what role can ecological awareness play?

TIM: This becomes a political question. I think the politics we need looks a lot more like anarchism than the traditional forms of progressive politics. These are still based on this 'one size fits all' mentality, which is very much part of the agricultural logistics I've been taking about. Political groups with a sense of ecological awareness need to be finite and fragile, like affiliations between humans and non-humans. There should be lots of them and there is no perfect one. In fact, the more the merrier, really.

If ecological awareness becomes a political question and we leave it up to existing political structures to decide our future, is there a risk of humanity being extinguished?

TIM: We think of extinction as kind of abstract. Who cares if humans stop existing? But it is important if the polar bear stops existing, it means somebody died. But we need to alter that thinking. Preventing their extinction is part of it. A species is also a kind of entity, not an abstraction – it could be a hyperobject. It has to do with thinking about species not as prepackaged things in a box. Again, it's about trying to go beyond this simplistic distinction between humanity and nature. It is a question we can now ask ourselves, because we've got the controls, and we need to stop thinking about each the extinction of each as a potentially isolated event.

JULIAN CHARRIÈRE WILL BE EXHIBITING A NEW BODY OF WORK AT GALERIE BUGADA & CARGNEL, PARIS, IN MARCH 2010. HE IS PART OF BABE EARTH, TRAIL, VIENNA, AUSTRIA, FEBRUARY 19 – MAY 31, 2010
TIMOTHY MORTON IS CONTRIBUTING WORK TO BJÖRK'S RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION TO BE HELD AT MOMA, NEW YORK AND JUNIPER ALL DRAAND GUILLERMO CALLADELLA, PUERTO RICAN LIGHT, DIA ART FOUNDATION, SEPTEMBER 2010







Clockwise from top
Clockwork, 2014

Mixed-media installation in collaboration with Julian von Reinach. 12 concrete cajones, stones
Dimensions variable
Installation view at CIRRI, Vienna
Photo: Lukas Dunkwart & the artists

The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories, 2013

Intervention, Iceland

On the Sidewalk, I Have Forgotten the Dinosaurs, 2013

Mixed-media installation, core drills, loose clamps
Dimensional variable
Installation view at BAC Bâtiment d'Art Contemporain, Geneva
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