

Timothy Morton spoke with artist and Art Books in Review Editor Greg Lindquist to discuss his new book *Hyperobjects* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013). Their discussion about ecology and art resonated with the particular New York meteorological spirit approaching the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Sandy.

GREG LINDQUIST (RAIL): How did the idea of *Hyperobjects* come about?

TIMOTHY MORTON: I was writing this book *The Ecological Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2010), and developing the concept of the mesh—everything is interconnected in some sense. And this idea of strange, stranger: that despite the interconnection, there are at every scale weird, uncanny entities. Then I started to realize that some of these weird, uncanny entities were actually not just life forms. I'd been thinking about them in terms of frogs, worms, viruses, and humans.

I developed this term *hyperobjects* to describe things that you can't see or touch but are real, and have an effect on your world. I was thinking in terms of things like pollution or Styrofoam or the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. They seem to be massively distributed in time and space in a peculiar way. This was the final section of *The Ecological Thought*, and as soon as I invented the word *hyperobjects* I thought, oh, that's important—I need to think more carefully about what those are.

Over the next couple of years, after the book came out, I kept being invited to do these talks about the *hyperobjects*, because people started to get very interested in them. Maybe this is connected to global warming, which has been on everyone's mind. What is this strange thing that we're on the inside of?

I think the reason why it worked quite well is the reason why *Dark Side of the Moon* is a really good album—not that I'm comparing myself with Pink Floyd, necessarily. Pink Floyd basically gigged the material for about two or three years before they actually went into the studio and recorded it. I did this as a series of talks—in Taiwan, Australia, all over North America—about *hyperobjects*. Finally, I just sat down in my student union coffee shop and wrote it in 15 days.

I learned more and more things about them by thinking them through. They have these weird properties: you can't see or touch them, but they're downwardly causal on things you can see and touch. We're not just talking about things like pollution and radiation. We're talking about things like evolution, biosphere, Earth. And it's not only huge things like that—you realize that rolling pins and granite countertops have those weird properties inside of them.

RAIL: An object is not really a discrete object as we think of it.

MORTON: It's discrete, but not your grandpa's discreteness. From these points of view, evolution is evolution in the same way a frog is a frog. A frog is not a cat, right? A frog is a discrete thing. This actual frog here—I'm gonna call him Thomas. Thomas the frog is a discrete thing and he's not a pencil. There's this sort of popular ideology by which everything is everything. You find it in the advertising of Chevron and some thinking of the New Materialism. It's almost the opposite of what I'm saying, which is that everything is discrete and yet weirdly related to everything. There's a kind of way in which a frog isn't really a frog. When you look for the frogness everywhere in it, as we all know from Darwin, you don't find frogs;

what you find are also the things that aren't frogs, like DNA—and some of that DNA is not frog DNA. It's viral code insertions and proto-frog DNA. Yet they are frogs, right? They're *not* dragonflies. So things are discrete, but weirdly discrete.

RAIL: It seems we're also living with an illusory hierarchy of scale.

MORTON: Yes, or at least it's the hierarchies gone haywire with ecological awareness. It's hard to know at what scale to see something. I mean, obviously there's the human scale, but also there's the polar bear scale, the DNA scale, the evolution scale, the biosphere scale, the Earth system scale, which is measured in millions and billions of years, and so on. Which is the right scale? Which is the real scale? All these things now become moot. So there's a kind of derangement of scale, as my friend Tim Clark would say. Also, if you're going to write about something ecological, then it does funny things with your head, and that's reflected in how you write about those things. One of the funny things it does is force you to think in five or six different scales at the same time.

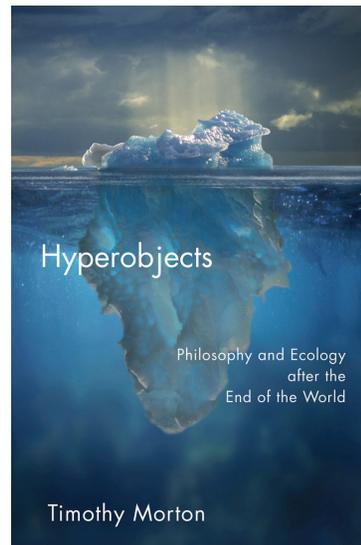
RAIL: You discussed the end of the world as happening twice: in 1784, with the invention of the steam engine, and then again in 1945, with the atomic bomb.

MORTON: That's funny. In a not "ha-ha" way, but it's sort of funny-peculiar. Like, how many ends of the world do we need to get the picture?

RAIL: Also at this time is the Romantic period, which you suggest was the beginning of thinking about nonhuman things with agency, for example, in the animal rights movement. I'm wondering if the Romantics, who are commonly understood as having distrust for industrial technology and expressing desire for a simpler way of life, have something in common with object-oriented ontology?

MORTON: Well, I'd like to push against the idea that the Romantics wanted to get back to a simple, pre-modern way of life. The Romantics are in fact the first tryout of how to negotiate your way around the modern possibility space. It's no accident that they were the first "ism." Impressionism, Naturalism, Expressionism, Situationism. They were the first reflexive form of art, where there was a kind of manifesto attached implicitly or explicitly to the art that said, "If you do your poems or your paintings this way, this kind of thing will happen and change this world." There are various different social and aesthetic reasons for that.

I think that if you look to some of the art and culture that was coming out before the Romantics, that was very much about getting back to nature. You know, think about Rousseau. The Romantics were trying to find ways of negotiating their way around a quintessentially modern possibility space in which nature isn't quite there. It's like an



antique-looking Christmas ornament from Michael's, even by the 1790s, and employing a fake antique Christmas ornament of nature to attack industry and technology. It doesn't work, right? Because it is itself an industry-technology product. It's this idea of a thing outside of social space and it's totally untapped, and pristine, and wild, and maybe we should put an oil rig there, or make a beautiful painting of it.

The whole idea is that it's outside of human social, philosophical, and psychic space. I think the ambiguity of modernity is that there's also this other idea, that there are these nonhuman beings all of a sudden.

We know they exist—we don't just posit them metaphysically. We can detect them in various ways, philosophically and scientifically. We can detect them and we can deduce them. They are on the inside of social space, psychic space, and philosophical space—which means that those spaces were never fully human to begin with, right? That is the thought that's gradually been occurring to everybody since the later 18th century. In the philosophical world, it's since Hume blew up causality theory and Kant gave the reason why, but it's also in all kinds of other domains as well.

RAIL: It's interesting how your writing style is very far-reaching, fluid, and lyrical, and I wonder how your background in Romantic literature and Shelley scholarship affects the way that you think about writing.

MORTON: There's a form question and a content question. Form is first. I love sentences. I'm an English literature scholar by training, and when you are an English literature scholar, you train to study sentences. I'm saying sentences rather than words because—I think I've said a few times—the atom of meaning is not the word. It's like a subatomic level. The atom of meaning is the phrase, right? The art of writing and speaking is to put phrases together into sentences. There are really crummy sentences out there, and I think I would like to make some nice new sentences that don't suck.

RAIL: How did you come into writing about ecology?

MORTON: It goes back to my interest in Romantic period literature and culture. Also, my first tryouts writing books were writing about food. When you write about food, you're writing about production, and when you're writing about production, you're writing about agriculture, and then you also start thinking about ecology. When you're writing about vegetarianism—which was my first book—you're also thinking about ecology, and in another way you're thinking about animal rights, for instance. I was struggling from the get-go to think about ecology.

I'm a child of the '70s. My first really strong experience of going to museums had to do with ecology. There was this big ecology exhibition at the Natural History Museum in London, which has now been taken over by BP, of course. The original

idea was extremely intellectually challenging, and rigorous, and fascinating. In 1972, when I was four years old, UNESCO put out this book called *SOS: Save the Earth*. It's disturbing actually, the extent to which what is said in that book still deeply applies nowadays. We know what we knew then, pretty much, give or take a few extra bits of data.

RAIL: It's interesting to think of Ruskin's pathetic fallacy, with its attribution of human emotion to inanimate matter, as an extension of that anthropocentric ideology that you extend throughout the book. Is thinking about *hyperobjects* a way to lead us from being products of the human gaze?

MORTON: Yes. *Hyperobjects* are there whether you're looking at them or not. There is this sense in which it's all a trick, otherwise. You can't really know whether the light is on in the refrigerator until you've opened the fridge. In a way I don't actually question this idea. I kind of like it. It's known as correlationism in the lingo of Quentin Meillassoux. But *hyperobjects* show us that things are not just any old things that we then make real or special by observing them, or thinking about them, or otherwise opening them like refrigerators à la Kant, Heidegger, Marx, Hegel, Foucault—all those guys. In all their different ways, they're all anthropocentrically saying human beings are the privileged deciders of what it means to be a thing. This is just unsustainable.

It's only the top half of the kind of extraordinariness that Kant and Hume discovered. Kant and Hume are also saying there *are* raindrops when I feel these raindrops on my head—this is an example from the first critique of Kant. I have raindrop phenomena: they're wet, and they're cold, and they're small. They're not gumdrops. They're raindrops. I can't make them be anything I want. Nevertheless, the actual raindrop is withdrawn. I never directly experience the actual raindrop; I only experience raindrop data, right? It's just that there's a kind of potential explosion in that idea, which is that a piece of dust falling on the raindrop also has a kind of "piece-of-dust-centric" experience. Imagine the piece of dust could think for some reason, and speak, and go on Oprah and tell you about raindrops. What it said on Oprah wouldn't be the raindrop, it would be a thing that was said on Oprah.

RAIL: I'm particularly interested in your discussion of the world as an aesthetic construct in which people depend on things like underground oil and gas pipes, yet don't acknowledge the unseen apparatus of unrenowable energy sources. Furthermore, they don't want any visible indications of alternatives in their landscape, such as windmills, because that would alter their aesthetic view—and force them to own up to these ecological realities.

MORTON: Well, the thing is, what we find disturbing is this idea that nonhuman beings are on the inside of social space. So, we've designed social space to look extremely binary, you know? I sometimes talk to architects about this. Here's where you live, and here's this place called "away." "Away" is sort of over there, somewhere in this field or on this mountain, over there somewhere, over yonder. The trouble is we now know that there's no such thing as over yonder. Whenever you flush the toilet, you are flushing whatever is in there to somewhere like the Pacific Ocean, or the Gulf, or the Waste Water Treatment Plant, or the Atlantic. There's no "away."

There's something profoundly weird about this kind of built space in which there is this idea of awayness—it's been kind of encoded. Of course it's part of the havoc that human beings have wreaked

on the environment for thousands of years, really. This idea of a homogeneous, nonhuman, non-social space that's outside, over there somewhere. We don't want that fantasy to be disturbed. That's why we don't want wind farms, because wind farms remind you that actually there were all kinds of decisions made, for instance to mine oil, and to put it in pipes, and to put these pipes under the earth so that they wouldn't disturb you.

I live in the very deconstructed town of Houston, where you can see all the pipes, all the pipelines, and all the construction going on all over the place. It is actually very disturbing. You're constantly reminded of it. You're eating your nice po' boy, you look outside the window, and you're almost practically underneath the most gigantic pipeline you've seen in your life. It's disturbing. People don't want to see the process of production.

There's a lot of art that's about revealing the process of production—that is one of the lineages of the Romantic period. It goes back through Benjamin to Wordsworth really—showing the wiring underneath. I think there's a deeper thing here, which is that just noticing how constructed things are doesn't really change things. It's like, how many Duchamp urinals do we need to change the world? Answer: infinite. It doesn't appear to be working very well, just being able to see the wiring underneath. Things are more profound than their relations, as far as I'm concerned, and so just showing how things relate is never enough. What we really need are disturbing encounters with discrete entities.

RAIL: Can you give an example of what you think an encounter with a nonhuman would be like?

MORTON: It would be like meeting a replicant. You're the detective in *Blade Runner*, and you come across this being who looks exactly like you, quacks exactly like you, and seems to be conscious exactly like you, but you can never totally know for sure. So you have this paranoia—the default condition of being conscious, as a kind of paranoia that perhaps I'm a puppet. Maybe I'm just a puppet of some other force—whether it is unconscious forces, or social forces, or material forces, or whatever. Precisely because I'm paranoid that I might not be a person, I am a person. So, when I meet this kind of stranger, I'm reminded of myself and that throws me into an uncanny loop. This stranger is familiar and yet at the same time strange—strangely familiar, and familiarly strange.

Encounters with nonhuman beings are saturated with anxiety because I can't check in advance who these guys are. I just have to allow them to exist, which means that in the end, one of the people that I have to allow to exist is me, funnily enough, because I'm also one of these nonhumans. I have to make friends with my anxiety. That's what ecological awareness and politics actually is. It's not some post-ironic position. Finally, I know what reality is. Finally I can cut my head open, and stick it in a tree, and have all the sense of irony and ambiguity drain out into this tree so I don't have to feel guilty anymore; it's almost the opposite of that.

RAIL: So, what would we do with this anxiety?

MORTON: Try not to delete it. Jared Diamond said that the worst mistake ever made was agriculture: a certain kind of agriculture that started in the Fertile Crescent about 10,000 years ago caused the following things to happen: patriarchy, mass immiseration for everybody except a few people, drastic health problems, environmental disasters such as plagues. This comes precisely from trying to get rid of anxiety.

If you think about the more indigenous culture that existed before that, it had to do with working with anxiety, because who knew where your next meal was coming from. I want to not be so anxious all the time, so I'm going to store up my grain and build this highly logistically-planned space called a field, in which I eliminate contradictions like weeds, pests, and so on which I define as invading my space.

It comes essentially from trying to delete something that you can't delete—the anxiety—which might be my human-flavored way of experiencing what it's like to be a thing. Obviously you can have anxious cats, but maybe you could, technically, have anxious bottles of Pellegrino, too.

RAIL: Do you think that the political slogans and ideologies of taking action to "save the earth" are too hyperbolic and oversimplified?

MORTON: I think it's weirder than that. I think the trouble is that we need to act. We need to actually reduce carbon emissions to where we're not making many, many life forms extinct. The trouble is that there isn't a really solid, easy-clean reason to do that. Ecological action is necessarily uncanny. You're saving the world, but you have no idea what the world is by the time you saved it; it's kind of melted. In the act of saving of it, your concept has melted. We've all become characters in that David Byrne song: This is not my beautiful world, this is not my beautiful ecological praxis. I'm not saying we shouldn't do stuff; I'm saying we should do stuff, but when you do it, it's not going to feel right. It's going to feel weird.

RAIL: As an artist, I look at your ideas from a perspective of having an intimate relationship with making things. What would you like artists to take away from this book?

MORTON: One of my jobs, I think, is to curate, promote, or explore not-well-known art. I want to give you more flexibility within the possibility space, within the existing possibility space, in ways of possibly transcending it, or tunneling through it, or escaping it, or however you want to frame it. But I think there are other ways of moving around in the modern possibility space, and I'm interested in giving people new moves, or thinking about old moves that they may have neglected.

I think that the dominant way of thinking about art, at the moment, is basically a modulation of a certain kind of 200-year-old way of doing it, which is, basically, critique. I've got to be able to see through my world in order to be clever or artistic; I've got to be able to jump outside of reality and see it from the perfect point of view. And the trouble is, according to my view, you can't do that—that's strictly impossible. So these attempts to jump outside don't end up working so great.

Instead, we should at least have in our arsenal of techniques ways of forging relationships with nonhuman beings; which, as you point out, can also be paint and the kinds of things we think of as materials for art. They are actually nonhuman beings, it's a better way to think about them. They're only materials because I'm an anthropocentric guy who thinks that the world is for me. They're actually plants that have been crushed into this powder and mixed with this egg white, and now I can paint with this paint brush. I'm making affiliations there with all kinds of things that aren't me. ☞