> Colossal Thesis Adventure:

20,000 ways to describe the indescribable

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> Help

Instructions for gameplay:

At the end of each section of the text, you will see a black box such as this one. It will contain the information needed to proceed to the next part of the discussion. If there is more than one option you must choose one and turn to that page. From there you will either be given yet more options, or you will have reached a dead end and must turn back. Once you arrive at a conclusion, you may start again and try a different route.

Along the right-hand margin of the page you will notice a series of tunnels, their beginnings and ends marked in red. They link together some of the themes and figures that appear throughout this thesis and provide you with a supplementary means of negotiating the text. Their placement on the page is dictated by the need for formal clarity and so a degree of investigation on your part might be required to make the connections.

Good luck.

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You are standing in a forest with dense trees all around you. It
is almost completely dark. Two small, white stones are lying on
the ground at your feet.

    > Take stones

Taken.

    > Strike stones

I do not understand.

    > Rub stones together

Done. Small sparks appear and the stones temporarily emit a
faint glow. In the dim light, a path is visible to the east.

    > Follow path

You can't go this way.

    > Go east

What?

    > East

You walk along the narrow path until you come to a clearing.
There is a small pile of leaves on the ground.

    > Examine leaves

I see nothing out of the ordinary.

    > Remove

Please supply direct object.

    > Remove leaves

There is a small grate leading into a tunnel. The grate is
locked.
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This sort of frustrating scenario will be familiar to anyone who has ever played the text-based computer game 'Colossal Cave Adventure', or one of its many spin-offs. With enough perseverance and back-tracking, a whole host of exciting situations await the intrepid adventurer who goes through the grate in the ground. Personally, I have never even managed to find the key. The imaginary landscape of the game is as dark

and inscrutable to me as the black screen of the monitor. However, this has not diminished my pleasure in wandering the forest, trying endless combinations of words in an effort to make the—often sarcastic—computer parser understand my commands.

In a similar way I would like to use this thesis as a means of constructing, and moving through, a web of information, pausing in places of uncertainty where the limits of human knowledge might be glimpsed. Different areas of enquiry await discovery by the reader, unified in their attempts to examine the gaps in our understanding of the world and to discover the politically and ecologically emancipatory potential within. With these I will endeavour to create a network that describes a network; a system to describe systems (and the noise therein). A useful analogy for this might be a tree identification key, in which the reader is presented with one descriptive statement followed by two options, for example, "4A. Leaves have pointed teeth along their edges: Go to 5A & 5B"[1]. This continues until the tracker successfully determines what plant they are looking at. What is of most interest to us in this scenario is that the identification key has a branching structure of its own; it is a tree itself. Likewise, I offer here a forest of multiple-choice.

Sections of the text do not exist in isolation; each one overlaps and resonates in some way with each other and through these relations they try to represent indirectly the unrepresentable. Some of the topics dealt with, 'The Sublime' for example, must be sidled towards, obliquely and with eyes half-shut; new contours of meaning formed through allusion and metaphor. In order to address the problem of thinking beyond ourselves, I adopt a strategy of side-stepping: moving along through affinity and association, both literal and figurative, taking pleasure in the ensuing confusion. By way of a mimetic approach to writing, both reader and writer might begin to feel

empathy with the subject under discussion, and thereby appreciate through form what cannot be expressed through content alone.

This thesis, therefore, will be structured in more or less the same way as a 'Choose Your Own Adventure' book. This series of children's books, popular in the 1980s, ended each section with a set of options for the reader. These might be something like:

> To try and fix the ship's radio in order to alert the coastguard … Turn to page 18.
>
> To go over to John to see if he is still breathing … Turn to page 25.
>
> To turn and fight the giant squid in a battle to the death … Turn to page 31.

The outcome of the story depends on the readers choices, there sometimes existing only one 'happy' ending. Many of the paths through the books result in a grisly death or, at best, a neutral outcome. Different readers can potentially have different experiences of the stories and, depending on their thoroughness, might miss some sections altogether. This kind of writing is described by Espen Aarseth as being 'ergodic', from the Greek *ergodon* and *hodos*, meaning "work" and "path". It applies to any literature that requires the reader to make a "non-trivial effort" to "traverse the text", constructing their own selective sequence as they progress (1997, p. 1). Aarseth also uses the term 'Cybertext' to describe texts that are cybernetic, that is, involve some kind of information feedback loop. The reader becomes an integral part of the process, actively affecting their reception of the text through a conscious set of decisions and necessary exclusions, which constantly reminds them "of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard" (ibid. p. 3). Cybertext literature is viewed as a kind of system: a cybernetic co-operation of operator, host medium and verbal sign, which produces varied, negotiated and contingent meaning. I hope to employ this kind of form in order to make simultaneous arguments, in a semi non-hierarchical manner. By necessity some

sections will be read before others, but it is up to the reader to navigate their own path through the network. There will be some dead ends, though hopefully none too grisly, and different conclusions may be reached through different routes. In such a way, the structure of this thesis might performatively illustrate Roland Barthes' idea of the 'plural text', which reveals its various meanings through multiple re-readings, manifested here as necessary backtracking. The text, with its internal resonances and connections can be thus imagined as,

"an iridescent exchange carried on by multiple voices, on different wavelengths and subject from time to time to a sudden dissolve, leaving a gap which enables the utterance to shift from one point of view to another without warning" (Barthes, 2002, p. 41-2).

This kind of networked text is also commonly associated with the rhizomatic structure employed by Deleuze and Guatarri in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). A similar emphasis on connections between elements from disparate strands of cultural knowledge is at work here, although the same degree of nonlinearity is not pursued. Rather than plateaus that may be read at random, this 'choose-your-own' thesis involves the reader in an active attempt to reach some kind of conclusion. This is truer to the form of the text-based adventure genre, but it also empowers the reader, whose choices will have genuine consequences in their reception of the discussion.

Thinking about the text in terms of Barthes' "wavelengths", we might consider its correspondence with an analogue signal. One feature of analogue technology is that some attribute of the medium is deployed in conveying the signal's information, for example, the speakers of a record player receive information from the movements of the needle over fluctuations in the surface of the record. This also means that every point on

the signal—including any disturbance—is significant. Similarly, I wish to use the properties of the book form to communicate the ideas of this thesis. It is aware of its own 'thesisness' and does not attempt to disguise itself. Therefore, through the gamebook format, attention is drawn to the standard codex presentation of an academic submission in all its papery materiality. However, the text is simultaneously disrupted by the presence of a set of wormholes that make connections across the different sections and areas of discussion. These function as a kind of secondary route to the "turn to page X" instructions, enabling the reader to follow some of the motifs that recur throughout.

The adventure begins in, and is informed by, the realm of contemporary art. Artists, through their work, consistently attempt to express the inexpressible, to represent the unrepresentable, and in this way their concerns correspond with those of this thesis. In searching for positive political and ecological potential in the grey areas of our knowledge, I look to art as an exemplary means of articulating "an international language and world of shared ideals and hopes", that remains vital due its status as "the most useless of all possible activities, in a state of autonomy, as was argued during modernism" (Christov-Bakargiev, 2012, p. 31). It is art's ability to still retain some (however negligible) independence from economic concerns that perhaps enables it to produce knowledge that is non-commercial, often eccentric, and slowly gleaned. As Boris Groys writes, art was produced in contexts prior to capitalist society and so it will continue after the potential demise of any particular economy or art market. Contemporary exhibitions do not exist solely for buyers and collectors, but for the interested and anonymous visitor who does not necessarily view every work of art as a commodity.

In order to reflect upon current developments and tendencies in artistic practice, the discussion will be framed around dOCUMENTA (13), the 2012 edition of the quinquennial art exhibition in Kassel, Germany, whose works and ideas constituted an intricate network that might be formally reflected here. Directed by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, dOCUMENTA (13) was an enormous survey of contemporary art that ran for one hundred days and featured over three hundred participants from a variety of backgrounds including archaeology, composition, philosophy and physics. Spread around the city, artworks appeared both in traditional venues, such as the 18th century Fridericianum, as well as further afield in various commercial or industrial spaces. Supplementing the main exhibition in Kassel was a programme of performances, readings, seminars and screenings, while parallel events also took place in the cities of Kabul, Alexandria/Cairo and Banff. These four locations reflect, according to Christov-Bakargiev, four conditions: being on stage (Kassel); being under siege (Kabul); being in a state of hope (Alexandria/Cairo) and being on retreat (Banff). The almost overwhelmingly large programme of things to see and attend was summed up nicely in a sentence that the curator used to describe dOCUMENTA (13): "The dance was very frenetic, lively, rattling, clanging, rolling, contorted, and lasted for a long time" (2012, p. 77).

One of the recurring motifs of dOCUMENTA (13) is the idea of moving towards a less anthropocentric way of understanding the world, considering the potential of all makers, animate and inanimate to act and produce knowledge. A likeminded attitude will underpin all sections of this thesis, approaching from different angles the implications of operating in a less human-centred way, from both ecological and object-oriented perspectives. To this end, the metaphors employed are often related to the natural world, as opposed to the mechanical. Although there will be mention of

cybernetic systems and noise, this is offered as a gesture towards ecological self-organisation and natural physical forces, rather than technological. This is following Carolyn Merchant's insight in *The Death of Nature* (1982) that the exploitation of nature—and of women—can be connected to the Scientific Revolution's violent grammar of 'forcing nature to reveal *her* secrets'. Instead, a language of non-exactitude and withdrawal will be applied, in contrast to the usual precision of computer game parsers. This might be imagined as the computer voice beginning to speak poetically, in spite of itself.

Through its various pathways, the discussion will lead eventually towards three texts relating to three artworks from dOCUMENTA (13) that will be relevant to, and hopefully enriched by, the preceding sections. The texts will be written somewhat mimetically, their form attempting to convey that of the artworks, in order to empathetically inhabit them. Empathy here is intended in the 19th century German sense: *Einfühlung*, literally meaning 'in-feeling'[2]. In contemporaneous psychological thought this referred to the "placing of human feelings into inanimate things, plants, animals, or other humans" so that the subject's experience becomes fused with that of the object (Depew, 2005, p. 100). Following the Greek *empatheia*, this evokes a passionate state existing in opposition to apathy; an ecstatic mimesis that goes beyond the familiar sense of empathy as 'putting oneself in another's position' towards a stronger sense of communion. A tension should therefore be evident in this thesis between diegesis and mimesis, between telling and showing. On the one hand there is the extra-diegetic exposition, or narration of ideas; on the other there is an attempt to empathically enter and re-present the subjects under discussion, perhaps producing some interference between text and thing, and between reader and subject.

Overall, this thesis will essentially function like a map of ideas, connections being made as though between synapses in the brain. Meanings should accumulate and sediment as the reader progresses in any one direction, resulting in one amalgamated though perhaps, like any structure of thought, sometimes internally conflicted picture. Furthermore, a sense of self-similarity should be apparent between each section and the argument in general: chains of associations form both the individual segments of the text and the thesis as a whole. As Christov-Bakargiev writes in her essay for the dOCUMENTA (13) catalogue, because,

"many truths…are valid, one is constantly confronted with unsolvable questions: thus it has to become a choice between *not* making a choice, on the one hand, not producing a concept, acting from a position of withdrawal; or, on the other hand, making a choice that one knows will also be partially and inevitably 'wrong'" (2012, p. 37). [3]

This thesis-adventure offers both:

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> To withdraw to the east, turn to page 38.

> To go west and prospect, turn to page 26.
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1. See, for example, http://www.albertaparks.ca/media/3337/tracktre.pdf
2. According to David Depew, the connection between *Einfühlung* and *empatheia* was first posited in 1910 by German psychologist Theodore Lipps (2005, p. 100).
3. We might think here of Jacques Derrida's concept of the 'undecidable'. This is the mad moment of suspense and non-knowledge present in every decision, which also indicates a properly free decision and not merely a programmed response. Not simply an equivalent of indeterminacy, undecidability refers to "a very specific structural condition at the heart of language" that acknowledges the multiple possibilities of meaning that co-exist, non-hierarchically (Bates, 2005, p. 4).

Douglas Kahn described noise as "the forest of everything". With this in mind we return to the forest in which this thesis began, to listen to some white noise: a mixture of random energy at every frequency. Noise may be understood as any arbitrary addition to a signal that interferes with the message being transmitted, for example, the fuzz of a bad telephone connection or, in textual terms, some orthographic disruption. According to John Johnston, "the activities of reading and writing are all historically determined aspects of a larger communication system", and so literature may be understood as a "form of data processing" (1997, p. 4). An examination may therefore be made of the tension between the information and the noise found in this system. If information is defined as "the number of available choices" then a chaotic system would have more choice and therefore more uncertainty. This also means that there would be more information but, since increased noise also causes greater uncertainty, it is important to distinguish between "desirable uncertainty (information) [and] undesirable uncertainty (noise)" (Weibel, 1999, p. 144).

The novelty arising from uncertainty may be seen as the "absolutely new", as emphasised by Roland Barthes, who claims that it increases the reader's pleasure and generates endless new meaning and significance (1987, p. 40) as well as disrupting power structures at play in the text. This sort of reading can find "what apparently isn't there at all" in any kind of a text, wading through "absences, spaces [and] lacunae" and coming to rest on "the wilder shores of meaning" (Steedman, 2001, p. 40). Narrative texts, he claims, do not follow a line of clear, pure communication but rather they provide for a noisy reading, in which the reader's own uncertainty adds to the din[1]. The writing then not only resonates with echoes of other texts, but with the reader as well, who may luxuriate in the swarm of "meanings that themselves vibrate, gather, loosen,

disperse, quicken, shine fold, mutate, delay, slide, separate, that exert pressure, crack, rupture, fissure, are pulverised" (Sontag, 1982, p. xiii).

It is noise's capacity to disturb, disrupt and interfere, as well as its aesthetic qualities that are of interest here. Like Klee's "multi-dimensional" attention, noise vibrates with the possibility of chaos in meaning. It speaks of the ineffable residue that one sometimes encounters, which lends a sense of unknowablity to an object; perhaps this is a fuzz worth getting lost in. Think of Karoline von Günderrode, the German Romantic poet who, whilst standing on a cliff in contemplation of the noisy sea, found herself enveloped by a "numbing fog" in which she danced as a droplet among the rest, before a dizzying return to Earth. She was not unchanged by this ecstasy and felt in commune with the sea, as she "glistened in the sun, orbited with the stars"[1]. The ocean might be imagined as a great expanse of aetheric fluid, filled with roaring electromagnetic waves. Indeed, the phenomenon of phosphorescence in the sea was once attributed to the presence of electricity. Writing in 1785, Dr Buchanan describes the water as having a "milk-white colour, and upon it were floating a multitude of luminous bodies greatly resembling that combination of stars known as the Milky Way" (1859, p. 418). And, ascending to the skies, we convert from Argonaut to Astronaut and listen for scraps of ancient cosmic noise. Maybe we will catch some of the chattering radio transmissions that travel outwards from this planet into the unknown; ghosts dustily scattered like so many stars in the sky. Or, given that sounds fade but never disappear, hear Echo's cries for her lost lover Narcissus reverberating still, though her bones lie petrified on Earth. Perhaps they have now turned to quartz, pieces of which, when struck together emit a faint glow called triboluminescence: a result of the electrons in the crystals being temporarily dislodged and agitated. Likewise, I picture

the sparks of Echo's little stony bones rubbing together to be like the crackle of distant noise, caused by the random vibrations of atomic particles.

It brings to mind W.G. Sebald's description in his novel *The Rings of Saturn* of fishermen's transistor radios that sounded like the "scratchy sound" of pebbles on a beach which, "being dragged back by the waves were talking to each other" (2002, p. 52). Sebald conflates nature and technology, allowing the two to overlap and interchange, describing each other. This, according to Gay Hawkins, gives his writing a "powerful ecological force" that emphasises the collapsibility of boundaries between human and non-human and leads towards a "horizontal", as opposed to hierarchical, understanding of nature. His is a non-anthropocentric worldview that is "attuned to the rhythms and movement of human and non-human difference and similarity" (2010, p. 166). Perhaps by demonstrating the contingency of categories like 'nature' and 'culture', our position as designators of these is undermined.

In this vein, Simon Critchley writes of Wallace Stevens' poem, 'The Course of a Particular', in which the poet stands and listens to leaves crying. They do not cry for or with him; rather their noise is a kind of leakage that fuzzily communicates the resistance of the things themselves to human-imposed meanings (2005, p. 72). Possibly these are the same leaves whose rustle Barthes borrowed to describe the pleasurable frisson that is generated by certain encounters with language. Just as Stevens' leaves cry "without meaning more/ Than they are in the final finding of the ear" (ibid. p. 71), so does the rustle of language place meaning on a blurry horizon, beyond all account. In this way, meaning is not altogether dismissed; however, the materiality of the "phonic, metric, vocal signifier" is foregrounded, going above and beyond common signification (Barthes, 1989, p .77). Sebald's pebbles, Stevens' leaves: both speak of an excess or a

residue that remains distant somehow; images of noise hinting towards the realm of the indistinct.

This allusive strategy can be discerned in another intersection between noise, nature and non-anthropocentricism: the work of Japanese noise artist Merzbow. His work is heavily informed by an ecological sensibility although this is not necessarily recognisable in the listening, a lot of it taking the form of 'harsh noise'. Using techniques of distortion, feedback, circuit bending, sampling and so on, noise music plunges the signal into a stream of waves and currents extraneous to its message which, in live performance, can create an ecstatic listening experience. Through a denial of clear communication, noise might be thought of as a recalcitrant oppositional force in the way that it disrupts the listener's desire for representation.

The disintegration of sound and meaning can have almost gothic associations with decay and residue, as is sometimes reflected in track titles—my personal favourites being "Corporeal abandonment and the dissolution of base metals" and "Pilgrimage of a fragmented corpse" by Irish noise outfit Luxury Mollusc. Merzbow's stance, however, is a resolutely environmentally conscious one, though not, as Paul Hegarty writes, part of the "panic that seeks to keep humans at the top of the food chain by 'saving the environment'" (2007, p. 163). For example, the 2006 album, *Bloody Sea*, is explicitly described by Merzbow as anti-whaling protest-noise music and was released to coincide with the relaunch of the Japanese whaling fleet. Nothing of the actual content suggests a connection with whales or whale 'song' (which is of course, a human projection), but in this way it comes far closer to suggesting the inconceivable vastness of the ocean, as well as, potentially, a whale's experience of it. Noise can be an allusion beyond meaning transmittable through language; suggesting through formless form what cannot be understood in human terms. In this way, Merzbow's work is not didactic 'eco-art',

but rather, through chaotic and excessive noise becomes “communication, ecstasy, and, feasibly, a messy encounter with nature” (ibid. p. 164).

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> To continue along the path of most resistance, turn to page
72.
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1. N. Katherine Hayles remarks that the privileging of equivocation by literary figures such as Roland Barthes is not necessarily as radical as it pretends to be. By declaring texts as ‘open’, and in need of analysis, the economy in which deconstructionists operate is uncritically sustained. In other words, they profit from “generating new words from old texts.” (1987, p. 133)
2. http://facstaff.bloomu.edu/lspringm/courses/cultciv2/texts/guenderrode.html


> You have been eaten by a monster

In this section I will examine Pierre Huyghe's contribution to dOCUMENTA (13), "Untilled". *The discussion will hover between two different forms that are appropriate to the work, as well as this thesis. Firstly, the second-person narrative of a text adventure game. This alludes to the exploratory nature of an encounter with Huyghe's piece, but also his self-confessed propensity for creating worlds that he subsequently enters, his walk through this world then becoming the work.*[1] *Furthermore, there is a strange confusion in these games between the player giving the commands and the player replying and (hopefully) following them in the text-realm; both turn out to be the same person. This leads to a situation where the player exists both in and outside of the diegesis of the game and therefore becomes an "observer who is [simultaneously] observing him or herself" (*Neitzel, 2008, p. 289). *There is also a sense of entanglement between seer and seen in* Untilled, *that is created through the environment of nonhuman inhabitants who may or may not care about the visitors peering at them, and who may or may not be peering back. Finally, Huyghe mentioned in a recent interview that he stumbled upon the site for the work accidentally. As though navigating a text adventure, he "could have gone left, but turned right"*[2]. *The second voice present in this short study belongs to Jakob von Uexküll, the German biologist, whose monograph '*A stroll through the worlds of animals and men: A picture book of invisible worlds' *(1934) became an important text for posthuman thought. Von Uexküll sets out on a (figurative) walk through a meadow and, encountering several kinds fauna, recommends that we take a look at the world from their perspective. Each being lives in a soap bubble, he writes; their own surrounding environment that is termed* 'Umwelt'. *We can only access it imaginatively, although von Uexküll includes numerous illustrations that supposedly show the world as seen through various creatures' eyes, given the information available on their respective physiologies. Towards the end of the*

text the attention is turned inwards and von Uexküll, rather charmingly, describes the Umwelten *of scientists themselves. For example, the astronomer who sits*

"high on his tower, as far as possible from the earth…He has so transformed his eyes, with the aid of gigantic optical instruments, that they have become fit to penetrate the universe up to its most distant stars. In his Umwelt, *suns and planets circle in festive procession. Fleet-footed light takes millions of years to travel through his* Umwelt *space" (1934, pp. 389-9).*

Pierre Huyghe's piece demands a similar shift in perspective. For we are imaginatively entering not just the artist's but the work's Umwelt, *and that all of its denizens as well.*

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You are standing in a park. To the west is a small artificial
lake; to the east is the path that you just left. There are
overgrown bushes all around you.

    > Go south

You struggle a little to get past the briars and ferns that
bar the way but soon you emerge from the thicket into a
clearing. There is a great pile of earth and rubble up ahead,
and the ground in every direction is rough and marshy. There
do not appear to be any other people around.

    > Climb rubble

This might not be wise, given the shoes you are wearing.

    > Climb rubble
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Very well. With great effort you manage to scramble to the top of the heap, only getting a little dirty. On the way up you notice some exotic but strangely familiar looking plants.

> Make sketch

Sketched. From the summit of the earth mound you are able to survey the entire clearing. Directly below you are some stacks of concrete blocks, forming an irregular yet geometric bridge across a muddy pool. Hulking piles of stones and broken asphalt punctuate the landscape, probably inviting you to try to climb them too.

> Go west

You slide back down to ground level, scattering a few foxgloves that get in the way. To the east is a muddy pool.

> Cross pool using concrete blocks

You jump onto the first concrete block. It seems safe so far. You get ready to jump again but are startled by a voice behind you. “Entschuldigung! Haben sie einen Hund gesehen?” Your German isn’t very good. You look behind you and see three teenagers.

> Answer

You smile and stutter in German that you don’t speak German. They understand. “Have you seen a dog?” You have not.

> Go west

You continue to cross the pool, landing successfully on the other side.

> Look

To the east there is a great pile of earth and rubble. To the south there is a wide path leading back towards the park. All around you there are plants wildly growing, some of which you recognise as poisonous. They compete for space on a particularly fertile mass of earth in the centre of the swamp that you presume to be an ex-compost heap. A graveyard of humus and leaf skeletons now sprouted all over with boisterous young shoots. Perhaps the mound has adorned itself with these widow's weeds as a mark of respect for the earthy comrades that fell for its sake. You notice a flicker of red on a nearby leaf and discover two ladybirds enjoying a quiet moment together.

> Greet ladybirds

The ladybirds remain indifferent.

> Go around mound

You walk around to the far side of the mound and can now see the other half of the clearing. More pieces of cement and wood pile on top of each other, some hollow but full of water that contains a bubbly slime, possibly frogspawn. Others host yet more vegetation; roots have squeezed themselves into every crevice of every breeze block. Both root and brick seem

satisfied with this arrangement. To the south lies a ring of smaller banks of clay, at the centre of which you can see a stone statue.

> Go to statue and make sketch

You approach but are stopped by a small cardboard sign. It says, “Please do NOT enter this area. THANKS”. Disappointed, you take another look at the statue and realise that the sign was only trying to help: the head of the reclining female nude is in fact covered by a very large beehive. And zooming around it are some very real bees who look totally absorbed in their business, crawling in noisy patterns all over the tessellated honeycomb. You are unusually disturbed by the surface of the hive. Its dark, grainy texture seems somehow diabolical, as every facet swarms with apian industry: a monstrous, external brain for the gorgonized body within. One worker zips past the side of your head, she’s probably just on her way to a flower nearby, but still it sends a little frisson of alarm reverberating along your ear canal.
Suddenly, a blurry white shape streaks across your peripheral vision.

> Examine white shape

It turns out to be a skeletal dog with large pointed ears, a brown nose and one leg dyed bright fuchsia. This strikes you as odd. The dog looks directly at you; the first local of the swamp to do so. You hear a voice, “Human!” Naturally you turn

to answer but it seems the dog is the one being addressed. It turns and strolls towards the bushes.

> Follow dog

You hurry after Human, rather relieved to leave the swarm and its dizzying, inscrutable factory behind. The dog notices you approaching and speeds up, moving further into the undergrowth.

> Go faster

You begin to run, catching only glimpses of the tail end of the dog as it disappears around corner after corner. Eventually your path is blocked by a long, decaying oak tree.

> Rest

Panting, you sit down gingerly amongst its roots, taking care to avoid yet another crowd of ladybirds. Just then, you hear a tiny rustle to your left; Human appears quietly by your side. In her mouth she is carrying some shoots of a plant that are laden with dark, shiny berries. They look delicious.

> Take shoots

Taken.

> Eat berries

Oh no! You have eaten the berries of the Deadly Nightshade plant. You are dead. Game over.

The brick *is* a radio. It becomes one the moment it is listened to, sincerely, by the citizens and confiscated, sincerely, by the police. Their radio-impounding bag is weighed down by a real radio, not a brick in drag. Through a kind of alchemy its dense, brickliness has given way to the flimsy resistors, capacitors and transistors of a working radio. Although it is more radical than any pirate, this bandit has no bandwidth; the fluctuations of its stations are stationary. It reminds me of a stone that I once encountered on the shore of a lake. The water had been at it—it was limestone so it wasn't hard—and had transformed the calcium carbonate into an image of itself. All of the rock's solidity had melted and become light, flowing waveforms that mirrored the lake (a giant mirror in its own right and perhaps just a touch vain, after all those years of Narcissus gazing at it). The brick, or the radio as we must now call it, is likewise translated: entranced into a state of blank receptivity. Its quiet surface is pollinose with luminous sulfur markings; lively companions for the ceramic wireless. They are already well acquainted of course, the sulphide galena being used in early crystal radios. But how nice to know that should someone attempt to destroy this new radio by incineration, its sulfur war paint will turn scarlet and molten like blood, and leak away, so that its comrade will have known what it is die for one's cause. It is not alone in the struggle either; hundreds more have been made to the same recipe, some wrapped in paper, some with antennae, all of them little tombstones to the radios that they have come to replace. Heavyweight transistors filling their captors' bags with Jovian amounts of gravity. They broadcast a deafening silence, even more sepulchral than radio's usual transmissions; a black hole for noise that annihilates all who listen too closely. In contemplating the thick space of this tenacious refusenik my brain is similarly petrified and slams against its brimstone encrusted walls. But the collision is harmonious and we sing together like two lost Orpheus heads into the abyss. Something is listening, however, and it follows us, trying to understand our secret communication. We do not mind it. It will not comprehend the crackle of stochastic residue that gathers and sediments into concrete blocks, grainy to the last.

> The stone presses downwards and manifests its heaviness. But while this heaviness weighs down on us, at the same time, it denies us any penetration into it. If we attempt such penetration by smashing the rock, then it shows us its pieces but never anything inward, anything that has been opened up. The stone has instantly withdrawn again into the same dull weight and mass of its fragments. (Heidegger, 2010, p. 11)[1]

Toucans, spice racks, plankton, thunderstorms, granite, tricycles, 80s covers bands, cat food, dust, banjos and particle accelerators. This list exemplifies the sort of unlikely gathering that Graham Harman regularly summons in his writings on object-oriented philosophy (OOP). Loosely assembled under the heading of Speculative Realism, Harman and other authors such as Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant and Quentin Meillassoux to name a few, have in recent years made a break from the continental and analytic philosophy traditions, and moved towards positing a human-independent reality. Whereas mainstream twentieth century thought has insisted upon the primacy of language in structuring a relational and contingent existence, Speculative Realism refutes this with a double assertion that a) there is a world of *real* objects that exist autonomously from human access to them and b) that although we cannot know this reality, we can nevertheless creatively and rigorously speculate as to its metaphysical framework. There are, of course, divisions within this group and various strands of Speculative Realism such as eliminative nihilism, cyber-vitalism and speculative materialism also exist. However, it is on Graham Harman's particular trajectory that I wish to focus here.

In a recent essay for the dOCUMENTA (13) catalogue Harman stated that his object-oriented philosophy can be summed up in a few sentences. I will attempt therefore to briefly outline the main features of his argument and then provide more detail on those aspects pertinent to this thesis. Firstly, he emphasises the need for philosophy to examine *all* objects, without reducing them to any particular type. Any privileging of things fails to

recognise their autonomy, meaning that "zebras, leprechauns and armies" are just as worth discussing as "atoms and brains" (2012, p. 540). Although thinking about toenails might not be as interesting or intellectually rewarding as thinking about the Colosseum, they nonetheless are both afforded equal status in this ontology.

Perhaps one of the most striking images that Harman frequently evokes is that of objects withdrawing into "a shadowy underworld" (2005, p. 147). This refers to the idea that every real object is only partially available to our perception. When we view a table we caricature it, reducing it to a list of qualities that relate to us. However, no matter how many ways we can think about it or use it, we fail to exhaust its reality: the table exceeds all of its relations. Furthermore, this holds not just for human-object interactions but 'interobjective' encounters as well. If hot wax were to spill onto the cold table, the wax would be only involved in the table's coolness and capacity to solidify hot wax, not its 1950s design, or the fact that it is made from oak. The wax would therefore also only have partial access to the table's entire being. The next problem then, is how can objects that "inhabit some still undefined vacuous space of reality" actually interact (ibid. p. 91).

Although they are, Harman claims, "vacuum-sealed" from each other, things still must relate in some way, otherwise nothing in the world would ever change. To overcome this abyss, he revives the classical concept of 'occasional cause', though not of a theological kind. Instead of God being present in every relation, objects interact indirectly, through what is termed "vicarious causation". I will give a more detailed, though still abridged, outline of what this entails below, but very briefly, relations between two entities must take place through an intermediary of some sort. Objects "somehow melt, fuse, and decompress in a shared common space from which all are partly absent", where they "exist side-by-side until something happens that allows them to interact" (2007, p. 190).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that there are, for Harman, both 'real' and 'sensual' objects. Real objects are like those described above. They exist in the world but are always somewhat hidden from view and remain inaccessible to us, to other objects, and even to themselves. Sensual objects, on the other hand, resemble the 'intentional objects' of phenomenology (though rechristened by Harman) and might be simply said to be the object of one's attention. These do not reticently withdraw in the same manner as real objects, but rather sit vividly, "express[ing] their reality only by drawing neighbouring objects into their orbit" (2008, p. 362). However, a further point must be added that perhaps changes the meaning of "intentional": sensuality is not just the province of humankind. If it were, this would exclude non-human individuals from this philosophical system and it would cease to be a properly object-oriented ontology. To this end, Harman redescribes intentionality as "sincerity" instead. This is not to be confused with "conscious awareness", but is simply to do with whether a real object is encountering a sensual one or not. In the example he cites, we find Harman gazing sincerely at some glass marbles on a table. In the same way that his focus is absorbed in the marbles, so the marbles are absorbed in sitting on the table, as opposed to doing anything else; they are encountering the "table-surface as a sensual one." (2007, p. 206).

There are certain areas of OOP more relevant to our purposes here than others, such as Harman's discussion on metaphor, and particularly his assertion that aesthetics might be seen as a 'first philosophy'. This then will necessarily be a partial examination of his ideas, but to ensure a better grounding to these later assertions, I will give a short introduction to two of the key concepts in this philosophy: a unique reading of Heidegger's broken tool scenario from *Being and Time*, and the aforementioned vicarious causation.

Heidegger describes a situation in which a hammer ceases to function. Before it breaks, it remains invisible and blends seamlessly with the world, performing its usual duties. Its being is bound to its relationship with everything that enables it to function as equipment: wood, nails, the need to build furniture etc. However, should the hammer go missing or suddenly stop working as expected, it moves from being 'ready-to-hand' (*zuhanden*) to 'present-at-hand' (*vorhanden*) and, paradoxically, becomes more visible than ever. We are forced to focus upon its network of relations, its various uses and also our original task: "The context of equipment is lit up, not as something never seen before, but as a totality constantly sighted beforehand in circumspection" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 49). Harman, however, rejects the idea that objects exist only in relation to humans and their projects; that they do not have a hidden reality of their own. He claims that it is impossible for the hammer to become suddenly 'present-at-hand' because there is an abyss between an object's being and its presence, and therefore every object exists simultaneously *zuhanden* and *vorhanden*. What was for Heidegger the partial invisibility of a working tool now becomes the independent, withdrawn, inexhaustible reality of an autonomous object. As for an object's *vorhandenheit*, that now refers to the finite, though equally inexhaustible, qualities according to which objects encounter each other, as in the above example of the wax being cooled by the table. As Fintan Neylan writes, "by distinguishing the idea of tool from the finite aspect of 'use,' [Harman] maintains that we cannot bridge the gap between the aspects we come across in our pedestrian acquaintances with objects and the reality of their domestic interiors" (2011, p. 348).

This of course entails a total decentring of human subjectivity in the world: we have no special kind of access to things any more than they have to one another. Not merely tools set out for our use, or "neutral slabs of material accidentally shuffled around or coloured by human viewpoints" objects, according to OOP, "are already aflame with

ambiguity, torn by vibrations and insurgencies equalling those found in the most conflicted human moods" (Harman, 2002, p. 19). Continental and analytic philosophy's fixation with the world-as-determined by language leaves no room for the weird realm of inanimate matter and places the human being at the centre of all understanding. Though we may be more intimately acquainted with our own private thoughts and feelings, this does not indicate that our structures of apprehending existence deserve to take centre stage. Rather, Harman believes, we should "stop all of the chic wringing of hands about the inaccessibility of the referent, and… [endorse] a theory where propositions and psychoses interact with oilfields and dolphins" (2010, p. 86).

How then do objects, particularly insentient ones, ever interact? If there is a yawning chasm between things, other things and our access to them, this would surely mean that no relation is ever possible. Escaping forever our grasp, these "entities flicker vaguely from the ocean floor: unable to make contact, yet somehow managing to do so anyway" (2007, p. 193). Harman's answer to this is that when objects meet, it must be indirect, or vicarious. This means that influence must occur through the medium of a third thing: a 'vicar', or mediator. Furthermore, this is equally the case within objects themselves. A substance, which refers to the object beyond any of its relations or qualities, "is also the vicarious cause of its qualities" because it unites them in a whole being, even though they themselves generally do not directly interact (2005, p. 93).

As mentioned above, there are both 'real' and 'sensual' objects at play in the world. The real ones, which recede from all view, and the sensual ones, which lie directly before us freely interacting and "frosted over with a swirling, superfluous outer shell" of disembodied qualities (2007. p. 195). All interaction must take place in the sensual realm because real objects never touch each other. Sensual objects, however, touch real ones because it is only *for* real ones that they exist. When encountering a stone, for example, it

becomes an intentional object, meaning it exists alongside every other sensual object that I might perceive including the sky, the grass, even my own sense of self. Yet we do not "fuse…in a single massive lump" but rather remain distinct from one another, meeting inside a third place which, Harman tell us, is in fact "the intention as a whole" (ibid. p. 197). Since every object sits in a vacuum, this medium is where all the events in the world must take place. And, just as real objects must meet on the interior of a sensual one, so must sensual objects meet inside a real one. He offers an example: whilst gazing at a tree, I am sincerely absorbed in it, no matter how passive my attention. When all the various bits of tree assemble and fuse to create a unified tree-object, I have become the vicarious cause for the union of these sensual objects because it is *for* me—a real object—that they have come together (ibid. p. 219).

In attempting to think about how these inscrutable entities meet, we must look to metaphor as a way of perhaps alluding indirectly to the space between an object's substance and its sensual manifestation. Because the inner reality of things is so remote from understanding, it is through poetic language and aesthetic sensibility that we might brush against their secret existence. Harman cites an essay on metaphor by Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, in which he describes two modes of being: execution and image. Executant being, in Harman's own example, is experiencing something such as a headache directly for oneself. Witnessing another in the throes of anguish is never quite the same, no matter how sympathetic we may feel. There is a fundamental gap between "my life as it executes itself and the life of another as seen from outside" (2005, p. 103). This also applies to introspection, in a similar way to the rift between an object's being and its sensual presence as mentioned above, in that we are only ever "eavesdropping" on ourselves; there is no consanguinity between our actual inner reality and our observation of it. Ortega then extends this concept to include inanimate objects as

well. Peaches, Viking ships, ribbons and bombs also have a private inwardness, or, as Ortega would put it: there is an I-peach, an I-Viking ship, an I-ribbon, and so on.

Importantly, this inner depth cannot be fathomed by language or perception but merely translated into an outward manifestation that inevitably falls shy of what it alludes to. Narrative, says Ortega, "makes everything a ghost of itself, placing it at a distance, pushing it beyond the here and now" (in Harman, ibid. p. 105); the real thing becoming dim like a snatch of stray radio chatter in space. Unable to literally reach the murky depths of an object, metaphor instead offers perhaps the best way to grope blindly towards it. And, although this cannot be done by referring to any genuine reality, metaphor draws upon our image of the thing as a unified whole: the executant "feeling" of it, which it then transforms, compelling us to live it as a new object (ibid. p. 109). This new object is created when other objects with apparently little in common collide. To illustrate this idea Ortega uses the example, "the cypress is a flame", but for the sake of variety we will take the similar sentence, "the stone is a radio". The reason that this metaphor has, potentially, more potency than say "the stone is a brick", is because the attributes of the latter are too closely related to disturb the surface of either object and so nothing changes.

In striking together two different things however, all previous associations and connotations that they may have had are shattered and fall away to reveal a "molten plasm" within, that is ready to take on any given form (ibid. p. 108). Stone and radio join forces to become a strange amalgam that sparks a new entity into being. This new hybrid object is the feeling-thing, or sensual object, that upon creation we are compelled to inhabit and live executantly, having been unable to reach the executant being of either radio or stone. By way of unlikeness, metaphor creates a crackle between an object's

hidden secrets and its sensual surface, opening a fleeting channel, perhaps, to the ever retreating molten core.

Allusion, metaphor, simulated being: this, according to Harman and Ortega, is where aesthetics plays an important role. Art does not merely tell us about things, but rather it "present[s] them to us in the act of executing themselves" (ibid. p. 105). Through its strange understanding and presentation of the world, art has the ability to brush up against the weird realm of objects, and help us attune ourselves to a poetic existence. It reaches out to things beyond their immediate qualities, beyond their relations, even as they back away. Here we might truly acquaint ourselves with and speculate about the mysterious, fascinating, rich and fleshly world, instead of drifting through a void, "pointing sadly at the ineffable" (ibid. p. 20).

> To make things a bit livelier, turn to page 45.

> To enter a vicarious encounter, turn to page 55.

> To tune into an object, turn to page 25.

1. Wallace Stevens' name for cold, distant reality was "the rock", which he describes as "the thing, a hard alien reality… *the thing itself*, the bare remote inhuman thing that lies beyond all human understanding and meaning-making" (Critchley, 2005, p. 62).

> Conclude

Poetry is the subject of the poem,

From this the poem issues and

To this returns. Between the two,

Between issue and return, there is

An absence in reality,

Things as they are. Or so we say.

- Wallace Stevens, excerpt from 'The Man With the Blue Guitar (1937), in (Critchley, 2005, p. 19).

This thesis has hopefully relayed not only the main themes and concerns of dOCUMENTA (13), but also something of the experience of attending the exhibition, with its manifold trajectories, possibilities and, inevitably, the paths not taken; the shows not seen. By attempting to channel multiple voices through this work, as well as giving some navigational control to the reader, I have tried to displace myself from its centre. Although this decentring is done to complement the attitude of anti-anthropocentricism advocated throughout, it perhaps fails the moment such a bias is even adopted. However, this endeavour can still attempt to make an ecstatic gesture of relinquished genitivity; to promote a spirit of humility in humanity's relationship with the world.

The various angles of perspective at play in this text also wish to evoke the experience of aesthetic contemplation: the way in which we can become lost in other things, and vice versa. This has been approached through the concept of empathy as a fusion between observer and object, and also through ecstasy as displacement of self when confronted with some fascinating entity. Graham Harman's idea of 'vicarious causation' has likewise proved pertinent to this entanglement. In these terms aesthetic experience is understood as the medium in which objects meet, as in the case of metaphor, where two unrelated things can collide and create a strange new object that we are compelled to live 'executantly'. Furthermore, I concur with Harman's view that metaphor and allusion can point beyond our current understanding, allowing us to creatively blunder towards new perspectives and possibilities of thought.

dOCUMENTA (13) emphasised the "embodied nature of the gathering in an exhibition" (2012, p, 76) as an alternative to the near-instantaneous, swarming network of flowing data that defines the digital age. As in Kassel, the discussion here works from within a networked structure; moments of concentrated observation encompassed within the fractured whole, and channels opened between disparate subjects. Christov-Bakargiev writes of the "focus" one can slowly direct at a single artwork, this "viscous experience" leading to a fusion of mind and matter (ibid. p. 43). Following this syncopic concentration, we may begin to see the world anew, strangely, and from the inside of the objects of our attention. I imagine this "focus" as doubling back on the subject, causing them to become focussed themselves; concentrated like light through a magnifying glass. And, as they thicken, they become stony and dense, temporarily suspended against the flow of information and progress.

Alongside this deep engagement with matter, dOCUMENTA (13) also addresses the recent turn towards objects in contemporary thought, specifically through the work

of Speculative Realism and object-oriented philosophy. Against the wandering, immaterial signifiers of a language-, and therefore human- centred existence, we are invited to savour instead the fascinating textures of reality. I have approached this shift by focussing on language as a thing in itself, emphasising its materiality in order to employ a grammar more appropriate to the discussion of objects. In foregrounding the materially resistant properties of words, I also wish to articulate a language of dissonance, recalcitrance and oblique agency. This thesis, like Catherine Clément's *Syncope*, does not offer specific ideas for action to effect change in our capitalist, patriarchal and environmentally hubristic society. It suggests instead something like an aesthetics of resistance and tactical withdrawal; a means of describing a necessary collective attitude adjustment, however idealistic an endeavour that may seem. These concerns have been expressed without, I hope, too much didacticism; rather they are intended to convey a sense of defiant enthusiasm and a sincere fascination with the world.

The references to noise throughout the text have attempted to demonstrate the potential for rich new information to emerge from chaotic states. The capacity of self-organising systems to observe noise at one level or subsystem and convert it into complexity at another, describes precisely what takes place within a work of art, according to William R. Paulson. Like an experience of syncope, or *ostrannenie*, the newly nuanced literary text (we will extend this to art in general), through its strange new presentation of the world, "leads us to modify ourselves, to shift position, to change and adapt our ways of mind a little so that it can become a part of them" (1988, p. 99). Indeed, Paulson emphasises the essential presence of the noise in artistic texts, which enables them to move beyond standard, purely functional communication. It is this excess quality that gives artworks their potential autonomy, freed from utilitarian

concerns (ibid. p. 83). Poetic language—literary, visual, or otherwise—seems therefore the best route to take in attempting to approach the extra-ordinary dimensions of our understanding. By way of metaphor and analogy, we might open an indirect, analogue channel to uncertainty and embrace the inevitably ensuing noise.

I believe that when it is at its best—its most thoughtful, its most generous and its most formally elegant—art creates genuinely transformative moments, which can lead to a renewed perception of reality, positive or otherwise. Taking a cue from dOCUMENTA (13), I am advocating a dance that is syncopic, empathic, rapturous, obstreperous, vital, stony, sublime, material, and lasts for a long time; one that speaks of a moment of impossible communion, as epitomized in the encounter between artwork and apprehender. Deep within this black hole there exists a strangely unsettled realm in which both parties, like atoms bonding ionically, become inextricably entangled; irrevocably altered; infinitely ecstatic.

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Blinking, you emerge from the forest. Game over.
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> It is she who sinks down, dress spreading out like a flower, fainting, before a public that hurries forward; arms reach out, carry the unresisting body…People slap her, make her sniff salts. When she comes to, her first words will be, "Where am I?" And because she has come to, "come back", no one thinks to ask where she has been. The real question would be, rather, "Where was I?" But no, when one returns from syncope it is the real world that suddenly looks strange.
> (Clément, 1994, p. 1)

Catherine Clément, in her book *Syncope*: *The Philosophy of Rapture* (1990) peers into the dark forest between moments of consciousness; she listens, off the beat, for dissonant notes and asks what kind of political gesture can be found within the elliptical syncope. She moves playfully, and romantically, through the wide range of meanings that the word 'syncope' contains, starting with the musical definition given by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the *Dictionary of Music: "Syncope*: prolongation on the strong [beat] of a sound begun on the weak [beat]; wherefore, every syncopated note is in counter time, and every collection of syncopated notes is a movement in counter time" (1994, p. 254). Syncopation is integral to countless different kinds of music and is easily imagined by recalling the off-the-beat feeling that is typical of any reggae or ska song; the rhythm is disrupted by displacing the accent from the strong downbeat to the unassuming upbeat. The musical syncope becomes, therefore, a crucial interruption that gives rise to an exquisite moment of suspense, like an irregularity in a heartbeat. A "jerk tremor" that "suppresses the subject's consciousness" (ibid. p. 18) but yet drives the music onwards, anticipating the next beat as opposed to simply withdrawing from action.

Then there is the medical use of the term to describe a temporary loss or absence of consciousness, in other words, a faint followed by a sudden return to the world. It is distinguished in this way from a coma, which is of course a potentially

more permanent state of affairs. Syncope is a near-death: a brief leave of absence from our waking life that momentarily suspends time in a dark "cerebral eclipse" (ibid. p. 21). Clément mentions both voluntary syncopes, for example those brought on by religious asceticism or ecstatic dancing, as well the more spontaneous kind, such as an epileptic seizure or even a sneeze. All share a brief but total loss of self that is often accompanied by a sense of elation, the rapture alluded to in the title of the book.

There is a game played by teenagers that might serve as one example of this kind of syncope. It involves depriving one's brain of oxygen either by strangulation, or hyperventilation followed by a strong force applied to the diaphragm. I knew it by the name 'American Dream', but it goes under many others, such as 'Suffocation Roulette', 'Trip to Heaven' and 'The Dying Game'. The idea is to black out and then hopefully experience vivid hallucinations accompanied by a euphoric high, an exciting prospect when you are thirteen and feeling bored. The trance, my friends and I believed, could only be broken by a bucket of ice water thrown over the dreamer; otherwise they would remain unconscious forever. Luckily we never managed to get past the hyperventilation part, being too squeamish—and cautious—for strangulation or a punch to the chest. Rumours abounded of classmates successfully passing out, though fakery was always suspected. Clément's syncope is just such a 'Dying Game'. One does not die in a moment of syncopation but merely pretends, returning with new perspectives and extended horizons. Looking to the East, she mentions the yogis of India, who would not consider the holding of breath to result in a "blackout of consciousness, but on the contrary of a consciousness broadened to the emphatic perception of the whole universe" (ibid. p157). And it is

through the example of the Hindu *renonçant* [*sannyasi*] that the author finds syncope's political potential.

To fully remove him or herself from society, the renonçant must cast aside all .material possessions, stage a funeral, and retreat to the forest to live the life of an ascetic, in spiritual contemplation. The withdrawal into a state of syncopation, however, is not an abdication of political agency but a firm assertion of passive resistance: "A limited rebellion; the political idea is on the edge of weakness. Surprisingly, this glaring weakness contains a raging force" (ibid. p. 20). The retreat is then followed by a new return, armed with a reformed perception. In opposition to contemporary society's valorisation of strength, vigour, and masculine power, syncope deals in darkness and tactical weakness, dissolving the subject and opening up a space for dissent. It is the realm of rebellion and resistance, home to Tricksters like Esu Elegbara the Yoruban deity.

Like Hermes he sits at the crossroads, mediating between the gods and their subjects through games and tricks that are calculated to test humanity and ultimately teach them some wisdom. The Trickster, by unsettling the stability of meaning and interpretation can inhabit the language of the oppressor and subvert it from within. Literary critic Henry Louis Gates offers the example of the 'Signifyin' Monkey', a character from African American-folklore who is based upon Esu Elegbara. The Monkey, who speaks in figurative language, constantly plays tricks on the Lion—the self-appointed King of the Jungle—who interprets everything literally and very much to his cost. The Monkey launches a tirade of insults aimed at the Lion's relatives but claims he is just repeating what has been said by the Elephant. The Lion then dashes to confront the Elephant who, after denying the offence, proceeds to soundly beat him. However, his vexation towards the Monkey upon his return is due mainly to the

fact that he has misunderstood the Trickster's use of figurative speech, or in Gates' terms, that he has been "Signified" upon, and his kingly status therefore undermined. Signifyin(g), Gates writes, "is the figure of the double-voiced, epitomized by Esu's depictions in sculpture as possessing two mouths" (1988, p. xxv) and is implemented in the games and metaphoric substitutions that can be used to destabilise hegemonic language. Both the renonçant and the Trickster, through strategies that create a situation of dissonance followed by one of change and maturation, may be said to be acting in sympathy with syncope. They "*disconcert* the consensus", like the "delay of the note that lingers and dislocates harmony for a moment" after a musical syncopation (Clément, 1994, p. 161).

Through Esu Elegbara's use of double meanings, puns and nonliteral speech, he has come to be associated with the indeterminacy and ambiguity inherent in figurative language. He is in fact a "metaphor for the uncertainties of explication, for the open-endedness of every literary text", (Gates, 1988, p. 21). Perhaps then, he functions in a similar way to the device of the syncope in that it too attempts to point towards a sort of confusion and chaos in meaning. It is the unrepresentable; the unknowable and inscrutable forest that language can evoke but not penetrate. Only through various translations can we move around the edges of the void, attempting to look beyond our current understanding, and hopefully emerging translated ourselves.

The word 'translation' can mean, "to render into another language; to express into another artistic medium; to interpret the significance or meaning of (an action, behaviour etc.); to remove or transfer to another place; to remove to heaven, *esp.* without death" (Chambers Dictionary, 1993). Saints were 'translated' into heaven, meaning that their bodies did not suffer the decay of mortal beings. The *transitus*, or 'passing over', therefore implies a change for the better, according to Marina

Warner. She tells of entranced bodies—*transitus* gives us the word 'trance'—such as that of Santa Caterina de' Vigri, who died in 1463 but remains sitting upright in a shrine in Bologna today. According to Catholic belief, she writes, the body of a particularly holy person can remain untouched by deathly disintegration while they await judgement and the reintegration of body and soul on Judgement Day. These figures, usually embalmed in wax to preserve a quickened countenance, lie somewhere beyond life in a transitional sleep, having somehow evaded death. The trance state suggests perhaps that "the self has also let go of conscious control" and "might figure a condition of receptivity" (2006, pp. 50-51).

Here is a moment of syncopation that can be connected to a certain perception of feminine passivity. In the many entranced subjects present in popular consciousness for example, the Spiritualist medium, Sleeping Beauty or Snow White, we can see an image of the vulnerable, weakened woman whose self has been abandoned, or lost, to the unknown. But we must insist, with Clément, that this temporary absence does not imply an enfeebled faint and instead look again to the East at a femininity that opens up to a "cosmic motherhood, of the forest and the sea" (1994, p. xvi). This productive passivity, she writes, is not exclusive to women but can be found embodied in the likes of Mohandas Gandhi who was quite happy to be considered a maternal figure, the 'Mother of India'.

In orbiting these various syncopes, we are attempting here to not only declare the importance of the displacement of white male dominance and power in society, but to extend that intention to humankind in general. It is simply undeniable that we have reached (or more probably, exceeded) a crisis point in our relationship with this planet. The plain facts of overpopulation, over-intensive farming, global warming, the decline in bee populations etc. and the obvious need to take action are well

known and need not be repeated here. I would like just to offer a brief account of syncope's relationship with ecology and how it might offer a means of expanding our thinking beyond an anthropocentric world. Clément does not offer specific ideas for action but simply advocates an adjustment in our relationship with the earth.

Returning to the figure of the renonçant, the deliberate loss of mastery as mentioned above might be described as a good start in learning how to relinquish some control over nature and abiding within it in a less intrusive manner. The renouncer, though she identifies with the natural sphere, rejects its inherent violence. Any syncopating person, according to Clément, "is not the centre of the world but simply part of nature, of the living, like plants, or animals" (1994, p. xvi). She encourages us, after Lévi-Strauss, to shift the emphasis from *thinking* in the world to *living* in it. This is reminiscent of Donna Haraway's term 'becoming-with' (as opposed to simply 'becoming'). We must be aware of other forms of being in the world, animate and inanimate. And, instead of fear and competition, perhaps there is potential in finding a sense of "accord between human and the many non-human intelligences" (Christov-Bakargiev, 2012, p. 34).

Clément contrasts the traditional attitudes towards nature of East and West. In the West, we have inherited the *cogito ergo sum*: the Cartesian subject that, once declared, became of supreme importance in the world. Masters of nature, we demonstrate our sovereignty by exploiting and preserving it where we see fit. In India however, though not without their share of pollution and agricultural damage, she sees a more readily-made transition towards 'becoming-with' nature. Humanity, in traditional Indian metaphysics, is viewed as "a passage from one cycle to another: merely a stage": an outlook that does not make man the owner of all other forms of life (1994, p. 257).

In the interests of survival we, like the Yoruban Lion, need to have our collective sense of lordship overthrown. Syncope, with its emphasis on the 'agency of nonagency' allows for the humble return to a nature that we ourselves have ravaged. By abandoning ourselves to the chaotic abyss, we can deliberately lose focus and control, fragmenting consciousness and opening ourselves to what Paul Klee called "polyphonic" or "multidimensional" attention. We shall enter the forest cave, but will soon return to new awareness of life beyond syncope.

"I wanted to displace self, I wanted to dissolve self. Belonging no longer exists; access is absolute, it accedes to nothing, since the 'to' is no longer there. I am access, that is all there is to it. Do not look for me 'elsewhere'; you will find nothing but monsters."
(Clément, 1994, p. 252)

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> To peer into the abyss, turn to page 50.

> To leave the forest and head for the ocean, turn to page 64.

> To make strange, turn to page 60.

> To look for Catherine Clément, turn to page 18.
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Tck tck tck tck tck. A gnarled chunk of wood sits against a white background, underneath a microphone. It appears to be a still image with accompanying sound but it soon becomes clear that it is a video loop; the wood is merely stationary. What of the frantic crunchy noise that the microphone hears? It turns out that this is the sound of a clew of woodworms, unseen but busy devouring the heart out of their host. This piece by Swiss artist Zimoun resonates with and makes tangible some of the ideas put forward by Jane Bennett, in her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010). Something, which at first glance looks inert, becomes vital and vibratory. The work, entitled *25 woodworms, wood, microphone, sound system* (2009), was shown as part of an exhibition that sought to displace humanity's claim to the centre of all being in the universe, through ideas that somehow trouble the subject/object, human/nonhuman divide[1]. Similarly, Bennett advocates a non-anthropocentric, ecological approach to the world that she terms, "Vital Materialism", using examples such as noxious rubbish and the fats in an unhealthy diet to demonstrate how matter is an active influence that can shape existence.

All things organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman are considered to be "actants", after Bruno Latour. This refers to "that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events (Bennett, 2010, p. viii). In recognising the agency of nonhuman actants, she argues, we open ourselves to the infinitely rich and mysterious world beyond our immediate gaze, and admit equal status with everything else. This gaze must be directed inwards as well as out to the world. Humans accommodate myriad tiny organisms, such as bacteria in the digestive system, which remind us of the multiplicity and radical alterity of our own flesh. Like Graham Harman's ontology, there is no special privilege awarded to humans; we are objects among the rest. And, as we have seen, interactions between

objects need no human observer to take place; the things themselves exist beyond any relations or presence in our consciousness. Equally, the vital materialist recognises that matter is a creative, lively force outside any human control or understanding, and that acknowledging this is crucial to our dealings with the environment. As Bennett puts it: holding on to an "image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (ibid. p. ix).

She promotes a certain degree of anthropomorphism; that is, we must learn to recognise an image of ourselves in non-human actants, thereby coming to appreciate the power of other entities and ultimately overcoming anthropocentricism. By seeing correspondences with human activity in nature, it is possible that our position as unique beings could be undermined, and agency more widely attributed. It is no longer an 'us' and 'them' relationship with the environment but rather a "chord is struck between person and thing" (ibid. p. 120) and the two become entangled. Bennett offers a lovely example of this kind of isomorphism: the fourteenth-century text *Great Treatise on Supreme Sound* indicates that players looking to produce a staccato effect should try to mimic the motion of "an emaciated crow perched on a bare tree or pecking at the snow in hope of finding something to eat" (ibid. p. 99).

The decentring of human beings in nature has obvious ethical implications; by calling ourselves mere objects surely we run the risk of exploitation and instrumentalization of the more vulnerable in society, denying people their subjectivity and therefore their basic human rights. Or, in more extreme terms, how might we distinguish, for example, between the right to life of a deadly virus and the sentient creature that is acting as its host? Here Bennett admits that her "conatus", or natural striving for life, outweighs the idea of completely "horizontalizing" all inhabitants of the world; we naturally identify most with our fellow humans, in that they are bodies

"most similar" to our own. The task of vital materialism is not to eliminate all differences between actants but rather to promote "a polity with more channels of communication between members" (2010, p. 104). Placing humans on equal ontological footing with objects does not signify any denial of human uniqueness or importance. Rather, by affirming our own materiality, vital materialism seeks to raise the possibility of a thoroughly egalitarian, non-hierarchical culture which is ultimately beneficial to the human race. Self-interest is endorsed here as a means to an ecological end. Though, as the author points out, alertness to lively matter will not bring a miraculous end to human oppression, it could "inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin", and illuminate the way in which we are all "inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations" (ibid. p. 13).

The kind of alertness to the vibrancy of matter advocated by Jane Bennett is reminiscent of Harman's idea that aesthetics might be a way of "establish[ing] objects deeper than the features through which they are announced" (2012, p. 542), and it also bears resemblance to Speculative Realism's goal of approaching things with an attitude of naivety. As previously discussed, through poetic strategies we might make creative speculations about the private interior of an object's reality. Likewise vital materialism recommends that, in order to begin to think about forces outside of human understanding, we must develop a patient, careful attentiveness to the sensuous world around—and inside—us. This sense of enchantment can then be focussed in two directions: one towards the activity of things that produce effects in the world, helpful or otherwise, and the other towards the people who "*feel* enchanted and whose agentic capacities may be thereby strengthened" (2010, p. xii).

Part of this new awareness is cultivated through the use of appropriate language: one that reflects the liveliness of nonhuman actants, running contrary to the traditional

association between objects and ‘inertness’, ‘passivity’ and ‘muteness’. Bennett wishes to muddle the distinction between “life” and “matter”, “worrying them until they start to seem strange”, in the way that the sound of a word can become defamiliarised and abstract when repeated over and over (ibid. p. vii).

This mimetic use of language fulfils the two recommendations given by Harman in his doctoral dissertation to encourage wider engagement with philosophical texts: firstly, that the style should be as “intriguing” as possible. The mimesis here might take place at a structural level, the form in some way conveying a dynamic organisation of worldly influences, or through an attention to the materiality of words themselves. Descriptions of things can emphasise the materiality of both the objects *and* the lexical corporeity of the words used to describe them. This leads to Harman’s second suggestion that the text should, at the level of content, remind the reader of the enthralling and seductive force of those entities alongside which we exist (1999, p. 279). For example, an engagement with specific beings can be observed in his own work through the ever-growing crowd of objects that it is populated, and enlivened, by[2].

This strategy is pertinent to ecological concerns because not only can it help to create an interesting and vibrant literature on the subject, but, working outwards from language, it can begin to foster an attitude of thoughtfulness towards the non-human. By drawing attention to the surface of language we might begin to see words as objects themselves and, even as they withdraw from view, they leave an impression of their hidden vivacity like an after-image fading from a retina. Unlike the disorienting postmodern realm of floating signifiers from which Harman is so keen to escape, we have a situation where words become like rubble, insistently rough and tangible, yet ever alluding to a real, lively and delicate environment beyond their own.

The past, the present, the future, the dawn of appearance and death, tenacious illusions, are only the declinations of matter. They decline and are declined like the tenses of a verb, a word made up of atom-letters.

(Serres, 2000, p. 33)

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> To go for a stroll in the compost heap, turn to page 19.

> To visit the Field of the Sky, turn to page 55.
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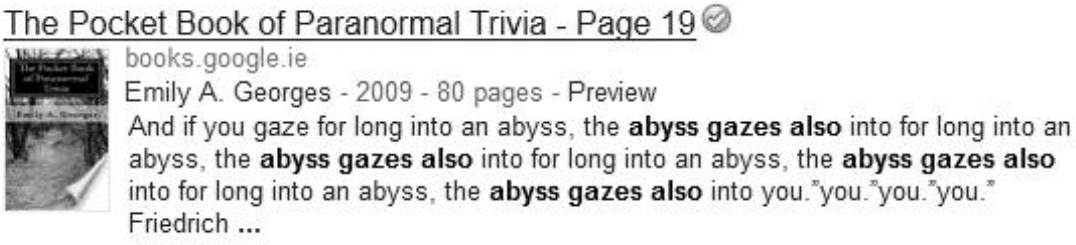
1. *And Another Thing*, curated by Katherine Behar and Emmy Mikelson, The James Gallery, New York, 2011.
2. For instance, some things that appear in *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (2005): a radio tower, a bean field, a forest, a lake, a crime scene, a comet, a monkey, a volcano, a saxophone, a police car, a kitten, coral reefs, sorghum fields, paragliders, ant colonies, binary stars, sea voyages, Asian swindlers, and desolate temples.



The above is a screen-capture from a Google Books search for the Nietzsche quote: "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze for long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you" from *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). Through some kind of glitch, the search result placed the phrase right into its own *mise-en-abîme*: "…the abyss gazes also into for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."you."you." What happens when the abyss looks at itself in the mirror? It would probably give itself a terrible fright, if it knew what it is to see infinity receding, infinitely. There is a description in Flann O'Brien's novel, *The Third Policeman*, of a theory postulated by the mad scientist, De Selby. He held that by looking in a mirror and seeing a reflection looking back which, due to the finite speed of light, is slightly delayed and therefore earlier in time, a kind of time travel could be achieved. The addition of many more mirrors, and thus many more delayed images resulted, De Selby claimed, in a "growing youthfulness in the reflections of his face according as they receded, the most distant of them – too tiny to be visible to the naked eye – being the face of a beardless boy of twelve" (1993, p. 67). To me this description of infinite regress, like the aforementioned abyss, is both amusing and terrifying; it is the sublime made ridiculous.

Perhaps we can look to horror and science-fiction writer H.P. Lovecraft in considering this situation. Lovecraft has recently become something of a muse for Speculative Realism, that branch of philosophy which posits a weird reality lying beyond all human understanding. Within his unsettling descriptions of alien presences, the various proponents of Speculative Realism have found an affinity with their own world of strange and reticent things. Indeed, it is the schism between the manifest surface of objects and their inscrutable private reality that reveals "terrifying vistas" and introduces a sense of horror to both approaches, theoretical and fictive (Harman, 2008, p. 336). What is more, the faltering tone of Lovecraft's narrators effectively conveys the unspeakable nature of the things with which they are confronted. For example, here is a short extract from *The Colour Out of Space* (1927) in which a meteorite falls from the sky into a man's garden and proceeds to suck the life from everything unfortunate enough to be nearby:

> "They had uncovered what seemed to be the side of a large coloured globule embedded in the substance. The colour, which resembled some of the bands in the meteor's strange spectrum, was almost impossible to describe; and it was only by analogy that they called it colour at all. Its texture was glossy, and upon tapping it appeared to promise both brittleness and hollowness"[1]

Language seems to dissolve into uncertainty when faced with something like this malevolent rock, or indeed when attempting to probe the depths of any object's inner existence. The horror therefore resides within the unknowability of the finite; the "insufficiency of the description" (ibid. p. 357) serving to destabilise our perception and propel us, perhaps, towards an updated version of the sublime.

The classic sublime experience as articulated by Immanuel Kant may be thought of in terms of syncope: a transformative moment of suspension and terror (or displeasure, as Kant would say) followed by intense rapture. This movement between

attraction and repulsion produces a shuddering in the subject, as they oscillate between feelings of displeasure, "arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason" (2007, p. 88), and pleasure in actually recognising this inadequacy, thereby reaffirming the power of reasoning. Kant's account of the sublime placed the emphasis on subjective experience of human limitation when faced with almighty, chaotic nature, "it was a way of talking about what happens when we are faced with something we do not have the capacity to understand or control- something excessive" (Morley, 2010, p. 16), but ultimately, reason endures and the subject emerges triumphant.

In more recent times, postmodern thought has looked towards overwhelming technology to articulate its sublime. Faced with the sheer amount of information that constitutes the ether nowadays, it is surely easy to lapse into technophobia, if not Neo-Luddism. The techno-sublime threatens to engulf us in its invisible matrices of data and global circuits of communication; the Internet coming to replace the ocean as the classic metaphor for subjective-annihilation.

Here, however, I would like to briefly examine chaos—as an element of the sublime—in relation to chaos in literature. Deconstructive theory developed cotemporally with scientific theories of entropy, information and chaos, and there are significant overlaps in their respective terminologies. At the same time as Jacques Derrida was developing his idea of Deconstruction, which posits the instability of language, physicist Mitchell Feigenbaum was studying chaotic systems. Though no evidence of an influence between the two men is apparent, they used the same vocabulary of "folding" and "iteration" to describe indeterminacy, whether in language or in information systems (Hayles, 1987, p. 122). Furthermore, just as Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics detached sign from signified, so Claude Shannon's information

theory separated the message from its meaning. N. Katherine Hayles suspects that the isomorphism between these two disciplines is due to a general "cultural climate" that sees the above separations as "an important part of the postmodern condition" (ibid. p. 124). In any case, both models favour chaos over order, in that indeterminacy holds the potential for rich information to emerge. This is due to the fact that chaos is no longer held in opposition to order, but is understood to precede it.

Shannon published a paper in 1948 stating that his equation for information, which we associate with order, was essentially the same as the equation for entropy, which we associate with disorder. This led to a wide re-evaluation of the presence of chaos in systems, as well as posing questions about humanity's capacity to understand chaotic nature: "If chaos is information too complex to comprehend, then perhaps the limiting factor…is the human mind" (ibid. pp. 120-1). We have returned to Kant's "inadequacy of imagination", but this experience of the chaotic sublime does not lead to the reassertion of human dominance and reason. Entropy, rather, evades "coercive control" and instead becomes associated with chance and creativity, allowing "organisms to evolve" and new, infinitely rich information to "come into being" (ibid. p. 133)

The attempt to understand complex information could be seen as a potentially infinite endeavour, one that might be identified with deconstruction's idea of the elusive movement of sense in language. Furthermore, this tendency towards the infinite can be said to reflect the post-structuralist concept of deferred meaning or deferral, that is, the inability to ever connect a word to its referent through language: meaning always escapes along an endless chain of signifiers. I am put in mind of a description of meaning withdrawing that has stayed with me for years:

"any attempt to find an objective reality at the heart of the labyrinth of signs is an exercise in futility. It is like unrolling a ball of string. The string is the sequence of signs, all of which signify other signs by conventions assigned to them. At the end of the string one hopes to find the object that is being signified, but when one comes to the end of the string there is nothing. It is string all the way down, and the ball is gone" (Hankins & Silverman, 1999, p. 144).

This portrayal of retreating meaning is of course reminiscent of Lovecraft's failed descriptions of things. However, though unfathomable and even terrifying, Harman does not believe that they represent a doorway to infinity. Rather, he sees these monstrous entities as a "subversion of the finite world" (2008, p. 341). As our image of the thing under scrutiny breaks down, its inaccessible reality withdraws even further from our grasp. Maybe this could be imagined through another image of Mylesian regress: there is a spear in *The Third Policeman*, manufactured by Officer MacCruiskeen, with a seven-inch point that is so sharp and so thin in cannot be seen with the naked eye: "The first half of the sharpness is thick and strong but you cannot see it either because the real sharpness runs into it and if you saw one you could see the other", and in fact, the spear continues towards a point "so thin that maybe it does not exist at all" (1993, p. 70-1). I suspect this is all that can ever be glimpsed by holding a mirror to the abyss.

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>You have reached a dead end. Turn back.
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1. http://www.dagonbytes.com/thelibrary/lovecraft/thecolouroutofspace.htm

Roundtable on Objecthood, Non-Human Intelligences and Intra-Worldly Collaboration

This conversation was held on the 12th February 2012, in the Campo del Cielo meteorite field in northern Argentina. The participants were: curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (artistic director of dOCUMENTA (13)), artists Guillermo Faivovich and Nicolás Goldberg (Buenos Aires), and meteorite El Chaco (Chaco, Argentina).

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev: I'd like to begin by thanking everyone for being here, especially on such a scorching hot day. As you know, we are here to discuss Guillermo and Nicolás' recently halted project for dOCUMENTA (13): *El Chaco en Kassel* (2012), in which the artists attempted to temporarily move El Chaco to the city of Kassel, Germany, for the duration of the exhibition. I hope that we can cover some of the issues surrounding the reasons for ending the project prematurely, but also think a bit about the broader questions it raises. For example, what kinds of access do we have to non-human actors in this world? Can we speak of an intra-worldly collaboration? We're delighted of course to have El Chaco with us today and we look forward to getting its input. I'll hand over now to Guillermo and Nicolás. Maybe you could start by introducing the background of the project; how you arrived at this juncture?

Nicolás Goldberg: Thanks Carolyn. When Guillermo and I first met we connected immediately over our shared love of the cosmos as well as visual art. We had only recently begun working together when Guillermo mentioned the meteorite field, Campo del Cielo. It sounded interesting so we headed up north to visit. I should briefly explain, for anyone who is not familiar with this region… the Campo del Cielo, or Field of Heaven, is a three hundred and twenty square-metre area which, four thousand years ago, was showered with broken pieces of an eight hundred ton meteor. It must have collided with something else in the asteroid belt that stretches between Mars and Jupiter and then sent hurtling to Earth. These

iron meteorites, which have been around for four and half billion years, are older than the world itself. The site, naturally, is revered by the indigenous people of the area; their ancestors probably would have even witnessed these luminous rocks falling to the ground. We both became fascinated with the history of these objects and began researching their cultural, political and scientific background. Obviously there are the local oral accounts, and then there is the documented history of the Spanish conquistadors who arrived in the sixteenth century thinking they had discovered a seam of iron ore. Since then the meteorites have had a busy life, being studied by scientists, being stolen by meteorite collectors, even being sent halfway around the world to Spain and England.

Guillermo Faivovich: Yes, then the latest part of their story began when Nicolás and I visited the planetarium in Buenos Aires. Sitting outside the building is El Taco, one of the meteorites from the Campo del Cielo. We noticed that one of its sides was perfectly smooth; it had clearly been cut in two. None of the staff seemed to know that much about it but we were captivated by this orphan stone and decided to locate its other half. We eventually traced it to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D. C. It's quite a long story, but basically we spent four years trying to persuade the Smithsonian to lend us El Taco for an exhibition in Frankfurt where it would be reunited with the half that lives in Buenos Aires. This required a lot of institutional engineering on our part, but eventually we managed to bring the two pieces of El Taco back together after almost forty-five years apart.

Goldberg: Though not totally together; they had to remain sixty centimetres apart, otherwise the floor would have caved in! [*Laughter*] Anyway, this work of course became the first part of our project for dOCUMENTA (13).

Christov-Bakargiev: It was a great moment. I recall feeling a strong sense of joy at seeing these long-lost entities being reconnected. Although I suppose forty-five years isn't that long in terms of a meteorite's life span. But what I found so compelling about this project was the way in which it gestured towards a wider sense of healing, perhaps even reconciliation, between the victims and perpetrators of colonialism. This utterly alien object, almost inconceivably ancient, suddenly became a common ground or meeting place for humans. And I suppose these are the issues that arose in relation to the second part of the work: bringing El Chaco to Kassel. On the one hand, the meteorite could establish a focal point. It would create a place for people to come together and contemplate its wonderfully contradictory nature as a dense, insistently present piece of

matter that somehow remains cosmically distant. On the other hand it could be, and was seen by many, as a perpetuation of colonialist models of cultural exploitation and theft.

Goldberg: Exactly. There were a number of meetings held locally to debate whether or not the loan should proceed and, in the end it was decided against, though not unanimously. The indigenous Moqoit community felt that moving El Chaco, or indeed causing any great interference to nature, would compromise the sacred balance of the ecosystem, which they pray to the meteorite to sustain. Without a consensus from El Chaco's traditional custodians, we felt the request should be withdrawn out of respect for those who did not agree with the move. As with the first part of the project however, the work, regardless of the actual outcome, can still be located in all the research, the negotiations and the "institutional engineering" as Guillermo called it. But perhaps El Chaco has something to say about all of this?

El Chaco: So, first of all I'd like to say that I'm flattered you have travelled so far to have this discussion. This is perhaps the first time that I have been consulted on such matters. Carolyn mentioned recently that she wondered would I enjoy a trip to an art exhibition as opposed to a world or science fair. Well I suspect, from my dealings with it in the past, that the scientific community would probably assume that I had no opinion at all. Does that answer your question, Carolyn?

Christov-Bakargiev: [*Laughter*] Yes! It does. Although we will not be graced with El Chaco's physical presence in dOCUMENTA (13), this endeavour will still leave an impression on the exhibition as a whole, and of course the process will be traceable in its accompanying publications. This might be an appropriate point at which to raise the question: when does matter come to matter? By this I mean, in the digital-age, how important is our bodily interaction with the physical world? What is it to be in one place and not the other? Or, as I have put it elsewhere, to be *em*placed?

Faivovich: In terms of the first half of this project that took place in Frankfurt, Guillermo and I agreed that it would not have mattered that much if we were unsuccessful in convincing the Smithsonian to lend us the meteorite; we would have probably had the exhibition anyway but with all the research and correspondence on display instead. However, when we actually did manage to borrow El Taco, there was no question but that the room would be totally empty except for the two halves. The objects were absolutely potent enough in themselves to fill the space.

Christov-Bakargiev: This is an interesting contrast to how the Moqoit people understand the meteorite's power. For them it is crucial that El Chaco remain in its original (earthly) context because the energy that it

possesses is inextricably bound to its local, contingent and multiple significances. But I believe it would have made a deep impact in its temporary home in Kassel too. As Etel Adnan wrote in her letter endorsing the proposal, it would dramatically link us to outer-space: "an archangel incarnated in stone"[1]. I am interested, as I think I mentioned earlier, in this idea of something that suggests both embodiment in the here-and-now while simultaneously alluding beyond itself, perhaps into to the unknown. Of course this is the territory currently being mapped by the Speculative Realist and object-oriented philosophers, notably Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman. They propose a move away from what Meillassoux has named 'correlationism', which is the tendency of post-Kantian thought to assert the inseparability of human consciousness and being, that is, the impossibility of thinking outside of thought. They reject this anti-realist stance and instead embrace a world of actual, yet always partially withdrawn entities. Apologies if you are all familiar with this already. I think that this reinstated sense of objecthood is very pertinent to our conversation today, to Nicolás and Guillermo's work, and to El Chaco itself. It encourages us to profoundly engage with the materiality of the world, whilst displacing ourselves as a species from its centre. Perhaps, El Chaco, you'd like to give us some of your thoughts on this?

El Chaco: Sure, I'm actually quite a fan of Harman's work and I really think this is an intriguing new direction for philosophy. First of all, it is refreshing in its attempt to give some autonomy back to objects; I did not find the rather narcissistic idea that there is no reality outside of the human mind particularly compelling. But object-oriented philosophy recognises that objects do exist in the real world, although they are never fully present for each other. For example, my perception of Nicolás will never fully exhaust his being; he exceeds all relations. If he were to change his entire appearance, there would still be an unquestionable Nicolás-ness about him. Likewise, if I were broken in two, there would still be a surplus to my being, an El Chaco-ness; I am not reducible to my iron atoms. I especially like Harman's idea of an object as a black hole. I'm probably showing some cosmic bias here, but he gives a lovely description of the thing's interior infinitely falling away into darkness while still leaking faint signals that transmit to us its particular qualities.

Christov-Bakargiev: It is certainly a very seductive theory. But I have concerns about Harman's idea of objects being vacuum-sealed from each other; he emphasises the *non*-relationality of the object-oriented system, presumably to account for the withdrawal we have mentioned. He is also explicitly opposed to holistic theories of interaction. I would advocate a more ecologically focussed version of this model that allows for a closer

interrelation of entities and creates more space for recognising the delicate system of forces at play in nature. Like Jane Bennett says, perhaps we need not make objects and their relations mutually exclusive.

El Chaco: I take your point, but it is simply too imperialistic to deny objects their private retreat into the unknown. We cannot lay claim to their inner realities.

Christov-Bakargiev: Absolutely, and both object-oriented philosophy and Bennett's vital materialism allow for this. She agrees that objects, events, processes and so on are not fully analysable, which is why the mechanistic view of nature (such as that criticised by Carolyn Merchant) is not viable. We are all in agreement, I think, that these modes of thinking are keen to cease the instrumentalisation of objects, natural or otherwise, that serves human hubris. Certainly this is one of the key trajectories of thought in documenta this year. I wonder do the artists have anything to say in that regard; do you think that we were hubristic in our attempts to bring El Chaco to Kassel?

Goldberg: Quite the opposite! We would have been presenting El Chaco to the world as a fascinating thing in itself. We do not claim to have special access to its hidden secrets, no more than it has access to ours.

Christov-Bakargiev: I agree; it was certainly not my intention to facilitate an opportunistic and exploitative manoeuvre, but rather foster a sense of community around this marvellous object. Before we finish, I would like to thank you all once again for being here, and will just make a couple of brief concluding remarks. Faced, as we are, with the prospect of ecological crisis, there is a certain sense of urgency in realigning our attitude to the nonhuman presences in this world. In doing this we can begin to recognise our entangled histories—and futures—putting humanity on equal footing with all other producers of knowledge. I believe that this is necessary to encourage a more sustainable means of existence for all inhabitants of this planet. And, in feeling a kind of empathy with other forms of matter, we might recognise our mutual interconnection although, following Harman, this may be indirect or vicarious. Works such as *El Chaco en Kassel* focus our attention on the compelling materiality of being, leading towards an enhanced sense of collaboration, worldly and intra-worldly.

> Game over

Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky recalls an anecdote told by Anton Chekov:

For years and years, you walk down the same street. Each day you look up at a shop sign that reads, "Nectars of varied colours" and wonder what on earth would anyone want with different coloured nectars? Then, one afternoon, you notice that the sign has been taken down and turned on its side. For the first time it is clear to you that in fact it reads, "Neckties of varied colours".

I had a similar experience myself when, one bleary-eyed morning in the shower, I thought for a moment that I was putting Human Conditioner in my hair. The instant of confusion followed by amused comprehension certainly woke me up. This kind of sensation, according to Shklovsky, is the essence of art. Only displaced, interrupted objects can really reach us through the haze of the habitual, and art is an effective means of displacing them:

"In order to transform an object into a fact of art, it is necessary to detach it from the domain of life, to wrest it out from the web of familiar associations, to turn over the object as one would turn a log in the fire" (Shklovsky, in van den Oever, 2010, p. 26).

In the hands of an artist the object spits and sparks, and is transformed into something new. Whether through de-contextualisation, metaphor, use of the absurd, or whatever, art's strategies attempt to liberate the object from obscurity and draw attention to its fascinating qualities. We might describe the artistic process as being a state of syncope, in its requirement of a temporary absence from everyday existence. Sometimes characterised as a kind of psychosis, the "artist's reality demands crossing through an essential syncope, a veritable mental collapse, resulting in new work" (Clément, 1994, p. 236). But it is not just the artist who can enter a condition of syncopation when dealing with a work of art. The reader, listener or viewer should also

have the opportunity to follow the fainting lady, whom we met earlier, into her fugue—and out again.

Art and Technique, Viktor Shklovsky's 1917 Russian Formalist manifesto, made a break from the Romantic preoccupation with 'expression' prevalent at that time. Instead of looking beyond the object to find meaning he believed that art should retard our perception so that the object itself becomes new, as though we are seeing it for the first time. Going about our daily business, we become accustomed to our surroundings, to the things that we regularly encounter. He describes this habituation as an "algebraic method of thought", in which we see only dull caricatures of objects, familiar by their main attributes but imprecise, "as though enveloped in a sack" (1917, p. 11). Eventually such things disappear altogether and the encounter itself forgotten. Art's task is to reawaken a sense of wonder in perception, and the device Shklovsky proposes for this task is variously known as '*ostrannenie'*, 'estrangement', or 'defamiliarisation'.

The moment of defamiliarisation is syncopic: the reader experiences an abrupt break from the world, followed by a strange return. As perception is impeded, time slows to a standstill; the object under scrutiny ensnarls and we are invited to lose ourselves in its form. As Shklovsky writes, "art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*" (1917, p. 12). For him, perception is an aesthetic end for its own sake, although it might be worth arguing that this heightened observation can also usefully draw attention to the contained meaning of a work as well as its form, thus avoiding too rigid a kind of formalism. Defamiliarisation takes the known, the familiar, and complicates it. This may be done through any number of strategies; the author cites Tolstoy's use of an equine narrator to describe the notion of private property in the novel *Kholstomer*.

Because ‘owning’ seems so ridiculous to the horse, this well-known concept is plucked from invisibility and the reader forced to reconsider their own position.

The Formalist technique often sought to emphasise the materiality of the medium, for example, in poetry words become things and acquire a substance[1]. Shklovsky mentions Aristotle’s pronouncement that “poetic language must appear strange and wonderful” (1917, p. 23) and states that this can be achieved through defamiliarisation. Through wordplay, figurative speech or nonsense words that have no referent, focus is drawn to the texture of the language itself and the reception of the text is disrupted. One contemporaneous example of this is found in Zaum, a type of Russian sound poetry. In these poems, words are pushed to breaking point and meaning is often sacrificed entirely, as reflected in its name, meaning ‘beyond the mind’ or ‘beyond sense’. Shklovsky approved of this sort of estrangement, declaring it a “new and properly poetic language” (ibid. p. 23).

Keen to distance themselves from Romantic, expressive lyricism, Futurist poets focussed on making self-referential, abstract, trans-rational works containing neologisms that displaced ordinary language. Velimir Khlebnikov, one of the originators of Zaum, compared these nonsensical sound poems to spells or incantations. Though incomprehensible in terms of intellectual meaning, they still possess the power to greatly affect the listener, and are perhaps all the more potent in their unfathomable immediacy. In the way that the language of ritual conjures a shared mood through what anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski termed “the coefficient of weirdness”, the defamiliarised language of Zaum could unite the poet, or listener, “with the beings and things he’s trying to influence or connect with for a sharing of power, participation in a life beyond his own, beyond the human, etc.” (Rothenberg, no date).

Poetry, according to Simon Critchley, is an "enchantment" through words which, under the "spell of imagination" is capable of transforming the world. Reality is taken into the poem, transfigured, and then given back to us "under a new aspect" (2005, p. 57). With art's help, perception becomes splintered, difficult, but perhaps reaches outside the subject to become entangled in thingly things; in stony stones.

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> To address the stone, turn to page 69.

> To turn the sign on its side, turn to page 72.
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1. Robert Smithson wrote about the materiality of words and the capacity for this physical presence to contain its own network of meanings: "Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any *word* long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void" (1996, p. xvii).

Let us linger in syncopation for just another few moments… Like Clément's "syncope-people", artists, prophets, philosophers, dancers on a crowded dance floor; ours is a self-imposed exile. In temporarily abandoning one's identity, moving between the everyday and the exceptional, there is often found "an unreal and extraordinary sense of emancipation" (1994, p. 240). I wish to consider some of the possibilities that arise from being in a state of ecstasy—thinking particularly about the Greek sense of the word, *ekstasis*: to stand outside of oneself. In pursuit of ecstasy, we need not necessarily turn to mystic trances, asceticism or even drugs, but can find a different route through music, aesthetic contemplation or perhaps even through textual bliss.

Or what of love at first sight? This presents a moment of self-dispossession, an opportunity to enter the forest with the beloved: "an exceptional moment of surprise followed by an implacable certitude: it was meant to be…" (ibid. p. 175). To be in love: to be possessed by another, in both senses of being owned and being haunted by them. In entering a state of ecstasy the subject satisfies a desire to become possessed (by love, by sound, by rapture) but at the same time to divest themselves of that which they possess. There is a shift between owning and being owned that resonates with our earlier question of human ownership of nature. Stephen David Ross asks how deeply entangled the 'genitivity' found in language is with our propensity for property and possession. In dictionary explanations of the genitive case, it is generally referred to in terms of source and origin, implying a sense of 'natural' ownership: "It appears that we must not let things wander throughout the earth, but must pin them down where they belong, attached to some human being" (2001, p. 258).

I was completely mystified by the meaning of the phrase "*my* colt" or "*his* colt". I could see that humans presupposed a special relationship between me and the stable. What the nature of that relationship was I could not fathom at the time … I couldn't possibly understand what it meant when I heard myself called by people as the property

of a human being. The words "*my* horse" referred to me, a living horse, and this seemed to me just as strange as the words "my land", "my air" or "my water".

– Surpukhovsky, in Tolstoy's *Kholstomer*.

But perhaps ecstasy is a means of escape from this; a way of speaking without genitivity. In choosing to leave ourselves behind, we implicitly demonstrate a refusal of the dichotomy of owning and being owned: of "master and slave" (ibid. p. 163). Once again we mount a type of weak, syncopic rebellion. In dissolving the boundaries of the self and entering rapture, the very possibility of the self as a thing to own is negated. Even the passionate wish to rethink humanity's position in the world is ecstatic: the motivating voice must be placed outside of the subject. A brief mention of Simon Critchley's latest work, in which he listens out for the sound of that voice, might be helpful here.

In the *Faith of the Faithless* (2012i), Critchley considers various intersections between religion and politics in order to ask if society could be organised in a way that might enable a subject to overcome nihilism and become politically driven to act in concert with others. Political life, he believes, seems to need a "motivating and authorizing faith in order to avoid cynicism which, while not reducible to a specific context, might be capable of forming solidarity in a locality, a site, a region" (2012i, p. 4). This would not mean a return to traditional theological faith, but rather a general appeal to something beyond rationality that could mobilize and motivate citizens to work together for the good. Critchley describes this faith as one that does not have the security of a transcendental or metaphysical guarantee, for example, the promise of heaven for Christians, but one that is all the more potent for this supposed weakness. Without recourse to any fixed external authority, the subject decides to engage in an

ever-changing and rigorous inward struggle to bind themselves to some conception of a moral life. It is a performative, ethical engagement with something that exceeds yet requires all of the individual's power: an "imaginative, poetic tool for thinking about some other way in which society might be organised" (2012ii).

It seems then that the self must split, ecstatically, in order to meet this idea of morality; or, in Critchley's terms, become a 'dividual' that must respond to an 'infinite demand'[1]. The demand is infinite because we cannot ever be equal to it but although we fail, there is strength in the admission of our weakness, the "powerless power of being human" (2012i, p. 7), and instead of passive resignation from the world, we are called by conscience to active commitment. Similarly, Jean Fisher writes: perhaps it is in the realm of the imagination that the self finds the "potential for transformation", because it is in this field that the subject struggles to reconcile their own sense of self with the one "constructed through inherited discourses". A productive indeterminacy in language is revealed through this discrepancy but because, therefore, there is no "authentic self", it allows for the possible re-inscription of values and identity (2010, p. 89).

Following this fissure in language, let us move away from the responsibilities of one ecstasy and dive into another. We will look towards textual ambiguity to consider a more sensuous kind of rapture: *jouissance*. Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), articulates his idea of erotic textuality: language that seeks to be seductive and playful, yet resistant to power. According to this work, pleasure lies in language's ability to "wound or seduce" (1997, p. 38) that is, its capacity to unsettle yet captivate the reader through its clamour of meaning. Through dense styles of writing that lead to ambiguity, uncertainty is nurtured and a commotion of sense is caused. This might be compared to what Barthes describes as the "third meaning": a meaning beyond that gleaned from an "informational level" (including characters, setting, costume) or a

"symbolic level" (including diegetic and historical symbolism and signification) (1977, p. 52). The third meaning eludes clear explanation because it describes the ineffable "vertical din" that feeds the feeling of jouissance experienced by a reader rather than a "processive haste" of narrative (1997, p. 12). The exquisite moment of bliss beguiles and captures; it is a moment of total suspension, or syncopation, in which "all recognised values" hang frozen in the air (Burke,1998, p. 65).

The experience of jouissance (textual or otherwise), is often described in oceanic terms. Thinking of the infinite, heaving expanse seems perhaps one of the few ways we can approach ecstasy through language. We become like water, and drown in ourselves. One example of this kind of pelagic ekstasis is given by Anton Ehrenzweig in his description of the artistic process. He refers to the moment where all boundaries between subject and universe dissolve as "manic-oceanic": a temporary psychosis that the artist must pass through before emerging again from the chaos, armed with new ideas and perspectives (Clément, 1994, p. 238).

Look too closely at the grain of the text and you will soon become lost in it; but perhaps we can say the same of art. To encounter in the flesh an extraordinary object, whether it is fascinating formally or simply the elegant expression of an idea, removes me from myself in a moment of ecstatic contemplation. This state however, as shown above, has concrete relevance to the world beyond an individual experience of pleasure. Ecstasy, jouissance, rapture, syncope: they are to be welcomed. We shall give the last word on this to arch-syncopator, Catherine Clément, who says:

> "Our society, which is bent on healing all ills, even the pangs of love when they convert into depression, has burned its witches and formed a tabula rasa of its potential shamans. All that is left are artists and their syncopes; all that is left is a hint of internal dissidence that it would be wise to avoid domesticating. …if so many artists are

answering the call of politics, it is undoubtedly because their *capacity for detachment* is indistinctly perceived."
(1994, p. 237)

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> To keep listening to the ocean, turn to page 13.
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Conversation with a Stone

- Wislawa Szymborska

I knock at the stone's front door

"It's only me, let me come in.

I want to enter your insides,

have a look around,

breathe my fill of you."

"Go away," says the stone.

"I'm shut tight.

Even if you break me to pieces,

we'll all still be closed.

You can grind us to sand,

we still won't let you in."

I knock at the stone's front door.

"It's only me, let me come in.

I've come out of pure curiosity.

Only life can quench it.

I mean to stroll through your palace,

then go calling on a leaf, a drop of water.

I don't have much time.

My mortality should touch you."

"I'm made of stone," says the stone.

"And must therefore keep a straight face.

Go away.

I don't have the muscles to laugh."

I knock at the stone's front door.

"It's only me, let me come in.

I hear you have great empty halls inside you,

unseen, their beauty in vain,

soundless, not echoing anyone's steps.

Admit you don't know them well yourself.

"Great and empty, true enough," says the stone,

"but there isn't any room.

Beautiful, perhaps, but not to the taste

of your poor senses.

You may get to know me but you'll never know me through.

My whole surface is turned toward you,

all my insides turned away."

I knock at the stone's front door.

"It's only me, let me come in.

I don't seek refuge for eternity.

I'm not unhappy.

I'm not homeless.

My world is worth returning to.

I'll enter and exit empty-handed.

And my proof I was there

will be only words,

which no one will believe."

"You shall not enter," says the stone.

"You lack the sense of taking part.

No other sense can make up for your missing sense of taking part.

Even sight heightened to become all-seeing

will do you no good without a sense of taking part.

You shall not enter, you have only a sense of what that sense should be,

only its seed, imagination."

I knock at the stone's front door.

"It's only me, let me come in.

I haven't got two thousand centuries,

so let me come under your roof."

"If you don't believe me," says the stone,

"just ask the leaf, it will tell you the same.

Ask a drop of water, it will say what the leaf has said.

And, finally, ask a hair from your own head.

I am bursting from laughter, yes, laughter, vast laughter,

although I don't know how to laugh."

I knock at the stone's front door.

It's only me, let me come in.

"I don't have a door," says the stone.

From *Poems New and Collected: 1957-1997*, translated from the Polish by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh

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> To knock again, turn to page 25.

> To continue the discussion, turn to page 55.
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> Resistance is futile (if < 1 Ohm)
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A resistor is a component placed into an electrical circuit to impede the flow of the current. Working in a similar manner to friction, resistance—measured in ohms—dissipates electrical energy. All resistors also produce a certain amount of noise, which increases in proportion to the size of the resistor. In electronics, signal levels are measured against noise levels and expressed as a 'signal-to-noise ratio' (SNR). A low SNR indicates susceptibility to noise whereas a high SNR indicates immunity from noise. As signals travel over space and time, fluctuations inevitably occur that lower the SNR ratio and require the signal to be amplified, preferably without being overwhelmed by noise (Vasilescu, 2005, p. 10). Noise musicians who use techniques of 'circuit bending' can harness and amplify this interference: the resistant properties of a material generating a new, noisy and audible signal. With this in mind, I'd like to briefly point towards some of the correlations and resonances between resistance, noise and materiality, and how they might create a space for political dissent. The idea of material resistance is one that we will follow in two directions: the use of words as things, as exemplified by the previously mentioned black vernacular Signification; and artists' capacity to let the world resist *them*, through the practice of 'making strange'.

Timothy Morton describes language in terms of object-oriented ontology (OOO), that is, the theory that objects exist in the real world, independently from human access to them. Just as we encounter objects so they encounter each other, although all such meetings are necessarily partial. We can never exhaust the being of any one thing; objects exceed their relations and withdraw into a private reality, unknown even to themselves. From this perspective Morton writes that language is, and is full of, objects. He focuses particularly on the characteristics of classical rhetoric, using it to explain what occurs in a meeting between entities. The element of delivery in rhetorical

speech—as opposed to invention, ordering, style, or memory—is given as the most important for an object-oriented approach because it demonstrates "*inventio*, an irreducible withdrawnness" (2011, p. 210). This is not unlike s*kaz*, the Russian Formalist idea of how direct speech can produce a sense of grainy physicality that lends the language-object something over and above its quantifiable presence. With speech we are immersed in the experience of voice, in whose vibratory medium words are conjured and made tangible. Morton connects this kind of allusion towards objects through the mysterious depths of the voice to fellow OOO theorist Graham Harman's ideas about metaphor. Harman contends that metaphor might enable us to speak indirectly about the hidden interior of objects, unknowable as they are, through a correspondence in their mutual obscurity. In this way, rhetoric becomes the manner in which objects hide themselves "in fold upon fold of mysterious robes, caverns, and fortresses of solitude and octopus ink" (ibid. p. 213). Morton then imagines encounters between objects as a sort of rhetorical persuasion, and by extension, a compulsion that becomes an object in its own right, on the inside of which the interaction takes place. The delivery then becomes integral to this exchange; it is the message as well as its container, and its aesthetic materiality is its driving force.

A similar preoccupation with the physicality of rhetoric may be found in Signifyin(g). In his discussion of the Signifying Monkey's linguistic strategy, Henry Louis Gates cites punning as an analogous means of focussing on the sound of a word, as opposed to its semantic content; Esu Elegbara, like the OOO philosophers, is concerned with the ontological status of figurative language. Signifyin(g) thereby disrupts the "coherent linearity" of chains of signifiers in a sentence by drawing attention instead to the surface of language 1988, p. 58); a noisy flicker occurs between the message and its medium. This is reminiscent of Zaum, the Russian Formalist sound

poetry, which pushed words to the edge of coherency; however, the Monkey uses rhyme as opposed to nonsense to make visible the signifier. Gates mentions two ways that texts Signify upon each other: motivated and unmotivated, corresponding to parody and pastiche, respectively. Though he terms pastiche as 'unmotivated', this is not to say that it is without intention, merely that there is no negative critique involved and is made more in a spirit of homage or tribute. The Monkey's discourse, however, is motivated and by holding received meanings of language open to question; "it functions to redress an imbalance of power, to clear a space, rhetorically" (ibid. p. 124). He takes advantage of the Lion's inability to recognise the figurative speech that is formed into humorous rhymes and in doing so, implicitly mounts a resistance against the King of the Jungle.

Another trope widely used in Signification is that of the 'Talking Book' or speakerly text, which attempts to represent black oral vernacular. Both speakerly and Signifyin(g) texts express the subjectivity of their authors against a predominantly white tradition. The 'Talking Book', like *skaz*, employs slang, idiomatic expressions and the dialectical eccentricities of spontaneous speech to produce a sense of 'estrangement' or 'defamiliarisation' from the written word. Such a strategy, especially in the years of segregation, was an extremely important "testimony to [the] humanity" of the African diaspora, whose culture was barely recognised in middle-class white America, let alone as part of the literary canon (ibid. p. 181). The textual dissonance between 'proper' English and direct, colloquial speech might be thought of in terms of syncope, whose moment of lingering discord between notes opens a space in which the consensus is suspended, creating the potential for change.

The sounds of opposition have long been considered as mere 'noise' by those in power, but this negative characterisation could be Signified upon (repeated and

revised); noise being deliberately used in a confrontational manner to disrupt the status quo. Of course, as Paul Hegarty points out, as soon as noise bears a message it ceases to be noise, and "politics requires consciousness and agency, not present in noise itself" (2007, p. 125). But perhaps a moment of transient politically engaged noise could be useful in directing attention towards a more defined message of resistance. One salient contemporary example is the action recently staged by feminist punk band Pussy Riot, whose colourful protest against Russia's authoritarian and patriarchal society has captured the imagination of the world's media; even Madonna weighed in to condemn their severe treatment by the state. The noise in question here then does not refer to the band's music, which delivers a very definite message that accuses Vladimir Putin and the church of corruption. Rather, the instant of interference occurred when members of Pussy Riot, dressed in brightly coloured clothes and with woolly hats pulled over their faces jumped onto the alter of Moscow's Orthodox Cathedral of Christ the Saviour and proceeded to perform their parodic punk prayer, "Mother of God Drive Putin Away". The noise in this situation is fleeting but crucial, as it simultaneously forces a break in habitual thinking *and* asserts the rights of its makers to make it. I could be argued that the striking aesthetic sensibility of this protest, regardless of its long term success or failure to promote change in Russia's political system, played a large part in garnering Pussy Riot's global support. The material signifiers of guitars and bobble hats with eyeholes have provided well-wishers with simple and instantly recognisable images that can be used in expressing their solidarity with the three imprisoned band members. These tangible symbols are the delivery, the form of Pussy Riot's message and are crucial to its communication.

At the other end of the spectrum of resistant communication we find an artwork, *Czechoslovak Radio 1968* (1969-2012), by Fluxus non-art artist, Tamás St. Turba, or as

he is variously known, Tamás St. Auby, or Tamás Szentjoby. This sulphur-adorned brick was made in direct response to the ban on listening to the radio that was imposed by the occupying Soviet military during the 1968 invasion of Prague. Rather than being just one individual piece, it was an instruction for anybody who wished to follow it, and went something like, 'Cover a brick in newspaper and listen to it on the street'. This was done by many, forcing the authorities to confiscate and collect the brick radios: an absurd and difficult task. The earnest attention directed by the citizens of Prague towards these mute devices bestowed them with a powerful recalcitrance as protest objects, their withdrawn silence becoming like a shared code amongst listeners. However, the radio brick is a potent entity independently of this energy invested in it. It seems to hover between two states, not-quite-brick and not-quite-radio; sometimes an ex-brick turned radio and sometimes a brick which, once decommissioned, has only a dim memory of being a radio, its sulphurous markings the only trace of its former existence. This mysterious dimension reflects perhaps the strange space opened up by metaphor in which things bump against each other, hinting at their remote realities. The shuttling back and forth between brick/radio and radio/brick causes it to become ontologically destabilised as well as estranged from the world and itself. And, as an artwork it demonstrates a moment in which, through the contemplation of an object, the world becomes unfamiliar; somehow resistant yet emitting enough faint noise to keep us listening.

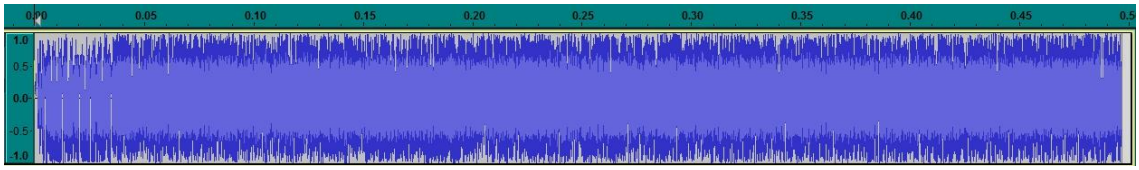

Fig. 1: Digital image of *Czechoslovak Radio (1968)* (1969-2012) by Tamas St. Turba converted to a sound file.

Fig. 2: Sound file of digital image of *Czechoslovak Radio (1968)* (1969-2012) by Tamas St. Turba converted to a digital image.

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> To tune in to the brick, turn to page 25.

> To conclude, turn to page 34.
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