

# The Aesthetics of Philosophical Carpentry

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THIS IS A CHAPTER about the practice of philosophy in the near future, based on a talk about the practice of philosophy in the near future. This is a chapter about the objects out of which philosophy is made as much as the objects of philosophy. Its form matters. It lives here now, in print, where once it did in speech—and in space: Shorewood, Milwaukee—and in time: early May 2012. It was invented for a room and now it finds itself on these pages instead. Some residue of its forcible relocation might be found, as is the case with most things wrest from their dwelling.

## I. Enjoying This Chapter

A note on enjoying this chapter: Imagine a plate of artisanal meats and cheeses. Imagine lardo, Sainte-Maure-de-Touraine, cornichons with spicy mustard, Shropshire blue, pickled cauliflower, and house-made blood sausage. The thing that makes them a plate is that they are all on a plate. No one sends an assiette de charcuterie back to the kitchen because it doesn't make an argument.

## II. The Things We Do

The tarmac atop airport runways and aprons and taxiways isn't really tar-penetration macadam. Instead of bound coal tar and iron-works slag, these days airports are coated with asphalt or concrete, like cupcakes are frosted with buttercream instead of confectioner's sugar.

It's a misunderstanding your airplane didn't notice when its rubber wheels glanced against the concrete runway of Milwaukee's Mitchell Airport, stretching its surface imperceptibly, like this week's raindrops against the nylon of tents thrown near Pewaukee Lake twenty miles to the west. The flights cleared behind and in front of you were similarly oblivious, no less than the precipitation or the Goodyear Flight Radials.

You weren't listening, either, to the grooved concrete or the raindrops. You were sleeping in your leather seat or your dome tent, dreaming about Kopp's Frozen Custard or reading Alfred North Whitehead or fretting over your presentation for The Non-human Turn conference.

A group of philosophers in a lecture hall isn't unlike a convoy of aircraft on approach. One lone Airbus A320 or associate professor performs—nose up, flaps down, throttle up, voice screeching, exhaust droning, before the rubber meets the road. The brakes engage, the show ends. Thank you very much. Meanwhile, onlookers stare agape, ears covered or plugged or otherwise impeded by droning noise pollution. Oh thank god, it's over, they cheer silently before clutching in to proceed through the traffic light on the airport-adjacent frontage road, or while plunging a Moleskine notebook into a Tom Bihn bag.

For some performances, multiple dancers tousle the venue all at once. Close-spaced double, triple, or parallel approach at Chicago O'Hare or Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson or the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Increased organizational apparatus is key: instrument landing systems, interstitial coffee break apparatuses, microwave landing systems, multiple lecture rooms, staggered approaches, diagonal radar separation—aircraft and lecture isolation is key. Final monitor controllers are required to ensure that the NTZ (no-transgression zone) is not entered. Overstressed, underpaid air traffic controllers and graduate students ensure order: "Delta two-eight-seven-niner cleared to land runway two-three, traffic landing runway one-zero"; or, "Ah, Professor Bogost, your session is in the Oak Room. It's just around the elevator, past the Gramsci display."

We do the things we do because they are the things we do, so

we do them. We do them so as not to disturb the way things are done—traffic landing runway one-zero, after all. It is at least as unlikely that this artifact will become a conversation as it is that it will become an orgy. Presumably I will write—I was brought here to write—and you will read. Had your timing or finances been better, you would have listened, or at least performed a ritual that would have been mistaken for listening (or even for reading). Some, struck by pique, may put it down to shop for a K-Cup for Keurig coffee brewers. Others may hold their heads in their hands lamenting in the guise of concentrating. Let your mind wander.

Eventually, inevitably, soon perhaps, but not soon enough, I will stop. Had we been face to face, live, polite ovation would follow. “We do have some time for questions,” someone would have said, perhaps even me. “Isn’t this just art?” someone might ask, or “Aren’t you committing a fatal Orientalism?” or “Interesting provocation, but I’m not sure I understand what you’re suggesting we do” or in any case “Not really a question, more of a comment.” Now that you’re reading this instead, you can tweet about it instead: “Really unusual book chapter by @ibogost” or even just “@ibogost is bonkers.” Thank you for flying Nonhuman Turn Edited Collection. We know you have a choice when you read. We wish you a pleasant stay in object-oriented ontology or in whatever your final philosophy may be. Then coffee, or wine, or schnitzel, or blogging.

What do we do when we do philosophy? That’s not a rhetorical question. I’m serious. Why am I writing at you now, instead of serving you custard? I’m not sure I can fully convey to you the degree to which I am freaked out about what a philosopher could do or ought to do. This is not an act.

### III. The Nonhuman Return

Milwaukee is the only town anywhere where someone might recognize my unusual surname, and that’s because the Bogost family settled here after emigrating from Russia in the nineteen-aughts, and indeed all the world’s Bogosts can be traced back to the city.

My father and his two brothers grew up there during the Great Depression and World War II, attending North Division High

School before shipping off to Madison to study the newly fashionable discipline of psychology and psychiatry in the early 1960s. As my father would say, it takes one to know one.

The Nonhuman Turn was the second scholarly event I attended at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and the second time I have come to Milwaukee for reasons other than visiting family. The first was hosted by Sandra Braman and Thomas Malaby in late April 2006, conveniently timed such that I was able to attend my grandmother's ninety-fifth birthday party that week as well. For years she lived right up the street from the university in Shorewood, near Oakland and Capitol. There wasn't much to do during those visits. Sometimes we would walk down to Sendik's for oranges or Benji's Deli for corned beef, and if I were very lucky, someone would take me to Walgreens for bubblegum or Garbage Pail Kids. Eventually we would drive up to Sister Bay, where there wasn't much to do either. Oranges would be replaced by cherries, corned beef by smoked whitefish. My grandfather ate the heads off of them.

That trip in 2006 was the last time I saw her, at Jack Pandl's Whitefish Bay Inn, which first opened when she was four years old. My daughter, just barely four herself at the time, panicked as dusk settled into night over North Lake Drive. "I have to go to my hotel!" she panicked, pointing outside desperately. "There are stars!"

I last came almost exactly a year before The Nonhuman Turn conference for my grandmother's funeral—she lived less than a month past her one-hundredth birthday, just long enough so the rest of us could say she did. By happenstance, Hertz rented me a big Buick, as if they knew I would need to camouflage among the elderly.

I'm not close to my extended family, and I'll admit that I was horrified that many of them were staying in the hotel I had chosen solely for Hilton HHonors elite tier status credits. Stuart Moulthrop picked me up and we ate schwinebraten and drank Franziskaner at Mader's downtown. We foolishly overate and had no room for frozen custard, even though Kopp's was right down North Port Washington Road from the Hilton Milwaukee River. A trip to Milwaukee is not complete without somehow failing to make it to Kopp's.

I'm also not very sentimental, but so much of object-oriented ontology is, to me, a reclamation of a sense of wonder often lost in childhood, that coming to Milwaukee as an adult, a professor, perhaps a philosopher even, makes me think of the rhubarb that would grow in the summer behind the house on Marion Street, or the milk delivery door at its rear, or the tea samovar on the shelf in the dining room. It didn't used to be so strange to be interested in things, but somehow it became so. Maybe this nonhuman turn is really a return, for you as much as for me. The things were always here, waiting. The rhubarb doesn't care about actual occasions or Antonio Negri.

#### IV. Carpentry, Part 1

In my recent book *Alien Phenomenology*, I advance an idea I call *carpentry*. It's a theory of philosophical productivity.

I found myself at the Nonhuman Turn conference performing the very act I critique in that chapter. When philosophers and critics gather together, I wrote in the book, they commit their work to writing, often reading esoteric and inscrutable prose aloud before an audience struggling to follow, heads in hands—that's why you're excused for shopping for coffee pods. Ideas become professionally valid only if written down. And when published, they are printed and bound not *to be read* but merely *to have been written*. Written scholarship is becoming increasingly inaccessible even to scholars, and publication therefore serves as professional endorsement rather than as a process by which works are made public.

The scholar's obsession with writing creates numerous problems, but two in particular deserve attention and redress. First, academics aren't even good writers. Our tendency toward obfuscation, disconnection, jargon, and overall incomprehensibility is legendary. As the novelist James Wood puts it in his review of *The Oxford English Literary History*,

The very thing that most matters to writers, the first question they ask of a work—is it any good?—is often largely irrelevant to university teachers. Writers are intensely interested in what might be called aesthetic success: they have

to be, because in order to create something successful one must learn about other people's successful creations. To the academy, much of this value-chat looks like, and can indeed be, mere impressionism.<sup>1</sup>

The perturbed prose so common to philosophers, critical theorists, and literary critics offers itself up as an easy target, but it's not alone. Many scholars write poorly just to ape their heroes, thinkers whose thought evolved throughout the linguistic turn. In any case, most of us don't write for the sake of writing, despite simultaneously insisting that literature is somehow more naturally sacrosanct than painting video games or *The Real Housewives of Waukesha*.

Second, writing is dangerous for philosophy. It's not because writing breaks from its origins as Plato would have it, but because writing is *only one form* of being. The long-standing assumption that we relate to the world only through language is a particularly fetid, if still bafflingly popular, opinion. But so long as we pay attention only to language, we underwrite our ignorance of everything else. Levi Bryant puts it this way:

If it is the signifier that falls into the marked space of your distinction, you'll only ever be able to talk about talk and indicate signs and signifiers. The differences made by light bulbs, fiber optic cables, climate change, and cane toads will be invisible to you and you'll be awash in texts, believing that these things exhaust the really real.<sup>2</sup>

Bryant suggests that our work need not exclude signs, narrative, and discourse, but that we ought also to approach the nonsemiotic world "on its own terms as best we can." When we spend all of our time reading and writing words—or plotting to do so—we miss opportunities to visit the great outdoors.

## V. Cows, Part 1

Recently, there have been numerous rejoinders against the arm-chair cogitations of traditional philosophy. One such trend has been dubbed "experimental philosophy," and it looks a lot like

cognitive psychology. Philosophers like Kwame Appiah and Joshua Knobe observe participants, collect data, run cognitive experiments, and attempt to draw conclusions from their results, which primarily address issues of ethics, thought, and belief.

Even more recently, philosophers like Robert Frodeman have advanced a position called “field philosophy.” Borrowing the modifier from “field science,” such philosophers not only abandon the wood-lined enclaves of their offices and libraries, but also eschew the public square of experimental philosophy. Instead they begin “in the world,” according to Frodeman, “drawing out specific, underappreciated, philosophic dimensions of societal problems.” Field philosophy “integrates ethics and values concerns with the ongoing work of scientists and engineers.”<sup>3</sup>

Experimental and field philosophies have their detractors. Some accuse these efforts of mere instrumentalism, of turning philosophy itself into standing-reserve, or of selling out philosophy in a barely veiled support of the neoliberal interests of global capital. But Frodeman, Knobe, and others respond that philosophy ought to serve the world, not just the mind, and not just the academy. Furthermore, they argue, given the current state of things, disciplines like philosophy must adapt and renew themselves to respond to changing times, both in the university and in the world.

I’m less bothered by the purported prostitution of philosophy as I am disappointed that such approaches prove so limited in their ambition. This isn’t philosophy, really, but merely ethics, an area that, as it happens, has long filled classes and books thanks to required accreditation requirements in engineering. And ethics is still a field of human interest, an amplification of the same human-world correlate that systematically omits all other beings from philosophical consideration.

I could suggest object-oriented philosophy as an alternative, one that embraces the same orientation toward the world, but without the human-centered instrumentalism of experimental and field philosophy. Would it really be so daft to admit that the world is simply full of interesting, curious things, all living their own alien lives, bumping and jostling about, engulfing and destroying one other, every one of them as secretive and withdrawn as any other?

If field philosophy just means driving our cars past the cows to

the industrial farms and then going back home to write up ethics white papers, why bother leaving the office? Cows would make better field philosophers than philosophers would, since at least they work in fields. What if instead the field *were* the philosophy, not just the place where the philosopher goes to stroke his chin and scuff his wingtips before returning to an iPad in a rental Mazda and a MacBook in a Holiday Inn Express and, two flights later, an office door left just open enough to discourage anyone from entering. I am here, but not for you.

## VI. Carpentry, Part 2

In *Alien Phenomenology*, I outline two versions of carpentry, which I might now call general and special carpentry, even though I don't use those names in the book.

General carpentry extends the ordinary sense of woodcraft to any material whatsoever—to do carpentry is to make things as philosophy, but to make them in earnest, with one's own hands, like a cabinetmaker.

Special carpentry takes up a philosophical position more directly connected to the practice of alien phenomenology, that of speculating about the experience of things. Into the general sense of carpentry, this sense folds Graham Harman's idea of "the carpentry of things," an idea he borrowed in turn from Alphonso Lingis. Both Lingis and Harman use that phrase to refer to how things fashion one another and the world at large. Special carpentry entails making things that explain how things make their world.

In the book I offer several examples largely from the domain of computing, where I do most of my work. These include the *Latour Litanizer*, which fashions lists of objects in the style of Bruno Latour, a phenomenon I name "Latour Litanies," and *I Am TIA*, a device that approximates the perceptual experience of the custom graphics and sound chip in the 1977 Atari Video Computer System. The first exemplifies *ontography*, a practice of philosophical enumeration central to my version of object-oriented ontology; the second carries out *metaphorism*, a speculative process of characterizing object experience through metaphor.

Carpentry might offer a more rigorous kind of philosophical

creativity, precisely because it rejects the correlationist agenda by definition, refusing to address only the human reader's ability to pass eyeballs over words and intellect over notions they contain. Sure, written matter is subject to the material constraints of the page, the printing press, the publishing company, and related matters, but those factors exert minimal force on the *content* of a written philosophy. Although a few exceptions exist (Jacques Derrida's *Glas*, perhaps, or the Nietzschean aphorism, or the propositional structure of Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics* or Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*), philosophical works generally do not perpetrate their philosophical positions through their style or their form. The carpenter, by contrast, must contend with the material resistance of his or her chosen form, making the object itself become the philosophy. This is aesthetics as first and last philosophy.

## VII. Cows, Part 2

The Kopp's Frozen Custard's website offers a flavor forecast. On Thursday May 3, 2012, the first day of the Nonhuman Turn conference, Mint Chip and Chocolate Thunder poured from metal spouts as heavy rain poured from the Milwaukee sky. One can't help but wonder if the custard mirrors the weather, or the weather the custard. According to the forecast for Saturday, May 5—the day I once spoke many of these words instead of you reading them—those fortunate to enjoy custards instead of philosophy indulged in Dulce de Leche and Chocolate Peanut Butter Chocolate. The mere existence of "Wisconsin-style frozen custard" should be enough to make us all stop reading Hegel, but alas, we shall not do so.

I'm not sure making custard is less noble or less philosophical than making philosophy, where philosophy means words written down on paper, typeset, and glued to bindings or distributed over Whispernet instead of pasteurized egg yolk and milk fat drawn through a refrigerated hopper with low air overrun. Is the dense and creamy mouthfeel of custard less rigorous than an abstruse and elaborate system of political, ethical, or ontological thought? I have to admit, I'd rather eat custard. Not cultural studies, but custard studies. As it happens, I'm an accidental bovine philosopher, so I have a head start.

At the 2010 Game Developers Conference, a schism seemed to erupt between “traditional” game developers, who make the sorts of console and casual games we’ve come to know well, and “social” game developers, who make games for Facebook and other networks. It was a storm that had been brewing for a few years, but the massive success of Zynga’s *FarmVille* along with the company’s publicly malicious attitude had made even the most apathetic of game developers suddenly keen to defend their craft as art.

In July of that year, my colleague Jesper Juul invited me to take part in a game theory seminar he runs at NYU, which he provocatively titled “Social Games on Trial.” Researcher and social game developer Aki Järvinen would defend social games, and I was to speak against them.

As I prepared for the NYU seminar, I realized that theory alone might not help clarify social games—for me or for anyone in attendance. It’s nice to think that “theorist/practitioners” like myself and Aki can translate lessons from research to design and back like adept jugglers, but things are far messier, as usual. The dialectic between theory and practice often collapses into a call-and-response panegyric. This in mind, I thought it might be productive to make an example that would act as its own theory—a kind of carpentry.

In the case of social games, I reasoned that enacting the principles of my concerns might help me clarify them and, furthermore, to question them. So I decided to make a game that would attempt to distill the social game genre down to its essence. The result was *Cow Clicker*, a Facebook game about Facebook games that completely consumed my life for well over a year and a half. There was a picture of a cow, which players could click every six hours. Each time they did, they received one point, called a click. Players could invite friends to join their “pasture”; when any of one’s pasture-mates clicked, the player would receive a click, too. Players could purchase in-game currency, called “mooney,” which they could use to buy more cows or to skip the click timer. There was more—much more, embarrassingly more—but that’s enough to get us started.

By sheer reach *Cow Clicker* is easily the most successful work I have ever produced. More than fifty thousand people played it, and in most circles I am now most easily introduced as “the *Cow Clicker* guy.” I was hoist on my own petard, as compulsively obsessed with

running my stupid game as were the players who were playing it. I added cow gifting; an iPhone app (*Cow Clicker Moobile*); a children's game (*My First Cow Clicker*); a "cowclickification" API; and cow clicktivism, which allowed players to click virtual cows to send real cows to the third world via Oxfam Unwrapped. When it came time to end it, I launched a bovine alternate reality game played on four continents that revealed the coming Cowpocalypse—*Cow Clicker*'s rapture. I have spent more time making cows than reading Alfred North Whitehead.

### VIII. Carpentry, Part 3

What does it feel like to make custard or cows? Making something from the ground up, participating in every process; avoiding abstraction. It is handicraft. The craftsman asks, What is involved in the creation or genesis of a thing? We philosophers consider this act only in the most cursory way. Forget the custard and the pastures for a moment, just consider once more the thing scholars usually make when we deign to make things: books.

Several years ago Eugene Thacker gave me a slim book in the hallway between our offices at Georgia Tech. When I asked him what it was, he said, It's a prototype. He and Alex Galloway were writing *The Exploit*, their weird book about network culture. The two had uploaded their work in progress to the print-on-demand site Lulu and run a few perfect bound prototypes of their book-in-progress. That's what Eugene meant by a prototype: not (just) a first go of the ideas, but also of the form of the object.

It wasn't perfect. Lulu and others trim beyond standard sizes, the paper isn't of offset quality or weight, the layout isn't typeset and endnoted professionally, and so forth. It could be, of course. I've published books as an author and as a publisher, and the process is straightforward enough. Getting a hard proof for the first time is liberating and weird, even though it's so simple. A book, not a collection of words. A book that opens and dog-ears and fits in a bag or under the short leg of a wobbly table. A book that can kill a fly or be subject to marginalia conductivity tests.

Compare Thacker and Galloway's experience to the normal publishing process. Back when his book *The Textual Life of Airports*

was published in December 2011, Christopher Schaberg reported what most authors do: seeing his book for the first time. “What a weird feeling,” Chris wrote on his blog. “It resembles an object from outer space. Vaguely recognizable, yet totally alien at the same time.” This is the experience of most authors. We say we *write books*, but really we write words. Then we put them in a FedEx box and give them to a publisher, who performs a ritual upon them that eventually spits out a book. Writers make words, and then they sign over rights to make books to book-makers.

It’s not always a bad thing. The book Continuum Publishing made for *The Textual Life of Airports* is well designed and attractive, delightful to hold, a nice size, laid out well. It’s also one hundred dollars in a hardback-only edition, which means that no normal human beings will buy it until Continuum gets around to publishing a paperback edition. All of which just underscores the point: authors rarely make books, where a book is an object with certain properties meant for the lives of readers. The publishing industry is not the problem, either. Sure, self-publishing puts more apparent control in the hands of an author, but the reality of print-on-demand (POD) printing and eBooks is one of far *less* design control than was ever possible in offset printing. Books can be designed. POD books just get uploaded and pressed out. They are the lunchmeats of publishing.

Shortly before *The Textual Life of Airports* dropped, Chris and his Loyola colleague Mark Yakich put together another book, *Checking In / Checking Out*. It’s a two-sided book about airports and airplanes, one written by each author. The book resembles a passport in size and shape and even texture, and the effect just makes you want to carry the thing with you when you travel. Which, of course, is the perfect time to read it. As the *Los Angeles Times* put it, “About 5 by 6 inches, small enough to tuck into a jacket pocket or a purse, it’s easy to carry, doesn’t take too long to read, and is quite nice to look at. And if you carry it on a plane, you don’t have to turn it off.”<sup>4</sup> To produce that effect, Schaberg and Yakich had to write, design, print, market, and distribute a book—a real object in the world. Not just a series of words on pages sent to a publisher.

I’ve certainly found myself thinking more and more about this

over the years (and asking more and more of my publishers). Both *Racing the Beam* and *Newsgames* are books whose physical size, heft, and feel very much please me. They are readable and attractive and desirable as objects. Likewise, *How to Do Things with Videogames* was made with a particular experience in mind: short chapters, small form factor, inexpensive paperback edition from day one, and so forth. A book people read and finish. And I hope enjoy having and experiencing as much as they enjoy reading it. I put laborious effort into the creation of *A Slow Year*, which is a book despite also being a video game. Experiences like these have made me realize that books are not just boxes for ideas. They are also just boxes, like cereal is just boxes.

There is a chasm between academic writing (writing to have written) and authorship (writing to have produced something worth reading). But there's another aspect to being an author, one that goes beyond writing at all: book-making. Creating the object that is a book that will have a role in someone's life—in their hands or their purses, wrapped around their mail, in between their fingers.

## IX. Materials

But beyond books, what approaches do we have? One would involve embracing the materiality of different media for their own sake, rather than insisting that we make appeals to writing and speech as the singular and definitive models for intellectual productivity.

For some time now I have been arguing for the use of models, particularly computational models, to make arguments.

For example, I've written several times about La Molleindustria's *The McDonald's Videogame*, a scathing critique of the multinational fast-food industry. The game demonstrates the abject corruption required to maintain profitability and manageability of a large global food company. It's a good example of what I've previously called *procedural rhetoric*, arguments fashioned from models.

In the game, players control fields in South America where cattle are raised and soy is grown; a factory farm where cows are fed, injected with hormones, and controlled for disease; a restaurant

where workers have to be hired and managed; and a corporate office where advertising campaigns and board members set corporate policy.

As play progresses, costs quickly outstrip revenue, and the player must take advantage of more seedy business practices. These include razing rainforests to expand crops, mixing waste as filler in the cow feed, censuring or firing unruly employees, and corrupting government officials to minimize public outcry against these actions.

But many players—especially those who are technically minded and enjoy mastering their video games—find themselves lamenting the difficult job of McDonald's executives rather than being incensed by their corrupt corporate policies. I've had a number of students make this observation about the game, in fact. "I empathized with the CEO of a big company. They have it rough."

When Molleindustria released a similar game, *Oligarchy*, about the global petroleum market, they seem to have recognized this failing, if that's the right word for it. In response, they posted a "postmortem" with text and images that explain the premise of the game: peak oil, supply and demand, imperialism, and so forth.

An obvious question, then: If the game is incapable of or insufficient to do this, if the traditional media of text and image are necessary or even better as explanations, then why are we making games? It risks becoming a purely aesthetic exercise, a kind of accessory. A bag of peanuts to go along with the "real" media of language.

Whether through convention or reception, the growth of form is short-circuited. Language reasserts itself. Procedural representation is not proven intrinsically ineffective, but subordinated to the media ecosystem in which it serves as unrealized underdog.

Consider the orrery. It's a mechanical device that illustrates the position and motion of planets and moons in the heliocentric model of the universe. It's named for the Earl of Orrery, to whom the first such example was presented in 1704. It would be possible to write or draw such an explanation of object interactions, for example, in a textbook or on a classroom poster. But no such explanation would disrupt or undermine the orrery as object, as craftwork. As a physical model, as a procedural argument. No one

would make an orrery and slink off apologetically to write a pamphlet to take its place, like La Molleindustria did for *Oligarchy*. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make a model, please take these words instead.”

Contrast the orrery with page 87 of Jared Diamond’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. It’s a book about the ultimate material causes of human historical progress. Diamond traces proximate factors in Eurasian global domination like guns, steel, swords, disease, politics, and writing to ultimate factors like plentiful plant and animal speciation and the east-west axis of Eurasia that allowed easier spread of animal husbandry and agriculture, which in turn facilitated food surplus, storage, population density, politics, and technology.

No matter what you think of Diamond’s position on geographical and material accident underlying all of human history, you might be struck by this single page—page 87—one of more than five hundred in the book. It rather stands in for the rest. Yes, of course there’s a large amount of detailed description on those five hundred pages, but the fundamental argument is here on this chart. I’d wager that W. W. Norton wouldn’t have published a laminated sheet with just page 87 on it, nor would that laminated sheet have won the Pulitzer Prize in nonfiction.

Another example, one closer to home. On Wednesday evening before The Nonhuman Turn conference began, Tim Morton and I sat drinking beer at Von Trier’s on Farwell and North. My ten-year-old daughter started texting me:

“Why r u in Milwaukee,” she asked.

“Conference! Nonhuman Turn,” I responded.

“Mmm,” she considered.

“Weird, right,” I offered apologetically.

“Yeah,” she said, adding an alien emoji to the exchange.

“That’s nonhuman,” she clarified.

Adding my own pictogram, a slice of cake, I responded,  
“So is this.”

This may seem harmless enough to you, if perhaps also adorable (“my daughter’s first lesson in object-oriented ontology,” I called

it on Twitter). But there's something quite serious going on here. This exchange goes further than most philosophy, because it takes a concrete situation and makes it manifest, in the moment, with only the tools I had on hand—my iPhone and its built-in emoji set. Sometimes I wonder: Why am I writing books when I could just write text messages to my ten-year-old? That may sound flip or glib, but what if we took the daily *practice* of philosophy seriously, not just the occasional chore of it?

Or, one more: Tim Morton gave a rousing talk at The Non-human Turn conference. I have no idea how it could be effectively reproduced in this book, in print, when it was so performative, so rhythmic and throbbing. Afterward, he fielded a number of questions about his rather arresting presentation. Most were questions about the form of the presentation: What is it that you just did? On the one hand, they are reasonable questions, and there's no doubt that Tim's presentation warranted them. But on the other hand, nobody would have thought to ask Steven Shaviro a question like, "I noticed you cited numerous philosophers by reading quotations from their books, which you interspersed with various commentaries about those quotes. Why did you do that?"

We are stuck in our materials, and mostly we don't realize it. Perhaps we are too obsessed with foregrounding political ideology even to notice the ideology of materials. But even if not, the ideology that *is* our materials is perhaps one to which we are even more blinded. Ideology critique demands that we take a closer look at what we take for granted. We ourselves offer one such object of study, by means of the tools we deploy for work like ideology critique.

## X. Cows, Part 3

Writing in *Wired* magazine in December 2011, Jason Tanz told the story of Jamie Clark, a student and military spouse living on Ellsworth Air Force Base outside of Box Elder, South Dakota.<sup>5</sup> She had made close friendships with her fellow Clickers. "I don't meet a lot of people who discuss politics and religion and philosophy, but these people do, and I like talking to them," she says. "I'd rather talk to my *Cow Clicker* friends than to people I went to school with

for 12 years.” It’s a common refrain among dedicated Cow Clickers, who have turned what was intended to be a vapid experience into a source of camaraderie and creativity, Tanz summarized. He continues:

It may be that *Cow Clicker* demonstrates the opposite of what it set out to prove and that social games, no matter how cynically designed, can still provide meaningful experiences. That’s how Zynga’s Brian Reynolds sees it. “Ian made *Cow Clicker* and discovered, perhaps to his dismay, that people liked it,” Reynolds says. “Who are we to tell people what to like?” Gabe Zichermann, a gamification expert, also dismisses Bogost’s critique of Zynga’s games. “Other gamers may think *FarmVille* is shallow, but the average player is happy to play it,” he says. “*Two and a Half Men* is the most popular show on television. Very few people would argue that it’s as good as *Mad Men*, but do the people watching *Two and a Half Men* sit around saying, oh, woe is me? At some point, you’re just an elitist fuck.”

I had responded to this idea almost a year earlier, in a “rant” at the Game Developers Conference titled “Shit Crayons.” In it, I compared *Cow Clicker* players to the imprisoned Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka, who composed poems from his cell using whatever writing material he could find. How resilient is the human spirit that it withstands so much? No matter what shit we throw, nevertheless people endure, they thrive even, spinning shit into gold.

The Cowpocalypse finally arrived in the evening of September 7, 2011. Frantically working at a makeshift desk in my den, I flip a few bits I had set up weeks earlier, and all the cows disappear—raptured. In their place, just empty grass. Tanz explains better than I could:

They have been raptured—replaced with an image of an empty patch of grass. Players can still click on the grass, still generate points for doing so, but there are no new cows to buy, no mooing to celebrate their action. In some sense, this is the truest version of *Cow Clicker*—the pure, cold game

mechanic without any ornamentation. Bogost says that he expects most people will “see this as an invitation to end their relationship with *Cow Clicker*.”

But months after the rapture, Adam Scriven, the enthusiastic player from British Columbia, hasn’t accepted that invitation. He is still clicking the space where his cow used to be. After the Cowpocalypse, Bogost added one more bedeviling feature—a diamond cowbell, which could be earned by reaching 1 million clicks. It was intended as a joke; it would probably take 10 years of steady clicking to garner that many points. But Scriven says he might go for it. “It is very interesting, clicking nothing,” Scriven says. “But then, we were clicking nothing the whole time. It just looked like we were clicking cows.”

## XI. Idiots

Despite co-organizing it, I was unable to attend the third object-oriented ontology symposium, held in September 2011 at the New School in New York City. Georgia Tech had asked me to attend the World Economic Forum’s meeting of the New Champions in Dalian, China, and I couldn’t refuse. I stopped over in Seoul on the way, where in an online chat I lamented with Tim Morton having to miss the triple-O event. Tim suggested I make a video they could play in my absence, and despite massive jetlag I put together a short visual essay on the twentieth-century street photographer Garry Winogrand.

Among the surprising benefits of making a five-minute video in absentia instead of delivering a three thousand-word paper, a popular photography site featured the video and it was viewed many thousands of times. One such accidental ontologist was Tod Papageorge, director of the Yale School of Art’s graduate photography program and a longtime friend and scholar of street photography in general and Winogrand’s work in particular. Papageorge sent me a 1974 lecture by Winogrand that included this nugget of wisdom: “A photograph is the illusion of a literal description of what the camera saw. From it, you can know very little. It has no narrative

ability. You don't know what happened from the photography. You know how a piece of time and space looked to a camera."<sup>6</sup>

It's a sentiment that bears fruit well beyond photography. The practice of alien phenomenology I call "metaphorism" involves amplifying rather than reducing distortion, capturing the metaphorical relation between objects by characterizing their perceptions through imperfect, speculative rendition. This is the gentle tragedy of carpentry, which Hugh Crawford has called "*working like an idiot*": in doing what we cannot, we nevertheless must strive to make something. With enough effort and practice and attention, we can even make things that are not just sufficient but also *beautiful*.

Winogrand said that still photography is the clumsiest way to exercise imagination. "Dali can have a melted watch anytime he wants," he explained. "It's tantamount to driving a nail in with a saw, when you can use a hammer." Carpentry is worse than this. Carpentry is the process of driving a nail in with a cup of frozen custard.

I want to put my custard where my hammer is, so to speak. I have many carpentered projects planned and in progress, using many different materials. But computers and cows notwithstanding, I still fancy writing—but real writing, writing where the writing matters, not just the written matter. Writing that's not sold in bulk to a tenure and promotion committee, but pruned like bonsai.

If I were really serious about the claims I made about carpentry in *Alien Phenomenology*, then I shall have to try to make good on them. As such, the work I want to do with objects is metaphoristic, not critical. I want to write well rather than write to completion. We don't have to give up writing to be philosophical carpenters. And as I think about being a philosopher—the kind who writes, anyway, at least some of the time—I realize that I can't currently imagine writing philosophical arguments or treatises or positions. Fault me for it if you'd like, but I just don't want to interpret Whitehead or Rancière. What if we took a break from it, from philosophical history for a while? What if we stopped making arguments?

One day, I hope this might be philosophy. I hope I might write some of it, and that you might read it. If that hope conflates philosophy with poetry or fiction, then so be it. Plato was wrong about poetry anyway.

## Notes

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# Our Predictive Condition; or, Prediction in the Wild

MARK B. N. HANSEN

## The Politics of Imminent Threat

The February 2013 confirmation hearings for John Brennan, President Barack Obama's nominee for CIA director, rekindled—indeed significantly ramped up—comparisons between the administration's recent policy decisions concerning collection of personal data and the fantasy of “precrime” made famous by Steven Spielberg's 2002 film *Minority Report*. Already in December 2012, following a *Wall Street Journal* article detailing Eric Holder's March 2012 decision to grant the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) broad rights to collect and archive private data from individual citizens,<sup>1</sup> Jesseyln Raddack, national security and human rights director at the whistleblower nonprofit Government Accountability Project, likened the administration's move to the fantasy at the heart of Spielberg's film:

In the movie *Minority Report*, law enforcement has an elite squad called “Precrime,” which predicts crimes beforehand and punishes the guilty before the crime has ever been committed. In yet another example of life imitating art, a blockbuster *Wall Street Journal* article describes how the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)—an ugly child of the Director of National Intelligence—*can now examine the government files of ordinary, innocent U.S. citizens to look for clues that people might commit future crimes.*<sup>2</sup>

# Artfulness

ERIN MANNING

Thanks to art, instead of seeing a single world, our own,  
we see it multiply. . . .

—Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*

## Part 1. The Art of Time

The word *art* in German (*die Art*) continues today to carry one of the earliest meanings of the term: “manner” or “mode.” In the early thirteenth century, art was still connected to this qualifying notion, attuned less to an object than to a skill or craft of learning.<sup>1</sup> A way of learning. To speak of a “way” is to dwell on the process itself, on its manner of becoming. It is to emphasize that art is before all else a quality, a difference in kind, a technique, that maps the way toward a certain attunement of world and expression.

Art, understood along these terms, is not yet about an object, about a form, or a content. It is still on its way, in its manner of becoming. It is intuition, in the Bergsonian sense. As Henri Bergson defines it, intuition is the art—the manner—in which the very conditions of experience are felt. Beyond the state (and the status quo), across the force of the actual, intuition touches on the decisive turn within experience in the making that activates a difference within time’s durational folds: intuition activates the proposition at the heart of the as yet unthought.

In its feeling-forth of future potential, intuition draws on time. It touches the sensitive nerve of time. Yet intuition is not duration per se. “Intuition is rather the movement by which we emerge from our own duration, by which we make use of our own duration to affirm and immediately to recognize the existence of other durations.”<sup>2</sup> Intuition is the relational movement through which the present begins to coexist with its futurity, with the quality or