

DK: *This is ARREST from the Punk Ethnography website, my name is Douglas Kidd.*

*ARREST is a series of short pieces that use anecdote, theory and reflection to share an idea that we hope you find arresting- an idea that stops you and helps you think a little differently.*

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## Hyperobjects

The 2022 documentary Geographies of Solitude follows naturalist Zoe Lucas who has spent over 40 years documenting life on Sable Island off the east coast of Canada.

It is a beautiful, gentle, innovative and melancholy film, but the most arresting scene for me relates to balloons.

During the years she has been there, Lucas has cleaned the beaches month after month.

Balloons wash up on the shore regularly and she pins each one to a corkboard in order of its arrival. She has several boards full of balloons and the camera lingers on them, stacked in a corner of her shack.

This scene put me in mind of Timothy Morton's idea of hyperobjects, and this is the idea I want to explore, using balloons as a starting point.

Morton is a British philosopher who writes within the school of philosophy known as Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), a kind of non-anthropocentric realism. He coined the term hyperobject as a word that would allow us to discuss and wrestle with things like global warming; things that threaten the world as we know it, but seem to resist our ability to understand or address.

A single balloon is not a hyperobject, it is just an object. But once we try to think about all the balloons in the world, then we are in the realm of hyperobjects. Over 3 billion balloons are sold each year in the US alone. I could find no estimates on the number of balloons in the world, but my supposition is that humans have already produced more balloons than there have ever been humans in history. The object constituted by all the balloons in the world is something dizzyingly impossible to grasp.

Since I made this connection with balloons in the film I have seen them everywhere- balloon archways for shop openings and parties, waterballoons, balloon animals at fairs, and always as waste in the natural world. And balloons travel- Zoe Lucas could not escape them nearly 200km from the nearest human- they can go literally anywhere.

The composition of a balloon affects how long it takes to biodegrade. For latex balloons it can be from a few months to years. For foil balloons or the weather balloons we release thousands of each day the timescale is centuries. In either case, balloons spend far longer as waste than they do as balloons.

So hyperobjects are massively distributed in time and place and our utter immersion in hyperobjects means we cannot stand outside them and see them for what they are. We will only ever be seeing hints and effects; the way the hyperobject plays out around us. We see

the balloon floating in front of us, but never the totality formed by all balloons. Beyond this balloon in front of me are the factories, rubber plantations, aluminium mines, shops, warehouses, transport systems, events, parties, endless trajectories of floating balloons and the waste in our oceans lasting for aeons. These interconnections relate to the manufacture and distribution of balloons, but the connections go further than this.

Zoe Lucas describes how she can tell when there is a US election by the names on the balloons. Our political processes are linked to balloons and her corkboards are a history of elections, campaigns, festivals, and hundreds of birthdays and quotidian events!

This consideration of balloons introduces the idea of hyperobjects in a practical way, as objects that are inescapable and interconnected, massively distributed in space and time, beyond our comprehension. Let's move on to how it can help us think about something like global warming.

We cannot escape global warming: we are always already embedded in it. It can be glimpsed in the weather every day- is this rain heavier because of it, this sun hotter? The exhaust fumes of the car we drive or the plane we fly in, do not go 'away', there is no such place. Instead they will haunt generations not yet born. Our choices to fly, turn on the aircon or heater are all part of global warming and it is there in the migrant crisis, food insecurity and changing patterns of diseases.

Global warming is not limited to a particular locality. Our climate is changing everywhere, in different ways, some places wetter, some drier, some hotter, some paradoxically cooler and there is no direct correlation with carbon emissions, indeed we know that those humans affected most by climate change are least responsible for carbon emissions. Hyperobjects (can) lead to ecological thinking claims Morton- they confront us with a world without neat boundaries and compartments- a world radically interconnected and truly planetary.

Global warming operates at different timescales- maybe we glimpse it in this flake of unseasonal snow, maybe in the shift of seasons which start earlier or last longer. But we also surmise that the effects on sea level rise will play out thousands of years after the last anthropogenic greenhouse gas emission. The invocation of the term anthropocene points at the fact that humans now affect the planet at a geological level and at geological timescales.

Morton explains: "Hyperobjects are phased: they occupy a high-dimensional phase space that makes them impossible to see on a three dimensional human-scale basis."

P.70 For global warming this is frighteningly true- we can see and feel its impacts, but we cannot predict or understand how all the parts interconnect. We can guess and adjust our models each time events overtake us, but the mechanisms, the reach and reality of global warming is beyond us.

Describing hyperobjects, Morton uses the image of the mesh to point to the connection of all objects- linked in a network, but one that is also full of gaps and disjoints.

The interconnections between capitalism and consumerism, social justice, neocolonialism, human migration, poverty, epidemiology and global warming are becoming more evident. We never see hyperobjects directly, merely their effects in the mesh. This famine, that hurricane, this migrant crisis, the collapsing government- they connect in the mesh, but, as we are

seeing in this survey of hyperobjects- we know global warming haunts all of these events, but it is impossible to know exactly how.

There have always been hyperobjects, but Morton sees them as particularly characteristic of the anthropocene. Global warming, social injustice, biodiversity loss and pollution, interweave to inhabit and provide the mesh for our modern world. They all have their origins in what Morton calls the Severing. The rippling effect of our separation from the rest of the planet. This disconnection is embedded in the word Nature- the way we can talk about it as if it were something separate, something we were outside of, able to visit, appreciate, exploit, miss. Or our use of the word Environment to describe something we might care for or have damaged or should save. Ask yourself: do you know where you might go if you wanted to not be in the Environment?

In offering the notion of hyperobjects, Morton is giving us a way to be haunted again by the world, to recognise that we are never outside nature, never separate from global warming, never beyond the environment, always implicated in and by pollution. We cannot escape. So what to do?

This age of hyperobjects has no answers. But hyperobjects offer a way to think and therefore some starting points. I want to focus on two ideas that Morton offers in his work, and that I saw too in the film I started this piece with.

The first is the idea of solidarity.

We are connected with each other, with all humans and with the vast more-than-human world of balloons and baboons, water and wallabies. I cannot be me without the trillions of microorganisms that make up what I call myself. I cannot be human apart from the billions of other humans with whom I share a neighbourhood or a country. I cannot be me without those who manufacture the clothes I wear or grow the food I eat; but I am just as much connected with the soil the food grows in the rain that waters it and the air we all breathe. Furthermore these connections are distributed in time and space, taking in countries far from me, affecting and affected by my distant ancestors and generations to come. To focus again on global warming, the history of the world I inhabit is interwoven with the climate- with the rise and fall of civilisations in constant dialogue with the climate that affects and as is affected by humankind.

Connectedness runs through everything and this calls for a recognition, an enactment of solidarity. What form this solidarity takes will vary enormously, but it will always begin with recognising and honouring our connectedness and it will always call us away from selfishness and resignation, from nihilism and fatalism.

Solidarity for Morton is the default mode of the world- it is separation that is hard and damaging- the severing that has brought us to the world of hyperobjects. So how do we navigate our way to solidarity? This brings us to the second response: art.

We can never step outside hyperobjects, never know them. Data describes but an aspect of them, they are always withdrawing. The role of art is not to try and capture their essence or describe them better, but to help us look behind the scenes of our own engagement with them. To help us navigate what it means to be aware, to live with them and to imagine a world where we might undo the Severing that embeds us in these hyperobjects.

This is what I saw in Zoe Lucas' corkboards- the balloons come in different shapes and sizes, covering decades, tracking the increase in use, marking incredible journeys from harvest to manufacture, shipping, purchase, release. They mark events and hopes and dreams, parades and marketing campaigns. And all of that on a simple corkboard display. Finally the boards represent the constant interplay between action and awareness- the balloons are there thanks to Lucas's constant cleaning of the island, they are displayed as a record, a way to be aware of and reflect on our actions, our waste. We 'rock' back and forth, Morton says, between action and awareness, response and reflection, hope and despair. Art is a companion, guide, encouragement, spur and irritant on the path to thinking with hyperobjects, to thinking in solidarity with the planet we all share. We are encouraged to ask questions: how do we celebrate? How can we express joy? How can we be responsible for our waste or our footprint on the planet?

Morton coined the term hyperobjects inspired by Bjork's song "hyperballad", a kind of love song where the singer describes living with her lover atop a mountain and how:

"Every morning I walk towards the edge  
And throw little things off  
Like car parts, bottles, and cutlery  
Or whatever I find lying around

It's become a habit  
A way to start the day"

She does this to feel safe, to feel able again to be with her lover. This is the role of art in the time of hyperobjects. To reveal to us the wiring behind our emotions, the demands of the world we live in. The demands of being aware, taking action, enacting the solidarity with each other and the non-human world. The singer has to imagine her own body crashing to the rocks below in order to feel safe and happy on top of the mountain. Morton is inviting us to recognise and imagine the end of the world in order to live in this age of hyperobjects. The world as we have made it- the world of global markets, Nature as a resource, endless growth- that world is over, and the longer it takes us to realise that the longer it is before we can imagine a different one.

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