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# Contemporary Painting: Autopoietic Improvisation and a Relational Ecology

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# Contemporary Painting: Autopoietic Improvisation and a Relational Ecology

## Abstract

Contemporary painting as a form of research-making and knowledge acquisition through applied practice calls for a re-evaluation of the relationship between painter and painting. This dissertation examines the complexity of this relationship by displacing authority over the artwork and its meaning from the artist. From this poststructuralist starting point the thesis expands upon Derridean ideas of *deconstruction* by folding them back into Martin Heidegger's concepts of *earth* and *world*. The aim is to reintroduce the physical materiality of paint back into the relationship between painter and painting, prompting a reassessment of the importance of a wider ecological context. Through an Object-Oriented Ontology Heidegger's concept of Dasein is expanded upon as the thesis moves from a human centered position, whereby meaning is derived from our human relationship to art, to a nonhuman, decentered, ecological position that maintains that objects exist independently from human perception. The work of Anselm Kiefer is used to document a movement away from human history and linear timescales towards ideas surrounding nonhuman timescales which include geological, material-object, and ecological formulations. Lastly, the thesis addresses how these theoretical examinations might be reflected in how a painter physically interacts with a painting in a studio. Autopoietic improvisation offers a way to address contemporary approaches to painting in a studio environment which brings together a decentered human position with other modes of interagency. This research seeks to question the hierarchies associated with anthropocentrism and to shed light on the intra-agentic forces at play within a contemporary painting practice.

## Keywords

Contemporary painting, creative act, improvisation, deconstruction, Dasein, interagency, Object-Oriented Ontology, difference, decentered, other, ecology, agency, affect, Anthropocene, posthumanism, poststructuralism, relationality, paint, earth, world, environment, autopoiesis.

## Summary for Lay Audience

The relationship between a painter and their painting is an often-discussed topic. Evidence of this can be found throughout art history and in the texts which accompany paintings in museums and galleries across the world. The focus of this research is to side-step this relationship and ask what other aspects of a creative process affect the way in which a painting is made. The study questions the extent to which a painter can truly dictate a viewer's interpretation through their canvas. It explores whether the artist's intentions are just one among a larger set of influences that collectively impact the outcome of a painting. This research asks how an ecological disposition might affect the creative act and destabilize the painter/painting relationship.

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## Introduction

The impact of anthropogenic processes on the planet have forced artists to respond to inherent hierarchies contained within the human/nonhuman relationship. Instead of asking what artists can do in light of this ecological predicament, this research questions what this impasse does to the status of the artist within the structures of a contemporary creative practice. In view of this, this thesis seeks to re-evaluate the position of the painter in relation to the painting within a traditional studio environment. This re-evaluation considers aspects of poststructuralism, Heidegger's notion of *earth* and *world*, and an object-oriented defense of painting. It asks where meaning might be located in contemporary painting when the authority of the artist/painter is brought into question. The decentering of the human artist ushers forth the proposition that objects and their relations in and around the formulation of a painting's architecture radically alter the role of the painter and make vital the interagency of objects to the improvisational potential of a creative act.

Chapter one positions this research across critical theory, language philosophy, and aesthetics. It does so by addressing the critical turn of "the death of the author" in the work of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. The chapter is anchored by Martin Heidegger's ideas of *earth* and *world* and intertwines the textual instability and multiplicity of meanings which reverberate through Derrida's work with the tangible material of paint. This intersection points towards a reformulation of the *author function* in the context of the contemporary ecological landscape.

Chapter two begins with a re-evaluation of the depiction of the natural world in painting after Bruno Latour's essay "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene." This essay is explored alongside Heidegger's notion of Dasein and further scrutinized by an object-oriented redistribution of subject and object relations. The chapter calls for a form of relationality that moves the human out from the center of the universe by maintaining that objects exist completely independently from human perception. The chapter argues that this reinvigorates painting's relationship to the natural world and asks questions about shifting timescales in the Anthropocene.

Chapter three is an exploration of the work of Anselm Kiefer. It develops ideas about non-linear understandings of time from chapter two and connects them to ecology through material and geological relations. This chapter connects the ecological with the political and acts as a means of bridging the gap between theory/text and the language of painting.

Chapter four introduces autopoietic improvisation to painting. Through Edgar Landgraf's essay "Improvisation, Posthumanism, and Agency in Art (Gerhard Richter Painting)" the chapter articulates how a decentered human position affects the way painter and painting physically interact with one another within a studio environment. Improvisation challenges ideals of agency and the autonomy of the artist. It provokes the viewer into a relationship with the creative act and becomes a reflection of the interconnectedness of humans and nonhumans which speaks to the complexity of ecological debates.

This paper is the product of painting. This research is borne out of a need to better understand conceptual and theoretical concerns conjured up by the painting process. The questions and concerns touched upon in this paper have been made manifest through a painting process, one could say, by the paint itself. As a result, the written research is an attempt to get as close as possible to the sensations involved in a painting praxis through language. Writing on painting has a tendency to want to feed back into the painting process the conceptual and theoretical concerns which in effect have already morphed from their genesis, as painterly concerns, into concerns now routed in language. This paradox runs right through the theoretical and practical investigations I have undertaken as part of this research.



## Chapter 1

### 1 The Artist/Artwork Relationship

The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other. Nonetheless neither is in sole support of the other. Artist and work *are* each, in themselves and in their reciprocal relation, on account of a third thing, which is prior to both; on account that is, of that from which both artist and artwork take their names on account of art.<sup>1</sup>

When a painter stands alone in their studio confronted with a blank canvas or even an artwork that is nearing completion something inevitable happens. The artist forms a relationship of sorts with the painting in front of them. A dialogue begins to happen. This relationship between artist and artwork is a physical, sensitive, intuitive exchange. Through this exchange, this dialogue, the specter of a third element in this equation appears. This specter, this other, is conjured up by the artist and sits alongside them in the studio. Always separate from them, this other holds the position of an outside observer, a potential viewer or even a first viewer. At the risk of complicating this equation of relations further there is another ever-present in the studio too which seeps into the fabric of every material and imagined thing. This seeping presence, this miasma of relations, referred to above by Martin Heidegger as *art*, we could call context. I will pick up and expand on this in subsequent chapters of this paper. For now, I wish to concentrate on the artist-artwork-viewer relationship.

Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author," published in *Image, Music, Text* (1967), focuses on text and the creation of ideas and has had a significant influence on the visual arts since its inception. The essay describes the idea that an author is not the creator or

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Martin Heidegger: Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and tr. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1.

producer of original content but a “scriptor” who collects and collages pre-existing quotations. A work has no singular message transcribed by the author according to Barthes. The author is unable to decide meaning in a work. Instead, a work is a construction. It exists as a multidimensional space made up of other texts none of which in themselves are original, which clash and blend to form a conglomeration of translations. What might this mean for painting and the role of the artist in the artist-artwork-viewer equation? Barthes’ designation reinforces the intuition experienced by the painter in the studio, the very intuition that sets up this idea of a relationship between artist and artwork in the first place. This intuition implies that if we really do feel we have a relationship to the work, an inherent degree of separation between artist and artwork becomes inevitable and a theoretical gap can be identified. Like the writer, the painter uses the panoply of colors, images, signs and symbols already present in the world to construct something new, something which in its current context resonates with people. Barthes’ idea of the “scriptor” separates the writer from the text or in our case the painter from the painting. The task of meaning doesn’t belong to the author, according to Barthes; instead meaning resides in the destination, in the reception of the work, and therefore in the reader or viewer. In these terms, it would be naive, restrictive or even counterproductive to impose the will of the author onto the work, the effect of which would be to close down meaning by restricting the capacity of the viewer and in turn limiting the life of the work itself. “The Death of the Author” is as much about the birth of the viewer in that it charts a movement away from the agency of the artist toward the agency of the work itself. How might this shift affect the creation of a work if the content or meaning in an artwork is not prescribed by the artist but is in fact the courtesy of the viewer? How does this affect the painting process when it is the artist who dictates what is painted on the canvas? Michael Foucault’s “What is an Author” (1969) also explores this relationship between author, text and reader. Foucault describes writing having “freed itself from the necessity of expression.”<sup>2</sup> This means that writing is not merely a result of the author’s need for expression. Foucault argues that the text recognizes its

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is an Author,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice; Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 114.

exterior deployment, and meaning then is no longer confined within the writing of the text. Writing unfolds itself, regulated only by an interplay of signs and not by some fixed a priori signification. This, Foucault suggests, allows writing to playfully move beyond its own rules and leave them behind. Writing, like painting in this instance, cannot be concerned with or hindered by authorial expression, instead, its primary concern is with creating an opening through which these authorial expressions disappear, something which I will expand upon later in this chapter. But for now, the implication is that this theoretical gap that separates the artist from the artwork is not fixed. The artist-artwork relationship is fluid, unsettled, mutable, and it is this inchoate gap which affects meaning.

For Theodor Adorno there is a direct correlation between how successful an artwork can be and the gap that separates artist and artwork. In *Aesthetics* (1959) Adorno writes of a composer's relationship to a musical composition. He describes this relationship in terms of an artwork's autonomy. Adorno suggests that the greater the aesthetic value a work of art has is synonymous with how successfully the artwork exists as independent from its composer as an internally organized thing in itself. Something should be clarified at this point. Adorno is not suggesting that the artist has no relationship to the artwork, that the painter never touches the canvas or the composer never composes in the first instance. Instead Adorno is suggesting that the artist works their way out of the artwork by degrees. The further artists extricate themselves from the interiority of the artwork by working their presence free from its potential meaning, the more aesthetically successful that work can be:

For the work of art becomes something objective precisely by asserting itself to the composer as an independent and internally organised thing. And I am almost inclined to say: the more fully it succeeds in this, the less it is a mere

document of the artist, the more it is something that speaks in its own right – the greater the value of the work will be in general.<sup>3</sup>

What is crucial here is how Adorno positions the artwork before the artist. That the artwork pushes the artist out of the work by degrees. The artist is made peripheral to the artwork by the artwork. The tension or resistance generated by the artist in the artwork is the same resistance that contributes to this removal of the artist as individual. The artwork pushes the artist out of the work, the artwork formulates the artist's disappearance. This is only possible if the artist is open to this resistance, this pushback, this assertion of an internally organised presence. Meaning is being moved by degrees through our artist-artwork-viewer equation.

What Foucault describes as the theoretical location of the author in relation to the text expands Adorno's idea of autonomy, what Foucault refers to as "the manner in which a text apparently points to this figure who is outside and precedes it,"<sup>4</sup> describes the absence of the author's presence. This absence of presence, this author outside of the text, we can call the author "other". The position of the author outside of the work and preceding it conjured by Foucault supports the idea that *another* to the artist is present in the creative process, an alterity. This *other* or first viewer may act as a mediator of sorts, a way for the painter to question and challenge the effects of their instinctive decision-making. For Foucault, texts will always create signs within them that evoke the author. But it is the play of signs which cancels the author out. If we wish to know the author, we must look for them in their absence. In the absence of the artist the first viewer – this spectre conjured up by the artist as *other* - measures the validity of the artwork against a preceding notion of art. This spectre or other may be Heidegger's 'third thing' where in the absence of the artist, the first viewer can gauge where and how the artwork might situate itself within the context which precedes it. The artist's absence allows more direct

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<sup>3</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetics*, ed. Eberhard Ortland, tr. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 114.

access to contextual situatedness. The strongest relationship in this artist-artwork-viewer equation is the connection between the artwork and the viewer. This can be better accessed by the artist if they work their presence free from the artwork and begin to align themselves with the work as its first viewer. This can be done by pushing a work beyond the artist's control. Through experimentation the artist is surprised by the work, they witness an unforeseen newness, and the work develops in a way which is unpredictable to the artist. By developing themselves out of the painting the painter frees themselves from the necessity of expression and catches a glimpse of what the painting might look like to someone else, to a potential viewer. They in turn create a position for themselves as an artwork's first viewer.

The deconstruction of artist-self which I have referred to here — the dialogue which is formed between artist, first viewer and artwork — mirrors aspects of deconstruction within philosophical discourse. As Joao J. Vila-Cha argues, “The purpose of an authentic deconstruction, we would like to claim, is to establish, within the boundaries of the philosophical discourse itself, a ‘dialogue’ with its own alterity.”<sup>5</sup> This *alterity*, or *other* or *being* is made possible following a moment in the history of philosophy referred to as the linguistic turn. I am not going to delineate the complete history of that movement here. Instead, I will evoke the end result which saw “the transformation of a paradigm of thought centered on *consciousness* into one dominated by the *linguistic sign*.”<sup>6</sup> What I have been attempting to question, in relation to painting, is where meaning is derived from when it comes to art making. What happens to thought or intention when it is mediated by paint through the process of painting? While the history of art, aesthetics, and discourse on painting has indeed been heavily influenced by the subject-object relationship, it's crucial to acknowledge that this relationship offers only a partial perspective. The linguistic turn requires that we reassess how this narrative has also been significantly shaped by issues of race, gender, and class. Likewise, identity and thought, which are so closely bound to ideas of artist and artwork, can be untied. This

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<sup>5</sup> Joao J. Vila-Cha, “Transcendental Is the Difference: Derrida's deconstruction of Husserl's Phenomenology of Language” in *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* (Jan-Dec, 1996), 970.

<sup>6</sup> Vila-Cha, “Transcendental Is the Difference,” 971.

may be because “thought touches its identity not in and through itself, but only through the ‘detour’ of its linguistic articulation. Independent of language, thus, there is neither object nor subject.”<sup>7</sup>

For a fuller account of this idea of deconstruction I will turn to Jacques Derrida’s *Speech and Phenomena*, in which he tackles Husserl’s theory of signs. The movement away from thought centered on consciousness towards an articulation of thought as a detour of linguistic articulations can be traced through Derrida’s theoretical dispute with Husserl. Derrida takes issue with Husserl’s idea of “solitary mental life.” Communication or expression for Husserl is a re-presentation of what occurs in the inner sphere of consciousness. He describes an interweaving between expression and indication where pure meaning or pure expression derives from an interior discourse. For example, speech, as a means of expression and a generator of meaning, repeats or reproduces content which initially manifests as pure sensation: “Properly speaking, speech only occurs as an outward transfer of a sense that is constituted without it and before it.”<sup>8</sup> Derrida deconstructs this notion of self-meaning, as it exists prior to the act of communication. He challenges this idea of ideal meaning by suggesting that any pure internal presentation of self must in fact be a re-presentation in consciousness. Derrida claims that any pure signifier must in fact be the product and repetition of pre-existent acts, all of which in themselves are repetitions of previous articulations or conventions: “Therefore, for Husserl, the notion of pure expression – and, consequently, of pure meaning – refers us back to that internal sphere of consciousness where, in the *absence* of indication a ‘silent’ monologue of the soul with itself takes place.”<sup>9</sup> If the soul or the internal sphere is in fact a conglomeration of external historical precedents, then there is in fact no interiority. For Derrida, then, imagination can never be fixed, centred, or independent of an antecedent experience. The reality that surrounds us, and the historical precedents that precede us, contaminate any idea of true personal expression.

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<sup>7</sup> Vila-Cha, “Transcendental Is the Difference,” 971.

<sup>8</sup> Vila-Cha, 981.

<sup>9</sup> Vila-Cha, 983.

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida, like Barthes and Foucault, describes a relationship between a writer and the internal structure of writing. But Derrida's approach differs in how he addresses this theoretical relationship from the point of view of the reader. Instead of mimicking the writer, the reader acknowledges the internal evidence of a writing's structural histories. Derrida suggests that a reading or writing of a text cannot transgress towards a signified outside — a content positioned outside of language — beyond writing. Writing for Derrida is made up of free-floating signifiers not necessarily attached to the signified. If the signified is real life or nature, “flesh and bone” as he refers to it, he commits that there has never been anything outside of writing. This is a divorce from Foucault in that for Derrida nature or the real has already disappeared: “what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.”<sup>10</sup> Derrida is challenging every attempt to fix linguistic meaning. There is no foundation or principle of meaning independent of our ever-evolving human context. As Alex Callinicos in an obituary to Derrida stated, “once you see language as a constant movement of differences in which there is no stable resting point, you can no longer appeal to reality as a refuge independent of language. Everything acquires the instability and ambiguity that Derrida claimed to be inherent in language.”<sup>11</sup> Meaning is derived not from the relationship between the artist and the artwork but from the ever-evolving relationship between the artwork and the viewer, which in turn is contingent upon the viewer's position within our shared history and culture.

When a painter attempts to communicate through paint, their own lived experience is not transferred to the viewer as they, the artist, have experienced it. Their experience is mediated by the paint. Our reception of that outward experience is only relational and of potential intentionality. By committing to communicating our own personal biography, our own intentionality, we restrict the power of the viewer's biography, the physical and immediate personal experience of the viewer or the other.

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<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 159.

<sup>11</sup> Alex Callinicos, “Obituary: The Infinite Search,” in *The Socialist Worker* (November 2004), online. <https://socialistworker.co.uk/socialist-review-archive/obituary-infinite-search/>

One's own lived experience is a far more powerful attribute than what an artist is capable of transferring or conjuring up in the other. This throws a greater importance on the viewer and their relationship with the artwork and in turn diminishes the nature of the figure of the artist in our artist-artwork-viewer relationship. Perhaps more importantly there is a movement that can be traced away from the artist, of pure intentionality, towards the relationship between the artwork and the context in which that artwork is made. If language and meaning are a constant movement of differences consumed by the instability and ambiguity of our ever-evolving present, then it feels logical to address this contextualizing *now* further.

Here I wish to expand our artist-artwork-viewer relationship to include context. The tension that is made manifest in the relationship between context and artwork once the artist is in absence is key to the generation of meaning in a work. Heidegger's words at the top of this chapter define a context of sorts for our artist-artwork equation: "Artist and work *are* each, in themselves and in their reciprocal relation, on account of a third thing, which is prior to both; on account that is, of that from which both artist and artwork take their names on account of art."<sup>12</sup> What Heidegger does very carefully here is describe a notion of context which attempts to reposition man's relationship with the world. This context is something he addresses in "The Age of the World Picture" (1938) in which a particular vantage point, which he argues is established by scientific experimentation, finds man looking upon the world and representing it in order to understand it. For Heidegger this modern 'representing' man should be opposed in favour of a pre-modern 'apprehending.' By contrast 'apprehending' humans are 'maintained with openness' free from calculated representation:

That which is, does not come into being at all through the fact that man first looks upon it, in the sense of a representing that has the character of subjective perception. Rather man is the one who is looked at by that which

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<sup>12</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 1.



is, he is the one who is – in company with itself – gathered towards presencing, by that which opens itself. To be beheld by what is, to be included and maintained within its openness and in that way to be borne along by it, [is] to be driven about by its oppositions and marked by its discord.<sup>13</sup>

Heidegger here expresses a perspective that challenges the traditional idea of subjective perception as calculated representation, suggesting a more dynamic relationship between the observer and the observed. In the context of painting and the making of art, the implication is that the act of creating art is not solely about the artist imposing their subjective representation onto the canvas. Instead, this act suggests a more reciprocal relationship where the artist becomes a part of the creative process, not just as an initiator but as someone being "looked at" by the creative force itself.<sup>14</sup> The artist becomes intertwined with the unfolding of the artwork, being included and "maintained within its openness."<sup>15</sup>

A connection can be made here between Adorno's positioning of the artwork in relation to the artist and Heidegger's idea of 'representing' and 'apprehending.' As the painter stands in the studio confronted by their painting, are they looking at it or is the painting looking at the artist? This question invokes John Berger's description of sight in *Ways of Seeing*: "Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen."<sup>16</sup> We could expand this statement to say: as soon as we can act we must come to terms with the fact that we can be acted upon. This shift in understanding completely changes how we approach painting or the creative act. We must first watch and listen before we act. This telling shift floods the artwork with a multitude of contextual relations.

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology*, ed. William Lovitt (New York: Harper, 1977), 131.

<sup>14</sup> Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," 131.

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger, 131.

<sup>16</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 9.

In “The Origin of the Work of Art” Heidegger introduces us to two terms, both dynamic in their positioning, which stand in for this non-fixed notion of context: *earth* and *world*. Both terms I will expand upon here as they pertain to the process of painting. *World* is an environment of sorts however it is not a ‘mere collection of things.’<sup>17</sup> Thomas Sheehan describes *world* as having two aspects, dynamic and static, wherein *world* is both a place, or situatedness, and a generator of meaning:

World when viewed statically and intransitively is the place of meaningfulness. But viewed dynamically and transitively it is the placing of things in meaning, the enworlding and contextualizing of them within a set of possibilities that makes things able to be known and used in terms of those very possibilities.<sup>18</sup>

*World* for Heidegger is not closed or fixed but an environment in which we operate, continually unfolding, opening up and out. It is a web of interconnectedness within and through which we are immersed, reminiscent of Derrida’s ideas surrounding language and the contextual nature of reality. *World* is an environment which itself includes many other worlds inside and outside of it. *Earth* as a term always connected to *world* allows Heidegger to articulate aspects of reality or *world* which can be present and absent simultaneously, for instance, how something might reveal itself and conceal itself at the same time. *Earth* fuses together ideas of nature, material, and ground. In “The Origin of the Work of Art” Heidegger points to a new concept of *earth* that might be more closely connected to the ‘material’ of a work. This expansion on the idea of material in relation to the artwork describes an earthly physicality not just outside the artwork but also within it. It points to what an artwork is made of elementally and how that elemental materiality

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<sup>17</sup> Heidegger, “Origin of the Work of Art,” 23.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Sheehan, “Dasein,” in *A Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 200.

is capable of moving inside and outside of the artwork simultaneously, as material function and as a signification of a presence outside of the work in its natural setting.

In “Expanded Painting” Mark Titmarsh discusses the importance of Heidegger’s terms *earth* and *world* to the painting process. He describes Heidegger’s term *earth* and its movement between presence and absence in relation to paint when he ruminates on what happens when we look at the paint in a painting: “When looking at a painting we can notice paint as a material for the first time, particularly in representational painting when a lick of red paint can suddenly refuse to disappear into the image of blood or fire.”<sup>19</sup> Through Heidegger’s notion of *earth* paint has particular qualities unique to its makeup and should not be considered inert or passive matter. The process of making or working draws the material of paint out of the earth and into the cultural domain. Out of *earth* and into *world*. The act of painting is a relationship between the artist and this understanding of material as it moves from *earth* to *world*. Thinking in terms of *earth* and not just material involves recognizing that matter or paint is not inert and something to dominate or have control over. Titmarsh states that “to acknowledge the creativity of materials involves rethinking matter as a kind of ‘creative intelligence.’”<sup>20</sup> The creative power of the material is harnessed by the artist and is brought into presence, into form. Following the examples given by Adorno concerning the autonomy of the artwork, we could state that as the appearance of the material is brought into form by the artist, as the material structuring of paint withdraws into the medium of paint, the artist responds to this presence as absence, this conceptual oscillation between the earthly materiality of the paint and its relationship to *world*. If the artist is open enough the paint begins to signal a way out of the artwork for the artist. The artist begins to present themselves in their absence. As the paint presents its meaning, its content, there is a simultaneous absence of its material: “the presencing of an art work is ‘pre-absential,’ it makes certain things present, discloses that there is material that has been worked and at the same time there is

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Titmarsh, *Expanded Painting: Ontological Aesthetics and the Essence of Colour* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 90.

<sup>20</sup> Titmarsh, *Expanded Painting*, 90.

an absence, an absencing of the material in favour of form, image, meaning, content,”<sup>21</sup> much like the absence of the artist’s presence in the same equation. By interconnecting *earth* and *world*, Heidegger “engages the artwork as a presence based on absence, withdrawal and non-presence.”<sup>22</sup> Heidegger’s concern for “the coming to presence of art”<sup>23</sup> invokes a different thinking about art through revelation where “the world grounds itself on earth and the earth juts through world.”<sup>24</sup> This interconnected web of relationality, which might be described as an ‘ecology of art,’ suggests that the object of the painting can no longer be isolated from its dynamically ever-evolving environment of interconnectedness. Painting can no longer be considered in terms of visual pleasure or personal expression, if we consider Heidegger’s interconnected terms *earth* and *world* to be an all-encompassing lens through which meaning can be derived. Instead, we find ourselves describing an ecology of thinking. Heidegger’s term *earth* provides us with a model for discussing art in terms of its elemental status as well as “indicating a dynamic force uncontainable and unfathomable to human reason, [which] has become an important concept in the contemporary deep ecology movement.”<sup>25</sup>

To understand context in our artist-artwork-viewer relationship, we must first understand that the term context is not a framing device which stands outside of, or around, our equation. Context must be thought of in ecological terms whereby nothing is independent from anything else. Everything is interconnected through a dynamic web of relationality. Following on from Derrida’s deconstruction of Husserl’s “solitary mental life” and in light of these determinations of context a situation presents itself, one which asks: How might we define what painting is in these terms, which acknowledges our actions as being reactions to sedimentations of previous stimuli or previous acts? Further, one which sees context as a dynamic, continually evolving series of relations jutting into our present actions. In the next chapter, I will quantify what this miasma of relations

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<sup>21</sup> Titmarsh, *Expanded Painting*, 91.

<sup>22</sup> Titmarsh, 93.

<sup>23</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” *The Question Concerning Technology* (New York: Harper, 1977), 341.

<sup>24</sup> Heidegger, “Origin of the Work of Art,” 174.

<sup>25</sup> Titmarsh, *Expanded Painting*, 4. See also Michael Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth’s Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

might look like and address what impact this ecological reframing might have upon a contemporary painting practice.

## Chapter 2

### 2 The Painter and their Art in the Anthropocene

The painter stands in the studio confronted with an object which has its own physical and material relation to the painter. Acting upon the painting, they are alerted to the sensation that the painting is also acting upon them. For Heidegger, *Art* precedes both the artist and the artwork so that even a blank canvas is seemingly full; it contains everything that has preceded it.<sup>26</sup> This offers a challenge to the idea that it is only the human who looks at the painting. It acknowledges that the painting, pregnant with historical precedent, prior to the painter's initial act, also sees the painter, it imposes itself on the painter. In light of this assessment, we must begin to reconsider the contract that we have entered into between the painting (art), the world, and a person.

For centuries, painting has witnessed and paid homage to the natural world as a means to record and document what we see, that which is in front of us, outside us. This depiction of the natural world as a wild, free, untamed other created an illusion of separation between us (human) and nature (world). Since the scientific revolution, to borrow a phrase from Bruno Latour, "the objectivity of a world without humans had offered a solid ground for a sort of undisputed *jus naturalism*."<sup>27</sup> This idea of an objective nature (planet Earth as object) complemented its depiction in paint seen through a frame, cut off from "us," cut off ironically from itself by its own pictorial boundaries. According to Latour this division between human subject and objective world is no longer an admissible theory. Latour argues that the human impact on the earth has been so profound by the way we, over the last two centuries in particular, have affected and altered the planet, that it has put to bed any ideas pertaining to remoteness or wilderness. From this we have managed to disentangle the (human) subject – (earth) object

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<sup>26</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 1.

<sup>27</sup> Bruno Latour, "Agency at the time of the Anthropocene," in *New Literary History* vol. 45 (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2014), 5.

relationship. As Latour says, “[t]here is no distant place anymore. And along with distance, objectivity is gone as well, or at least an older notion of objectivity that was unable to take into account the active subject of history.”<sup>28</sup> What does this mean for painting? How does this affect the way we read landscape painting today, representational landscape painting in particular? What is our relationship to our environment and how do we quantify that relationship through art?

The impact of anthropogenic processes has had such a profound effect on the planet, that the earth and with it nature, can no longer be thought of as free from our influence. The earth for Latour is a subject, it has agency, it is not a context against which we can measure ourselves. The earth is a subject equal to the human subject. In “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene” Latour describes the failures of the modern epoch. The delineation of disciplines and the partitioning of areas of expertise have, for Latour, failed to address the ecological impact of our presence on the planet. He posits that science’s concern for the construction of facts has failed to understand the active role of human agency in the construction of those facts.<sup>29</sup> We have reached a Kairos moment, one which marks a shift away from “economics to ecology.”<sup>30</sup> The time for disconnectedness and theories of objectivity is over, and in their place Latour proposes that we engage in our “common geostory.”<sup>31</sup> Michael Serres echoes this redefining of our relationship to earth:

For, as of today, the earth is quaking anew: not because it shifts and moves in its restless orbit, wise orbit, not because it is changing, from its deep plates to its envelope of air, but because it is being *transformed by our doing*. Nature acted as a reference point for ancient law and for modern science *because it had no subject*: objectivity in the legal sense, as in the scientific sense,

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<sup>28</sup> Latour, “Agency at the time of the Anthropocene,” 2.

<sup>29</sup> Latour, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Latour, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Latour, 2.

emanated from *a space without man*, which did not depend on us and on which we depended de jure and de facto. Yet henceforth it *depends so much on us* that it is shaking and that we too are worried by this deviation from expected equilibria. We are disturbing the Earth and making it quake! Now it *has a subject once again*.<sup>32</sup>

Like a warning, the reference to the earth quaking hammers home the importance of our present epoch to the existence of a human presence on planet Earth. Serres, an interdisciplinary thinker, described his work as a general theory of relation.<sup>33</sup>

Relationality or a philosophy of relations unites a wide range of theories in the humanities field, including actor-network theory, affect theory, assembly theory, new materialism, speculative realism, and systems theory. In *The Nonhuman Turn* Richard Grusin brings together these theories in an attempt to repair our past, in the present, in anticipation of our shared collective future “with less violence toward a variety of bodies.”<sup>34</sup> Grusin’s project aims to “depict a world populated not by active subjects and passive objects but by lively and essentially interactive materials, by bodies human and nonhuman.”<sup>35</sup> Each of these theories, including Latour’s essay, aims to recognize the Anthropocene epoch as an officially designated geological time period that commenced in 1945. This epoch signifies the point at which human activities significantly started to impact the earth’s systems. Simultaneously, it marks a shift in perspective, moving humanity from being at the center of the universe to an equal participant in a network of subject relations.

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<sup>32</sup> Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, tr. Elizabeth Macarthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 12.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Crocker, “As Soon as We Are Two There is a Medium: Michel Serres’ Philosophy of Relations, in *Media Theory Journal* (St. Johns: University of Newfoundland, 2022), 185.

<sup>34</sup> Jane Bennett, “Systems and Things; On Vital Materialism and Object-Oriented Philosophy” in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2015), 235.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Grusin, “Introduction” in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2015), xxvii.



As stated in the previous chapter, to understand context in our artist-artwork-viewer relationship, we must first understand that the term 'context' is not a framing device which stands outside of, or around, our equation. Context must be thought of in ecological terms whereby nothing is independent from anything else. Everything is interconnected and infused through a dynamic web of relationality. The previous chapter ended with Heidegger's ideas concerning *earth* and *world* and the notion of a vast, contextual, interconnected web of meaning. Woven into this web is Heidegger's idea of Dasein or being-in-the-world. The position of Dasein in relation to *world* is challenged by Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), which conjures up a means of surpassing Heidegger's notion that everything in the world, that "every entity we encounter gains its ultimate meaning from us from our own being."<sup>36</sup> Heidegger's idea of equipmentality or tool-analysis introduces us to the notion that tools, like being, are withdrawn from access; they recede from visibility. What this means is that when a tool is in use, when it has a *readiness-to-hand*, it fuses with the worker's being and thus recedes from visibility. When 'things' or tools are removed from their everyday settings of equipment practice and considered as independent objects, they are described as having a *presence-at-hand*; they become independent objects, and this separateness from the world affects our position in relation to them as a result. In *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenon to Thing* Graham Harman posits that when this transformation occurs in an object, when it moves from *readiness-to-hand* to *presence-to-hand*, it also transforms the position of the human-being-in-the-world (Dasein) as a result. What OOO sees in this transformation of Dasein is a new position where the human subject is separate from the objective universe: "Everything that we encounter appears as 'for-the-sake-of' Dasein—not because it all exists just to serve our purposes, but because we are human, and entities make sense to us only within a total system of human meaning."<sup>37</sup> Encounters with *readiness-to-hand*, which dissolved ideas of subject and object relations, are reversed and revised by encounters with the *present-at-hand* which are fundamentally subject-object in structure.

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<sup>36</sup> Graham Harman, *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenon to Thing* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2007), 64.

<sup>37</sup> Graham Harman, *Heidegger Explained*, 64.

In *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* Harman expands the Heideggerian concept of Being by arguing that tool-analysis cannot belong to human existence alone and that it must refer to every entity, every object and not just human existence. This is what OOO refers to as Being-tool. OOO, which is a variation of Speculative Realism, calls for a form of relationality which seeks to move the human out from the center of the universe by maintaining that objects exist completely independently from human perception. Humans are not the only objects shaping things to their own ends, according to Timothy Morton, a thinker whose ecological writings have become associated with the OOO movement, when they say “Everything else is doing the same thing.”<sup>38</sup> Objects, according to Morton, exist prior to their relations. By that Morton means that no one translation of an object defines that object. What follows from this argument is that there can be no hierarchy between objects and/or their relations. This natural extension of Heidegger’s topology of being and place can also be viewed as a post-Derridean as it moves attention away from subjective to object-oriented modes of understanding.

Here I wish to take a closer look at OOO by way of Morton’s essay “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry.” I will attempt to make plain its importance to non-human agency and how these ideas come to bear upon contemporary painting. The radical relationality which is synonymous with ideas of the non-human is described by Morton as a type of translation. By drawing on Heidegger and Harman, Morton uses the sound of the wind as an analogy: “We never hear the wind in itself: we hear the wind in the chimney, the wind in the trees.”<sup>39</sup> The wind is translated by the objects it encounters, it is this translation which we hear. We humans do a similar translation of sorts because as the sound waves enter our ear the waves are translated by a pressure cell in our heads which translates the mechanical vibrations of the sound wave into electrochemical signals in the body. OOO is often accused of claiming that non-sentient objects are given consciousness. In response, Morton suggests that consciousness is no different from the

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<sup>38</sup> Timothy Morton, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” in *New Literary History* vol. 43 No.2 (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), 207.

<sup>39</sup> Morton, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” 206.

way the tree translates the wind. The tree doesn't come to understand the wind as it moves through its leaves: "Nor does the wind capture the essence of the branches and leaves."<sup>40</sup> This is what Morton means when they suggest that objects are withdrawn from access. The essence of the wind is inaccessible to the tree or to the human ear; it is withdrawn not temporally, in time or space, but ontologically, in its very being. This gives us another way of considering a painting as an autonomous thing separate from the painter. The painting of course does not have consciousness in the human sense. It is, however, a translation of relations.

Simon Ingram addresses this key question pertaining to non-sentient thinking in relation to painting. For Ingram, a painter can be conceived as an "actor in a system called painting whose role is to be seen less as the 'maker of a painting' and as much as possible, as a painting's 'first viewer',"<sup>41</sup> a point we saw in chapter one with regards to the author function. Ingram perceives a system in which the painter and the painting have interchangeable and simultaneous authority:

The painter finds the rules of the game in a particular painting *posteriori*, incrementally, iteratively and in a loop. Importantly, the painter finds such rules *after the fact*, incorporating them into a *during the fact* of a painting's production – a production that [...] occurs largely within painting by painting.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," 207.

<sup>41</sup> Simon Ingram, "Painting as a Thinking Machine," Research Gate (California: American Association for Artificial Intelligence, 2006) 1. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Simon-Ingram/publication/254598609\\_Painting\\_as\\_a\\_Thinking\\_Machine/links/5c0c6dc2299bf139c7499f86/Painting-as-a-Thinking-Machine.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Simon-Ingram/publication/254598609_Painting_as_a_Thinking_Machine/links/5c0c6dc2299bf139c7499f86/Painting-as-a-Thinking-Machine.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> Ingram, "Painting as a Thinking Machine," 1.

Ingram warns of a reductionist, reverse-engineered view of painting here. The isolating of individual components of a work, or the parsing out of complex living systems, leads to a decontextualized loss of meaning. This stands on equal terms with OOO's effect of translation and the idea of existence as a withdrawal from access. Ingram makes plain an idea put forward by Julian de Offray La Mettrie, who "saw organic matter as having 'active' and 'formal' properties, that included feeling and thought."<sup>43</sup> Following from his painter-as-first-viewer articulation, Ingram suggests that painting, like a complex organic system, is an "object imbued with subjectivity and an ability to think."<sup>44</sup> Ingram is at pains to move us away from empirical or idealistic philosophical concerns with subjects and objects and in their place he formulates a materialist theory of practice which coagulates thought as matter. Thought is substantiated in and extended through a painting's body, a praxis that emerges from the synthesis of theory and practice. He offers a compelling challenge to Marcel Duchamp's quip about the stupidity of the painter ("bête comme un peintre") by suggesting that Duchamp was wrong to assert that intelligence needed to reside in the painter in the first place. Perhaps it is the painting that is intelligent. Here we revisit that relationship once more between artist-artwork-nature (world). Radical relationality or the nonhuman offers us an extraordinary arena in which to scrutinize agency in relation to contemporary painting. This interagency allows us to consider paintings as part and separate from their authors. It challenges traditional notions of artistic inspiration by suggesting that inspiration, like intelligence, may reside between things, in their relations.

According to Morton, in OOO the idea that consciousness is a re-presentation of prior relations aligns with the emphasis on the agency and independence of objects. Consciousness, then, serves as a kind of translation mechanism through which we interpret and represent the intricate web of relations among objects. This perspective challenges anthropocentric views that place human consciousness at the center of reality, suggesting instead that our awareness is just one among many ways in which objects

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<sup>43</sup> Ingram, "Painting as a Thinking Machine," 2.

<sup>44</sup> Ingram, 2.

interact within the broader ontological landscape. This is something I touched upon in Derrida's dismissal of Husserl's *interiority* of signs. Morton states that "[e]ven when objects appear to touch one another physically, they are withdrawn from one another ontologically. This means that when an object is 'translating' another one—when it is influencing it in a causal way—it is doing to that object something analogous to what I as a human do when I act on things."<sup>45</sup> A human relation or translation of an object sits on equal terms with a nonhuman relation or translation of an object. Objects exist prior to their relations and no one translation of an object defines that object. The term object exists as a provocation of sorts here. It alludes to ideas of fixity and stasis yet the only way we can grasp OOO's definition of objects is through movement and relationality, something referred to as *process*:

According to OOO, what is called *process* is an aesthetic feature that emerges from the object as such. Reductionism downward into component parts or processes, then, is not on the OOO cards. Conversely, neither may we 'reduce upwards,' [...] into an effect of some entity such as god or my mind. Objects are not blocks of whatever waiting to be given true meaning by some (usually human) other.<sup>46</sup>

In this way objects, irreducible in nature upward or downward, "are unique but are not necessarily singular."<sup>47</sup> Objects can be wrapped in objects, which can be wrapped in objects. Going back to the idea of an object withdrawing from itself, Morton describes a rift of sorts. Object is an inadequate expression of itself. The rift conjured here describes a difference between essence and appearance. However, when we try to get close to an object by isolating an aspect of it for the purpose of study, it withdraws from access.

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<sup>45</sup> Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," 207.

<sup>46</sup> Morton, 208.

<sup>47</sup> Morton, 209.

These dissections simply become a series of human translations of an object. Morton describes our human relations to an apple as a means to articulate this idea of translation and withdrawal:

An apple is not only its appearance for a human: round, juicy, sweet, tart [...]. It has those appearances because it exists beyond human access. Thus the apple is not only its appearances-for some (other) entity. Since the apple consists of parts that are not strictly the apple, it withdraws even from itself. An apple is a nonapple, like the Magritte painting of the pipe that is not a pipe.<sup>48</sup>

I have utilized Morton's description of the appearance and withdrawal of the apple as it points towards another essay and articulation of an apple by D.H. Lawrence in reference to the painting of Cézanne. Lawrence describes Cézanne's apples as an attempt to let an apple exist without transcribing it, to let it exist in its own terms. This paradox of painting life without it being a translation of life drives at the heart of Morton's rift between essence and appearance. According to Lawrence Cézanne attempts to shove the apple away from himself "and let it live of itself."<sup>49</sup> What is at stake for Lawrence is the necessity to describe the power of intuition and instinct as a way of negotiating the world without consuming, transforming, or co-opting it.

Like the impossibility of knowing or quantifying the existence of an apple, this impossibility —whereby, according to OOO, to exist means to "withdraw from access"—strikes at the heart of the problem with the relationship between the natural world and painting. However, according to Lawrence there is hope through intuition and instinct,

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<sup>48</sup> Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," 210.

<sup>49</sup> D.H. Lawrence, "Cezanne" in *Late Essays and Articles*, ed. James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 201.

through our innate ability to live with the unknown. In chapter four on improvisation, I will attempt to classify the concept of instinct as a manifestation of relationality. This understanding of instinct is intricately linked to OOO. Cézanne wanted a representation that was true to life. Through that acknowledgment, Lawrence serves up a description of some of Cézanne's paintings as truer to life than life itself. Or to put it in OOO terms, a representation in paint truer to life than a mere human translation of it. This representation we could describe as expressing something beyond or outside of the structure of painting that we currently have at our disposal. Lawrence argues that through intuition and the frantic resistance of cliché, Cézanne was able on some very rare occasions to "introduce into our world of vision something which is neither optical nor mechanical nor intellectual-psychological."<sup>50</sup> According to Lawrence, Cézanne wished to displace mental concepts of consciousness and replace them with ideas of intuition, something described as touch. This idea of a sense of touch, which we can also describe as being a simultaneous pushing away, describes OOO's notion of an object in withdrawal. We could say, then, that Cézanne was attempting to paint the withdrawal of the apple's existence, that he wished to know the apple not as a human translation but as a nonhuman. He wished to represent an apple as a nonapple; he wished to resist the human translation of an object by attempting to re-present an apple's being outside of the received structure of painting. Lawrence's essay, which is equally scathing and complimentary of Cézanne's work, seems to suggest that it is in this impossibility, this rift, that we must use our human instincts to attempt to defy or transgress our human relation to the apple. We must use our humanness to access an understanding of the nonhuman, the unknowable. This approach echoes radical relationality's relationship to the Anthropocene within the humanities and gives us a description of OOO's understanding of objects as a human construct of a nonhuman formulation.

In *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* Brian Massumi and Erin Manning fold this notion of painting back into Latour's proposition of ecological agency. Massumi and Manning extend the idea of painting as being transformational

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<sup>50</sup> Lawrence, "Cezanne," 204.

rather than simply representational when they describe a painting process as relational, not imaginative, “its own thinking-feeling subject, moving choosily across material operations.”<sup>51</sup> They describe inter-agentic forces at work, not subject and object relations. If we return to this idea of the solitary painter in the studio momentarily, we add a further layer to the idea of the creative act as a destabilization of the author function. On top of that process, we must also consider the painter as being part of a set of infinite relations, a crowd if you will. This crowd is a cacophony of precedents, voices, others, materials, gestures, environments, and colours—what Massumi and Manning refer to as “an ecology.” By way of Lawrence on Cézanne, we can move our thought processes on from describing painting as being about perception to thinking about painting as connection. Paint is a means to structure or make *live*, to show us more clearly the elemental make-up of what surrounds us. This painting is not one concerned with depicting objects or even attempting to capture an experience. Instead, it is about transformation. At first, we might jump to the conclusion that painting in terms of transformation describes how the painter transforms our understanding of an object, which would constitute a human-centered relationship fixed on binaries and not relations. Instead, we are talking about how the painting transforms the maker. As artist Bracha B. Ettinger states, “I allow the painting to paint me.”<sup>52</sup> Massumi and Manning emphasize a language of traces, resonances and vibrations which “articulate what cannot quite be seen, what remains, always, to some extent, not only ineffable but essentially imperceptible.”<sup>53</sup> This is not an “attentiveness of the human *to* the environment but attentiveness *of* the environment to its own flowering at the very limit where experience and imagination, immediacy and cross-checking overlap.”<sup>54</sup> By putting everything at stake all the time simultaneously, by beginning and re-beginning in every moment, they posit a “co-compositional engagement with the associated milieu of emergent relation [...] an *environmental mode of awareness*.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Brian Massumi & Erin Manning. *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 79.

<sup>52</sup> Massumi & Manning, *Thought in the Act*, 66.

<sup>53</sup> Massumi & Manning, 66.

<sup>54</sup> Massumi & Manning, 6.

<sup>55</sup> Massumi & Manning, 6.



According to Heidegger, entities or objects are grasped in their existence as ‘presence,’ signifying their comprehension in relation to the present moment. Morton proposes a novel term, ‘alreadiness,’ to describe the current state or situatedness of objects.<sup>56</sup> Unlike the Heideggerian notion of coming into presence, Morton suggests that objects do not come into being through our interactions with them; rather, they already exist before our engagement with them. In other words, objects possess a state of ‘alreadiness’ prior to our establishing a connection with them. As Morton explains, “Alreadiness hints at our tuning to something else, which is a dance in which that something else is also, *already*, tuning to us. Indeed, there are some experiences in which it simply can’t be said which attunement takes priority; which comes first, logically and chronologically.”<sup>57</sup> As the painter stands in front of the painting, both of these objects, painter and painting, attune to one another. With each moment, the painter either encroaches upon or makes gestures to influence the painting, the painting is already in a state of *attunement*. In 2015, at the Moderna Museet in Sweden, Morton and Olafur Eliasson explored the concept of attunement and its connection to time. In this conversation Eliasson describes how as a viewer we respond to a work of art: “A work of art is almost like a thought that is sent to you from the future. It is an un-thought thought. You don’t necessarily do that alone. Maybe the work of art is the thinking part of the thought.”<sup>58</sup> This articulation helps to describe not just how we experience art as a viewer but how this also applies to the creation of art. It suggests that the impetus to create materializes in the process of creation itself. The work deposits the germ of a possible opportunity into you, and by extension the creative process is not solely instigated by you, the painter.

Returning to the painter in the studio once again, we can now formulate a better understanding of how even a blank canvas exists prior to our relationship to it. As the painter tunes to it they are also tuning to a history of prior relations, everything that has

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<sup>56</sup> Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological* (London: Penguin Random House, 2021), 36

<sup>57</sup> Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological* 36.

<sup>58</sup> "Olafur Eliasson & Timothy Morton | Artist Talk." Moderna Museet. October 9, 2015. Video, 0:02:45, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYht9r9xdA8&ab\\_channel=ModernaMuseet](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYht9r9xdA8&ab_channel=ModernaMuseet).

propelled painting into that present moment. In addition to a painting's prior relations, we must also consider how paint as a material tunes to the painter too. We can formulate the thought that the substance of paint is in fact telling you how to use it: "The work of art is also engaging in you in a way that it is verbalizing on your behalf the unthought thought."<sup>59</sup> This articulation of creation should not be confused with the idea that things are predetermined, which would be to misunderstand the point entirely. Eliasson and Morton are suggesting that acrylic paint tells you to use it differently from oil paint; watercolour paint tells you to use it differently to a pencil. You must be in tune with something in order to use it. Founding and maintaining this tuning is an experiential and intellectual pursuit. Thought about in these terms, one might say that a painter's skillset is one which allows for the most sensitive and open attunement with their material as it contracts into pure matter and expands out into a set of infinite current and prior relations.

In "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry" Morton also supplies us with an object-oriented defense of painting. Crucial to understanding Morton's defense is the re-evaluation of time as some objective, universal measurement. As Eliasson suggests, we can consider the work of art coming to us, prior to us, from the future, informed by the infinite set of relations that make up our distillation of *past*. Time for OOO cannot be considered as a linear projection outward (future) and backward (past) from the present. Instead, according to Morton time emanates from objects. As with Einstein's theory of relativity whereby space-time is affected by mass and energy, Morton champions a non-objective understanding of time. According to Heidegger, Dasein *times*. Dasein's temporality stretches between birth and death, occupying itself in the present with projections of the future. Here, then, time is understood from a mortal or human vantage point. Morton's argument is that human objects are equal to nonhuman objects and so by his calculation objects must also *time*.

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<sup>59</sup> "Olafur Eliasson & Timothy Morton | Artist Talk," 0:08:30.

Why is this important to painting and art creation? According to Morton, objects *time*, art objects then must also *time*, paintings by this definition must *time*. The importance of this definition comes to bear when we consider what creating something new in the world means. Making something new in the world, “the birth of fresh things”<sup>60</sup> involves an interruption of sorts, a break in the “continuous and smooth sequence of evenly spaced now-points.”<sup>61</sup> What Morton describes as the trauma of beginning “happens ‘outside time’ because it disrupts the habitual currents of temporality. A trauma just is the appearance of a new object. A new temporality appears, because there is a new entity in the world, with its own way of ‘timing’ and ‘spacing.’”<sup>62</sup> This seems to suggest that the creation of the new, be that poetry or painting, directly tampers with causality. The notion of the white gallery space, then, delivers us a strange kind of paradox to access and encounter works of art. It serves to separate us from this habitual current of temporality, the monotonous repetition of daily existence, by shielding us from this *outside* world and thereby allowing for the maximum possibility of temporal disruption. I claim that when we encounter art in the right setting, the evenly spaced ticking of human time dilates or is augmented in some sort of fashion. The same happens to a greater extent when we create work in the studio. The painter, whilst in attunement with their painting, must resist delineating their time by means of a clock as much as possible. The clock is a constant reminder of regimented, human time. The creative act by definition of its attunement and engagement with the *other* subsumes temporality. When the painter engages with the painting, and in turn when the painting engages with the painter, they also engage in the vast, complex, entangled boundlessness of relations which interrelate and permeate this encounter between objects and this act is a distortion of regimented notions of human time.

OOO maintains that “the aesthetic dimension, the dimension of relations, is the causal dimension.”<sup>63</sup> For Morton, the aesthetic dimension provides a means to re-assess

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<sup>60</sup> Morton, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” 215.

<sup>61</sup> Morton, 215.

<sup>62</sup> Morton, 216.

<sup>63</sup> Morton, 217.

humanity's relationship with the universe. Adorno's discussion on the autonomy of the art object touched on in chapter one is rooted in Hegel's aesthetics. According to Hegel, beauty, meaning, or thought in the artwork emanates from the materiality of the artwork itself—how it has been crafted, shaped, and brought into fruition through the act of creation. Morton considers this definition clumsy, as it seems to suggest that there is a correlation here between a mind and a thing, that matter in these terms requires the existence of another from which this notion of matter must differ. I wish to take us back to Derrida here, as Morton does in their essay, to challenge this idea of the artwork existing in and of itself, but always at the requirement of an *other*:

Think about Derrida's infamous line "il n'ya pas de hors-texte." Happily, Gayatri Spivak gives us two translations. The second, parenthetical translation is the one I prefer: "there is no outside-text." In other words, not everything is reducible to pure language, as is the case with structuralism, which indeed reduces things to their relations. What Derrida is saying, by contrast, is that a text is an operationally closed system that is founded on some kind of externality that it both includes and excludes, that it can't talk about but that it can't help referencing in the negative.<sup>64</sup>

OOO attempts to construct a positivistic process of relationism, one in which the object cannot be isolated from its relations and is not beholden to an outside *other*. Time is one way by which to understand this complex relationship between an object's appearance and its essence. According to OOO, an object is formed by what has happened to it, form is memory thought about in terms of archeology not through linear time but deep time. "Your chipped coffee mug records what happened to it. What is called the past is really other objects that coexist with the object in question. When we hold a glass, we are

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<sup>64</sup> Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," 218-9.

holding the past.”<sup>65</sup> This as alluded to previously illustrates a rift between the appearance of an object and its essence. If we consider matter in these terms, matter is not just a wrought thing for human manipulation but a material imbued with a sense of deep archeological time. This notion requires that painting, for instance, garners a more sensitive and adaptive association with its fabric. It requires a painter to begin to comprehend how paint acts, how it holds its alchemical and material properties alongside its cultural, social, and historical elementality, part of a process of refinement and augmentation by way of mechanical, human, and sedimentary forces. Sensitivity of this kind allows the painter to see the painting on equal terms with themselves with shared relations to deep time.

In Chapter one, Heidegger’s concept of coming to presence, initially explored and revisited in this chapter, situates existence in the present. While this may seem straightforward, Morton challenges this perspective by asserting that existence is, in fact, rooted in the future, marked by an “in-difference to oneself.” This introduces the recurrent theme of the distinction between appearance and essence. If we think about painting in these terms, a painting’s meaning is its potential, its future. When we encounter a painting, we experience it and consider its meaning, its effect upon us, the viewer. However, if we were to revisit that same painting again, as the painter does in the studio day after day, we would never assume to have exactly the same relation to it as we did in the first instance. Our experience of that painting and the meaning we derive from it is different each time. The reason we return to it in the first place “is that it might release a different meaning this time.”<sup>66</sup> The present isn’t a space that oscillates between past and future: “The present is a construct imposed on an uncanny intermeshing of appearance and essence.”<sup>67</sup> According to Morton, the poem, which we will extend to include painting here, is a reminder of our shared equitable existence with other objects both human and nonhuman:

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<sup>65</sup> Morton, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” 220.

<sup>66</sup> Morton, 220.

<sup>67</sup> Morton, 220.

Since there is no top object, no bottom object, and no middle object, sheer coexistence is what there is. To write poetry is to perform a nonviolent political act, to coexist with other beings. This coexistence happens not in some eternal now, or in a now-point, however expansive or constrained. The “nowness” of a poem, its “spaciousness,” is the disquieting asymmetry between appearance and essence, past and future. With remorseless gentleness, a poem forces us to acknowledge that we coexist with uncanny beings in a groundless yet vivid reality without a beyond.<sup>68</sup>

Morton is portraying poetry as a reminder of our shared existence with both human and nonhuman objects. Poetry, or in our case, painting, becomes a nonviolent political act, fostering coexistence with other beings. The “nowness” of a poem or the “spaciousness” of a painting emerges from the tension between appearance and essence, past and future.

Context, then, is not some delineation of a boundary or the formulation of an inside/outside. Instead, it is Heidegger’s notions of *earth* and *world* devoid of a human-centric perspective. This may be a fruitful way of thinking about art in the Anthropocene through the redefined idea of context in the artist-artwork relationship. The studio floods with the boundless series of objects and their relations, and the painter and the painting exist as objects in that network of relations. In this sense painting is ecological and inherently political, holding the potential to reshape relations on earth, as we shall see in the next chapter by exploring the work of Anselm Kiefer and by delving into non-linear understandings of time and their connection to ecology through material and geological relations.

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<sup>68</sup> Morton, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” 222.

## Chapter 3

### 3 Anselm Kiefer – From Human History to the Nonhuman

My idea of time is that the more we return to the past, the further we go into the future. It is a contradictory double movement that expands time.<sup>69</sup>

In May 2022 German painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer opened up to the public his vast former studio complex in the south of France. Located near Barjac, northwest of Avignon, this 40-hectare site is an immersive environment consisting of vast open-air installations and site-specific exhibition spaces all connected by a network of paths, tunnels and underground crypts. This monumental complex has been constructed over several decades by Kiefer and his team of assistants. In 2014, as Kiefer prepared for a retrospective of his work at the Royal Academy in England, the BBC was given access to this site when it still functioned as his studio. The documentary film by the BBC *Imagine* series, *Anselm Kiefer: Remembering the Future*, gave us the first glimpses of what Kiefer was envisaging at Barjac. As this chapter will make clear, Kiefer has been attempting to re-route common points of access within his work which have been dominated by autobiographical associations and historical precedents since the late 1990s. His work at Barjac marks the most comprehensive movement away from his own personal histories and his Germanic roots. It separates Anselm Kiefer the man from his work, and with this distancing his output offers the viewer access to more complex relationships within the work. It is this distancing that I wish to make the focus of this chapter. I will make a case for an alternative reading of Kiefer's work as a provocation to be read alongside the substantial art historical analysis that already exists on Kiefer's life and work. I will argue

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<sup>69</sup> Jérôme Sans, "Anselm Kiefer: Architect of Landscape and Cosmology," in *Gagosian Quarterly*, 2022, <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2022/06/22/essay-anselm-kiefer-architect-of-landscape-and-cosmology/>

that Kiefer's later works provide a fertile ground for an Object-Oriented Ontological reading. The shift from a symbolic focus to a recognition of materials allows for an exploration of the agency of non-human entities and brings Kiefer's oeuvre into conversation with the central themes of OOO. This chapter will take a broad look at the developments and changes made to Kiefer's output throughout his career to date. It will examine how meaning is generated, how the artist approaches working and how that might in turn affect agency in the work. I wish to consider how we, as viewers, access a work of art. By this I mean to ask: What are the ways through which we gain access to meaning within a particular painting? What is present in the work which begins to trigger us into action? What agency does the painting have by way of which it can stimulate a response from us and therefore instigate a relationship or form of correspondence? By way of Mark Titmarsh's determination of expanded painting, I will also consider Kiefer's three-dimensional, sculptural, and installation works as relations to painting, in that they establish a way of "a sense of difference with painting" but are seen always in relation to it.<sup>70</sup>

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Kiefer experimented with photography, artist books, and flat illustrative painting formulations. His *Occupations* series and his *Heroic Symbols* paintings acted as a provocation. They depicted Kiefer dressed in his father's army uniform performing the Nazi salute at key locations around Europe. This act, considered a crime in Germany due to its association with neo-Nazi sentiments, added a controversial dimension to Kiefer's work. In "Building, Swelling and Thinking," the title of which recalls Heidegger's famous essay "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," Kathleen Soriano suggests that Kiefer "views these actions as performances, as acts of mourning and remembering, using his own body to tackle the representation and legacy of Nazism."<sup>71</sup> In *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Hannah Arendt addressed the manner in which, under Nazi rule, crimes against humanity became

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<sup>70</sup> Titmarsh, *Expanded Painting*, 75.

<sup>71</sup> Kathleen Soriano, "Building, Swelling, Thinking," in *Anslem Kiefer*, (London: The Royal Academy of the Arts, 2014), 21.



routinized and implemented without moral indignation.<sup>72</sup> Kiefer's *Occupations* series, in a contemporary context, asks what price silence might cost a generation of Germans following the Second World War. The criminality associated with the Nazi salute depicted in Kiefer's series suggests, via Arendt's theory, that the gesture's normalization during that historical period continues to have consequences, emphasizing the enduring impact of silent complicity. Kiefer's work necessitates a critique of the idea of collective guilt and echoes Arendt's work about moral responsibility under dictatorship and the consequences of non-thinking or inaction. In a 2019 interview with the San Francisco Museum of Art, Kiefer describes these early works and his concern for German history: "When I did this action *Occupations*, from then on I was a lot involved in the recent history of Germany."<sup>73</sup> What is unclear from his comments is whether the work produced at this time provoked this process of investigation into Nazism and the Second World War or whether this interest preceded the work.

By the late 1970s, Kiefer was expanding on this investigation into German history further by including references to German myth, literature, music, and philosophy within his work. Still two-dimensional in nature, his paintings from this time employ illusionistic constructions of three-dimensional space through the depiction of wooden interiors or landscapes of fields and trees replete with horizon line and the demarcation of perspectival depth. By the 1980s, Kiefer was beginning to work in a much more textural way with paint. The painting *Margarethe* (1981) saw Kiefer attach straw to the painted surface, complicating the traditional illusionistic painting devices of perspective and depth. His early painted works, prior to 1981, referred to subjects and themes outside of the picture plane. This suggests that meaning was previously accessed through visual symbols and references, transcending limitations imposed by the paint itself. These flatter, illustrative depictions in paint pointed towards meaning beyond the materiality of paint. Meaning in Kiefer's work was derived from his personal biography, his German

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<sup>72</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006).

<sup>73</sup> Anselm Kiefer, "History is a clay," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2016, <https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/anselm-kiefer-history-clay/>, 00:01:20.

identity, and specific historical precedents in Germany. This gap which simultaneously connects and separates Kiefer from his work is an essential agent in determining where meaning is located and how meaning is accessed through Kiefer's painting.

Kiefer's identity and his relation to his work has long been a topic of some consternation. When representing Germany at the 39<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1980 alongside George Baselitz, his works were said to have "appalled many critics, who felt that Kiefer's monumental canvases associated a tragic beauty with the Third Reich, some even suggesting that he was a neo-Nazi."<sup>74</sup> It was America which supported Kiefer in the 1980s: "I am grateful to America, because I made my career there when they didn't like me in Germany. They still don't."<sup>75</sup> In a 1988 article in *Art in America*, Peter Schjeldahl characterises Kiefer as "Our Kiefer? One among many (mine, yours, theirs)."<sup>76</sup> The significance here goes beyond an assessment of who champions or critiques Kiefer's work. If we consider Bruno Latour's concept of interobjectivity here, we come closer to grasping how the identity of Kiefer is not in fact singular at all but just as Schjeldahl suggests: Kiefer is many. Andreas Huyssen's "Kiefer in Berlin" describes "how Germanness functions differently in the United States and in Germany."<sup>77</sup> This goes some way to explaining the divided opinions on Kiefer's output between Germany and the USA. However, it also makes plain the notion that history, instead of being comprised of events in chronological order, is comprehended in the present through the diverse inter-object relations that specific groups maintain with those events. Gordon Sammut, Paul Daanen, and Mohammad Sartawi define interobjectivity as "a representation of an object that incorporates different social meanings and that exists across diverse cultural groups [...] that permits different inter-objective relations [...] with the object in

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<sup>74</sup> Soraino, "Building, Swelling, Thinking", 22.

<sup>75</sup> Janne Sirén, "Beauty Needs a Foundation: A Conversation with Anselm Kiefer," in *Anselm Kiefer Beyond Landscape* (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 2014), 19.

<sup>76</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, "Our Kiefer," *Art in America* vol. 76, no. 3 (March 1988): 126.

<sup>77</sup> Andreas Huyssen, "Kiefer in Berlin," *October*, vol. 62 (Autumn 1992): 84.

common, according to each group's version of the object itself."<sup>78</sup> Here we can determine German history as an object, the Nazi salute as an object, Anselm Kiefer as an object, as well as a Kiefer painting making reference to these prior objects as an object too. This interobjectivity informs my claim that Kiefer's early works related to meaning that exists outside of the confines of the work. German history and the Nazi salute as objects have their own agency quite separate to the painted object. Relying on an aspect of German history or on a symbol of Nazism as a means of establishing some form of objective agency, then, is problematic. The artist's nationality or the artist's intent are in themselves not as sure or concrete a point of access into the work as might be first assumed. Timothy Morton provides an object-oriented defense of this fluidity of identity by stating: "Things are inconsistent rather than constantly present. To be a thing is to have a gap between what you are and how you appear."<sup>79</sup> According to Morton, the notion that something, an object, has a constant presence or a fixed agency has dissolved.

By the late 1990s, the delineation between how a painting comes into being and what points of access it offers the viewing public becomes more of a concern for Kiefer: "In the work I had accomplished earlier, the past assumed proportions that were existential. But with time that aspect has vanished."<sup>80</sup> Kiefer himself was attempting to move away from the associations his paintings had with a very specific German history in favour of a more global, universal, geological history. The recent German history referred to in his earlier works, far from being existential in nature, presumes a retrocausality. The access these early paintings and photographs offer the viewer is regressive and stymied. The existential nature of the themes Kiefer developed at this time was never present, as the manner in which he framed these themes was confrontational and as a result became inevitably divisive. In "Anselm Kiefer and the Shapes of Time," Charles Molesworth identifies a shift in Kiefer's work and describes how the artist seems at once supported by

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<sup>78</sup> Gordon Summut, Paul Daanen & Mohammad Sartawi, "Interobjectivity: Representations and artefacts in cultural psychology. *Culture & Psychology*," (Msida: University of Malta, 2010,) 456.  
<https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/83144>

<sup>79</sup> Timothy Morton, "From Them Flow What We Call Time," *Ecology Without Nature*, 2015, 19.12.  
<https://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/2015/05/from-them-flows-what-we-call-time-mp3.html>

<sup>80</sup> "Anselm Kiefer Identity Crisis," *Art News* vol. 96 No.6. 1997.

history whilst simultaneously being “contemptuous of its rigidities.”<sup>81</sup> Molesworth suggests that Kiefer’s work allows the viewer access through historical narratives whilst at the same time allowing Kiefer to create his own historical context, one in which time can be warped and bent to his own ends, showing an open disdain for chronological timescales. Rather than being tethered to human history, Kiefer’s work by the 1990s was seeking to actively dissolve it. Kiefer’s “move from a focused history to a more global, or perhaps a more geological history”<sup>82</sup> in the late 1980s and into the 1990s heralds a new direction in his output. Gone is the illustrative, thin, symbol laden approach to painting and in its place are thick mixed-media works which question painting’s historical ties to illusionistic space and shift our attention away from painting as perspective: painting as illusion into painting as object. In his 2019 San Francisco Museum of Art interview, Kiefer describes a notion of history which is free from human timescales or chronological, linear time frames. He says that “history is a material,”<sup>83</sup> malleable and pliable, “a clay to build with.”<sup>84</sup> History thought about in these terms might be better described as time. Here we can draw parallels to Heidegger’s notion of time as a horizon giving our moments of existence particular meaning. What Kiefer infers is that horizon, like history, is not fixed and is in fact malleable. Although still very much human centered, there is a movement here towards nonhuman timescales, geological, material-object, ecological timescales which chart a contradictory double movement backwards and forwards simultaneously, an identification of a nonlinear expansion of time.

*Anselm Kiefer: Remembering the Future* opens with Kiefer rather playfully hacking away at a very large canvas. The canvas is thickly encrusted with layer upon layer of what looks like paint, plaster and clay, a panoply of materials. Kiefer says:

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<sup>81</sup> Charles Molesworth, “Anselm Kiefer and the Shapes of Time,” *Salmagundi*, Spring-Summer 1989, No. 82/83 (Saratoga Springs: Skidmore College, 1989), 78.

<sup>82</sup> Matthew Biro, *Anselm Kiefer and the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 254.

<sup>83</sup> *Anselm Kiefer – Remembering the Future, Imagine*, season 24, episode 4, directed by Jack Cocker, featuring Alan Yentob and Anselm Kiefer, aired November 18, 2014, BBC. 00:19:00.

<sup>84</sup> Anselm Kiefer, “History is a clay,” 00:01:00.

It's always construction, demolition, reconstruction, all the stars who die and some others are born. It's always like this. Who is responsible for that. Who started this in the beginning. We don't know. We don't know why we are here, we don't know where we go. It's quite desperate no? We have an intellect to try and find out but we cannot. When a star explodes all the material goes in the cosmos. It's there it's not forg..... it's not err... God doesn't forget it you know [Laughs] and then one day it will be recomposed, the gravity will recombine another star and so on.<sup>85</sup>

Here Kiefer draws a distinction between a lack of a God, a grand instigator of things, a super creator, a metaphysical center on the one hand and the timelessness of evolutionary cycles on the other. This distinction marks a shift in his practice away from a sole creative force towards a symbiotic relationship with matter. The paint and the materials that fall to the floor as he hacks away at the painted surface are kept. All these fallen fragments are used and re-used in future works. These materials seem to contain the memory or energy of a previous work reconstituted or reconstructed now in another form. Kiefer seems much less interested in depicting things or understanding things in this more recent work. Like Bracha Ettinger, as we saw in Chapter two, he seems much more concerned with painting as a form of translation or connection. This connection seems simultaneously ecological and cosmological, indicating a radical redistribution of human timescales through which the human becomes wholly insignificant. Pointing to this change, Kiefer says: "I have to connect things in the world in a different way." He continues: "this is what artists do, they create a new connection between things."<sup>86</sup> Kiefer's previous fascination with history has given way to an interest in time and with it the idea of the present as being embedded in the many other cycles from the macro to the micro, from the seen to the unseen. In "In the beginning is the end and in the end is the

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<sup>85</sup> Imagine, "Anselm Kiefer Remembering the Future," 00:01:15.

<sup>86</sup> Imagine, 01:01:28.

beginning,” Richard Davey writes: “in this artistic crucible the fixed becomes fluid, and the regular structure and divisions of space and linear time are dissolved.”<sup>87</sup> These new connections are facilitated by the gap or distance which separates artist from artwork. By removing himself from the artwork and by facilitating a relationship with painting which acknowledges the human aspect as only a part of the whole process of working, Kiefer seems to be championing an autopoietic process of working. He relinquishes control and listens to and searches the material for clues of how to proceed. The painting becomes an ‘other,’ a nonhuman agentic force. In conversation with Tim Marlow at White Cube in 2016, Kiefer claims: “The painting told me what it wanted to be.”<sup>88</sup> This statement locates the painter as other to the painting, which is where Kiefer believes all artists must stand: “in the midst of the ‘senseless,’ a stranger to his own work, gazing at it like a child looking for shapes in the clouds, or early man looking for the familiar forms in the stars.”<sup>89</sup> Kiefer’s migration from the subject of his paintings towards the painting’s other is an evolution which has taken the best part of twenty-five to thirty years. As I wish to make plain, this shift has come about by way of an interaction between artist, material (paint) and ecology (context).

At around the time Kiefer painted *Margarethe* he began to experiment with readymade materials or recognisable found forms. In the case of *Margarethe* it was straw. In other paintings we find lead books or sticks attached to the painted surface. These objects which first were attached to his paintings have over time made their way off the wall and into being self-supporting three-dimensional sculptural forms. By incorporating the readymade into the substance of the painting, by way of being attached directly to the painted surface, Kiefer conjures up Heidegger’s crucial tool analysis found in *Being and Time* and the theories of the object in its process of use and withdrawal (*zuhanden* and *vorhanden*). Over the years the objects have become less and less material

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<sup>87</sup> Richard Davey, “In the beginning is the end and in the end is the beginning,” in *Anselm Kiefer*, (London: The Royal Academy of the Arts, 2014), 50.

<sup>88</sup> Anselm Kiefer, “Conversations: Anselm Kiefer and Tim Marlow, 2016 I White cube,” December 30, 2022, Royal Institute of British Architects, 00:08:35, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8Y\\_4eOPrc&ab\\_channel=WhiteCube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8Y_4eOPrc&ab_channel=WhiteCube)

<sup>89</sup> Davey, “In the beginning is the end and in the end is the beginning,” 50.

like and more and more readymade. By 2014 he was using bicycles, sunflowers, boots, animal traps. Kiefer's relationship to these objects, just like that of the viewers, has changed. We no longer experience the bicycle or the sunflower. These objects have been extracted from their *everyday* meaning. Morton might say that we see the gap between what the object is and what the object looks like. Davey suggests that we no longer see these objects "as having fixed meaning or function, rather [they] become a collection of atoms."<sup>90</sup> This visualisation of the rift between what an object is and its appearance dissolves notions of linear time that leads us to question the object's situatedness as it exists prior to our experience of it. In this sense we have an overt visualisation of Morton's term *alreadiness* in which an object, rather than being brought into presence by us (Heidegger), is in fact already present, prior to our relation to it (OOO), and therefore must be re-constituted or re-imagined with every new encounter.

Kiefer's use of objects also creates a visual metaphor which helps articulate the shift in their position as painter in relation to painting. The articulation of this gap between what the painter is and how the painter appears helps dislocate the presence of the painter as the sole dictator of agency. Agency was never in the hands of the painter, it is always *already* elsewhere. Kiefer's comment that "history is a material" emphasizes this shift. Yes, history is mineral, ecological, geological time as established in a material, but it is also outside of us. Morton further radicalizes this decentering of the human when they describe a human as not human at all but an object: "a human is a heap of things which aren't human."<sup>91</sup> No one aspect of a human makes us human. We are a collection of nonhuman objects. Kiefer himself describes this nonhuman othering when he talks about walking through his studio at Barjac at night in 2014: "When I walk through my studio at night, somewhat tired, when I'm no longer working, I'm no longer in logic but in another world: I see my studio, I walk through my brain. I see synapses." This state of no longer being in logic hints at a state of mind or a way of being that is more finely tuned, as Morton might put it, in better *attunement* with his surroundings. Kiefer is a

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<sup>90</sup> Davey, "In the beginning is the end and in the end is the beginning," 50.

<sup>91</sup> Morton, "From Them Flow What We Call Time," 00:19:12

relation among relations, an object in symbiotic or autopoietic relationship with other objects, an autopoiesis, and its relationship to improvisation, I will take up in chapter four.

Marking a turning point in the understanding of Kiefer's work, Matthew Biro's *Anselm Kiefer and the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger* describes how the shifting, constantly evolving context or atmosphere in which Kiefer works also contributes to the theoretical re-articulations of what we call history I have explored to this point. Biro points to fundamental structures in twentieth-century German culture which are given shape by the interdisciplinary analysis of Kiefer's work seen in relation to the topics of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, history, and technology found in the work of Heidegger. He alludes to the dissolution of fixed narratives and rigid histories by invoking Jürgen Habermas's nuanced positioning of modernity as a "future emerging in the present."<sup>92</sup> Traditional narratives and received histories become disconnected from the present; they become something that must be criticized before they can be used. Habermas states: "Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; *it has to create normativity out of itself.*"<sup>93</sup> Kiefer's work has developed to visualise and describe this refusal to accept modes from another epoch. He has stopped trying to point at the thing that was driving his creative questioning and is now searching an historical present for emergent or possible futures. Kiefer is still wrestling with these ideas of refusing to accept received histories, but perhaps he has now come to terms with the fact that to do that one must re-orient oneself. Rather than look back and point at the issue, Kiefer now lives and creates possible alternatives: "it doesn't mean you have found a sense of the World, you have constructed a sense of it."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Biro, *Anselm Kiefer and the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger*, 4.

<sup>93</sup>Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, tr. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 7.

<sup>94</sup> Imagine, "Anselm Kiefer Remembering the Future," 00:16:36.



By documenting this re-orientation, *Anselm Kiefer: Remembering the Future* offers a glimpse into what Kiefer is constructing at his Barjac studio in France. This snapshot offers us a valuable insight into Kiefer's process, and we witness work in a state of becoming, free from the trappings of finitude and completion. The pitfalls of finishing are an ever-present concern for Kiefer and for good reason. The vitality he demands in his process and the constant probing is given up to stasis. As Davey states, "For this reason, Kiefer never really wants his works to coagulate and become finished."<sup>95</sup> The painter's paradox is that finishing dilutes the works futurity; it resists possibility. For this reason the glimpse we have of Kiefer's studio in 2014 is just as valuable, if not moreso, than seeing the site's completion in 2023. Kiefer's painting in many ways has never been about finishing, but presenting something we as viewers may finish. He presents something with enough evidence of its journey that it remains alive for us in this state of uncertainty. The many works that have come to completion by way of a symbolic gesture or metaphorical trick lack this openness, they lack this knowing, they begin to close down instead of continually unfolding.

In "Anselm Kiefer Architect of Landscape and Cosmology" Jerome Sans introduces us to Kiefer's completed Barjac site by way of several key themes: time, ecology, and the agency of the invisible. Sans describes Kiefer as "both the orchestrator and first viewer of his work,"<sup>96</sup> a deliberate separation between artist and artwork this is one of my paper's main themes. This position of the artist allows for two significant things to happen. Firstly, it gives agency to the artwork as it exists outside of the artist, by which I mean that its existence is not dependent on its relation to the artist. Secondly, this position also allows the viewer access to a work without first having to navigate a relationship to the artist experienced through the artist's relationship to the artwork. There is a generosity to this act of creating that allows other people's biography into the work and doesn't force the artist's own biography on the viewing public. It also allows the artist truly to search and not simply to fulfill prior convictions about or expectations

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<sup>95</sup> Davey, "In the beginning is the end and in the end is the beginning," 58.

<sup>96</sup> Jerome Sans, "Anselm Kiefer Architect of Landscape and Cosmology," Gagosian, June 22, 2022, <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2022/06/22/essay-anselm-kiefer-architect-of-landscape-and-cosmology/>

for the work. For Sans, Barjac “is the history of life, of searching for one’s voice, searching for the other and for oneself: wandering from one point to the next, without arriving and always finding something else.”<sup>97</sup> Sans describes navigating the many tracks, underground passages, and exhibition spaces, but he could just as well be describing a painting process, a process of creating.

Barjac symbolizes the ultimate paradox of contemporary painting: the need to create something which is never settled and which is always in a state of constant flux, like the creative process itself, but which is achieved through a painted object which theoretically is always to remain fixed. This idea of fixity or finishing a painting has been an issue for Kiefer since his more textural painting style emerged in the early 1980s. This raw, physical, unencumbered, industrial approach to paint and material application has allowed Kiefer not to be precious about his work. Armed with his machete in his studio in 2014 he hacks away at a large painting: “I’ve painted a long time on this painting”, and “added layers, on layers, on layers and now I go back [...] to the beginning.”<sup>98</sup> He gestures with his machete through the surface of the canvas. In Barjac Kiefer makes three-dimensional this excavation of time. Instead of the excavation of paint, this time Kiefer is moving earth, he is mining geological time. Instead of feeling, handling, and sensing time through the application and removal of painted matter, he is immersing himself in the earth. He is cutting, building, and exploring down through geological time. He is surrounded by time not just referring to it. This doing and undoing is not about an outcome; it is a valorisation of the process of making. The result is an immersion in material. There is no need to attach a clever metaphor or mythical reference to the work. This time one must simply navigate the raw material of production.

Sans describes how Kiefer has managed to strip away “the weight of museographic conventions which at times suffocate Kiefer’s work.”<sup>99</sup> I agree that Kiefer’s work has been suffocated by a museum system, not because of lack of space or

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<sup>97</sup> Sans “Anselm Kiefer Architect of Landscape and Cosmology.”

<sup>98</sup> *Anselm Kiefer Remembering the Future*, 00:00:45.

<sup>99</sup> Sans “Anselm Kiefer Architect of Landscape and Cosmology.”

opportunity, nor by location or by the confines of the white walls, but because of the suffocation of museographic conventions which for so long have prioritized painting as object. At Barjac, Kiefer frees himself from the confines of the painted object. Instead, his work's natural affinity is with ecology, with the elements that make up our environment and the formulation of time through sedimentation. Kiefer can leave history behind at Barjac and transport us from the micro to the macro from organic soil and plant matter to the elements of the cosmos. He is displacing himself from the center of his work and at the same time he displaces us from the center of a metaphysical field which for so long has prioritized the human over the nonhuman. This spirit is characterised by Sans when he writes, “[t]he thousands of synapses of his creative process make up an ecosystem that extends beyond the sole centre of gravity of his relationship to history and to memory and innervates much greater mythological, cosmological, literary, archaeological and organic territories.”<sup>100</sup> For Sans, Barjac is a possibility for Kiefer, and for mankind, to break free from history by “building bridges to take us back.”<sup>101</sup> This rather contradictory statement begs the question: back to where? Back to a pre-modern apprehension of the world. Heidegger's *apprehending man* doesn't look out upon the world and attempt to understand it by representing it; instead, *apprehending man* is looked upon by the objects of *world* and apprehends his symbiotic relationship to it. Barjac emerges as a potential avenue for Kiefer and humanity to liberate themselves from history, ostensibly by constructing bridges that lead backward. Again, this seemingly paradoxical proposition hints at a return to a pre-modern comprehension of the world. Contrary to the conventional view of man scrutinizing and interpreting the world through representation, Heidegger's philosophy paints a picture where man is subjected to the gaze of worldly objects. Instead of actively seeking to understand, the world of objects implies a symbiotic relationship where the observer becomes an observed participant.

Applying this critique to an ecological perspective, the idea of building bridges to the past takes on a cautionary tone. If not carefully navigated, such a process could result

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<sup>100</sup> Sans “Anselm Kiefer Architect of Landscape and Cosmology.”

<sup>101</sup> Sans “Anselm Kiefer Architect of Landscape and Cosmology.”

in an ecological mindset that is regressive, overlooking the advancements and lessons of the present. The call to break free from history risks neglecting the pressing environmental challenges that stem from very real anthropogenic processes, and these demand contemporary solutions. An object-oriented ontology doesn't seek to take us back, or risk sentimentalising history, but instead moves us beyond Heidegger by giving equal agency to all objects and their relations prior to a contaminated human relationship to them. Kiefer's work at Barjac is the closest he's been to animating the nonhuman and the quiet complexity that affects these nonhuman-object relations:

To survive, I create meaning, and this is my art. I create it there where the horizontal and vertical lines that traverse space intersect: historical, geological astral lines. I need to be there where they meet, where they touch each other. There are also waves, the existence of which is certain: waves of sunlight, infrared waves, gamma waves, and all sorts of others, up to 99.99% invisible. And I would suggest that the artist renders them visible, in small part.<sup>102</sup>

Rendering the invisible visible, shifting from a human centered investigation of history to a de-centred invagination of time, Kiefer has shifted his painting process away from explaining and describing to transforming. This transformation describes how the artist transforms the artwork but more importantly how the artwork transforms the artist and in turn the viewer.

I wish to end this chapter by hinting at how this notion of transformation affects the distribution of agency within the artist-artwork-ecology relationship. While deeply entrenched in spiritual and mythological themes, Kiefer's approach has evolved to recognize the inherent liveliness and autonomy of the materials he employs in his art.

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<sup>102</sup> Sans "Anselm Kiefer Architect of Landscape and Cosmology."

There is a vibrant materiality in his work. This shift aligns with the core tenets of OOO, which posits that all entities, human and non-human alike, possess a degree of reality and agency. In his 2016 conversation with Tim Marlow at White Cube, Kiefer described the relationship he has with painting during his creative process. We can begin to see how his approach and the agency afforded the painting might cater to a more transformational painting outlook over one that seeks to explain or describe meaning:

I'm in the painting, I'm in the colour, I just start I don't know what I do, I just do something. And then after a while I put it up on the wall and I look at it and then there is a discussion between the painting and me and I'm reflecting what I thought what this painting wanted to say to me. And then I change it. I make a decision I change it. And then a few days later, a few weeks later I put it again on the wall and so it goes on and on until I think it could be finished.<sup>103</sup>

What Kiefer describes here is a symbiotic relationship in which the painting and the painter have equal agency and one must not attempt to overthrow or dominate the other. This relationship is a form of autopoiesis or improvisation which involves just as much watching and listening as doing. Only this autopoietic improvisational relationship could lead Kiefer to state "the painting told me what it wanted to be." Here we are made aware of the agency of the nonhuman object, the painting, and the agency apportioned to the relationship between the human object, Kiefer, and the nonhuman objects that surround him. It is this improvisational relationship between artist-artwork-ecology that I will take up in my next and final chapter.

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<sup>103</sup> Anselm Kiefer, "Conversations: Anselm Kiefer and Time Marlow, 2016 I White Cube," 00:08:50.

## Chapter 4

### 4 Autopoietic Improvisation

The global reach of pollution, atomic energy, weather science, and genetics, to name just a few ‘world-objects’ means that our actions act on the whole of the World. As climate change and the discourse on the Anthropocene has recently made clear though, the world, or nature is not simply our object to act upon. It acts back on us and responds to our action in ways we had not anticipated. If the earth was our object to do things to, we have now become the object of our objects.<sup>104</sup>

The painter stands again in the studio, the painting stares back at them. In an environment devoid of subject-object relations the painter must come to terms with the efficacy of their actions. The painting no longer resembles an object cut off from the world. Isolated from its surroundings, it is no longer something only the painter acts upon. The painting expands out to encompass the whole world. Every small action upon the painting is an action in the world, upon the world. The world, like the painting, has always responded to our actions. As we do things to the world, the world does things to *painting*. The painting standing before the painter was being acted upon before it even became a painting. The painting makes an object of the painter, it responds to our actions. In this chapter I will address what a painter’s actions might look like in this world of infinite objects and object-relations. I will do that through a study of improvisation seen in relation to contemporary studio-based painting to further expand upon this artist-artwork-ecology relationship.

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<sup>104</sup> Crocker, “As Soon as We Are Two There is a Medium,” 186.

I wish to oversimplify painting for a moment. I wish to boil painting down to a form of communication. If we were to consider that the painter wished to communicate something to the viewer and wanted to use the medium of paint through which to do so what might this entail? How might this work and what are the effects of each object's involvement in this relationship? The painter wishes to paint a black cat. They do so and the viewer receives this rather simple depiction of a black cat by way of seeing it on the canvas. Communication, however simple, requires a medium or a conduit between sender and receiver through which information travels: the air, radio waves, pen and paper etc. The perfect communication makes the medium it travels through disappear. Sender and receiver appear tied to one another in perfect relation seemingly with no intermediary, with no mediation. However, as Michel Serres points out in *The Parasite*, communicants don't control the medium through which they communicate. The message the sender imparts must travel through this middle, this medium, in order to be received, yet neither sender nor receiver are in possession of this middle: "As soon as we are two, there is a medium between us."<sup>105</sup> Every medium harbours its own unique properties of mediation. This mediation, this associated milieu, is capable of distortion; it must be factored into the equation of communication by both sender and receiver in order for it not to disrupt or fragment what is being communicated: "To hold a dialogue is to suppose a third man and to seek to exclude him; a successful communication is the exclusion of the third man. The most profound dialectical problem is not the Other, who is only a variety – or a variation – of the Same, it is the problem of the third man."<sup>106</sup> This problem of the third man, the medium, is precisely what painting is. If the painter wants the viewer to imagine a black cat, they may be best using a different medium in order to do so. Writing "Black Cat" on a piece of paper and attaching it to the wall might be a better transfer of information from sender to receiver than painting a black cat.<sup>107</sup> The painting's job as a

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<sup>105</sup> Michael Serres, *The Parasite*, tr. Lawrence R Schehr (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982), 70.

<sup>106</sup> Serres, *The Parasite* 66-67.

<sup>107</sup> Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) offers an illustration of how different mediums affect the same object. In this work a chair sits alongside a photograph of the same chair and a dictionary definition of the word chair. Each manifestation of the chair imparts a difference from the other two upon the viewer. The conceptual gap which exists between the affect of these individual chairs stands as an illustration of the

medium is not to disappear, it is to deliberately distort and disrupt the sender's information. Sender and receiver must accommodate this *third man*, the medium. In order to communicate they "go up against the racket of their shared milieu."<sup>108</sup> The painting becomes a stand in for this shared milieu. It becomes the distortion, the noise; the painting becomes the context of communication. Rather than being an unwelcome intrusion painting becomes facilitatory. A painting competes with the noise of the painter by generating its own noise. It becomes the environment and by extension it becomes a stand in for Heidegger's notion of *World*. What is received by the time the viewer witnesses the painting is the signal of the sender distorted and refracted by the noise of the world, mutated by the paint into object: "We are surrounded by noise. We are in the noises of the world, and we cannot close our door to their reception. In the beginning is the noise. The real seems to me to be stochastically regular."<sup>109</sup>

What if the painter standing in their studio were to refuse to listen to this noise? What if they were to refute any idea that the painting has its own agency? What if they were to boldly wrestle complete control away from the painting (the medium, the middle) and dictate what the painting must be in the most concrete terms possible? The painter would be refusing to acknowledge that the world acts upon us. They would be holding firm to the subject-object binaries which have allowed humans to believe they act upon nature and that nature bends to the will of the human with no recompense. The painter must also come to terms with the fact that painting as a visual, sensual medium is an incredibly inefficient communicator of information. Like Serres' notion of a parasite, painting here can be seen as a form of interference. So, the painter then finds themselves in a quandary:

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very particular and different properties each medium brings to the same object. For more information see: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81435>

<sup>108</sup> Crocker, "As Soon as We Are Two There is a Medium," 191.

<sup>109</sup> Serres, *The Parasite*, 126.



Whether biological, social, or informational, the parasite flourishes by interfering in some already established circuit of exchange that joins a guest and host, or a sender and receiver. Its presence compels us either to try to expel the intrusive pest, or to readjust our internal workings so that we can accommodate its needs and live with it.<sup>110</sup>

For a painting to effectively communicate the painter's intentions it must eradicate itself in the process. The gap between what the painter sends and the viewer receives is the painting. Thought about in these terms the painting becomes the epitome of what has failed to be accurately or effectively communicated. The painting becomes the waste, the loss, the ineffective aspect of communication.

Painting thought of in terms of communication overly simplifies this infinitely complex situation, but it does get us closer to understanding why a loss of control is essential to the painting process. In order for the painter "to actively transmit a signal, we first have to passively open ourselves to the effects of the medium in which it occurs."<sup>111</sup> The notion of the passive painter creates a situation within the studio whereby just as much emphasis is on the painter to listen, wait, and look as it is to act. Waiting and watching, for the painter, becomes a form of resistance, it becomes more associated with risk, than inactivity. Serres' idea of parasitism allows us to see that in any form of exchange things both act and are acted upon simultaneously. The noisy background or the third element, this milieu of relations from which a signal emerges, generates substances too: "Relations spawn objects, beings and acts, not vice versa."<sup>112</sup> Painting as parasite, painting as interference becomes painting as translation. The objectness of a painting is simply a means of containing this translation, not as a means to control it but as a means to give this "third man" a tangible agency separate from both painter and viewer. Its

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<sup>110</sup> Crocker, "As Soon as We Are Two There is a Medium," 192.

<sup>111</sup> Crocker, "As Soon as We Are Two There is a Medium," 194.

<sup>112</sup> Michael Serres, Bruno Latour, *Michael Serres with Bruno Latour: Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, tr. Roxanne Lapidus (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 107.

objectness allows the painter the ability to concretize this noise, this noisy background, this associative milieu of relations, in order for the painter to respond to this translation as it mutates from relation into object. As Crocker remarks: “These ideas play a central role in Bruno Latour’s development of Actor Network Theory in which any given thing that acts requires the agency of other things to realize its capacities, and in its turn, a means through which other things pursue their ends.”<sup>113</sup> By reducing painting to a form of communication we nullify the painting’s capacity to act, which in turn abolishes the necessity for a painting to exist in the first instance. Painting as translation draws into itself the need for us to overcome a subject-centered ontology and a necessity to better understand how the world acts upon both the painter and painting. How we choose to act within this set of relations as painters radically alters a painting’s autonomy. It is here that I wish to introduce the importance of improvisation to contemporary painting practice. By way of Edgar Landgraf’s notions of autopoietic painting practices in “Improvisation, Posthumanism, and Agency in Art,” I will look at methods of painting which seek to directly challenge traditional notions of human agency. Landgraf’s decentered human position is conceived as an ever-evolving system of co-constitutive processes, feedback loops of increasing variability. This inter-agentic proposition for painting draws from and contributes to the noise of our continually evolving ecological moment.

The relevance of improvisation in relation to painting is not a new concern; however, its importance is the subject of some debate. In “Improvisation in Painting” Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcelo Ruta describe improvisation as a kind of agency that is structured but simultaneously capable of adapting to changes in its environment. They pose the question: what role can improvisation possibly play in a non-performance-based art form? Action painting would be a natural reference point here and is a subject Bertinetto and Ruta address by way of Jackson Pollock. They formulate that the “works of improvisation are not so much the paintings produced by the pictorial action...rather the

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<sup>113</sup> Crocker. “As Soon as We Are Two There is a Medium,” 195.

real works, so it seems, are the filmed performances of the American ‘action painter.’”<sup>114</sup> Painting as a form of performance creates a tension around what the art work is, the performance itself, or the evidence of that performance in paint. This relationship between the product of improvisation and the process through which this product comes into being is a frequently occurring theme in improvisation studies. If we assert that the improvising creative practitioner is more interested in the process of creation than they are with the product of their creation, then as Ted Gioia formulates this renders artistic improvisation an imperfect artform governed by “an aesthetic of imperfection.”<sup>115</sup> This process-product opposition becomes an improvisation-composition binary which oversimplifies the painting, rendering it a product or object which simply evidences improvised doings. For painting and music that are often composition-oriented and not live or performed, the position Robert T. Valgenti articulates in *Material and Improvisation in the formative process* is a crucial one. He alludes to improvisation as being neither opposed to composition nor restricted to a specific form of composition; rather, improvisation is an element that is always at work in any composition and is an essential part of the artist and material relationship. The word improvisation dates back to the Greek “improvises,” which simply means unforeseen.<sup>116</sup> For the Italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson, art and improvisation are synonymous. Art, he states, is a “mode of making that invents the way of making while making.”<sup>117</sup> According to George W. Bertram, this lack of a pre-established guarantee of success is the very condition for the possibility of a successful artwork.<sup>118</sup> Where improvisational painting diverges from a recorded or documented improvisational act, for example, is its ability to continually address and re-address what Gioia describes as “an aesthetic of imperfection.” Rather

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<sup>114</sup> Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta, “Improvisation in Painting,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 570.

<sup>115</sup> Ted Gioia, “Jazz: The Aesthetics of Imperfection,” in *The Hudson Review*, vol. 39, No.4, Winter, 1987. 585.

<sup>116</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero. *Cicero on the Emotions: Tusculan Disputations 3 and 4*, tr. M Graver (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 52.

<sup>117</sup> Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta, “Introduction,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 6.

<sup>118</sup> George W. Bertram, *Art as Human Practice*, tr. Nathan Ross (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

than fixing this imperfection, settling for the first instance of improvisation, improvisational painting must come to terms with when or how to fix a work and when to continue to respond to the product of their initial improvisation. With each new occasion of improvisation, the painter must respond to previous improvisational iterations evidenced on the canvas. This back and forth between painter and painting supports the idea that we see the painting as an *other* to the painter. It is both a product of improvisation and the very thing the painter must respond to in subsequent improvisational actions.

Bertinetto and Ruta suggest that artistic improvisation is particularly marked by its occurrence of *real time*, something they state is philosophically questionable.<sup>119</sup> However, *real time* only becomes philosophical questionable if it insists on a human linear articulation of time. As the painter begins to construct this relationship, this co-constitutive feedback loop between painting and self time is sedimented in layers (from back to front) through repetition and the pursuit of difference in the material. OOO's willingness "to transcend anthropocentrism and develop a philosophy that includes the nonhuman"<sup>120</sup> points to a radical re-thinking of space and time, as we saw in chapter two: "What is called *space* and what is called *time* just are aesthetic properties of objects. OOO provides a way to think the ontological reasons for the validity of Einstein's spacetime, which ripples from objects depending on their mass."<sup>121</sup> The painting in these terms emits time and duration; it interrupts the conception that we only see time when it is visually manifested in a work. A painting made over many years in a slow and painstaking manner doesn't always feel like that to a viewer. A painting is capable of contradicting what is visually evident to the viewer. Sara Ramshaw's "Rethinking Realtime in Improvisation" draws on the writings of Henri Bergson and Derrida in order to theorize dynamic and vibrant conceptions of improvisatory time and duration. Ramshaw structures real time in relation to the legal system, which offers us a fascinating

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<sup>119</sup> Bertinetto and Ruta, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>120</sup> Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," 205.

<sup>121</sup> Morton, 214.

glimpse into time as aporia, “an ongoing mediation between the singular act of decisioning and the necessarily living and surviving context in which decisions are made.”<sup>122</sup> This extrapolation of time offers us a key lens through which to consider painting time not as a singular act but as feedback loop of multiple actionings. It allows us to consider the painted work as having its own life, a shared life within our collective ongoing living context. The painted object again here becomes a stand-in for the environment in which the work is made. Harman’s description of objects being wrapped in objects, being wrapped in objects describes this conflation of nonhierarchical relations. The painting object is wrapped in the environment object, which is wrapped in the ecology object. No one object takes precedence over the other and no one is reducible to another. They exist as separate and inseparable simultaneously.

The materiality of the painted object is wrapped in the geological formulations which make up the paint itself. Titmarsh sees this materiality as a stand-in for Heidegger’s notion of *Earth*. Ecology can be understood as a nonhuman formulation of Heidegger’s *Earth* and *World*. Seen in this light a painting has an indebtedness not just to its social and cultural environment but also to its ecological environment. This is how a painting times, it is a painted object, wrapped in a cultural object, wrapped in an ecological object. When a painter becomes open or receptive to nonhuman formulations, they must open themselves up to the unfolding of objectness. Encountering a painting is a sensitive embodied experience; it is not merely an observation. The painting must not be separated from its background, isolated from its associated milieu. Foucault’s idea of self helps us further to visualize this notion of objects wrapped in objects. Foucault equates the many layers that make up an onion to the layers that make up an idea of self. When we peel back the layers one by one, we see that there is no onion essence, nothing that makes the onion an onion. This is how Morton describes the human as made up of an infinite number of nonhuman formulations and relations. This is also a description of what constitutes a painting. If you continue to peel each layer back from a painting, there

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<sup>122</sup> Sara Ramshaw. “Rethinking Realtimeness in Improvisation” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2022), 130.

remains no essential aspects of the object which makes it a painting. Instead, the painting is the culmination of everything that makes it a painting, which includes an infinite set of objects and relations.

In “Improvisation, Posthumanism and Agency” Edgar Landgraf draws on the autopoietic improvisational painting practice of Gerhard Richter. Corinna Belz’s 2011 film *Gerhard Richter Painting* documents Richter’s practice as a means of questioning the dominance of human agency over “human/non-human couplings, networks and other modes of interagency.”<sup>123</sup> For George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut the next frontier of improvisation studies will mean putting them in dialogue with the post humanities.<sup>124</sup> Posthumanism’s break from the “patterns, dichotomies and dead-ends created by anthropocentrism” aligns with improvisation studies’ challenge to “traditional conceptions of human agency”:<sup>125</sup>

The Western expectation for improvisation and for the creation of art to be inventive, original and unique requires the inclusion of elements that are unplanned, unrehearsed, non-repetitive and that hence must elude the immediate control of the improviser. In this sense, the decentering of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human is part of the very structure of improvisation.<sup>126</sup>

The Improvisor is made aware of a loss of authorial control through the very act of improvising. A gap or rift occurs between one’s thoughts and one’s actions. According to

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<sup>123</sup> Edgar Landgraf, “Improvisation, Posthumanism, and Agency in Art (Gerhard Richter Painting)” in *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2018), 220.

<sup>124</sup> George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut. “Introduction: On Critical Improvisation Studies.” *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* Vol 1. Ed. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.

<sup>125</sup> Landgraf, “Improvisation, Posthumanism, and Agency in Art (Gerhard Richter Painting),” 212.

<sup>126</sup> Landgraf, 212.

Landgraf this relationship between intention and execution fulfills two functions: “It invokes an agent behind the action, some kind of volition, intention, wanting why the action is taken; and it insinuates that the intentions of the agent give meaning, direction, and coherence to the action. Without these two elements, the action would be a mere happening, a movement, an accident, or random event.”<sup>127</sup> This attribution of agency which mitigates the difference between chance and action doesn’t need to be restricted to people: “Groups, abstract entities, gods, chimeras” are all listed by him as possible actants, sources of agency with which we may attribute meaning.<sup>128</sup> However, thinking of improvisation in terms of actions and agency is a rather reductive way of coming to terms with the dynamics of complex autopoietic or self-organizing processes. When we consider something an ‘act of god’ what we are doing is we are attributing agency to an other, a stand-in for the natural, this notion of an ‘act of god’ oversimplifies the complex chain of events that leads to this point or happening. According to Latour nature can no longer be thought of as separate from us; an objective background in front of which we act as autonomous subjects. There is no separation between humans and nature, we are affected by and affect each other simultaneously.<sup>129</sup> Landgraf suggests that the post humanities allows us to circumvent the “reductive scheme which looks for the agent or subject behind the deed. Critical and methodological posthumanism invite us to develop more sophisticated explanatory models that can take into account a multiplicity of limiting and enabling factors, both internal and external.”<sup>130</sup>

So how might we describe autopoietic improvisation as different to simply improvising? Landgraf cites Niklas Luhmann as a way of describing an autopoietic process of creation:

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<sup>127</sup> Landgraf, “Improvisation, Posthumanism, and Agency in Art (Gerhard Richter Painting),” 212.

<sup>128</sup> Landgraf, 212.

<sup>129</sup> Latour, “Agency at the time of the Anthropocene,” 4.

<sup>130</sup> Landgraf, “Improvisation, Posthumanism, and Agency in Art (Gerhard Richter Painting),” 213.

Luhmann portrays a process where the artist, after contingent beginnings, must attune him-herself to the emerging artwork or the performance, react to the choices that present themselves during and based on the production process until the work or performance achieves a level of saturation or cohesion that invites an end. The decentering of the artist takes place at the level of thought and control; thought goes into what the artist is doing, but there is also the profound sense of *im-provisio*, of not knowing and of not being able to control where the process will lead. The loss of control is a consequence of artist and emerging artwork being entangled in a co-constitutive relationship where the artist is as much an agent as s/he is a recipient for the input of feedback that the merging artwork or performance offers in the process of its creation.<sup>133</sup>

The freedoms we prescribe to the creative process are entirely “the product of the art itself.” According to Luhmann, they are the result of decisions made with the work.<sup>134</sup> The necessity with which we feel compelled to act during the creative process is a result of attunement with the artwork and are the consequences of our beginning in the first place and not some internal or subconscious personal drive.

In *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Brian Massumi challenges notions of intentionality as self-sufficient agency. Massumi positions “will” at a crossroads between determinacy and chance, a self-organized indeterminacy which responds to the continually evolving complexity of exteriority. Massumi expands on this relationship between intention and environment further in “The Supernormal Animal,” which questions ideas of consciousness and/or instinct and its correlation to improvisation. He looks at the relationship between an action and the environment in

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<sup>133</sup> Landgraf, “Improvisation, Posthumanism, and Agency in Art (Gerhard Richter Painting),” 214.

<sup>134</sup> Niklas Luhmann. *Art as a Social System*. Trans. Eva M. Knodt. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 203.



which this action takes place, specifically in terms of nonhuman actants. Massumi describes instinctive behavior as “the instrumentality of intelligence wrapped in reflex. So masterful it is in its functionality that it gives luster to utility.”<sup>135</sup> He undermines the notion that utility is somehow normative, contending instead that just as reflex wants to deliver a purely mechanical performance, upon further examination there actually appears to be just as much a tendency for instinct to outdo or go beyond its utilitarian regimen as there is to maintain it: “If this natural sympathy is moved by an instinctive tendency to outdo itself in expressive excess over its own norms, what does this say about the nature of the animal? The nature of nature?”<sup>136</sup> By way of this expressive excess Massumi contends that in fact life and consciousness are one and the same. He takes up the notion of instinct as something which is condensed through time from generation to generation, “retained through adaptive selection.”<sup>137</sup> He articulates the impossibility of isolating an actant from its environment and argues that instinct’s unpredictability does not derive from the outside “intervention of accidents, but [from] the self-consistency of its experiential dynamic.”<sup>138</sup> Instinctive behavior, then, is not a mere reflex mechanism for Massumi but “a processual ‘inducer’. It jump starts an active process, inducing the performance of an improvisation.”<sup>139</sup> He terms this an “induced improvisation.”<sup>140</sup> At stake here is the co-constitutional relationship between external stimuli and instinctive response. The environment, which is accident rich for Massumi, preys upon the instinctive animal, and in turn the instinctive animal preys upon its environment: “Supernormality is a force not of impulsiveness or compulsion, but of *affective propulsion*. This is why it is necessary to say that instinct involves the inducement of an effect rather than triggering an automatism.”<sup>141</sup> As human actants, then, we are bound to our nonhuman actant environments by way of a feedback loop or

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<sup>135</sup> Brian Massumi, “The Supernormal Animal” in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>136</sup> Massumi. “The Supernormal Animal,” 2.

<sup>137</sup> Massumi, 1.

<sup>138</sup> Massumi, 6.

<sup>139</sup> Massumi, 7.

<sup>140</sup> Massumi, 7.

<sup>141</sup> Massumi, 9.

continual liaison. The paradox of consciousness and subconsciousness are usurped by notions of action and environment relations.

I will now turn specifically to painting in relation to autopoietic processes. Landgraf's utilization of Gerhard Richter as an example of autopoietic improvisation in process also rejects mere automation or concepts of *pure* reflex. Here he describes a movement away from Luhmann's improvisational beginning towards a creative pursuit of an end:

As in improvisation, the burden of a work's composition, Richter confirms, lies not on the beginning, but on the step-by-step execution, and on finding an end. Richter suggests that at the beginning, he can "theoretically, practically smear anything he wants" on the canvas, "this first creates a state to which I have to react, which I have to change or destroy. Then it develops on its own, not on its own, but without plan, without reason" (54'20"). Richter rejects concepts of automation or ideas of subconscious or chance composition. The creative process is experienced as following codes that emerge during the work and that create a sense of necessity (or failure) for subsequent choices. "With every step, it becomes more difficult, and I become less and less free, until I reach the point, where there is nothing else to do, where, at my level, nothing is false anymore, then I will stop, then it is good."<sup>142</sup>

Belz's documentary shows Richter applying vast swathes of thick colour to the surfaces of his paintings. Just as much time is spent in contemplation of the work, negotiating and pondering what the work might be telling him subsequent to his last actions. He uses brushes and a large squeegee loaded with paint, which he pulls from left to right and from top to bottom across the painting surface, obliterating and constructing in the same

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<sup>142</sup> Landgraf, "Improvisation, Posthumanism, and Agency in Art (Gerhard Richter Painting)," 215.

action. Richter is not an autonomous observer in control of his actions; instead he remains receptive to the subtle differences, options, and possibilities which the work presents at each subsequent turn. Painting is a material pursuit and Richter is mining the material. Technique here is nothing more than a catalogue of material properties which Richter can predict or choose to intentionally disrupt in search of the unpredictable. Technique then comes into the process by way of experience. The more the artist knows their material, the more options lie open to them to disrupt what they already know. The work then is not distorted by the sole action of the artist it is distorted by way of the material, the medium itself. This reciprocity between artist and artwork is not exclusive to Richter.

As we have seen, Anselm Kiefer described a similar relationship to his work during the creative process: “the painting told me what it wanted to be.” This separation of thought and action, this decentering of the human, permeates perception as well as thought, as Landgraf points out in relation to Richter: “The ability to ‘see when something is good’ suggests a social component entering judgement.”<sup>143</sup> Richter’s judgment of good or bad painting is evidently based on years of experience with the medium, and the leap Landgraf makes assumes that we might also compare this experience to the effect that language or communication has on thought: “just as thought is bound to draw on a medium that is not a person’s own, thoughts (and possibly even perception which differentiate by drawing on linguistic distinctions) are never fully owned, authored, authorized, or controlled by the mind that produces them.”<sup>144</sup> This explanation takes us back to the idea of the first viewer or the presence of an *other* in the studio of the painter. Richter is carrying the viewer around with him in the studio at all times. The medium itself helps to formulate this viewer and aid in a work’s autonomy from the artist: “It points toward the constitutive role the observer plays in defining the

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<sup>143</sup> Landgraf, “Improvisation, Posthumanism, and Agency in Art (Gerhard Richter Painting),” 216.

<sup>144</sup> Landgraf, 216.

'object'; and it recognises how the observer changes in relation to the painting *qua* his/her exposure to it.”<sup>145</sup>

In “Rethinking Realtimeness in Improvisation” Sara Ramshaw considers a positioning of Western Law as being improvisational in nature. There are a number of crossovers between Ramshaw’s description of improvisation in the legal system and the process of decision making in painting. According to Ramshaw, “legal judgement rarely takes place in what we would conventionally consider 'real time,' that is created extempore and communicated as events in the courtroom happen.”<sup>146</sup> Instead, judges deliberate; they take time. However, this process must also be real-time, as Derrida explains:

[...] a just decision is always required *immediately*, right away, as quickly as possible. It cannot provide itself with the infinite information and the unlimited knowledge of conditions, rules, or hypothetical imperatives that could justify it. And even if it did have all that at its disposal, even if it did give itself time, all the time and all the necessary knowledge about the matter, well then, the moment of *decision as such*, what must be just, *must* always remain a finite moment of urgency and precipitation; it must not be the consequence or the effect of this theoretical or historical knowledge, of this reflection or this deliberation, since the decision always marks the interruption of the juridicio-, ethico-, or politico-cognitive deliberation that precedes it, that *must* precede it. The instant of decision is a madness, says Kierkegaard. This is particularly true of the instant of the *just* decision that must rend time and defy dialectics.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Landgraf, “Improvisation, Posthumanism, and Agency in Art (Gerhard Richter Painting,” 216.

<sup>146</sup> Sara Ramshaw, “Rethinking Realtimeness in Improvisation,” 129.

<sup>147</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’,” in *Acts of Religion*, tr. M. Quaintance, ed. G. Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 255.

This notion of decisioning is the closest account I have found to describing the improvised painted act. All of the conditions which help inform the act of decisioning (painting) must be in place and fully registered. But as soon as the painter yields the brush or cloth or whatever device used to make a mark, an immediacy that can only be described as a madness takes hold which undermines, overwrites, and abolishes all of the prior conditions which have led the painter to this point. Improvisation takes place in this moment of forgetfulness in “an absolute specific tempo-spatial singularity.”<sup>148</sup>

This creative moment, this performative event, this creative instant has an undeniable relation to time. As Vijay Iyer argues, “[t]wo main aspects of that class of acts we call ‘improvised’ seem to be (1) real-time process of making choices and acting on them, and (2) the sense of temporal embeddedness: the fact that these actions take time, and that time taken matters.”<sup>149</sup> Iyer points towards a continuing temporal realm of realliveness, an ongoing continually unfolding time in which these “singular” decisionings, these precise judgements and actions are made. The effect of these singular actions within this temporal realm act as a rupture of sorts, a cut, albeit always still in movement. Derrida suggests that this singular act of improvisation must be a *first-time ever* event. The uniqueness of this first-time event, in order for it to be complete and containable, must also be a *last-time* event simultaneously.<sup>150</sup> According to Peter Fitzpatrick, if indeed we were capable of this *pure* improvisatory act, it would be so unfamiliar or removed from us “such that there would be no possibility of adequate relation to it in order for us to know it.”<sup>151</sup> Therefore it is only through repetition that

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<sup>148</sup> Davide Sparti, “On the Edge: A Frame of Analysis for Improvisation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, vol. 1, ed. G.E. Lewis and B. Piekut (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 187.

<sup>149</sup> Vijay Iyer, “Improvisation, Action Understading, and Music Cognition with and without Bodies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, vol. 1, ed. G.E. Lewis and B. Piekut (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 74.

<sup>150</sup> See Jacques Derrida. “Psyche: Inventions of the Other,” in C. Porter (trans.), L. Waters and W. Godzich (eds.) *Reading de Man Reading* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987) 28-29.

<sup>151</sup> Peter Fitzpatrick. *Modernism and the Grounds of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 43.

this singularity can be understood; it gains meaning through repetition, a repetition that is never the same.

The premise that a painting is made upon sits on a border between what it is in the process of its creation and what it otherwise could be. This premise suggests Eliasson's notion of a work of art being akin to an unthought thought. Through the madness and impulsiveness of the improvisatory act we call on possibility, on potential from the future. Improvisation is not as linear as this description seems to suggest, the manifestation of a pure presencing within a temporal time frame subsumed by past and future. As Henri Bergson states, Western thinking has been "dominated by spatiality, wherein we describe time as a kind of linear movement in an unbounded homogenous medium similar to how we envision space."<sup>152</sup> Time or duration, what Bergson calls *durée*, is more aptly described as "a succession of qualitative changes, which melt into one another, without precise outlines, without any tendency to externalize themselves in relation to one another."<sup>153</sup> This blurring of spatiotemporal space resists linear notions of time, and its lack of externalization creates a complex paradox surrounding notions of self. The momentum and madness of the spatio-temporal act of improvisation omits the possibility for self-reflection. However, as Derrida points out this blindness of self doesn't necessarily mean that one is free from judgement:

It's not easy to improvise, it's the most difficult thing to do. Even when one improvises in front of a camera or microphone, one ventriloquizes or leaves another to speak in one's place the schemas and languages that are already there. There are already a great number of pre-scriptions that are prescribed in our memory and in our culture... And so I believe in improvisation and I fight for improvisation. But always with the belief that it's impossible. And

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<sup>152</sup> Lisbeth Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being: Toward an Ethics of Attunement* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 142.

<sup>153</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, tr. F.L. Pogson (London: Elibron Books, 2005), 104.

there where there is improvisation I am not able to see myself. I am blind to myself. And it's what I will see, no, I won't see it. It's for others to see. The one who is improvised here, no I won't ever see.<sup>154</sup>

Belz and Landgraf echo this reference here to a consciousness of self. The intrusion of having the camera in the studio for Richter becomes untenable. Richter states that “painting while being observed is the worst thing possible.”<sup>155</sup> The camera makes Richter aware of himself, which is very different from being made aware of the other, an internalized observer which is a stand in for self in the creative process. Just as performers get used to the eyes of the audience and learn how to perform in spite of their gaze, so too the painter is never really alone in the studio. They are watched by the internalized other, the first viewer which is constructed in the gap between the painter and the painted work.

Mistakes also play into this notion of the other and must be understood by way of Bergson's notion of *durée* as a constantly evolving spatiotemporal moment. Unlike a musical performance, a painted mistake displays itself to the painter and this notion of an *other* within the studio. However, as is also true of musical improvisation in the moment, a mistake is in fact something which can be and often is subsumed by further action. If an improvising musician plays too far out of the harmonic structure of a piece, either on purpose or by accident, this dissonance can be rectified or qualified by adjusting in real-time the harmonic structure of the work itself. This is how improvised music moves, morphs, and shifts. The same happens in the studio of the painter. A mistake, an error of judgement in the impulsiveness of the improvisational act, sits and stares back at the painter. This mistake, this aesthetic dissonance can also be subsumed by the future actions of the painter. The rest of the work is bent to accommodate its progressiveness.

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<sup>154</sup> Kirby Dick and Ziering Kofman, *Screenplay and Essays on the Film Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 93

<sup>155</sup> *Gerhard Richter Painting*, dir. Corinna Belz, Zero One Film, 2011, 00:46:00.

Its initial rupturing is reassessed with each subsequent action, this is how a painting moves into unknown territory for the painter. “Mistakes may turn out to be affordances for positively changing the norm in an unexpected situation, thereby investing a new norm in which the 'wrong' application of the (old) norm is savaged as a good application of the (new) norm.”<sup>156</sup>

By returning to the notion of communication with which I started this chapter and leaning on Morton’s ideas of attunement, we are able to make sense of where ideas of self are positioned thanks to Bergson’s *durée*. As Bergson makes plain, “there is no perception which is not full of memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience.”<sup>157</sup> Attunement in duration is the looking and listening for an *other* that always escapes us yet is always in a process of movement and flux. Creativity is a process we must always be prepared to give ourselves over to if we desire change or newness. This giving in or giving up of self creates a sense of risk, something is a stake here within the process of improvisation. It is this selflessness that forces the social and the political into contemporary painting practice. In “Openness from Closure” David Borgo explores this idea of painting as having a sense of responsibility, whilst addressing cybernetic feedback as a means to engender common morality or a shared democratic ethos. As Borgo states, “[r]esponsibility arises as if elicited, before we begin to think about it, by the approach of the other.”<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Alessandro Bertinetto and Georg W. Bertram, “We Make Up the Rules as We Go Along: Improvisation as an Essential Aspect of Human Practices” in *Open Philosophy Journal* 3, 2020, 210.

<sup>157</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 17.

<sup>158</sup> David Borgo, “Openness from Closure: The Puzzle of Interagency in Improvised Music and a Neocybernetic Solution” in *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound and Subjectivity*, ed. Gillian Siddal and Ellen Waterman (Durham, Duke University Press, 2016), 129.



## Conclusion

The present epoch is marked by the geophysical force of human action on the planet. With this there is a responsibility to look at alternatives to a human centered expectancy. This research offers a provocation to the normalization of *presence* which, structured through Heideggerian notions of *being* posits human thought as a hierarchically superior access mode of presence on earth. As the formalization of the Anthropocene epoch continues, the relinquishing of our position of relative power and a move towards an embrace of the unknown and the ungraspable offers an opportunity to re-structure this human-centered logic in favour of a more equitable, even field of agentic forces. Learning to adapt, live, work and thrive in this new habitat necessitates a mode of *attunement* which forces art to “include its environment(s) in its very form.”<sup>159</sup> As we move on an axis away from a human-centered, artist-oriented creative process, we must embrace the turmoil and uncertainty of this anthropogenic age and begin to see this ecological insecurity as an asset. “There is a need to be ill-equipped (*‘le besoin d’être mal armé’*),”<sup>160</sup> says Samuel Beckett. The relative instability of this shift from human to nonhuman actants and the risk and urgency associated with it are echoed in the uncertainty posited by humans on humans in the wake of the climate crisis. To make paintings within this geopolitical arena is to force the viewer to also live with this unknown, this fragility. To co-exist with the delicate tactility of the raw materiality of pigment, the temporality of oils and flimsy cotton, is to experience the multitude of affects that co-relate to form a painting’s architecture. Painting points towards a human synchronicity with an infinite array of agentic forces which simultaneously disrupt, fracture, build, and re-invigorate the planet on which we exist. Art, according to Morton, is a vital tool in better understanding our relationship to nonhumans. An object-oriented

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<sup>159</sup> Morton, “Art is Ecological,” 16.

<sup>160</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume II: 1941-1956*. ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck, tr. George Craig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.)

ontological approach is one mode of *being* through which to do this. Where art fails according to Morton is “when it tries to mimic the transmission of sheer quantities of data; it’s not artful enough.”<sup>161</sup> What my research has tried to make plain is the difference between depicting and describing human ‘content’ or human data, which is so often displayed through ready-made or ready formed human objects and ideas, and its opposite, which is an approach to ecology that is inherent to the fabric of a painting’s construction. Painting is and always has been ecological, and we must attune to its material architecture and listen to its nascent propositions and not simply apply to it our own pre-formed human representations as if from on high. Giving painting anthropomorphic status, asking questions of it and listening to its silence almost as if it might give an answer, is a coming to terms with the unknown. Thinking of painting as a living medium renders both the painting and the painter as ontological equals, present and absent, caught in a process of appearance and withdrawal from each other and from the world. The ideas within this thesis, which associate painting with a form of transformation and translation, point to areas of study for future research. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s work on the politics of translation and Lawrence Venuti’s theories of domestication and foreignization provide futile ground for a positioning for painting embedded within the prism of culture which speaks to notions of confluence, adaptation and conflux.

By way of OOO, I asserted that meaning within painting is not something that is fixed or exhaustible. It is in constant movement, and according to Eliasson and Morton, it comes to us from the future. Painting then gives us the opportunity to “glimpse the unconditional futurity that is a possibility condition of predictable futures.”<sup>162</sup> If we move the artist out from the center of the artist-artwork-ecology equation and spread agency equally across its actants, we must admit to ourselves that meaning garnered from a work of art is not solely generated from the human side of this equation:

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<sup>161</sup> Morton, “Art is Ecological,” 38.

<sup>162</sup> Morton, 41.

An artwork does something to you, so if you think that only lifeforms can do things to you, this is a weird and challenging fact. If you think on top of this that only humans are empowered with the magical ability to impose meaning and temporality on things, then you are in for a bigger shock, because as I've argued, art emits time, which tells you something about how everything emits time. It's designing your future as much as you're designing its.<sup>163</sup>

Meaning is not exclusive to human agents; nonhuman entities such as artwork and ecology also play a significant role in generating profound effects on the viewer. In this context, nonhuman agents possess a capacity to influence individuals as much as humans do. As embodied beings we are stitched into the fabric of other biological and nonbiological beings. Morton's idea of *alreadiness*, a natural extension and progression from Heidegger's *always-already* and Derrida's notion of *de-structuring*, hints at a tuning to and with everything in the world. This ecological awareness, this symbiotic entanglement shares many of its affectations with contemporary improvisation. Autopoietic improvisation's pertinence to contemporary painting is its insistence that every act, each gesture, gives the painter "the power to re-begin at every instant."<sup>164</sup> Painting thought about in terms of improvisation offers an alternative to a methodology which prioritizes preconceived outcomes, one that restricts a futurity and maintains a dominant human centered position.

The nature of thought must change if we are to live within the continually evolving radicality of our present ecological epoch. And with this change painting must change too. Painting is a fragment of our larger world, a mostly nonhuman world by which we are influenced. *Alreadiness* or *attunement* amounts to a feeling of power that an object has over us. This radical reversal of agency away from the human towards the nonhuman usurps the limited and outdated political stasis which has forced this line of enquiry upon itself. Painting offers an opportunity to magnify and show more clearly the

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<sup>163</sup> Morton, "Art is Ecological," 43.

<sup>164</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Movement-Image: Cinema I*. tr. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 115.

cracks that are already forming on the human face of our collective geostory. Painting is in a unique position to actively reconcile the two distinct domains of nature and culture. By drawing on the material tactility of nature, it has the power to extract and weave these elements into cultural, societal realms. In doing so, painting seeks to recombine, congeal, coagulate, and ultimately to transform these two domains.

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