

# INHUMANIST ART AND THE DECOLONIZATION OF NATURE

*This essay seeks to challenge the hold exerted by the Object Oriented Ontology/Actor-Network Theory/New Materialism axis on contemporary art. It does so in order to pursue a theory that might aid the decolonisation of nature. This includes providing resources for a strong defence against post-truth ideology. OOO, et al. are problematic to the extent that their Anti-rational-anthropocentrism results in contradiction and political debilitation, including an inability to contest post-truth demagogy. My theory is instead indebted to Ray Brassier and Peter Wolfendale, an Inhumanism that retains a position for wo/man's exceptional rational-capacity. I read Pierre Huyghe's After ALife Ahead as bearing this Inhumanism.*

**Text by Steve Klee**

In his recent book *Decolonising Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* TJ Demos sums up the seriousness of the environmental challenge facing humanity (2016, 8-9).

Humans, particularly 'industrial humans', have colonised the natural world subjecting it to mastery and ruthless exploitation, and have done so to the extent that the ecosystems on which they (we) depend are threatened. Demos is clear that the colonisation of nature can only be ameliorated by a political project, the decolonisation of his title (Demos 2016, 12).<sup>[1]</sup>

So, how might contemporary art, in some small way, contribute to a politics of this kind? In attempting an answer, I will discuss Pierre Huyghe's much-praised work for Skulptur Projekte Münster, 2017, an ambitious piece called *After ALife Ahead*. This installation described by Huyghe as a "time-based bio-technical system", (Skulptur 2017, 210) is, in many ways, a complex ecology, one that includes its human spectators. Insects, birds, and fish are also involved. As such, the piece provides fertile ground for thinking through humanity's relation to nature, and the role art might play in its decolonisation. Demos,

describes the framework I will adopt when assessing the eco-politics of Huyghe's work.

I'm convinced that art, given its long histories of experimentation, imaginative invention, and radical thinking, can play a central transformative role here. In its most ambitious and far-ranging sense, art holds the promise of initiating exactly [the] kinds of creative perceptual and philosophical shifts, [needed to offer] new ways of comprehending ourselves and our relation to the world differently than the destructive traditions of colonising nature. (Demos 2016, 18-19)<sup>[2]</sup>

In this quotation Demos highlights art's ability to create shifts with regards to humanity's "relation to the world", these are transformations that occur in the understanding of an audience. Using shorthand, we might say that art produces 'counter-images' that can change minds. Demos is clear regarding the mindset that needs changing. He explains that art should move "beyond anthropocentrism", which "entails transcending

human-centered exceptionalism, no longer placing ourselves at the center of the universe and viewing nature as a source of endless bounty" (Demos 2016, 19).

An eco-political art, then, should produce images that work against anthropocentrism, providing ways for thinking humankind as being 'in continuity with', rather than 'exceptional to', nature, and on this basis feeling and acting in solidarity with the environment. It is art's role in the shaping of individual and collective opinion that makes it political in this sense, functioning as the *precondition* for political ecological activity, whether that be via representational government or direct action.<sup>[3]</sup> I shall follow Demos in this understanding of art's politics, seeing it as serving a 'conditioning' role. I also agree with him in situating anthropocentrism as problematic, a viewpoint that needs to be overcome so that we might pursue ecological decolonisation.

Where I differ, however, is on the precise character of the anti-anthropocentric image that is required. For there is more than one way to contest this concept. Different philosophical perspectives can be critical of anthropocentrism, broadly speaking, but approach the task in very different ways. In this article, I shall articulate two of these positions. The first emphasises human nature continuity at the expense of difference, the second attempts to think this continuity whilst accommodating difference. I will defend the latter strategy and, perhaps contentiously, the difference that I uphold is one given by rational capacity, understood as the ability to wield sophisticated representational concepts.<sup>[4]</sup> In other words, I shall attempt to articulate an anti-anthropocentric image of 'wo/man in the world' that accommodates her rational capacity as different to most other processes and entities found within nature. This approach, as we shall see, is radically divergent from that employed by the other anti-anthropocentric position discussed in this article.

One of the problems with Demos' book is that he does not recognise these two positions as different.<sup>[5]</sup> Another, related but bigger issue is that he, like most contemporary art writing on this subject, nails his colours to the wrong philosophical mast, at least as I see it. Much art theory, especially in relation to ecologically minded practice, is heavily influenced by what Peter Wolfendale has called the

"OOO/ANT/NM axis" (Wolfendale 2014, 383). This string of initials stands for Object-Oriented Ontology, (as propounded by Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, and Timothy Morton), Actor Network Theory (associated with Bruno Latour), and New Materialism (as practiced by Jane Bennett, among others). In this article, I concentrate, particularly on Harman and Bennett. I agree with Wolfendale that despite these thinkers' differences they share certain fundamental presuppositions. One consequence of this is that they advocate a particular counter-image of the human that offers essentially the same solution to anthropocentrism - they do so by taking aim at human rationality.

It is often said, convincingly so, that Classical and Modern humanism represents an extreme form of anthropocentrism, and that this results from its understanding of rationality as completely distinct from (exceptional to) nature, an entirely different substance no less.<sup>[6]</sup> It is the understanding of *man*<sup>[7]</sup> as *rational* animal that secures his thorough separation from the nonhuman, his lack of solidarity with it.<sup>[8]</sup> In light of this, those thinkers that Wolfendale groups aim to undermine anthropocentrism by deflating the exceptional status of rationality to the point of its eradication, in other words, they propose an anti-rational-anthropocentrism (from here on, Anti-(r)centrism). With this eradication, Harman, and Bennett - for instance - are able to theorise the human as existing in complete continuity with the nonhuman. And, it is on this basis, one of similarity or non-difference, that solidarity with nature is secured. My position is that this outright philosophical attack on rationality is mistaken and that humanism ought to be contested differently.

To restate, it is the Anti-(r)centric version of philosophical anti-anthropocentrism that has made the biggest splash in art. Huyghe's recent output often being understood in this way.<sup>[9]</sup> In relation to *After A Life Ahead*, I take the Artsy editorial of June 19, 2017, by Emily McDermott as exemplifying this interpretation.

My key critique of the Anti-(r)centric position is that it achieves its apparent anti-anthropocentrism, or complete continuity, by way of an argument that *implicitly retains* humankind's central role within nature. There is, then, a major contradiction at its heart. To be clear this hidden



**Pierre Huyghe**

*After ALife Ahead*, Installation, 2017, photograph by Ola Rindal curtesy of Skulptur Projekte © Pierre Huyghe

anthropocentrism does *not* reproduce that image of wo/man-as-superior, characteristic of humanism. No, the entire *raison d'être* of Anti-(r)centrism is empathy towards the nonhuman. But this well-meaning attitude does still generate problems, particularly in terms of its philosophical coherence and, I think, its political effectiveness. I accuse Anti-(r)centrism of not giving due prominence to humanity's ability to use technology so as to achieve certain ends, it underplays wo/man's techno-agency. My view, therefore, is that to propagate Anti-(r)centrism through art theory is to make artworks the bearers of a counter-image that does not offer the most effective resistance to the colonisation of nature, it does not condition spectators for political action in the best possible way.

A better image, I think, is to be found in the recent work of Ray Brassier and Peter Wolfendale, a philosophical perspective termed Rationalist Inhumanism or simply Inhumanism.<sup>[10]</sup> In many ways, this position can be understood as an

attempt to rescue an account of rationality from the baggage of Classical and Modern humanism. Following these philosophers, I understand it to be possible and indeed preferable to consider the human animal part of nature, *whilst also* manifesting a rational capacity that can be considered exceptional, so long as this is understood in a qualified sense. In contradistinction to traditional humanism this perspective holds rationality to be *of nature*. Brassier and Wolfendale draw on the findings of science in this assertion, for instance, understanding conceptual ability to be the result of Darwinian processes no different from those that shape any other animal capacity. To this extent *Homo sapiens* is dealt a blow to its narcissism shown to be "kin to all other living beings in a biological world devoid of hierarchy" (Cox, et al 2015, 22) This blow is followed by another, Inhumanism, again in opposition to humanism, enjoins us to think rationality as separate from any particular 'way of life', or even any particular entity.<sup>[11]</sup> Humans are the bearers of this rational

capacity but they do not 'own' it. Reason is to be seen as a type of 'natural software' that might run on different organic, and indeed inorganic platforms. It might well be recognised in other terrestrial animal species if it has not been already, or we might encounter extra-terrestrials that 'use' it, or it might well be created 'artificially'. (That being said, in the following text, when I make reference to the 'rational entity', it is the human variant that I name.)

Although rationality is not 'substantially' different from the rest of nature, it is rare in respect to that which science understands most of nature to be.<sup>[12]</sup> The crucial distinction is between causal processes and conceptual ones, the latter understood to provide the capacity for objective knowledge and techno-agency. The Inhumanist, therefore, does secure a *distinction* between rationality and other things and processes on the basis of this rarity, as well as the fact that the rational entity would appear 'better' able to achieve certain ends - at certain scales - than most natural, causal processes. There is then a partial discontinuity between any rational entity, which need not be human, and the rest. But, this does not mean that these entities should be considered entirely exceptional as they are *of nature*, their partial difference no reason for other entities to be devalued.

This assertion of rationality's difference, then, is not the complete separation offered by Classical/Modern humanism, rather, it is a complex picture that affords solidarity between rational entities and the rest, but one that makes room for, or works across, difference. I consider this Inhumanism to be preferable to Anti(r)centrism because, first, I find the image of wo/man described by it to be more philosophically convincing, less contradictory, also, the Inhumanist image has political consequences that I take to be more adequate to decolonising nature than those that flow from its rival. Importantly, this picture of the human gives its techno-agency sufficient weight. I will, therefore, pursue a reading of *After ALife Ahead* premised not on Anti-(r)centrism but Inhumanism. I shall start with a straight description of Huyghe's work moving to an outline of the Anti(r)-centric interpretation, which will then be counterpointed with my own reading.

### ***After ALife Ahead, Description***

*After ALife Ahead* inhabited a decommissioned ice rink on the edge of Münster. The concrete surface of the old rink had been cut through, the sawyer slicing in such a way as to produce angular shapes. Most of these were removed exposing the earth below, excavated and modelled to create a landscape reminiscent of the American Badlands in miniature or perhaps the surface of an alien planet. Steep mounds and valleys as well as two irregular 'pillars' - reminiscent of termite towers - were shaped from the earth. Pier-like forms jutted over the red landscape and some concrete sections acted as table-top plateaus for the mounds.

Resting on one of these was an aquarium made of black switchable glass. This housed GloFish, a trademarked brand of genetically engineered fluorescent fish as well as a Conus textile, a venomous species of sea snail with an intriguing patterned shell, white triangles floating over an orange background. To one side of the hall sat a piece of medical equipment, an incubator containing a petri dish of HeLa cells. This cell line was originally extracted from cancer patient Henrietta Lacks in 1951. Her cancerous cells were found to be 'immortal', continuing to divide and proliferate and to do so indefinitely even *in vitro*. This remarkable durability allowed the cells to be used in bio-scientific experiments. In *After ALife Ahead* this cell line sits unseen performing its 'immortal' subdivision.

Above the landscape, several large mechanised skylights were installed. Periodically their triangular shutters, which mirrored the shapes on the Conus textile shell opened and exposed the artwork to prevailing weather conditions. When it rained the piece got wet. This water contributed to shallow pools that rested in some of the landscape's hollows. These contained algae noted in Huyghe's 'materials list' for the work. Other items listed included bees and Chimera Peacocks (Skulptur 2017, 210). On my visit, I didn't see the birds but the insects were very much in evidence, flying singly and in small groups from one of the irregular pillars that acted as their hive.

A piece of minimalist music rumbled, all atmospheric base and hum saturating the space. Its score was derived from translating the visual

pattern of the Conus textile shell into audio correlates. Huyghe also commissioned an app that could be downloaded and used by spectators to produce an augmented reality experience. When viewing the installation via one's phone black triangular shapes appeared to hover over the landscape.

Many of these installation components were connected to one another physically, networked into the aforementioned "time-based bio-technical system" (Skulptur 2017, 210). The music, the opening of the skylights, the opacity of the aquarium glass, the proliferation of augmented reality shapes, the division of cells, even the air quality in the hall were interrelated in an ongoing and changing system.

### ***The Anti-(r)centric Interpretation***

McDermott, in her Artsy piece, offers an assessment of *After ALife Ahead* that translates the Anti-(r)centrism of, for instance, Harman and Bennett into art criticism. She focusses on the way the piece's network structure 'situates' the artist and spectator. She takes up this theme in the sentence below, directly quoting Huyghe as she does so: "the project's complexity isn't intended to confuse viewers but instead to make them question where its processes (and thereby wider processes within our lives) begin and end. 'It's a way to shift the centrality of the human position—whether as a maker or receptor.'" (McDermott 2017)

Let us take the 'decentering' of the spectator (receptor) first; Huyghe's point is that appreciation of *After ALife Ahead* as a complex system courses the spectator to question their own status as an isolated or exceptional individual, seeing themselves, rather, as merely one component within a set of symbiotic natural-technological relations. The central position of the author (maker) is challenged too. This pertains to the way that the work's human-techno-system is viewed as *dependent* upon - subject to interruption by - those biological elements imbricated with it. "He [Huyghe] designed the system such that the technology involved is dependent on natural factors, reversing the traditional notion that technologies can somehow bring nature under control" (McDermott 2017).

It would seem that this relation of dependency, which mitigates against "control" is an instance of that gesture familiar to much modern and contemporary art wherein the artist's mastery of their work is questioned. And this artistic decentering is taken to be a synecdoche for a more general point, the spectator is expected to understand the 'unpredictable' aspect of the piece as proving the falsity of wo/man's belief in her ability to stand outside nature in order to technologically master it. So, both decenterings, that of the spectator and author confer the same meaning, the recognition that wo/man cannot be seen as exceptional to nature, rather she is continuous with it, one more component part.

McDermott does not explicitly say what it is about the human that is being decentered. She does not use the word rationality. But, the simple fact that she concentrates almost exclusively on those ways that (Huyghe's piece shows) humankind to be continuous with nature, without remainder, evidences her underlying allegiance to Anti-(r)centrism. This is because, as I have already mentioned, and as I hope to prove in a moment, Anti-(r)centrism is characterised by theorising rational and other entities to be *the same*. Another 'tell' as to McDermott's sympathies can be found in her interpretation of technology. It is a commonplace that humanity's technology, from personal computer to space shuttle, evidences our rational abilities, or cognitive difference. As we have seen McDermott is scrupulous in disabling this common-sense view, exclusively emphasising those ways (Huyghe's piece shows) that technology fails to achieve its objective, becomes interrupted by non-technological forces, or moves beyond human jurisdiction.

McDermott's reading, then, hammers home those ways that *After ALife Ahead* prompts its spectator to feel a sympathetic and complete similarity with the nonhuman. As already outlined I am wary of this particular approach to anti-anthropocentrism, of its non-accommodation of rational difference, but why? My first criticism is of a purely theoretical nature, I think that the image of wo/man presented by Anti-(r)centrism is philosophically contradictory. I will work through this criticism referencing the work of Harman and Bennett, and then highlight another, perhaps more serious problem with this framework.

### ***Hidden Anthropocentrism***

Harman's Object-Oriented Philosophy (OOP), has had an enormous influence on contemporary art. As is well known he focusses on objects, seeking to create an ontology which accounts for all of them, even conceptual, or fictitious ones. The opening sentences of *The Quadruple Object* make this clear.

Instead of beginning with radical doubt, we start from naiveté. What philosophy shares with the lives of scientists, bankers, and animals is that all are concerned with objects. The exact meaning of "object" will be developed in what follows and must include those entities that are neither physical nor even real. Along with diamonds, rope, and neutrons, objects may include armies, monsters, square circles, and leagues of real and fictitious nations. All such objects must be accounted for by ontology.

(Harman 2011, 5)

But, more importantly for my current discussion, Harman also insists that these objects be accounted for *equally*. Wolfendale, in his book-length critique of OOP names this imperative "ontological egalitarianism" (Wolfendale 2014, 214). This is why Harman's ontology is famously 'flat', all objects must be presented as existing on a radically level plane. It is also clear that a very similar principle animates Jane Bennett's approach, all material, from human bodies to worms are very deliberately positioned as objects of equal attention.

This vibrant matter [...] is my body but also, the bodies of Baltimore litter (chapter 1) Prometheus's chains (chapter 4) and Darwin's worms (chapter 7) as well as the not-quite-bodies of electricity (chapter 2) ingested food (chapter 3) and stem cells (chapters 5 and 6).

(Bennett 2010, xiii)

This ontological egalitarianism includes the fact that all objects *interact* in the same way. Harman understands conceptual processes in a very

particular way, they are, despite appearances, actually unexceptional. For him, rationality represents just another form of object-encounter, a premise we can see animating the following statement: "And like every exercise of intelligence, philosophy is less a creation of concepts than a creation of objects. Ultimately, the phrase 'object-oriented philosophy' is redundant" (Harman 2005, 247-248). For Harman, the characterisation of his philosophy as 'object-oriented' is superfluous because *all* philosophical programmes are objects, including the concepts they employ. In other words, conceptualisation bears no special dispensation, it functions in the same way as any other worldly interface.

It is this eradication of rational exceptionality, its reframing as ubiquitous process, that I name Anti-(r)centrism. From this perspective, wo/man is not accommodated within the 'tree of life' as different but is merely one object amongst many. She is the same as, or in continuity with everything else: To restate then, and as we have seen, it is clear that positions such as these lie behind McDermott's framing of *After ALife Ahead*, her emphasis on the similarity between human and nonhuman elements within Huyghe's composition.

I think, though, that this Anti-(r)centric image is philosophically contradictory. Weirdly, the continuity between wo/man-and-the-rest is *won* on the basis of the radical inflation of another of her capacities, that of experience. Peter Wolfendale names this inflation "introspective metaphysics" (Wolfendale 2014, 104-5). As is well known Harman's philosophy begins with certain phenomenological premises. His method is to introspect the mechanics of human perception and feeling, analysing how the world appears to consciousness. This is a philosophical examination of how it is that wo/man relates *experientially* to the world. He then projects this model *onto the world*, or more specifically, onto the way that objects are and how it is that they interact with one another. (This projection is done by philosophical fiat, without any scientific justification.) In other words, he presumes that 'the world' *is* and behaves in a manner precisely comparable to humans, as perceptual and feeling beings. Humanity stripped of its rational difference is presented in continuity with the world *because* everything therein is taken to be 'like' human experience.

Bennett's methodology is similar. She

SYMBIOSIS  
CO-EVOL Biotic/ABIOTIC  
ORGANISM.



ICE PALAST



EXISTING CEILING  
WITH  
INVERTED  
PHYSICAL  
PYRAMIDS

AR. METASTASIS (VIRTUAL)  
SIMULATION OF



FROM:  
PAST ARTIFICIAL ICE  
SURFACE: CONCRETE  
(CNT BY OSTOMACHION  
LOGIC PATTERN)  
AMMONIA  
SOIL  
TABLE WATER

to: LAST GLACIATION (ICE AGE) SAND  
211

Pierre Huyghe



AIR  
CO<sub>2</sub>+T°

CHGT  
CLIMATE

ANTOMATED  
SPACE

IFRAIN

MUTATION

REPRODUCTION  
EMERGENCE

GENETIC  
ALGO.



CANCER  
CELLS

INCUBATOR

INFLUENCE

BEE BEHAVIOR  
INFRA RED  
+  
PALEOLITHIC  
FIGURE  
(FROM POND CLAY)  
PLASTICITY



FATE  
NAIVE

CHIMERA  
PEACOCK

ALGAE WATER SENSOR

BACTERIA  
SENSOR

CONUS TEXTILE  
PATTERN  
+ CORAL  
SWITCH GLASS  
CONTAINER

SFS

does not draw on the resources of phenomenology, but from a Deleuzian inspired philosophy of sensorial intensity. In the introduction to *Vibrant Matter*, she explains the development of her thinking as it has moved from theorising these intensities in human affairs to a broadening of this approach, so that all matter is seen to be *affective* (Bennett 2010, xii).

It would seem to me, and following Wolfendale, that Bennett and Harman's philosophical assertion of human continuity and non-exceptionality, their Anti-(r)centrism, is secured by a move that grants the human qua experience a *radical* exceptionality, a status as 'the measure of all things'. From this perspective wo/man *cannot* be, as Harman wants, just one object like any other because s/he is the *first*, or blue-print object... This move, then, secretly enshrines wo/man at the centre of the universe, in other words, it represents an "unbridled" anthropocentrism (Brassier 2015, 222).

A philosophical position that begins with the attempt to displace the centrality of the human and results in an implicit re-establishment of that centrality, is, it must be said, a rather curious one. Certainly, for me, this 'boomerang move' makes it hard to take it seriously, and punctures its virtue as a profoundly 'Copernican' position. And, if we value theoretical clarity we might decry the way that this theory has influenced contemporary art, shaping the opinions of primary spectators and secondary audiences alike. This is certainly my personal opinion.

But there is a bigger, if related issue bubbling away in the background. The reason Anti-(r)centrism deflates reason and inflates experience is to posit a similarity between wo/man and the rest as the basis for *solidarity*. And it is my contention that theorising solidarity in this way actually inhibits political action. This is because any effective environmental politics needs to draw upon what I have been calling rational techno-agency. To win solidarity at the expense of rationality, therefore, is to undermine humanity's ability to best act upon this feeling. In Anti-(r)centrism this techno-capacity is dissolved or subsumed into a generalised picture of agency as radically distributed.

### ***Distributed Agency***

In the world of Bennett's New Materialism, 'results' are understood less in terms of human action (people-constituencies realising goals) than in relation to distributed networks of actor-entities causing certain 'ends'. Thinking agency in this fashion holds faith with the principle of ontological egalitarianism already discussed. Bennett is dedicated to giving the agency of each and every material (worms, electricity) its due, seeing them, as far as she can, as equally weighted. It is this multiplicity of equal actors working upon one another in affective relations that make 'outcomes' nearly impossible to predict *or direct* by any human(s). Again, from this perspective wo/man deserves no 'special' distinction, in terms of getting 'things done' she is, simply, one actor amongst many. We might say that Bennett's picture subtly downgrades motivated or willed human action, especially in terms of the way it is commonly understood, presenting it to be not especially effective.<sup>[13]</sup>

And this is where the problem lies. As I've already outlined, the aim of Anti-(r)centrism as political project is to *motivate* human actors. Bennett wants to encourage "more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption", she wants to "promote greener forms of human culture" (Bennett 2010, ix-x). This begs the question, is a theory that downgrades human agency as a matter of principle, the best vehicle for inspiring such political action? Would it not be reasonable for a reader to ask, what is the point of action when the theory extolling me to do so emphasises the limited nature of that action?

Again, it is clear that McDermott is drawing upon this Anti-(r)centrist view of human agency in her theorisation of *After ALife Ahead*. As we have seen the bio-techno system that animates *After ALife Ahead* is discussed only in those ways that it escapes or evades the direction provided by human agency, specifically of its artist creator. The idea that technology might enable some successful intervention into nature is understood to be 'old-fashioned'. This is a vision that is skeptical of humanity's ability to achieve certain goals on the basis of its technological prowess.



If the spectator does feel that humanity has no special techno-agency then this has a knock-on effect on the piece's art-politics. In a manner symmetrical to the question just posed to Bennett's philosophy, is it not reasonable to assume that the spectator might ask, what is the point of, say, voting for renewable energies, if all such technological interventions are seen as limited, not especially effective? Huyghe's piece, then, (as framed by Anti-(r)centrism) provides a picture of human nature continuity that might well result in a feeling of solidarity with the nonhuman – a solidarity built on similarity. But, this is gained at the expense of a spectatorial self-understanding as that entity able to *really* make a difference in particular situations, to collectively facilitate techno-political ecological action. *After ALife Ahead*, seen in this way, represents a problematic conditioning of its spectators. Rather than actively motivating political action it generates a certain friction.

I hold that Inhumanism provides a better counter-image in this regard. Before showing how Inhumanist art-politics play out, I need to properly articulate the different assumptions, already gestured at in my introduction that distinguish this position from the Anti-(r)centric one.

### ***Inhumanism***

As already mentioned the Inhumanist perspective figures rationality as different to most of nature. How so? To reason, for Brassier, is to engage in "rule-governed conceptual practices" (Brassier 2011,49) that are exceedingly rare. Cognitive rule-following is fleshed out as a form of 'strong knowing', that is: "the taking of something as something, classifying an object under a concept" (Brassier 2011, 49). This classification is subject to "normative standards of truth and falsity" (Brassier 2011, 49), i.e. the agent making the classification can be correct or incorrect, and must bear responsibility for their conceptual judgment. This strong rational knowing, that Brassier also calls sapience, is then contrasted with sensing (sentience), understood as one example of a much more common type of natural process. He describes sensing as "the registration of a somatic stimulus" and, further, as "the responsive dispositions through which one part of the world – [for instance] thermostat - transduces information from another

part of the world – [i.e.] molecular kinetic energy" (Brassier 2011, 49). Sensing is different to knowing in that there is no conceptual classification involved. The thermostat bears no responsibility for the truth, or otherwise of its 'somatic registration'. As Brassier says, "[t]he transduction of information may be adequate or inadequate to relative ends, but never 'true' or 'false'" (Brassier 2011, 49). According to the Inhumanist, this ability to conceptually classify the world stands behind all manner of rational abilities. It is the means by which humans produce objective knowledge about the world via the disciplines of natural science. Again, to quote Brassier, "reason is our sole means of cognitive access to nature. There is no other way of knowing what nature is (certainly not intuition, *pace* Bergson and others)" (Brassier 2015, 220-221). Second, this objective window on the world accounts for human techno-agency.

I want to pause for a moment here, as claims around objectivity and technology can appear suspect, especially within the context of recent continental philosophy. To be clear Brassier does not posit articles of objective knowledge as timeless verities, rather they are *always* open to revision. The revisable nature of scientific postulations does not mean that, at any given historical junction they are untrue, but that their traction upon reality is likely to be reassessed or improved. Brassier is also very aware that the institutions of science are subject to social pressures that may distort the findings of particular research projects. One such distortion concerns the hold patriarchy has over the discipline. But, again, the recognition of this male dominance does not invalidate the notion that science is able, when functioning correctly, to make objective claims. Not all of its statements are dressed up biases or social distortions. Brassier's stance is, therefore, different from those positions (sometimes feminist) that assert the impossibility of truth claims about the real. For instance, certain theorists "insist on the social [...] construction not only of gender but of knowledge and truth, maintaining that epistemological and ontological claims are always [...] gendered, never neutral" (Cox et al 2015, 23).<sup>[14]</sup> That this view exists and has a currency does not mean that a defence of rational objectivity is therefore necessarily anti-feminist. In fact, there is a body of cutting-edge feminist thought that takes

Inhumanism and Brassier's work very seriously indeed. I'm talking about Xenofeminism, a position that characterises itself as rationalist, defends scientific truth claims, whilst also engaging in a critique of those moments where existing science falls short.<sup>[15]</sup>

### ***The Inhumanist Interpretation***

With this clarification in mind, we can return to the main argument. Following Brassier we can understand reason as different to other natural processes such as 'somatic registration' and that this difference confers upon its users' certain capacities. (And that these capacities are not necessarily tied to social exclusion or dominion.) To interpret *After ALife Ahead* through this lens is to read in a way that makes room for this rational difference. For instance, we might begin by recognising that *After ALife Ahead* was an imposing piece. The size and ambition of the install as impressive as the manner of its realisation. The surface of the old ice rink had been broken apart like the crisp on a crême brûlée. The revealed earth 'terraformed' into an alien setting, in a manner as convincing as any sci-fi movie set. This was not a work that dissimulated itself as 'made artefact'. It was an ostensible, ostentatious even, piece of human engineering. To grasp the work as Inhumanist involves an appreciation of these characteristics as indexing rational knowledge and technical expertise, or in other words, it is to see the piece as a rational 'feat'. For instance, the ability to 'landscape' an environment so effectively is understood to depend upon the objective knowledge of physical properties and how these might be manipulated. To read in this way is to be impressed by these capacities, to see them as unusual and distinctive.

This impression of the work is only magnified the more we attend to its complexity. The work's components were bound together with enormous intricacy in a series of physical interactions. For instance, hidden within the space were sensors that both tracked the movements of peacocks and bees, as well as measuring the proportion of carbon dioxide - and even certain bacteria - within the hall. This data was then processed by a piece of software, Huyghe called it a "genetic algorithm" that created a 'measure' of

the space's "vitality" (Skulptur 2017, 210). This was then used to control the conditions within the medical incubator, such that: "When the space has a higher vitality, so does the petri dish with cancer cells. When it has a lower vitality, the algorithm slows the cells' rate of reproduction" (McDermott 2017). In turn, the rate of division amongst the cells influenced those digital shapes produced within the spectator's phone app. These shapes, however, disappeared (were killed off) when a skylight was opened. Furthermore, the opening of the skylight changed the CO2 content of the space as did the number of spectators present, renewing the sensor readings and thus changing the characteristics of the installation. Whether the skylights were open or closed was dependent upon the transparency of the aquarium's switchglass, which in turn was affected by the musical score

From the Inhumanist perspective, rational capacity lies at the root of this complexity. For instance, the biomedical component of the work, the quiet subdivision of cells within the incubator, draws attention to humanity's ability to strongly know the world, to deeply understand its structure in a way that enables successful intervention into that very structure, to extract a cell line, clone it and artificially maintain its reproduction, for instance. And, importantly, the work's complex network structure draws attention to the human skills involved in creating such a demanding 'computational organisation'. I would argue, then, and to re-state, that to see *After ALife Ahead* in this way prompts an appreciation not only of the capabilities of Huyghe and his team but of rational difference in general. On viewing the piece, a spectator understands humans as capable of objective thought and its technological application: impressive capacities well described by Brassier.

But, importantly, this understanding of *After ALife Ahead* as 'feat', represents only one half of the Inhumanist perspective, it is not the full story. This is because Inhumanism does not promote that understanding of the human animal as completely different, as per Classical/Modern humanism. Therefore, an Inhumanist interpretation of Huyghe's work would not only focus on those ways that his piece reveals difference, but it would also set itself the task of showing how *After ALife Ahead* also shows rationality to be entirely natural.

In other words, the Inhumanist interpretation would show that rational distinctiveness is not total, that it does not destroy human nature continuity.

Brassier draws attention to this feature of Inhumanism when he stresses that philosophers and (neuro)scientists should commit themselves to revealing how cognition is resolutely *of the world*. This means illuminating the material basis for rationality (within the brain, as well as without).

Yet reason is not supernatural because rules (i.e., concepts) must be realised in patterns: they can do nothing independently of their material realisation. In other words, concepts are functions, but functions must be materially realised in order to do anything – and I use “material” in the broadest possible sense here, to encompass the microphysical, neurobiological, and sociohistorical domains. (Brassier 2015, 221)

It is also beholden upon philosophy and science to explain how our knowledge emerged from ubiquitous natural process, in other words, how transduction might have made the evolutionary move into ‘knowing that’. Both these interrelated tasks are complex and ongoing, but, suffice to say, they index Brassier’s commitment to rationality as *partially* exceptional, that is a difference nevertheless fundamentally continuous with nature.

As we have seen via McDermott’s review, it is possible to read *After ALife Ahead* as containing many moments in which this human nature continuity is stressed. The Inhumanist interpretation concurs with the Anti-(r)centric one here. They agree that Huyghe’s work represents human nature continuity, but, ultimately, they draw different conclusions from this shared assessment. For instance, the Inhumanist agrees with McDermott when she describes how *After ALife Ahead* causes the spectator to understand humanity as ‘decentred’ in relation to its technology. (As we have seen, she draws attention to the way that the bio-techno system that underlies the piece is not, at any given moment, controlled by a human (artist) operator.) The Inhumanist view, however, disagrees with McDermott over exactly how we should

understand this decentring. We can characterise the Anti-(r)centrist reading as holding to an overly strong interpretation; wo/man is *totally* decentred from a position of distinct difference, thereby rendered *completely* continuous without *any* claim to be able to control nature more than any other entity. The Inhumanist interpretation, on the other hand, interprets decentring in a ‘softer’ manner, and this is because its reading is leavened by that understanding of Huyghe’s work as ‘feat’ already discussed. In other words, for the Inhumanist, the decentring unquestionably produced by Huyghe’s work is *conjoined* with the idea that humanity is different, in possession of certain distinctive rational capacities.

So, bringing these two perspectives together prompts the Inhumanist to recognise that wo/man can never be in complete control of nature, because she is part of the world, in continuity with it; her techno-agency always likely to be met with resistance by other vital materials, those sharing the same ecology as her. But, this does not mean that we should see her techno-agency as completely continuous with - the same as – all other a-rational actors. And, the fact that our intentions, or ambitions to control (certain situations) can be thwarted does not mean that we are poor at utilising our techno-agency to achieve certain goals. In fact, we are often very good at achieving these, impressively so. The notion that we as a species can achieve objectives is not always a hubristic one. The Inhumanist sees the engineered complexity of *After ALife Ahead* as a manifestation and celebration of this ability. Contra Anti-(r)centrism, then, humanity can be seen as decentred, and continuous with nature but not *completely* so.

In sum, to understand Huyghe’s piece through the lens of Inhumanism is to see it as articulating those ways that the rational actor is both different *and* in continuity with nature. The Inhumanist approach is characterised, therefore, by the effort to understand *After ALife Ahead* as bearing both of these meanings. We can understand these significations to be in a dialectical relation with one another, such that the spectator ‘first’ appreciates the human animal to be *part of nature*, then, that it is also *different*, and finally that it is, therefore, *part of nature as different*.

## ***Inhumanist Art Politics***

Huyghe's work under an Inhumanist reading is a carrier of this complex picture of wo/man in the world, one that represents a rational anti-anthropocentrism. By these lights, rationality is considered to be entirely of the world. This continuity, or similarity in kind, is the basis for solidarity between the human and nonhuman. As I have argued, this solidarity is the precondition for acting in consort with nature, taking concrete measures towards its decolonisation, for instance, voting or demonstrating in favour of radical environmental policy. This is a similar ethico-political principle to that which underlies the Anti-(r)centrist perspective. But, an artwork understood to be Inhumanist doesn't suffer the contradiction that undermines its theoretical rival; it does not call for action whilst implicitly disrupting the basis for that action, i.e. by promoting the idea that human techno-agency is no more nor less than any other object-encounter or 'vital transduction'. This is because the basis for Inhumanist solidarity does not eradicate rational difference.

In other words, the philosophical image of wo/man carried by Inhumanist art is better than that contained in the Anti-(r)centrist version because it gives human agency its due. From this perspective, the spectator of *After ALife Ahead* is less likely to respond to the recognition of nonhuman-solidarity with a shrug, to feel that any personal action on this basis - voting or campaigning for techno-political solutions - is likely to be ineffective in the last instance. The Inhumanist perspective shows that solidarity with nature need not mean that wo/man must renounce her self-understanding as technologically proficient, even remarkable. Huyghe's work as an impressively engineered artefact should be seen as promoting this form of causal power. Understood in this way *After ALife Ahead* can be seen to condition spectators so as to render (more) likely political action on the basis of solidarity with nature, in other words, to grease the transition from solidarity to action.

## ***Conclusion***

This article has sought to contest the hold exerted by the OOO/ANT/NM axis on contemporary art theory and practice. I have done so in order to pursue a theoretical image of wo/man in the world, one which might form an effective basis for the decolonisation of nature. Harman and Bennett are problematic to the extent that their Anti-rational-anthropocentrism, a position that attempts to eradicate any exceptionality for the human subject qua rationality, results in philosophical contradiction and 'tacitly' debilitates political action. I turned, instead, to the philosophy of Ray Brassier and Peter Wolfendale, specifically their Inhumanism, so as to formulate another image, one that although not conventionally anthropocentric maintained a place for humankind's rational difference, i.e. its cognitive facility. This position, Inhumanism, was seen to provide no friction to the potential development of a political constituency devoted to nature's decolonisation. I sought also to read Pierre Huyghe's *After ALife Ahead* as the bearer for this Inhumanist image of wo/man in the world, understanding the piece to effectively precondition spectators for eco-political action.

## ***Coda: Post Truth and OOP***

The task of addressing our environmental crisis now faces a further complexity. The most powerful government in the world denounces environmental issues, for instance blithely dismissing the scientific consensus around climate change.<sup>[16]</sup> It does so, in part, by employing a strategy characteristic of so-called 'post-truth' politics, that is, the systematic discrediting of objective knowledge. Under this purview, climate change is taken to be merely a suspicious theory, promulgated by a cabal of corrupt experts (Runciman 2017). That science has a legitimate claim to objectivity is ignored, or rather, objectivity is no longer the measure by which truth is accounted. Fact, rather, is taken to be bestowed by the strength of the intuitive or emotional pull of any given message, as well as the force and repetitiveness with which it is communicated (Runciman 2017). It is clear that the current state of political discourse, its post-truth condition,

exacerbates our contemporary ecological crisis, disrupting our collective ability to understand and take action. Any effective decolonial project, therefore, must resist the post-truth ideology.

It is my contention that this task requires philosophical resources that defend science as producing knowledge of the world *in itself* (i.e. objective knowledge). We need a way to understand and articulate this comprehension as having a legitimate authority. The consensus on climate change, for instance, involves hypothesis, and these are liable to change, but, they are supported by evidence in a manner that gives them legitimacy and authority over theories that purport description of the natural world *without* such evidence.<sup>[17]</sup> Following Brassier and Wolfendale, and as already suggested, I understand Anti-(r)centrism to be inadequate regarding this defence of objectivity. In what follows I shall focus upon the work of Harman attempting to address his work in relation to post-truth politics.

I shall begin with a quotation. In it, Wolfendale accounts for the difference between Harman and other philosophers associated with so-called Speculative Realism. Object-Oriented Philosophy is different in approach to the systems of Quentin Meillassoux et al because, unlike theirs, it is a veiled form of anti-realism.

The reason that OOP is the odd man out of the initial SR group is not that it refuses materialism, but rather that it refuses to have any truck with positive epistemology whatsoever. Regardless of the supposed ontological realism in which it dresses itself up, its epistemological anti-realism is pervasive and corrosive to the realist spirit that the other approaches, for the most part, represented. Most tellingly, the rallying cry [...] that we take the literal pronouncements of the sciences seriously is completely rebuffed by OOP.

(2014, 402)

Wolfendale's criticism is clear, OOP is little interested in epistemology, commonly understood as the grasping of positive facts, rather it concerns itself with delineating a certain 'negativity' that disrupts all such attempts to understand. Harman asserts that the reality of objects is essentially

hidden from knowledge, in other words "[r]eal objects withdraw from our access to them, in fully Heideggerian fashion. The metaphors of concealment, veiling, sheltering, harbouring, and protecting are all relevant here" (Harman 2009, 195). One consequence of this philosophical move is that wo/man can never make contact with the object in itself, rather she only encounters the sensuous surface of any given thing. From this perspective the pronouncements of science, for instance, those which claim to track the deep structure of the universe, cannot be taken *literally* they must always be seen to miss that withdrawn structure, to track only the sensuous realm. This gap between what scientists think they are doing, and what they actually achieve is one reason to be skeptical of them.

Another is that according to Harman, scientific knowledge should not be privileged even in the sensuous realm. Science misses the metaphysical truth in a manner that is absolutely *ubiquitous*. As we have seen, Harman levels the interaction between any 'thing' and another, describing all in terms of a rather crude 'object-encounter'. This is seen to be true for both material reality, conventionally understood, but also within the realm of human thought and knowledge; concepts, words, statements, etc., are all objects. From this perspective, then, a scientific concept's relation to its 'target' is synonymous with, for instance, fire's relation to cotton. Harman says: "I hold that interaction between cotton and fire belongs on the same footing as human interaction with both cotton and fire" (Harman 2011, 6).<sup>[18]</sup> This emphasis on the similarity between conceptual and other natural processes serves to undermine scientific claims by relativizing them, making them no different, essentially speaking, from causal processes. Harman, therefore, deflates their descriptive value and significance. Harman's notion of the 'relative' worth of scientific pronouncements is another reason to be skeptical.

As we have seen this stance of skepticism towards scientific truth also characterises the post-truth position, albeit for very different reasons. There is a symmetry between OOP and post-truth, one that makes it hard for the Object-Oriented philosopher to chastise the post-truth demagogue for his 'freedom with the facts', especially with

scientific truths. The philosopher cannot articulate this particular criticism because it would demand a defence of the *special* status of scientific fact as *really* diagnostic (of the in-itself), a status that the Object-Ontologist *does not* accord science.

It is my contention that this epistemic skepticism is translated into the Anti-(r)centric interpretation of *After Alife Ahead*. McDermott's emphasis on Huyghe's piece as prompting spectators to appreciate themselves (qua human) as decentred, so as to be completely in continuity with nature, mimics (and performs) Harman's relativising move. As we have seen, the Inhumanist reading, on the other hand, offers a foundation from which to contest the post-truth position. From this perspective, *After ALife Ahead* is viewed as an impressive 'feat', one that indexes humanity's rational ability to strongly know the world. The piece, therefore, can be seen to propagate the idea that *objectivity is possible*. This idea is a necessary weapon in the fight against post-truth politics. In communicating this message to its audience, we might situate *After ALife Ahead* as contributing to the development of a constituency who recognise the justified authority of scientific knowledge, and are thus better placed to dismiss the Trumpian demagogue, especially as he attempts to undermine the validity of those scientific theories best able to aid in our attempts to decolonise nature.

## Notes

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[1] Demos' title also reflects his recognition that our environmental crisis is bound up with the colonial exploitation of 'non-western' people.

[2] In this quotation Demos posits a *central* role for art in the task of shaping opinion. This is because the tradition of radicality within modern and contemporary art, its iconoclasm, makes it a discipline well suited to the propagation of counter images. But Demos is also clear that the eco-political project requires the mass mobilisation of media, print, and broadcast, etc. Art plays but one part.

[3] Art can, of course, be formulated as political in many other ways. For instance, artists might actively intervene in a social situation bringing practical aid to a disadvantaged community, and/or mobilise direct activist strategies, such as staging protests, organising occupations, etc. Or, an artwork might be political in the way that its materials and relations of production are organised so that it enacts, say, environmentally friendly ways of being-in-the-world. It is also the case that these

strategies create their own image-interventions; an occupation, for instance, is both a physical *and* symbolic action after all. A great strength of Demos book is that it covers all of these methods and is attentive to these overlaps. I agree with him that these forms are not mutually exclusive and all should be championed. Art's contribution to a political ecology must be pursued on as many fronts as possible. My task in this article, however, is less ambitious than that tackled by Demos. I concentrate on one aspect of art's political valence, that of image intervention as produced by artworks in relation to a 'conventional' spectatorial situation. I do so not to privilege this encounter but to mark out a defined territory so as to focus, in a fine-grained manner, on a particular philosophical query. The question is this: what is the best way to think an anti-anthropocentric image?

[4] This qualified defence of rationality is contentious because continental philosophy has for a time now been suspicious of this term. I take the view along with other projects such as Xenofemism and Left-accelerationism that rationality can be put to emancipatory work. (See <http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/>; <http://criticallegalhinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics/>)

[5] This is exemplified by the way that Demos understands Brassier's philosophy as offering essentially the same insight as Harman's. In the terms of my argument Demos does not make a distinction between Anti-(r)centrism and Inhumanism.

[6] I am referring to the 'mind-body dualism' derived from the philosophy of René Descartes.

[7] I have been gender specific here because Classical/Modern humanism did understand rationality to be the preserve of men. From this point on I shall refuse such thinking by employing the term wo/man.

[8] This point is made forcefully in Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman*.

[9] For instance, a review of Huyghe's retrospective at the Pompidou has this to say: "Huyghe's exhibition echoes the critique of anthropocentrism inherent in such branches of contemporary philosophy as [...] object-oriented ontology" (Khazam 2013).

[10] For a clear account of this term see Wolfendale's self-published dictionary definition: [https://www.academia.edu/26697819/Rationalist\\_Inhumanism\\_Dictionary\\_Entry\\_The\\_word\\_as\\_used\\_by\\_Wolfendale\\_and\\_Brassier\\_bears\\_little\\_resemblance\\_to\\_Giorgio\\_Agamben\\_and\\_Roberto\\_Esposito's\\_mobilisation\\_of\\_it](https://www.academia.edu/26697819/Rationalist_Inhumanism_Dictionary_Entry_The_word_as_used_by_Wolfendale_and_Brassier_bears_little_resemblance_to_Giorgio_Agamben_and_Roberto_Esposito's_mobilisation_of_it). For Agamben the Inhuman plays a role in a complex deconstruction of the subject; he wants to develop an ethics that is ontologically prior to that explored within traditional human rights frameworks. For instance, see his discussion of the 'Muselmann' in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (Agamben). Similarly, Esposito uses the Inhuman to worry problematic distinctions and presumptions that underlie rights discourses, proposing an alternative 'Third Person' perspective. The difference between these approaches to the Inhuman and the

Inhumanism of Brassier and Wolfendale is profound and very complex. Unfortunately, an analysis of these dissimilarities is beyond the remit of this current essay.

[11] As has been thoroughly and convincingly theorised humanism, as it emerged in Europe during the Middle Ages and evolved in the Modern period, conflated rationality with 'a way of life', the particular virtues, vices and prejudices of western culture. This conflation acted as part of the justification for the colonial project.

[12] Inhumanism in this way moves beyond the tired Cartesian assertion that thought and material are incommensurably different – distinct substances.

[13] Bennett admits that her analysis of material agency over-reaches itself somewhat, when she says: "I will emphasize, even overemphasize, the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and in human artefacts)" (2010, xvi)

[14] This passage refers to the work of Donna Haraway.

[15] The following paragraph from the influential Xenofeminist manifesto makes all these points succinctly and is worth quoting at length. "Xenofeminism is a rationalism. To claim that reason or rationality is 'by nature' a patriarchal enterprise is to concede defeat. It is true that the canonical 'history of thought' is dominated by men, and it is male hands we see throttling existing institutions of science and technology. But this is precisely why feminism must be a rationalism—because of this miserable imbalance, and not despite it. There is no 'feminine' rationality, nor is there a 'masculine' one. Science is not an expression but a suspension of gender. If today it is dominated by masculine egos, then it is at odds with itself—and this contradiction can be leveraged. Reason, like information, wants to be free, and patriarchy cannot give it freedom. Rationalism must itself be a feminism. XF marks the point where these claims intersect in a two-way dependency. It names reason as an engine of feminist emancipation and declares the right of everyone to speak as no one in particular" (Cuboniks).

[16] I am of course referring to the US Administration's attitude, exemplified by its recent withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement.

[17] To be clear, understanding the pronouncements of science to have authority in this way does not preclude critical assessment of their content, including 'calling out' bad science.

[18] "When fire burns cotton, it makes contact only with the flammability of this material [...] Cotton-being is concealed [...] from all entities that come into contact with it" (Harman 2011, 44).

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