

Received: 18 December 2021 Accepted: 2 January 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/joe.v1i1.2061>

Book Review

Morton, T. (2021). **All Art Is Ecological**. Penguin Random House. ISBN: 978-0-1419-9700-1.

Heidi Hart¹

In a 2021 Zoom conference titled *The Garden and the Dump: Across More-than-Human Entanglements*, climate philosopher Timothy Morton (they/them) gave a performative rant on the abomination of the American lawn. Their talk exemplified what they call “playful seriousness” in their new book *All Art Is Ecological*. This approach to climate crisis, in an age of doomscrolling and grief aesthetics, is on the surface as refreshing as it is unsettling. Instead of taking an academic stance, Morton’s book reads more like a chain of chatty riffs on phenomenology, ecological attunement, and art’s hypnotic power. The book is divided into two long essays. It opens with a call to embrace the subjunctive, titled “And You May Find Yourself Living in an Age of Mass Extinction,” with reference to the Talking Heads’ song “Once in a Lifetime” as an antidote to the “indicative age” of data-based certainty. Wishing instead for strangeness, beauty, and hesitation, Morton revisits their well-known notion of the “hyperobject” (Morton, 2013), arguing that art can open humans to a sense of ambiguity and wonder, to help us face a climate crisis that can seem too huge to comprehend.

As the past year’s monster wildfires, hurricanes, and Arctic heat waves have brought global warming far too close for comfort for most humans, hard-to-grasp “hyperobjects” may seem passé. Morton’s new book compensates for this in its enthusiastic explanation of phenomenology – the world as we can touch it, and it touches us – for those who might find Kant or Heidegger too formidable, fascist, or simply old-school. The first long essay in the book (“And You May Find Yourself ...”) carries the reader along on an approachable and engaging philosophical journey. Drawing on food-marketing terminology (“mouthfeel”), Morton describes “Kantian beauty” as “thinkfeel” (Morton, 2021, 4), a term that works well to evoke the empirical-noumenal slippage that even Kant’s categories could not contain. Next, the essay provides some background on the philosopher Martin Heidegger, whose work, despite his membership in the Nazi party and ongoing appeal to the far right, some scholars still find salvageable for ecological thinking (see Marder, 2018). Morton takes readers on a tour of Heidegger’s terms *Dasein*, *vorhanden*, and *zuhanden*, showing how embedded we are in our own “low resolution” (5) experiences of truth, and how we don’t notice what we sense until its functionality breaks down. Building on Kant’s phenomenology through Heidegger, Morton furthers the idea of beauty into “truthfeel.” They attempt to subvert the problematic thinker by “being more Heideggerian than Heidegger” (14), and this works especially well in their use of language. After all, Heidegger tried his hand at poetry, with an unintentional glibness

¹ Heidi Hart, SixtyEight Art Institute, Copenhagen. E-mail: heidi.hart@sixtyeight.dk.



in wordplay that Morton's very intentional text recalls, puncturing the weightiness of Being – if neglecting Heidegger's Nazism entrenched in his philosophy of rootedness (Bambach, 2003).

Amid their celebration of the sensory qualities of knowing, Morton takes special pleasure in strangeness and in the uncanny. This is where art comes in. "Yelling at people that we are making lifeforms go extinct isn't nice," they write, "because it deletes the strangeness" (Morton, 2021, 21). They explain their "dark ecology" approach as "something slippery and evanescent," like waking up in a hotel room in Norway at an odd winter hour. Unlike their rival dark ecologist Mark Fisher, who wrote on Lovecraft, hauntings, and urban "capitalist realism," Morton puts evanescence before darkness, slipperiness before the sense of "*wrongness*" that might induce dread or depression (Fisher, 2016, 13). Sometimes this strangeness gets lost, however, in what sounds like common-sense nature pedagogy. In the book's second long essay, titled "Tuning," Morton critiques the need to reorient oneself toward large-scale climate solutions as a product of the very hierarchical, binary thinking that wrought all this planetary damage in the first place. Instead, they ask, "How about just visiting your local garden centre to smell the plants?" This approach sounds a bit like Candide in his own garden, but in an age of increasing Insta-narcissism, practicing daily phenomenological awareness is at least a start toward caring for the larger world. As David Abram famously noted in his *Spell of the Sensuous* (1996), attunement means not only paying attention to the other species out there, but also realizing that they perceive you, too.

Art takes human awareness even further, Morton argues, into what Heidegger liked to call "the Open," or (in the less rhapsodic art-phenomenology I prefer) what Jean-Luc Marion describes as "givenness," the surprise of encounter "when "the phenomenon gives itself"; "I cannot make it, produce it, or provoke it" (Marion, 2002, 160). Morton's take is less elegant but certainly juicier:

A work of art is like a transparent bag full of eyes, and each eye is also a transparent bag full of eyes. There is something inherently weird, even disgusting, about beauty itself, and this weirdness gets mixed back in when we consider things in an ecological way. This is because beauty just happens, without our ego cooking it up. (Morton, 2021, 50).

As an example, Morton describes participating in Olafur Eliasson's 2015 installation *Ice Watch* alongside the COP21 summit in Paris. This circle of huge ice blocks imported from Greenland allowed visitors to meet melting ice in real time, with the phenomenological benefit of touch. Just as the sunlight and Paris weather "accessed" the ice, "the ice was accessing us," Morton writes. "It seemed to send out waves of cold, or suck our heat, whichever way around" (57). This kind of dialogic encounter works in embodied, embedded ways that data cannot. Morton continues, performing the difficulty of finding words for art: "there is some kind of mind-meld-like thing that takes place, where I can't tell whether it's me or the artwork that is causing the beauty experience" (59). The result of this mysterious process, of course, is that humans care more about the melting ice, and think more about our capacity for making and destroying, realizing that "the future emerges *directly from the objects we design*" (62).



I wish Morton continued in this direction, because design can also make radical climate response possible, beyond the “sustainability” discourse the book finds, rightly, too often superficial. By asking “What would it look like if we allowed more and more things to have some kind of power over us?” (65), Morton invites, instead of the collective humility and massive effort needed to dismantle growth-based economic structures, “enchantment.” For me, admittedly trained in old-school Brechtian aesthetics, this is a dangerous word. Yes, art can be disturbing in Plato’s “*demonic*” sense, and fruitfully so, as “it’s a message from somewhere else” (Morton, 2021, 67). But when art works as hypnosis, as Kant feared, too (and Morton thinks this was a hang-up), it can lead to mass entrainment, personal manipulation, or pleasure without criticality. The sheer number of immersive “eco-art” exhibits drawing visitors in these truly disturbing times seems more escapist than engaging. Enter floor-to-ceiling Van Gogh and you risk feel-good narcosis, not the moment of astonishment that asks something of you. What I call “critical vulnerability” occurs in artworks like Diana Thater’s silent (except for the projector’s whirring) dolphin videos, which draw you into underwater strangeness *and* bare the “nature film” device, reifying the slippery creatures as if already lost and turned to artifacts in a museum. I do take Morton’s “I could dissolve” appreciation of environmental art as they intended it (“I am coexisting with at least one thing that isn’t me” [70]), but embodiment without critical distance – even in oscillation – risks lazy passivity, not the threshold experience of focused openness that leads to change.

All Art Is Ecological ends with a call for humor and almost Buddhist “care less”-ness, letting an artwork “hold me in its infinite tractor beams, like a bagful of hypnotic eyes,” and risking, yes, the “greasy pathway towards kitsch” (80). In this “world of tricksters” (82), I can see the appeal of going against the earnest ecological grain, and of finding irreverent holiness in art. In contrast, the Cartesian, problem-solving approach of Bruno Latour’s exhibition and book *Reset Modernity!* (Latour & Leclercq, 2016) dis-enchants art and ecology in favor of technological innovation, with art as a pedagogical tool. The sublime or mysterious are meant to fall away – though, oddly enough, traces remain in Latour’s rigorous “thought exhibition” (Lointier, 2016). Whenever I open the exhibition book, I find myself touching saturated images of forest, mine, or dam, even in the section subtitled “Farewell to the Sublime” (Latour & Leclercq, 167-183). We humans do need numinous traces, inklings of the unknowable. I’m all for being absorbed, for a moment, into Rothko Chapel or into the memory of flickering candlelight in the “dirty” Sistine Chapel, as Morton recommends. Humor has its place, too, even in environmental art, as in the Icelandic artist known as Shoplifter’s maximalist installation of furry, colorful quasi-creatures titled *Nervescapes*. But art that speaks to planetary emergency needs more than the wobbly, subjunctive, hypnotic effects that Morton describes. Without being heavy handed, art can ask us humans in, to grieve in ways our daily screenworlds keep at bay, and to ask why we’ve arrived so late. Morton’s book does eventually get to grief, as a last word: “The ecological society to come, then, must be a bit haphazard, broken, lame, twisted, ironic, silly, sad” (17).

References

- Abram, D. (1996). *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Vintage.
- Bambach, C. (2003). *Heidegger's Roots: Nietzsche, National Socialism, and the Greeks*. Cornell University Press.
- Fisher, M. (2016). *The Weird and the Eerie*. Repeater Books.
- Latour, B. and Leclercq, C. (Eds.) (2016). *Reset Modernity!* MIT Press.
- Lointier, F. M. (2016, June 1). "Reset Modernity! By Bruno Latour at the ZKM." *Seismopolite: Journal of Art and Politics*. <http://www.seismopolite.com/reset-modernity-by-bruno-latour-at-zkm>
- Marder, M. (2018). *Heidegger: Phenomenology, Ecology, Politics*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Marion, J. (2002). *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*. Stanford University Press.
- Morton, T. (2021). *All Art Is Ecological*. Penguin Random House.
- Morton, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press.

