# Animal, Vegetable, Mineral Ethics and Objects

# Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Editor



# ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, MINERAL

## Ethics and Objects

Edited by

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen



## Oliphaunt Books | Washington, DC



#### ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, MINERAL: ETHICS AND OBJECTS © Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 2012.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommerical-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/bync-nd/3.0, or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

This work is Open Access, which means that you are free to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to the authors, that you do not use this work for commercial gain in any form whatsoever, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build upon the work outside of its normal use in academic scholarship without express permission of the author and the publisher of this volume. For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.

First published in 2012 by **Oliphaunt Books | Washington, DC** an imprint of punctum books http://oliphauntbooks.com

ISBN-13: 978-0615625355 ISBN-10: 0615625355

Library of Congress Cataloging Data is available from the Library of Congress.

Cover Image: Mandrake, from *Tacuinum Sanitatis in Medicina* manuscript (Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, Codex Vindobonensis, series nova 2644, ca. 1390)

Facing-page drawing by Heather Masciandaro.

Before you start to read this book, take this moment to think about making a donation to punctum books, an independent non-profit press,

@ http://punctumbooks.com/about/

If you're reading the e-book, you can click on the image below to go directly to our donations site. Any amount, no matter the size, is appreciated and will help us to keep our ship of fools afloat. Contributions from dedicated readers will also help us to keep our commons open and to cultivate new work that can't find a welcoming port elsewhere. Our ad/venture is not possible without your support. Vive la open-access.



Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, Ship of Fools (1490-1500)



## TABLE OF CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION: ALL	1
THINGS	
Jeffrey Jerome Cohen	
WITH THE WORLD, OR	9
BOUND TO FACE THE SKY:	
THE POSTURES OF THE	
WOLF-CHILD OF HESSE	
Karl Steel	
ANIMALS AND THE	35
MEDIEVAL CULTURE OF	
EMPIRE	
Sharon Kinoshita	
THE FLORAL AND THE	65
HUMAN	
Peggy McCracken	
EXEMPLARY ROCKS	91
Kellie Robertson	
MINERAL VIRTUE	123
Valerie Allen	
YOU ARE HERE: A	153
MANIFESTO	
Eileen A. Joy	

SHEEP TRACKS: A MULTI- SPECIES IMPRESSION Julian Yates	173
THE RENAISSANCE <i>RES</i>	211
PUBLICA OF FURNITURE	
Julia Reinhard Lupton	
POWERS OF THE HOARD:	237
FURTHER NOTES ON	
MATERIAL AGENCY	
Jane Bennett	
A RESPONSE ESSAYS	
SPEAKING STONES, JOHN	273
MUIR, AND A SLOWER	
(NON)HUMANITIES	
Lowell Duckert	
'RUINOUS MONUMENT':	281
TRANSPORTING OBJECTS IN	
HERBERT'S PERSEPOLIS	
Nedda Mehdizadeh	
ANIMAL, VEGETABLE,	289
MINERAL: TWENTY	
QUESTIONS	
Jonathan Gil Harris	

# POWERS OF THE HOARD: FURTHER NOTES ON MATERIAL AGENCY

### Jane Bennett



THE CALL OF THINGS

There exists a rich metaphysical tradition in the West that engages stuff—animal, vegetable, and mineral—as lively intensity, as vital force.<sup>1</sup> Take, for example,

I am grateful to Dorothy Kwek, Jennifer Culbert, Nathan Gies, Drew Walker, Jennifer Lin, Chad Shumura, Martin Coward, Anand Pandian, Jairus Grove, Constance Bennett, Rebecca Brown, Katrin Pahl, Christine Sylvestre, William Connolly, Christine Hentschel, Debbie Lisle, William Galperin, Derek Spinoza's belief that every body (person, fly, stone) comes with a *conatus* or impetus to seek alliances that enhance its vitality; or Diderot's materialist depiction of the universe as a spiderweb of vibrating threads; or Thoreau's account of The Wild within human and nonhuman nature; or Lucretius's physics of atoms that swerve, which Michel Serres spun into an ontology of fluctuating ado or *noise*.

I wrote a book called *Vibrant Matter* that positioned itself within this tradition, which Althusser termed "aleatory materialism."<sup>2</sup> But my book was not just a response to other books. It was also, quite literally, a reply to a call from matter that had congealing into "things." In particular, some items of trash had collected in the gutter of a street in Baltimore—one large black workglove, one dense mat of oak pollen, one unblemished dead rat, one white plastic bottle cap, one smooth stick of wood—and one sunny day as I walked by, they called me over to them. I stood enchanted by

McCormack, Eileen Joy, Jeffrey Cohen, Jonathan Gil Harris, the members of the 2011 seminar of the Rutgers Center for Cultural Analysis, the 2011 Fellows of the Institute for Cultural Inquiry in Berlin, the participants in the workshop on The Political Life of Things at the Imperial War Museum in London, the 2011 fellows of the Institute for Cultural Inquiry in Berlin, and the participants of the Political and Moral Thought 2010 seminar at Johns Hopkins University for their contributions to this essay.

<sup>1</sup> This is so despite Kant's claim that the concept of lively matter "involves a contradiction, since the essential character of matter is lifelessness, *inertia*": Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), sec. 73.394, 276.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Althusser, "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," in *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian, ed. Francois Matheron (London: Verso, 2006), 163–207.

the tableau they formed, and for a few surreal moments thought I caught a glimpse into a parallel world of vibrant, powerful things. Sullen objects revealed themselves to be expressive "actants," to use Latour's term, or, to quote one hoarder attempting to justify his collecting, "The things speak out."<sup>3</sup>

The uncanny task that I and other "new materialists" in a wide variety of disciplines<sup>4</sup> are pursuing is to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Alvin, a hoarder, is quoted in Randy O. Frost and Gail Steketee, Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 211. For Latour, an actant is a source of non-mechanical action, either human or nonhuman, that has sufficient coherence to produce effects or alter the course of history; 'actant' names a participant in a world swarming with multiple modes and degrees of agency. See Bruno Latour, The Politics of Nature: *How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2004. My encounter with the trash was an instance of those times when, in Sarah J. Whatmore's words, "the material fabric of our everyday lives becomes molten": "Mapping Knowledge Controversies: Science, Democracy and the Redistribution of Expertise," Progress in Human Geography 33.5 (October 2009): 587-98; or what Kathleen Stewart describes as "the unexpected discovery of something moving within the ordinary": "The Perfectly Ordinary Life," S&F Online 2.1 (Summer 2003): 7; http://barnard.edu/sfonline/ps/stewart. htm. See also Kathleen Stewart's "Cultural Poesis: The Generativity of Emergent Things," in The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research, eds. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (London: Sage, 2005), 1027-42: ". . . ordinary things were beginning to seem a little 'off', and that was what drew [my] ... attention to them. Or, maybe the ordinary things had always seemed a little off if you stopped to think about them" (1021).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See, to cite just some examples, Michelle Bastian, "Inventing Nature: Re-writing Time and Agency in a More-than-Human-World," *Australian Humanities Reviews* 47 (2010): 99–116; Nicky Gregson, H. Watkins and M. Calestant, "Inextinguishable Fibres: Demolition and the Vital Materialisms of

see what happens—to our writing, our bodies, our research designs, our consumption practices, our sympathies—if this "call" from things is taken seriously, taken, that is, as more than a figure of speech, more than a projection of voice onto some inanimate stuff, more than an instance of the pathetic fallacy.<sup>5</sup> What if things really can (in an under-determined way) hail us and offer a glimpse, through a window that opens, of lively bodies unparsed into subjects and objects? How does that work?

Asbestos," Environment and Planning A 42.5 (2010): 1065–83; Steven Shaviro, "The Universe of Things," Steven Shaviro [website], http://www.shaviro.com/Othertexts/Things.pdf; Graham Harman, "The Assemblage Theory of Society," in Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), 170-98; Aaron Goodfellow, "Pharmaceutical Intimacy: Sex, Death, and Methamphetamine," Home Cultures 5.3 (2008): 271–300; Eileen A. Joy and Craig Dionne, eds., "When Did we Become Post/human?", special issue of postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies 1.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2010); Jussi Parikka, Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); and Bruce Braun and Sarah Whatmore, "The Stuff of Politics: An Introduction," in Bruce Braun and Sarah Whatmore, eds., Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010), ix-xl.

<sup>5</sup> I think that the notions of "pathetic fallacy" and "prosopopeia," even if stretched creatively, are not right for my project. Satoshi Nishimura defines the former as the "ascription of human characteristic to inanimate objects, which takes place when reason comes under the influence of intense emotion" (Nishimura, Satoshi, "Thomas Hardy and the Language of the Inanimate," *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900* 43.4 [Autumn 2003]: 897 [897–912]). This notion, like "prosopopoeia" (the trope that confers a human voice on a dead thing), assumes and insinuates that only humans (or God) can indeed participate in speech. The pathetic fallacy and prosopopeia remain too closely aligned with Kant's categorical distinction between life and matter.

At best, this window has a rickety sash liable to slam shut without warning. And after it did that morning in Baltimore and I regained my composure as a subject among objects, I tried to narrate what I saw, to enunciate this thing-power, to translate the nonlinguistic emissions of glove-pollen-rat-cap-wood. In this essay, I will again pursue this quixotic task, even as Zarathustra's dwarf, who sits on my shoulder dripping lead into my ear, whispers this: "Attempts to cross the ontological divide between people and things leads only to incoherence, animism, romanticism, vitalism, or worse." The plan is to refine the accounts of thingpower and distributive agency that I pursued in *Vibrant Matter*, again by engaging some trash, this time a whole hoard. My primary tactic will be to listen to how hoarders—people who are, one could say, preternaturally attuned to the call from things-talk about their things.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> It might seem that the most reasonable approach would have been to follow the path of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. And it is true that even though his Phenomenology of Perception tended to reduce the expressivity of things to a projection of the bodily structure of human depthperception, his later work pursued a less anthropocentric approach. If *Phenomenology of Perception* focused on the perceptual field in which subject and object appear simultaneously (Merleau-Ponty as perhaps the quintessential "correlationist" of Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*), the unfinished text The Visible and the Invisible invokes the notion of "flesh" precisely in order to give things more of their due. He says there that "when we speak of the flesh of the visible, we do not mean to do anthropology, to describe a world covered over with all our own projections, leaving aside what can be under the human mask": Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), Merleau-Ponty now presents the power of things as the very impetus or generative force behind the formation of projections, and thus as having a certain independence from

I'll experimentally theorize their insights. A less verbose practice (performance art, photography, painting, music, dance) is probably better suited to the task of acknowledging the call of things. Word-workers can best keep faith with things, I think, if they approach language as rhetoric, as word-sounds for tuning the human body, for rendering it more susceptible to the frequencies of the material agencies inside and around it. The goal: to use words to make whatever communications already at work between vibrant bodies more audible, more detectable, more *senseable*.

I am hardly the first to try to address the uncanny agency—the capacity to impress—of things. Heidegger, to name one influential strand of thinking, considered the topic in several of his late essays, where he emphasizes the *incalculability* of the thing and its persistent *withdrawal* from our attempts to use, represent, or know it.<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, the natural

them. Still, by definition, there are limits to how much independence is thinkable within the frame of phenomenology, as is evidenced in the way, in the following quotation, things "exist only" as tethered to "my flesh": "What makes the weight, the thickness, the flesh of each color, of each sound, of each tactile texture of the present . . . is the fact that he who grasps them feels himself emerge from them by a sort ot coiling up or redoubling, fundamentally homogeneous with them, he feels that he is the sensible itself coming to itself and that in return the sensible is in his eyes ... his double or an extension of his own flesh. . . . The things—here, there, now, then—are no longer themselves, in their own place, in their own time; they exist only at the end of those rays of spatiality and of temporality emitted in the secrecy of my flesh" (114).

<sup>7</sup> But note that this flight is not merely a postulation that Heidegger makes as a philosopher. It is for him also something that we can *sense*: the thing's act of seeking cover is, he says, a "draft" from the "Open"—or that slight breeze made as the window slams shut.' Thus even for Heidegger, the withdrawal is a beckoning *call* (as well as the Thing's refusal to acknowledge that anyone has received its call). See historian Stephen Jay Gould spoke of the utter *"intractability* of actual organisms in real places.<sup>8</sup> In Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, the use of exclusively privative descriptors (incalculability, intractability, unknowability) rises to the level of an ethical virtue: thing-power ought only be described in relief, as "nonidentity" or the object's adamant refusal to coincide with our concepts—to say any more would be to perpetuate the violent hubris of man upon a world not designed for him.

I agree with Gould, Heidegger, Adorno, and others that any list of thing-powers should include recalcitrance, elusiveness, and the ability to impede (and thus perhaps to chasten) the will to truth.<sup>9</sup> But while such terms direct attention to the capacity of materialities to humble us as thinkers, these terms also tend to elide the power that things have to draw us near and provoke our deep attachments to them. Just how is it that bonding between human selves and "inanimate"

Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays,* trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper, 1982), Appendix 13: "Everyday opinion sees in the shadow only the lack of light, if not light's complete denial. In truth, however, the shadow is a manifest, though impenetrable, testimony to the concealed emitting of light. In keeping with this concept of shadow, we experience the incalculable as that which, withdrawn from representation, is nevertheless manifest in whatever is, pointing to Being, which remains concealed." Related to this is Graham Harman's notion of the "allure" of the object's mysterious withdrawal from the realm of our knowing; see his *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 1338; my emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> Thing-power as the ability to remind us to mind the limits of human knowing. Or, as a bumper sticker puts it: "Don't believe everything you think."

objects is possible? In order to explore *this* dimension of thing-power, we are going to have to risk hubris and ignore the dwarf, and experiment with a speculative account of the active, expressive, "calling" capacity of the thing. Foucault said that his main concern in the History of Sexuality was to trace the outlines of a strange new kind of power he vaguely discerned around him, a *productive* power that did not operate by repressing or "refusal, blockage, and invalidation." Extending Foucault's method, I want to keep my eyes, ears, and words focused on the productive power of things. Yes, nonhuman things are recalcitrant and never fully calculable. But let's try to sharpen our perception of their powers by thickening our description of their activeness, their vitality. For help, I turn to hoarders and their hoards.

INSTEAD OF THE PATHOLOGICAL

First, two maxims to guide our encounters:

1. Keep returning the focus to the nonhuman bodies of the hoard, considered as actants. The human practice of hoarding, as a psychosocial phenomenon, is fascinating, but aim to put the things in the foreground and the people in the background.

2. Meet the people, the hoarders, not as bearers of mental illness but as differently-abled bodies that might have special sensory access to the call of things. In examining hoarders' self-reports of their relationship to their stuff, resist the frame of psychopathology, in order to better hear what the hoarder might have discerned about her objects' thing-powers.

If the hoarder is a human body positioned at one end of a continuum whose points mark degrees of positive attraction between human and nonhuman bodies (owner, connoisseur, collector, archivist, packrat, "chronically disorganized," hoarder), then because the hoarder's body forms unusually resilient, intense, and intimate bonds with nonhuman bodies, she may have broader access to thing-power, access from the inside out, so to speak.

Hoarders display what one researcher called "extreme perception."<sup>10</sup> They seem to notice *too* much about their things, are struck *too* hard by them. "When most of us look at an object like a bottle cap, we think, 'This is useless,' but a hoarder sees the shape and the color and the texture and the form. All these details give it value. Hoarding may not be a deficiency at all—it may be a special gift or a special ability."<sup>11</sup> Henri Bergson's thoughts about the physiology of normal perception are relevant here. He modeled perception as an essentially *subtractive* process: most of the swirl of activities around us are screened off or allowed simply to "pass through" our bodies; only a few are isolated for attention and "become 'perceptions' by their very isolation."<sup>12</sup> The principle of selection is pragmatic: we

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Corinne May Botz, as quoted in Penelope Green, "Documenting Accumulation and Its Discontents," *New York Times*, November 3, 2010, http://www.nytimescom/2010/11-/04/garden/04botz.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Randy O. Frost, author (with Gail Steketee) of *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, as interviewed by Thomas Rogers in "Stuff': The Psychology of Hoarding," *Salon.com*, April 25, 2010, http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2010/04/25/hoarding\_interview\_stuff.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911), 28–29. To perceive is to "attain" *only* to "certain parts and to certain aspects of those parts" of all the "influences" of matter; there is a "necessary poverty" to perceiving (31). Mark Hansen puts the point this way: for Bergson, "the body functions as a kind of filter that selects, from among the universe of images circulating around it and according to its

typically discard those vibrant materialities that have "no interest for our needs" and what we do detect "is the measure of our possible action upon bodies."<sup>13</sup> Normal perception is biased toward instrumentality rather than vibrancy, simplification rather than subtle reception.

A working hypothesis: the hoarder is bad at subtraction / good at reception: his perceptual filter is unusually porous.<sup>14</sup> ("I was born with an overwhelming curiosity about everything and anything," says Ron of California, one of the people featured on the "Hoarders" television show, produced by A&E.) If so, then this would help to make sense of the initially implausible claim of some hoarders to be *artists*. These people do not make works of art in the same deliberate way that, say, Jean-Simeon Chardin composed his 1766 "Still life with Attributes of the Arts" or Song Dong arranged his 2009 MOMA installation "Waste Not," but perhaps they can be said to be "artistic" in their exquisite sensitivity to the somatic effectivity of objects. "Visual art bounces my electrons," says one hoarder.<sup>15</sup>

own embodied capacities, precisely those that are relevant to it": Mark B.N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 31. Bergson acknowledges that perception cannot be described in purely physiological terms: "In fact, 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. In most cases these memories supplant our actual perceptions, of which we then retain only a few hints, thus using them merely as 'signs' that recall to us former images" (*Matter and Memory*, 28–29).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Hoarders are often depressed (one estimate is 40%) and if we think of a depressed body as a slower and less energetic one, then the balance of power in the human-thing relationship will be shifted in favor of the latter.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Cited in Frost and Steketee, *Stuff*, 211.

Hoarders participate in the found-art assemblage not by creating it but by conjoining their sensuous bodies with it (which is why they cannot bear to part with an item of the hoard—more on this below). Let's at least consider the possibility that the person who hoards and the artist who creates share something of a perceptual comportment, one unusually aware of or susceptible to the enchantment-powers of things.<sup>16</sup> Hoarders and artists hear more of the call of things—to conjoin with them, play with them, respond to them.

Of course, nonhoarders and nonartists are not wholly deaf to the call. Ours is, after all, a consumer culture fueled by sensuous responsiveness to things, things whose power does not seem to be exhausted by the cultural meanings invested in them. Though I want to avoid a pathological reading of the individual hoarder in order to focus on the nonhuman powers of the hoard, before I do so, let me say a few words about

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> The Deleuze of *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) might describe the external lure for this greater-than-average receptivity as a realm of "virtual intensities"; see also James Williams, Deleuze's Difference and Repetition: A Critical Introduction and Guide (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 8. Virtual intensities, like the related notion of "powers of the false," are forces that are real enough to exert multiple effects under variable conditions (many of which may never occur-hence, their 'falseness') but are often too vague to qualify as a definite actuality, or even a preformed possibility: "The *power* of the false is the potentia of that which is merely simmering in a formation; it is not implicit in the sense of tending on its own to become only one thing. The powers of the false refers to that which quivers with a potential that can be defined authoritatively only after the fact of its emergence and evolution." See Jane Bennett and William Connolly, "The Crumpled Handkerchief," in Time and History in Deleuze and Serres, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (London: Continuum Press, 2012).

hoarding as a symptom of a hyperconsumptive body politic.

### CONSUMPTIVE CULTURE

In Mad Travelers: Reflections on the Reality of Transient Mental Illnesses, Ian Hacking makes a persuasive argument that some forms of mental illness arise "only at certain times and places," and are semantically located between a virtue celebrated in the culture and its accompanying vice.<sup>17</sup> Hacking examines the strange epidemic of *fugueurs* (compulsive walkers) in 1887 in France and shows how it arose in the space between the culture's *celebration* of travelling abroad and its pathologization of vagrancy. What this particular virtue-vice pair expressed was the thematization of physical mobility as an area of ethical and political concern. If the fugueur was the madman for his time and place, as hysteria has been called the prototypical psychopathology of Victorian England, then perhaps hoarding is the madness appropriate to a political economy devoted to over-consumption, planned obsolesence, relentless extraction of natural resources ("Drill Baby Drill"), and vast mountains of disavowed waste<sup>18</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Ian Hacking, *Mad Travelers: Reflections on the Reality of Mental Illnesses* (University Press of Virginia, 1988), 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Jairus Grove explores the fascinating connection between "domestic" consumption practices and international affairs: American e-waste, after it is dumped in sites in Africa and the Middle East provides the raw material for the Improvised Explosive Devices that at the time of this writing account for an estimated 50% of the casualties in Afghanistan (see http:// www.afghanconflictmonitor.org/2011/01/us-casualties-from -ieds-skyrocket-from-2009-to-2010.html): Jairus Grove, "Becoming War: Ecology, Ethics, and the Globalization of Violence" (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2011), 96.

Americans seem especially obsessed with things today: we stockpile canned goods, weapons, shoes, cats, junk mail, email, pdfs, music files, light bulbs, books, data, paper, car parts, you name it. In the U.S., the most famous hoard is that of the Collyer brothers, Homer and Langley,

wealthy, reclusive Manhattan pack rats who lived for decades in squalor in a Fifth Avenue brownstone and died within a labyrinth of trash . . . [including] human organs in brine, pianos, a Model T Ford . . . After their deaths, in 1947, investigators had to break an upstairs window to gain entrance. Burrowing through walls of clutter, they soon found Homer's body, but it took weeks to locate Langley's, which lay within 10 feet of his brother's, crushed beneath a booby trap he'd set for prowlers. After both Collyers were extracted, more than 100 tons of refuse was removed from the building.<sup>19</sup>

An example of a more collective hoard is the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a continent of plastic debris roughly the size of Texas. (There is now also an Atlantic version.) This 21st-century "commons" is a creation of the conjoined actions of water currents, capitalist accumulation, a fervent ideology of economic growth and "free markets," and the trillions of plastic bags, toys, packagings, machines, tools, bottles that humans manufacture, use, and discard daily. The U.S. military and comporations hoard cell phone and web browsing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Liesl Schillinger, "The Odd Couple," review of *Homer and Langley* by E. L. Doctorow, *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, September 8, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/13/books/review/Schillinger-t.html.

histories, in quantities that exceed even their use-value. We collect objects in museums, which, according to Patrick Moran, enact "the impossible project of containing time," of "accumulating everything . . . in one place."<sup>20</sup> We try to immortalize our data with backups on disks and drives and clouds. "The urge to store up information . . . is analogous to the imperatives felt by compulsive hoarders."<sup>21</sup> The worldwide web is one gigantic hoard.

So, yes, hoarding expresses a pathology of capitalist accumulation. Or, as Felix Guattari said.

Of course, capitalism was and remains a formidable desiring-machine. The monetary flux, the means of production, of manpower, of new markets, all that is the flow of desire.<sup>22</sup>

The affectivity of political economy is a point that deserves further attention. But for now, I want to return the focus to things, and to what the subjects of the A&E reality TV show "Hoarders" say about them.

"HOARDERS"

Each episode of A&E TV's "Hoarders" examines two stuffed households and the humans who get pleasure and pain from the hoard. The format of the show is this: First, a screen with the text of the scientific definition:

Compulsive hoarding is a mental disorder marked by an obsessive need to acquire and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Patrick W. Moran, "An Obsession with Plenitude: The Aesthetics of Hoarding in Finnegan's Wake," James Joyce *Quarterly* 46.2 (Winter 2009): 287 [285–304]. <sup>21</sup> Moran, "An Obsession with Plenitude," 295.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Felix Guattari, *Chaosophy* (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 1995), 63.

keep things, even if the items are worthless, hazardous, or unsanitary.

Second, an account of the impending doom that prompted the hoarder finally to agree to (televised) help (child protective services will remove the children, the city has condemned the property, health officials detect deadly "black mold"); then the hoarded house is surveyed on camera in all its shocking glory while the hoarder offers an incongruously flat description of the "clutter"; after which, family and friends testify to the untenability of the situation: and finally, the hoarder meets with a "support team," consisting of a professional therapist or psychologist, family members who return to the scene of the hoard after many years away, "extreme cleaning" entrepreneurs, and a small army of men who haul junk and women who sweep, wipe, and disinfect. The hoarder is regularly accused of caring more about things than people, of choosing her stuff over her human family.

The therapeutic accounts offered on the show are insightful, but they are premised on a strong dichotomy between subjects and objects, where agency is located in subjects with complex, intersubjective relations and not at all in things. But the hoarders themselves regularly contest this framing: almost every one of them denies "responsibility" for the hoard. They do not occupy the position of sovereign agent. A typical scene goes like this: standing on a tiny clearing in a room filled floor to ceiling with housewares, rotting food, bags and bags and bags, opened and unopened boxes, and many unidentifiables, the hoarder picks up one particular item and speaks bitterly about how her son / daughter / husband dropped this and that's why the place is such a mess. Or the hoarder uses elocutions that leave the agent or genesis of the hoard unspecified: "The pile just accumulated . . . No answer for it," says Lloyd.

A good answer to the question—how did this hoard happen?—would be to name the hoardassemblage, to name, that is, the *joint* agency of people and things. The hoarder, of course, does not speak of thing-power or material agency or of the efficacy of assemblages; within the framework of psychopathology that the show employs, to say anything close to "the things did it" would only bring down upon the hoarder the full, punitive weight of normalizing power. In this sense, hoarders retain elements of normal subjectivity: they find themselves *imperiously called* to buy, to collect, to amass stuff, and yet they obey the (supreme) taboo against animistic thinking when describing what attracts them to things.

Obliquely, however, hoarders do affirm the existence of a *material* agency at work. They repeatedly say that "things just took over," got out of hand, and "overwhelmed" them; they experience the hoard as having its own momentum or drive to persist and grow; they offer rich and impassioned descriptions of the insistent allure of objects in thrift shops and dump-sters—how the items demanded to be taken home.

How do mere things manage to do this? Let me turn now to three insights about the operation of material agency that hoarders seemed to me to offer.

### POWERS OF THE HOARD

### § Slowness

One way to explain the ability of paper, plastic, wood, stone, glass to "overwhelm" humans is in terms of their comparative advantage over human flesh when it comes to endurance, patience, waiting it out. This is the first of the insights about thing-power made possible by a close encounter with various hoards. It concerns the "speed" of the thing, the relative slowness of its rate of change.

A common observation made by the therapists on the show is that hoarding is triggered by the death of a parent, child, or marriage, or even by an "empty nest," (especially in the case of women hoarders). The mounds of trash, stacks of paper, collections of jars, etc. somehow compensate, in an unhealthy but not unsatisfying way, for that loss. Hoarding, in other words, is a coping response to human mortality. I find this explanation, that hoarding is all bound up with the fear of death and pain of loss, plausible. Especially if a materialist element is added to the psychological analysis: the hoarder desperately clings to things because metal / plastic / glass / ceramic / wooden objects (what one hoarder terms his "miscellaneous") last longer than human flesh. Their relatively slow rate of decay presents the reassuring illusion that at least something doesn't die.<sup>23</sup> When asked why her house is filled with thousands of rocks, the hoarder Tami replies: "Well, I like rocks, I love rocks. They are peaceful."

If the volume of the hoard is large enough, it can provide a veritable cocoon of matter—the ingroup term is "comfort clutter," that may be shielding the hoarder from a world in which becomings happen all to quickly. A sociologist of hoarding writes: "There are . . . [homes] where I've walked in and there were papers all the way up to the ceiling, and I wondered whether something was going to come crashing down on me. When I first started going into these homes, I was struck by their darkness, and wondered if people who hoard have this tendency to want to be encased in a protective shell."<sup>24</sup> The daughter of Ron, featured on one episode, agrees:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> I am suggesting that the love of stuff is a love of immortality. In *Archive Fever* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Derrida associates it with the death-drive or the desire to return to inorganic indeterminacy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Randy O. Frost, cited in Rogers, "'Stuff': The Psychology of Hoarding."

her father, she says, "wants to just stay there in his little cocoon . . . ."

The hoard is protective by its sheer volume and heft, but also by the familiarity of its sensuous affects or distinctive smells, colors, textures. Hypothesis: the slowness of objects is preferred to the faster and more visible rate of decay that characterizes human bodies and relationships. "I like rocks, I love rocks. They are peaceful." Thing-power as a power of slowness; its efficacy is in part a function of its examplary patience, stability, duration.

§ Porosity and Contagion

The second insight about material agency yielded by hoarding is that thing-power works by exploiting a certain porosity that is intrinsic to any material body, be it fleshy, metallic, plastic, etc. I use the verb "exploit" in a non-purposive sense, as in the way the bodies of ground water "exploit" openings in (find their way into) basement foundations. It is in the nature of bodies, Spinoza said, to be susceptible to infusion / invasion / collaboration by or with other bodies.<sup>25</sup> Any extant contour or boundary of entitihood is always subject to change; bodies are essentially intercorporeal. This applies to the hoarded object as well as to the hoarder's body: each bears the imprints of the others.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> This is akin to Goethe's notion of metamorphosis, which became for Emerson and Thoreau the "master symbol for *all* natural process. Before the ideas of evolution and natural selection become our catchall explanation of natural change—and our all-but-universal and therefore invisible metaphor for social change—the Romantic generation, from Goethe to Whitman, expressed its conception of the role of change in nature, quite detached from any notion of progress, in the idea of metamorphosis": Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 30.

Hoarders are acutely aware of these connections, and articulate a keen sense of themselves as permeable and aggregate formations that have become integrated into their hoard. The things with which they live, and which live with them in close physical proximity, are less "possessions" (a term rarely used by hoarders) than pieces of self. "I can't even imagine getting rid of my tapes. They are a part of me," says Beverly of Kansas, whose house is filled with thousands of videocassette recordings of the television shows that were broadcast on each day of her life since the 1980's.

Family members and viewers may recoil at other hoarder's nonchalant embrace of the cat-urine, black mold, rat feces, and rotting food in their cocoon. But if the hoarded house emits strong odors of decay, excrement, filth, the hoarder does not smell it any more than I can smell my own flesh. "I don't mind it," says Ingrid. Ingrid's acceptance of what others find disgusting seems to be linked to her extreme sense of connectedness to her place and space. A friend of Jill explained to the cleaners why Jill resisted discarding the rotten food packed into her filthy fridge: "to her it felt like you removed layers of skin." The hoarded object is like one's arm, not a tool but an organ, a vital member. When a therapist has to leave the kitchen of another hoarder, Karen, because the smell is too revolting, Karen becomes upset and insulted. When the therapist explains, "This is not a personal reflection of you," Karen is adamant in a way that is both ashamed and proud: "Of course it is." "But this isn't you," the therapist says soothingly. "Of course it is," Karen repeats with annovance.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> This could be an example of what the geographer Derek McCormack calls "thinking-spaces," as opposed to thinkingabout spaces. See his "Thinking-Spaces for Research-Creation," *Inflexions* 1.1 (May 2008): http://www.senselab. ca/inflexions/volume\_4/n1\_mccormack.html.

I speculated above, with reference to Bergson's model of perception as subtraction, that the hoarder might have a relatively non-action-selective perceptual style compared to the nonhoarder, which might allow hoarders to take pleasure in what nonhoarders see as filthy junk. This same distinctive sensibility might also account for why hoarders experience the bodies of their junk and their own biological body as fused, as forming a *working whole*.

A therapeutic discourse would say that hoarders have lost the ability to distinguish between person and thing. A vibrant materialist would say that hoarders have an exceptional awareness of the extent to which *all* bodies can intertwine, infuse, ally, undermine, and compete with those in its vicinity. Biochemistry has lately focused on the nonhuman contributions to human agency: when *any* human (hoarder, connoisseur, minimalist) acts, she is not exercising exclusively human powers, but is expressing and inflecting the powers of a large variety of indispensable "foreign" bodies within the human body. These include microbiomes in the human gut and on the skin,<sup>27</sup> heavy

 $<sup>^{27}</sup>$  The crook of my elbow alone is "a special ecosystem [of] . . . no fewer than six tribes of bacteria. . . . [which] moisturize the skin by processing the raw fats it produces." Overall, the its outnumber the mes: "The bacteria in the human microbiome collectively possess at least 100 times as many genes as the mere 20,000 or so in the human genome": Nicholas Wade, "Bacteria Thrive in Inner Elbow; No Harm Done," The New York Times, May 23, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/ 05/23/science/23gene.html. Cancer researchers now note that "some 90 percent of the protein-encoding cells in our body are microbes. We evolved with them in a symbiotic relationship, which raises the question of just who is occupying whom. 'We are massively outnumbered,' said Jeremy K. Nicholson, chairman of biological chemistry and head of the department of surgery and cancer at Imperial College London. Altogether, he said, 99 percent of the

metals such as mercury or chemicals such as dioxin absorbed into flesh, foods metabolized in this or that way, not to mention the sounds imbibed from natural and cultural environments, our reliance upon prosthetic technologies, etc. What is more, the 'I,' as a compound of human and nonhuman parts, is continually entering and leaving larger assemblages (ideologies, diets, cultures, technological regimes) made up of other sets of composite or compound bodies. A full acknowledgement of the porosity and contagion between bodies would entail a dramatic revision of the role of "will" and "intentionality" in human agency.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Other findings from microbiology and from the biochemistry of addiction, schizophrenia and other forms of atypical brain conditions also reveal the limits of the common sense assumption that the default locus of action is the willing or intentional human individual. Once we admit to the nonhuman members of self, "intentionality' and "will" are better translated into terms that allow their distribution and dissemination across various species of nested bodies engaging in something like what John Dewey, in The Public and Its Problems (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1927), termed "conjoint action." Many of us now believe that the *locus* of action is probably better figured as an assemblage of human and nonhuman bodies, each of which emits quanta of thing-power. If you think of materiality as vibratory (Deleuze), or prone to swerves and flukes (Lucretius), or expressing a conative drive to ally itself with other bodies in order to enhance its power (Spinoza), then it becomes harder to believe that humans are anything other than participants composed of many actants with variable degrees of agency. Human bodies have their distinctive powers-both humans and apes have mirror neurons, for example, but ours can resonate with intransitive or abstract movements in our sensory field and theirs cannot (thanks to Rom Coles for that

functional genes in the body are microbial": George Johnson, "Cancer's Secrets Come Into Sharper Focus," *The New York Times*, August 15, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/ 16/health/16cancer.html?\_r=1&ref=science.

But the point I want to emphasize now is this: the difficult task of enunciating the ingression or call of things is made possible at all by the fact that the ethnographic translator is already herself a thing with thing-power.<sup>29</sup> Which brings me to my third point.

### § Inorganic Sympathy

In addition to bringing the efficacy of slowness and porosity to light, hoarding allows us to specify a third quality of thing-power: things work on us by tapping into what (for lack of a better term) I'll call the human inorganic. Hoarders (again more acutely than ethnographers or theorists) feel the force of the "its" that scientists increasingly find at work inside us, for good and ill. In an act of sympathy and self-recognition, the

point)—but *all* material configurations have their specialties. The notion that the effective locus of agency is a collective rather than any individual is not news to my home discipline political science, which regularly examines the agency of crowds, bureaucracies, nation-states, international and transnational systems. But what social scientists have tended to ignore is the active participation of ordinary objects inside these collectives, and inside the collective called the I. The thought of a *material* and *essentially distributed* agency is hard to retain and pursue even for scholars of the new materialist or posthumanist persuasions, a point which I take up in at the end of this essay.

<sup>29</sup> In a world of vibrant materialities, the agency of a self appears not only as radically *entangled* with nonhuman things, but as partially composed of such stuff. That's why I think that the notion of our "embodiment" is insufficient; we are, through and through, an array of bodies, many different kinds of them in nested sets. For a good discussion of this point, and of microbiomes and their implications for thinking about sovereignty at the personal, state, and international levels, see Stefanie Fishel, "New Metaphors for Global Living" (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2011), especially the chapter "I have all lives: Metagenomics as Paradigm." hoard accesses the it-stuff within the hoarder herself and forms bonds therein. This bond can be as adamantine as rock, as durable as teeth or bones, as becomes clear in the pain and violence hoarders experience when they are wrenched from their things. As it flies through the air toward the 1-800-Got-Junk? truck, the vibrant matter morphs into useless trash. What I am calling an act of "inorganic sympathy" may be akin to what Freud was getting at with the "death drive." The human body, he says, longs to return to the indeterminacy of the inorganic:

Starting from speculations on the beginning of life and from biological parallels, I drew the conclusion that, besides the instinct to preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units, there must exist another, contrary instinct seeking to dissolve those units and to bring them back to their primaeval, inorganic state. That is to say, as well as Eros there was an instinct of death.<sup>30</sup>

The so-called death drive could also be described as a distinctive form of *relationality*, a peculiar associational logic, a subterranean "sympathy" between bodies that we normally segregate: life / matter, person / thing, animal / vegetable / mineral. Sympathy, as a mode of relationality or encounter, is different from both relations of instrumentalitiy and relations of aesthetic appreciation. One the one hand, the hoard-hoarder relationship has little to do with utility or instrumentality—items of the hoard are rusted, broken, rotten, or simply inaccessible, and I'm not willing to go so far as to project purposiveness onto things and say

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> See Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989).

that *they* are using the hoarder.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, neither is the relationship aptly described in terms of the usual alternative to utility, i.e., aesthetics.

I'll try to make clear why not by reference to Walter Benjamin's analysis of the relationality operative in the connoisseur and his collection. The connoisseur, says Benjamin, does not "use" his collection but rather makes "the glorification of things his concern." Benjamin explains the irrelevance of utility to the collectorbody's longing to escape the oppressive world of marketed goods, as a desire to engage with bodies other than those of the commodified type:

The collector . . . made the glorification of things his concern. To him fell the task of Sisyphus which consisted of stripping things of their commodity character by means of his possession of them. . . . The collector dreamed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Here the question of panpsychism arises, and I think there is promise in the version that finds "mind" as existing in all things, in the sense that "all objects, or system of objects, possess a singular inner experience of the world around them." This panpsychism "asks us to see the 'mentality' of other objects not in terms of human consciousness but as a subject of a certain universal quality of physical things, in which both inanimate mentality and human consciousness are taken as particular manifestations": David Skrbina, Panpsychism in the West (Boston: MIT Press, 2007), 16–17. For a related discussion, focusing on the implications of the concept of material agency for a philosophy of mind, see Lambros Malafouris's brave analysis in "Knapping Intentions and the Marks of the Mental," in The Cognitive Life of Things: Recasting the Boundaries of the Mind, eds. Lambros Malafouris and Colin Renfrew (Cambridge: McDonal Institute Monographs, 2010), 13-22.

that he was in a world . . . in which things were freed from the bondage of being useful.  $^{32}$ 

Like the collector, the hoarder often reports feeling a high or a surge of pleasure when she is called by and becomes bonded to a new item for the hoard. And perhaps Benjamin is right that part of what is happening there is a human body taking pleasure in the useless, sheer thereness of other bodies.<sup>33</sup> But from the point of view of a vital materialist, Benjamin falls too quickly down the slide from thing-power to human power when he speak of the collector's "glorification" of things, especially if "glorification" is something that the self-possessed human beholder bestows upon dull things. (Maxim 1: keep the focus on what things do and resist the all-too-human tendency to reduce thingpower to a projection of human agency.) It may be Benjamin's focus on the connoisseur and his *deliberate* aestheticism, rather than the more extreme case of the hoarder and hoard, that lends itself to this anthropocentrism. The overwhelming volume and often wholly non-discriminatory quality of the hoarder's collection jars with the idea of artistry. The hoarder and artist may share, compared to the average person, a sensibility, but they are not identical.

As a description of a relationality that is neither utilitarian nor quite aesthetic, Roland Barthes's term "advenience" has some advantages over "glorification."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1997), 168-69.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Benjamin early on voiced the lament, even more common today, that opportunities for non-commodified encounters are vanishing, though as I look around Baltimore and the life of the streets, I'm not so sure about that. See Jane Bennett and Alex Livingston, "Philosophy in the Wild: Listening to Things in Baltimore," *Scapegoat* 02, special issue on "Materialism" (January 2012): (n.p.).

In the wake of a particularly vivid encounter with a photograph, Barthes wonders just what "is in it that sets me off." He describes the peculiar calling-out of the thing as "*advenience* or even *adventure*"— "This picture *advenes*, that one doesn't." Davide Panagia explicates Barthes's term of art, emphasizing the way the process of advenience is indifferent to the normal logic of cause and effect and to the human interest in knowledge-production: "For something to advene means that it . . . strikes without designating. An advenience is at once wholly present and always partial," an "incomplete becoming." An advenience marks a presence that we can sense but not know.<sup>34</sup>

Advenience is a making-present to human senseperception, a jutting or intruding into the "regime of the sensible."<sup>35</sup> It is a standing up and standing out that the ancient Greeks called *ekstasis* ("to stand outside

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Panagia *includes* advenience *within* the realm of the aesthetic, which he defines as that sphere of vitality and appearance that is unstructured by the human interest in knowledge, where things indicate their presence without designating an object: "This is what aesthetic disinterest ultimately means: the absence of a structure of interest that would guarantee a causal relation between an advenience and a referent, between a cause and an effect. The advenience of an appearance . . . [resists] the *a priori* of interest, cognitve or otherwise. Whereas an armature of interest is such that it assigns a privilege to the knowing of things, the advenience of an appearance resists the privileges of . . . assignation and designation. We might state the matter this way: an object becomes a commodity (i.e., instrumental and useable) ifand only if-it exists within a structure of interest. The moment that interest is dislocated, the commodity-status of the object is discontinued" (Davide Panagia, Ten Theses for an Aesthetics of Politics: http://trentu.academia.edu/Davide Panagia/Papers/406813/Ten\_Theses\_for\_an\_Aesthetics\_of Politics).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> See Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

oneself, a removal to elsewhere"). These are some attempts to mark the thing's role as the *impetus* that sets in motion the sympathy or strange relationality described above.

### STICKY WORDS

It is not normal today to think of "inanimate objects" as possessing a lively capacity to do things to us and with us, although it is quite normal to experience them as such. Every day we encounter the power of possessions, tools, clutter, toys, commodities, keepsakes, trash. Why this tendency to forget thing-power, to overlook the creative contributions of nonhumans and underhear their calls? One source of the tendency is a philosophical canon based on the presumption that man is the measure of all things (and, as noted already, even the dissenters have tended to focus on the negative power of things). Another source is a default grammar that diligently assigns activity to subjects and passivity to objects.<sup>36</sup> (Here an antidote might be to develop the "middle voice," which is not formally marked off in English but is present nonetheless, as in such phrases as "The pie cooked in the oven," where "cooked" is syntactically active but semantically passive; or "Shit happens," where the happening is not an quite an active endeavor and the shit is not quite a passive object.)

Another impediment to detecting thing-power is what Bergson identified as the action-bias built right into human perception. Sensory attention is continually directed pragmatically toward the potential *utility* of external bodies, rather than toward their noninstrumentalizable aspects or thing-powers. Jacques

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Related here is an onto-theology according to which creativity and agency belong only to God and, to a lesser extent, to the beings made in His image.

Ranciere makes a related point in the context of a theory of political power: political power operates, he notes, by imposing a set of aesthetic-affective habits that restrict the range of what it is possible to perceive at all: they erect a "partition of the sensible."<sup>37</sup> An example here might be the way the figure of matter as nonlife (passive stuff) supports the irrational pursuit of limitless economic growth and consumption. And vice versa: the pursuit deepens the attachment to the figure.<sup>38</sup>

But here we've again reverted to making a point about how things "refuse, block, invalidate" our framing efforts, when the task is to find ways of talking that select for the active powers of things and expose a material agency in which human perception and conceptualization participate but do not exhaust.

Poets have explored with more grace than I this enunciative project. (Paul de Man said that "poetic language seems to originate in the desire to draw closer and closer to the ontological status of the object."<sup>39</sup>) Listen, for example, to James Joyce's bobbing description of the living space of Shem the hoarder in *Finnegan's Wake*:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Jacques Ranciere, *Disagreement*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> There are lots of green thinkers in philosophy, geography, history, and biology who today are making the call for more sustainable, less noxious modes of production and consumption in the name of a world swarming with lively materials rather than for the sake of "the environment" which serves only as a context for human action. They include Freya Mathews, Donna Haraway, Gay Hawkins, Jamie Lorimer, and Timothy Morton, to name just a few.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> This project was for de Man "essentially paradoxical and condemned in advance to failure." He thus might be added, alongside Gould, Heidegger, and Adorno, to the list of those who focus on the privative.

The warped flooring of the lair and soundconducting walls thereof. say to nothing of the uprights and imposts, were persianly literatured with burst loveletters, telltale stories, stickyback snaps, doubtful eggshells, bouchers, flints, borers, puffers, amygdaloid almonds, rindless raisins, alphybettyformed verbage, vivlical viasses, ompiter dictas, visus umbique, ahems and ahahs, imeffible tries at speech unasyllabled, you owe mes, evoldhyms, fluefoul smut, fallen lucifers, vestas which had served, showered ornaments, borrowed brogues, reversible jackets, blackeye lenses, family jars, falsehair shirts, Godforsaken scapulars, neverworn breeches, cutthroat ties, counterfeit franks, best intentions, curried notes, upset latten tintacks, unused mill and stumpling stones, twisted quills, painful digests, magnifying wineglasses, solid objects cast at goblins, once current puns, quashed quotatoes, messes of mottage.40

Or to the contemporary poet of lively matter, Kevin Davies in *The Golden Age of Paraphernalia* :

Any surface at all, inside or out, you touch it and a scrolled menu appears, listing recent history, chemical makeup, distance to the sun in millimetres, distance to the Vatican in inches, famous people who have previously touched this spot, fat content,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> *Finnegan's Wake*, quoted in Moran, "An Obsession with Plenitude," 288.

will to power, adjacencies, and further articulations. And each category has dozens of subcategories and each subcategory scores of its own, all meticulously cross-referenced, *linked*, so that each square centimetre of surface everywhere, pole to pole, from the top of the mightiest Portuguese bell tower to the intestinal lining of a sea turtle off Ecuador, has billions of words and images attached, and a special area, a little rectangle, for you to add your own comments. It is the great work of a young-adult global civilization, a metaliterate culture with time on its prosthetic tentacles, at this point slightly more silicon than carbon, blinking vulnerably in the light of its o radiant connectedness.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Kevin Davies, *The Golden Age of Paraphernalia* (Washington, DC: Aerial/Edge Books, 2008), 58. Christopher Nealon says that Davies, like Lisa Robertson, does a wonderful job of "describing what it feels like to live now— ... among both the effluvia of the object-world and the liquidity that is constantly building it up and casting it aside" (Christopher Nealon, "What is Bennett's Materiality?", conference paper presented at "New Materialisms," Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, April 13-14, 2010).

Thing-power, "blinking vulnerably in the light of its own radiant connectedness," is intermittent at best. It continually darts behind the utility screens of perception and the anthropocentric figures of speech that insistently rise up with it. Still, sometimes it manages to advene.

Hoarding is of interest to me because it is one site where the appearance of the call of things seems particularly insistent, and I've turned to hoarders for help in the admittedly paradoxical task of trying to enunciate the nonlinguistic expressivity of things. Perhaps words can be deployed as sticky substances to slow the perceptual transformation of thing-powers (slowness, inter-corporeal infusion, strange attraction) into human powers (imaginative projection, artistic production, use- or aesthetic-value). Hoarding is, of course, not the only site of thing-power. Insight into nonhuman agency might also be pursued via poetry, or a study of religious orders (the Franciscan friars, the Poor Clares) whose practices of voluntary poverty are counter-attacks against the allure of material possessions.<sup>42</sup> Much could also be learned from archaeological digs, where exquisite attention is paid to the smallest material shard.<sup>43</sup> The project of listening to the call

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Thanks to Jennifer Culbert for this point.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Chris Gosden, Chair of European Archaeology at Oxford University, makes explicit his object-centered approach to the agency of prehistorical European artifacts: "It is often assumed that society is created and reproduced through the actions of human agents who are shaped and constrained by the broader society in which they live. For the prehistorian, the active human subject is a problematical entity, but artifacts are often abundant.... There are a number of strands of thought within archaeology and outside which explore the effects that things have on people and I would like to use these to start thinking about the obligations objects place upon us when they are operating as a group." Gosden uses the incorporation of Britain into the Roman Empire as a case

from things might also engage the experience of "attention deficit disorder," refigured as a preference for the punctuated time of lively things over the smooth linearity of intentional motion. Or one could explore the world of paranoia-again considered less as a psychological disorder than as an over-extended receptivity to the activeness of material bodies. On this point, the media theorist Jussi Parikka notes how the recent new materialist interest in the thing "is parallel to the observational power of the paranoid schizophrenic, who believes in thing-power—or that things have agency, connected to wider networks."44 Or one might revisit the "fetish" objects of museum curators and art lovers, or examine the uncanny persistence in popular culture of lucky charms. Additions to the lexicon of inorganic agency might even be gleaned from examining the web-marketer's sensitivity to the call from the data of web-page hits, as that data morphs from useless thing to commodified object.<sup>45</sup>

Each of these sites might shed light on the role that a not-quite-human form of effectivity might be playing

study in "What Do Objects Want?" *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 12.3 (September 2005): 193–211.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Jussi Parikka, "Object-oriented Madness" [weblog post], *Machinology*, July 10, 2011, http://jussiparikka.net/2011/07 /10/525/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Relevant here is Paul Caplan's study of the way the jpeg protocol, used, for example, when one posts a photo on Facebook, acts to conceal both its own agency and that of "machine vision systems," where computers 'see', 'file' and 'analyse' with no human intervention." Caplan notes that this masking action might be described as a "photo object connecting with face-recognition object within a surveillance-image-evidence object." See Paul Caplan, "Jpeg: more than accidents, relations and qualities" [weblog post], *The Internationale*, April 2011, http://theinternationale. com/blog/2011/04/jpeg-more-than-accidents-relations-andqualities/.

in maintaining the over-consumptive, ecologically disastrous society that I inhabit. This concern is really at the heart of my project and it reveals the fact that, despite my interest in material agency, mine is not a *post*-human project. Quite to the contrary: it is my conviction that to really understand social practices it is necessary to acknowledge the non-human components that are always at work inside them. Ultimately, I am looking for a road that leads toward more sustainable consumption practices; things might have something to say about how to forge such a path.



Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome

punctum books, 2012 ISBN: 9780615625355

https://punctumbooks.com/titles/animal-vegetablemineral-ethics-and-objects/

https://www.doi.org/10.21983/P3.0006.1.00