AESTHETICS

Yukultji Napangati’s painting *Untitled* (2011) is in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and was highly commended for the 2011 Wynne Prize. The painting is reproduced here [Fig. 1], but the image simply fails to do it justice. The first one seems to evoke it better. But this is one of those images one must see in the flesh.

At a distance it looks like a woven mat of reeds or slender stalks, yellowed, sun baked, resting on top of some darker, warmer depth. A generous, relaxed, precise, careful yet giving, caring lineation made of small blobby dots. The warmth reminds you of Klee. The lines recall Bridget Riley. As you come closer and begin to face the image it begins to play, to scintillate, to disturb the field of vision. It oscillates and ripples, more intense than Riley. How did I know this was a woman artist before I found out who it was? In fact this is a painting about, a map of, a writing about, a line of women traveling through the sandhills of Yunala in Western
Australia, performing rituals and collecting bush foods as they went. The painting is a two-dimensional map of an event unfolding a higher dimensional phase space.

Figure 1: Yukultji Napangati, *Untitled* (2011).

Then something begins. What? You begin to see the “interobjective” space in which your optic nerve is entangled with the objects in the painting.¹ The painting begins to
paint right in front of you, paint the space between your eyes and the canvas. Layers of perception co-created by the painting and the field of vision begin to detach themselves from the canvas in front of you, floating closer to you. This “floating closer” effect is one I associate with the phenomenology of uncanniness. The experience you have in a strange place, or a strangely familiar place evokes the feeling: objects in mirror are closer than they appear.

The painting gazes. It appears to extrude itself out of the canvas towards your face. It does not offer itself up for inspection or penetration, like a perspective painting. Instead, Napangati’s painting strafes the viewer like a scanner or an X-ray machine. It is an unnerving experience, being seen by a painting. When I saw it, all the hairs on my arms and my friend’s arms stood up, as if they too were caught in some crisscrossing electromagnetic field. The painting watches you: it does not allow you to form an attitude towards it. In this sense, it is almost the absolute opposite of conceptual art. You are not permitted to form concepts of any kind. The work is more akin to a siren or a warning light than a picture-of-something. It beeps at you, scanning you.

Intersecting shards of patterns within patterns, patterns across patterns, patterns floating on top of patterns. A constant mutagenic dance between the levels of patterns. The painting is a device for opening this phenomenal display. It comes lurching towards you, hypnotizing you and owning you with its directives of sandhill, women, rituals, bush food, walking, singing, lines. You feel gripped by the throat with the passion of the imagery. All the hairs on your arms stand up and the painting has you in its electromagnetic field. The painting dreams. Causality begins.

What does this mean? I do not access Napangati’s painting across a space. Rather, the painting appears to abolish the supposed distance between itself and me. The image is not a mute object waiting to have its meaning
supplied by a subject, nor is it a blank screen, nor is it something objectively present “in” space. Rather the painting emits something like electromagnetic waves, in whose force field I find myself. The painting forcefully demonstrates what is already the case: space and time are emergent properties of objects.

The fact that this fact is common to relativity and to phenomenology should give us pause. Perhaps just as remarkable is the fact that relativity and phenomenology arose roughly synchronously towards the beginning of the twentieth century. Just as Einstein discovered spacetime was the warped and rippling gravitational field of an object, so Husserl discovered that consciousness was not simply an empty limpid medium in which ideas float. Consciousness, as revealed by phenomenology, is also a dense, rippling entity in its own right, like the wavering water of Monet’s contemporary water lily paintings: the water that is the true subject of those paintings.

The paintings to which we have grown accustomed presume a disembodied subject floating in a void, capable of imparting meaning to objectively present things. A perspective painting, for instance, contains implicit instructions for viewing, a place from which the painting will render the most “lifelike” three-dimensional illusion. The work of the painting as such is supposed to vanish without a trace, leaving the illusion suspended in front of us for our inspection. Modernist art attempts to shatter this illusion. But Napangati’s painting is not in the illusion making or illusion shattering business whatsoever. Pleasing and shocking (thus pleasing in a higher key) the bourgeoisie is not on its agenda in any sense. The painting destroys the distance necessary for the aesthetic illusion to function, yes. But it does not try to abandon the aesthetic dimension: far from it. Instead, it takes that dimensional all the more seriously. In order to render the illusion of a three-dimensional space from which the
trace of painterly labor has vanished, there has already to be a play, a dance of some kind, some sort of phenomenal display, like the stage set that enables the actors to strut around. Napangati shows us the wiring underneath the normal aesthetic artifact, so to speak, but this wiring is also part of the aesthetic.

Causality

The aesthetic form of an object is where the causal properties of the object reside. Theories of physical causation frequently want to police aesthetic phenomena, reducing causality to the clunking or clicking of solid things.² It is not the case that a shadow is only an aesthetic entity, a flimsy ghost without effects. Plato saw shadows as dangerous precisely because they do have a causal influence.³ When my shadow intersects with the light-sensitive diode, the nightlight switches on.⁴ When a quantum is measured, it means that another quantum has intersected with it, altering it, changing its position or momentum.⁵ Aesthetics, perception, causality, are all almost synonyms.

When the diode detects my shadow, it perceives in every meaningful sense, if we only accept that objects exert an aesthetic influence on one another (aisthenesthai, Greek “to perceive”). When I am caught in another’s gaze, I am already the object of causal influences. Causality does not take place “in” a space that has been established already. Instead, it radiates from objects. The gaze emanates from the force field of a Yukultji Napangati painting. It gathers me into its disturbing, phantasmal unfolding of zigzagging lines and oscillating patches.

Doesn’t this tell us something about the aesthetic dimension, why philosophers have often found it to be a realm of evil? The aesthetic dimension is a place of illusions, yet they are real illusions. If you knew for sure that they were just
illusions, then there would be no problem. But, as Jacques Lacan writes, “What constitutes pretense is that, in the end, you don’t know whether it’s pretense or not.”6 Intense yet tricksterish, the aesthetic dimension floats in front of objects, like a group of disturbing clowns in an Expressionist painting. If there are only objects, if time and space and, as I’m arguing here, or rather gently suggesting, not even so much as stating yet, just beginning to evoke, to tune in to the possibility that causality is like time and space an emergent property of objects—if all these things float in front of objects in what is called the aesthetic dimension, in a non-temporal, nonlocal space that is not in some beyond but right here, in your face—then nothing is going to tell us categorically what counts as real and what counts as unreal. Without space, without environment, without world, objects and their sensual effects crowd together like leering figures in some Expressionist masquerade.

From this point of view, causality is wholly an aesthetic phenomenon, involving induction, transduction, seduction, whatever-duction. These events are not limited to interactions between humans or between humans and painted canvases or between humans and sentences in dramas. They happen when a saw bites into a fresh piece of plywood. They happen when a worm oozes out of some wet soil. They happen when a massive object emits gravity waves. When you make or study art you are not exploring some kind of candy on the surface of a machine. You are studying causality. The aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension.

Art is important because it’s a direct exploration of causality. Post-Newtonian physics involves a lot more than just little metal balls clunking one another. Nonlocality, for instance, is the fact (a highly repeatable fact, at this point) that two particles, seemingly separate, can instantly affect one another in some sense.7 Entities interact in a sensual ether that is (at least to some extent) nonlocal and nontemporal.8 That’s
how objects can influence one another despite the fact that they withdraw from all forms of access. So when old fashioned art criticism speaks of timeless beauty, it is saying something quite profound about the nature of causation, not about spuriously universal human values.

Consider mechanist theories of causation. Machine-like functioning, which is what our common prejudice often takes causality to be (at least since Newton and Descartes), must only be one specific kind of emergent property of some deeper nonlocal, nontemporal ocean in which things directly are other things. Machines are made of separate parts, parts that are external to one another by definition. What causality just isn’t is this kind of mechanical functioning, like the metal balls in an executive toy. The click of the balls as they hit one another is a sound that implies the existence of at least one other object—the ambient air that vibrates, causing the click to be heard. How come this click or clunk is more real than other forms of causality such as attraction, repulsion, magnetism, seduction, destruction, and entanglement?

Clunk causality implies a determinist view: two balls must be contiguous with one another, the causality only goes in one direction, and there must be at least a necessary, if not a sufficient reason for the clunk in the ball that does the clunking. Yet when we go down a few levels, we discover that quantum behavior is irreducibly probabilistic. What does that mean? It means that indeterminacy is hard wired into the behavior: it’s not as if we could clean up our way of analyzing it and it would then look determined. So there are physical reasons why determinism doesn’t work: we’re talking about both sufficient and necessary conditions failing at some point. It means that Hume is in trouble. But there’s another big reason not to like determinism. When you have a probabilistic fact such as the likelihood that you will get cancer if you smoke, and you are a determinist, you can wish that fact away.
This is what tobacco companies do. There is no “proven link” between smoking and cancer—but that’s evidently not the point. Likewise, global warming denial takes a leaf out of the determinist notebook. Since there is no obvious link between the rain falling on my head and global warming, it must be untrue. Or the theory of causality given here is distorted. Large complex systems require causality theories that are non-deterministic just like very small quantum scale ones. Clunking is an illusion that seems to happen to medium-sized objects such as billiard balls, but only when we isolate the clunk amidst a welter of other phenomena.

The Arabic philosopher Al-Kindi defines all causes as metaphorical—apart from God, the unmoved mover, (Al-Kindi is an Aristotelian theist). Al-Kindi did so when my ancestors were clunking one another (talking of clunks) with crudely fashioned weapons, in the last years of the tenth century AD. Causation is metaphorical—that means that causes are overdetermined. The balls are held in place by a wire frame. The frame sits on a desk. The desk is part of an office in a large corporation. All these entities are causes of the executive toy’s clunking sounds. Overdetermination, metaphor—they mean the same thing. Or, in translation, translation: metaphor is just Greek for translation, since meta means across and -phor means carrying. This is a far more suitable way to think causality than mechanical clunking. It provides a reason why many forms of empirically observed causation are probabilistic.

Aesthetic-causal nonlocality and nontemporality should not be surprising features of the Universe. Forget quantum physics: even electromagnetic fields and gravity waves are nonlocal to some extent. At this moment, gravity waves from the beginning of the Universe are traversing your body. Maxwell and others who pioneered the notion of electromagnetism imagined the Universe as an immense ocean of electromagnetic waves. And then of course there’s the real
nonlocal deal—the quantum mechanical one. This is when the aesthetic shape of an object is what a fruit fly smells (a quantum signature), not the volatile molecules themselves. Or consider the aesthetic shape of an electromagnetic field (how birds navigate, using tiny quantum magnets in their eyes).\textsuperscript{11} Since at this level matter just is information, theoretical physics is already in an aesthetic kind of a conceptual space. Even the atomist Lucretius imagined causality working through aesthetic “films” emitted by objects.\textsuperscript{12} But of course the arguments here go beyond a fanciful exploration of theoretical physics. They can be applied to any sort of entity whatsoever, not just the kind the physicists study.

One substantial advantage of arguing that causality is aesthetic is that it allows us to consider what we call consciousness alongside what we call things and stuff. The basic quantum level phenomenon of action at a distance happens all the time. Think of a black hole. Are there any in the vicinity? Yet somehow you are linked to them. Bertrand Russell denies physical action at a distance, arguing that causation can only be about contiguous things. If there is any action at a distance, he argues, then there must be some intervening entities that transmit the causality.\textsuperscript{13} Yet isn’t this an elegant definition of the aesthetic dimension? Action at a distance happens all the time if causation is aesthetic. What is called consciousness just is action at a distance. Indeed, we could go so far as to say that consciousness—of anything is action at a distance. Empirical phenomena such as mirror neurons and entanglement bear this out. Minimally, action at a distance is just the existence—for-the-other of the sensual qualities of any entity.

In Plato’s time they used to call action at a distance demonic. That is, it was the action of demonic forces that mediated between the physical and nonphysical realms of existence. This is what Socrates says about art in Ion: he compares art to a magnet in a string of magnets, from the
Muse, goddess of inspiration, to the artist, to the work to the performer, to the audience and so on, all magnets linked by some demonic force. Nowadays we call this demonic force electromagnetism, but really it’s remarkably similar to Plato’s insight: the electromagnetic wave transmits information over a distance; a receiver amplifies the information into music coming through the speakers of the PA system. In an age of ecological awareness we will come again to think of art as a demonic force, carrying information from the beyond, that is, from nonhuman entities such as global warming, wind, water, sunlight and radiation. From coral bleaching in the ocean to the circling vortex of plastic bags in the mid Atlantic.

Now we should not think that this “sensual ether” is some kind of adhesive that glues pre-existing “subjects” and “objects” together. Nor should we imagine that it is a restaurant in which subject and object might finally hit it off. Subject and object will never hit it off, for the simple fact that the concepts subject and object are prepackaged ontic contraband, imported from the long history of ontology. Such a “between” would indeed be a version of “aesthetic ideology”: an attempt to reconcile the ugly divorce between subject and object. Against such an aestheticization, however, we would be right to insist that the aesthetic is crucial to understanding causality. We must therefore distinguish rigorously between the aesthetic and aestheticization.

Aestheticization is just the conceptual imposition of aesthetic concepts onto prepackaged subjects and objects. The aesthetic however, is nonconceptual and cannot be packaged in this way. Its atemporal nonlocality should already have warned against this. If we don’t wish to load the dice in favor of a particular kind of being (say Da-sein, say the human) we are left with a simple solution. The aesthetic dimension is simply the interior of some object: this is how objects are able to encounter one another. When I reach for the phone, I do so on the interior of a room. When I reach
for the phone, I do so on the interior of a solar system. When I reach for the phone, I do so on the interior of a universe. The “sensual ether,” then, is not like the ether of pre-Einstein physics at all, or the supposed Higgs field of quantum theory’s Standard Model. Such entities allow objects to float around, have mass, and so on. If we were thinking of a physical ether, a quick glance at Locke’s devastating assault on the idea of an “ambient fluid” that contains all the other entities will set us straight.¹⁸ Such a physical ether must be composed of ether particles, argues Locke: and in what fluid are they floating?

If, by contrast, the causal “ether” is simply the way one entity “dreams” itself or another one, it is constituted by these entities as such. When I reach for the phone, I don’t imagine myself as an objective subject trying to grasp an objective object, like Wile E. Coyote in Roadrunner. Still less do I need to imagine myself reaching through a space “between” prepackaged me and the prepackaged phone. This might happen, but only after the phone has gripped me, alarming me with its piercing ring or with the thought of some person I must call, or seducing my laziness, pulling me away from the essay I have to write. In Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night, Olivia says, “The clock upbraids me with the waste of time.”¹⁹ Olivia doesn’t think to look at the clock: the clock looks at her. This is what Alphonso Lingis calls the imperative, which we can detect in the way objects demand to be handled in specific ways.²⁰

**What Is the Difference between a Duck?**

There is no such thing as a phenomenologically empty space. Space is teeming with waves, particles, magnetic seductions, erotic curvature, and menacing grins. Even when they are isolated from all external influences, objects seem to breathe with a strange life. A tiny metal tuning fork thirty microns
long rests in a vacuum. To the naked eyes of the observers outside, it is breathing: it seems to occupy two places at the same time. There is already a rift between an object and its aesthetic appearance, a rift within the object itself. Causality is not something that happens between objects, like some coming out party or freely chosen bargain into which things enter. It pours constantly from a single object itself, from the chorismos between its essence and its appearance.

An object is therefore both itself and not-itself, at the very same time. (“What is the difference between a duck? One of its legs is both the same.”) If this were not the case, nothing could happen. The uncanniness of objects, even to themselves, is what makes them float, breathe, oscillate, threaten, seduce, rotate, cry, orgasm. Because objects are themselves and not-themselves, the logic that describes them must be paraconsistent or even fully dialetheic: that is, the logic must be able to accept that some contradictions are true. Objects are dangerous, not only to themselves, but even to thinking, if it cleaves to rigid consistency. If thinking refuses to accept that objects can be dialetheic, it risks reproducing the dualisms of subject and object, substance and accident, that are unable to explain the most basic ontological decision—the one that insists that things are objectively present, as they are. The thing becomes imprisoned in a philosophically constructed cage, a mechanism, or in some kind of ideality that falsely resolves the dilemma by shunting everything into a (human) subject. Moreover, thinking itself becomes brittle. The more rigorous the metalanguage, the more susceptible it is to more and more virulent contradictions. Thinking should learn from Antigone and bend, like a willow: “Seest thou, beside the wintry torrent’s course, how the trees that yield to it save every twig, while the stiff-necked perish root and branch?”

Phenomenology, then, is an essential cognitive task of confronting the threat that things pose in their very being.
Without it, thinking is unable to break through the traditional ways of philosophizing that Heidegger calls “sclerotic.” After phenomenology, we can only conclude that a great deal of philosophizing is not an abstract description or dispassionate accounting, however adequate these may be, but only an intellectual defense against the threatening intimacy of things. Moreover, since there is very little difference between what happens to a light sensitive diode and what happens to a human when they encounter a shadow, we can only conclude that there is a strange kind of nonhuman phenomenology, or, as Ian Bogost puts it, an alien phenomenology.

Things can dream one another because they are always already not themselves. Not even the thing itself can objectify itself. The mud is capable of receiving the dinosaur footprint. If it were totally its muddy self in a noncontradictory way, it would be opaque, permanent, impervious, “objective.” Causality happens because a dance of nonidentity is taking place on the ontological inside of a thing. The mud muddies: it dreams about the dinosaur in its muddy, mud-pomorphc way. Napangati’s painting “paintings” me. It doesn’t remain in perfect isolation, but sends out dreams of itself that intercept me as I walk towards it across the gallery floor.

I do not encounter patterns and relations that are resolved in my mind into paintings, mud, and glasses. These things encounter me directly, as themselves. But more precisely, every entity throws shadows of itself into the interobjective space, carving out its own version of Plato’s cave. It is like the poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s  
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying, *What I do is me: for that I came.*

What Lingis notices, however, is that this *myself* has an uncanny dimension. Like the person who assures you they are being sincere, can we ever really believe that objects don’t play tricks with us? Again: “What constitutes pretense is that, in the end, you don’t know whether it’s pretense or not.”

Duns Scotus speaks of the *haecceity* of a thing, its *thisness*, and Hopkins translates this into verse. Yet the thisness is not imposed from without, objectively. It wells up from within. Hopkins himself says so explicitly: *What I do is me.* Quite so: it is a case of *I* versus *me*. In this difference between a reflexive and a nonreflexive personal pronoun, we detect archaeological evidence of the rift between a thing and its appearance. What Hopkins gives us then, if it is a rendering of the real, is not a brightly colored diorama of animated plastic, but a weird stage set from which things stage their unique version of the Liar: “This sentence is false.” To speak otherwise is to have decided in advance what things are, which contradicts the way the poem itself forces us to experience things. “Tumbled over rim in roundy wells / Stones” are felt and heard before we hear what they have to say for themselves against the walls of the well and in the deep water within: the first line is an invisibly hyphenated adjective, tumbled-over-rim-in-roundy-wells. The adjective takes almost as long to read as it might take for an average stone to hit the water. The adjective draws out the stone, just as the dragonflies “draw flame.” The stone becomes its tumbling, its falling-into-the-well, the moment at which it is thrown over the rim. Then splash—it’s a stone all right, but we already sensed it as a non-stone.

The very notion of movement involves the paradox that a thing is “at once” *p* and *not*-p (*p ∧ ¬p*). If we want to avoid
Zeno’s paradox, we have to be ready to accept that a tumbling stone both is and is not “here.” If we don’t do this, the stone will never reach the bottom, because we will be able to take smaller and smaller slices of objectified “time” thought as a “between in which” the stone sits, now consistently here, now consistently there. Motion is not something that an object “does” on occasion: motion is a deep ontological feature of a thing. Thus Napangati’s painting can “move” while it hangs motionless on the wall; indeed it can “move me” in the affective sense for the very same reason. Motion is never a matter of billiard balls rolled across a preexisting surface of “space” or “time,” but instead motion arises from the rift between a thing and itself, between its I and its me. Motion betrays the clownlike strangeness of a thing.

ETHICS

When I experience beauty, I resonate with an object. The object and I attune to one another. Kant describes beauty as a tuning process. “Beautiful” is what I say to myself when an impersonal, “object-like” cognitive state arises that seems to emanate from the object itself. It is as if the object and I are locked together in inseparable union.

The beautiful object fits me like a glove. Kantian beauty, however, is unlike Aristotelian and Horatian decorum. Decorum provides objective rules, an external, systematic set of criteria for what counts as beautiful, a checklist. Kantian beauty, by contrast, is a symptom of a major discovery of something nonobjective. Kant thinks this discovery as the transcendental subject, but object-oriented ontology thinks the discovery as the withdrawal of objects. In other words, what Kant discovers about human beings—that part of their nature is sealed from empirical access—applies to nonhumans. Because of the rift between essence and appear-
ance—which must not (again) be associated with the supposed difference between “substance” and “accidents”—any entity whatsoever has this hidden property. There is evidence for this even in Kant himself, as the following should show.

Something in the beauty experience is hidden from me, even while I am experiencing it. Beauty is nonconceptual. It involves a certain “je ne sais quoi.” Nothing in the object directly explains it: not the parts, because this would be sheer positivistic reductionism; not the whole, because that would be another kind of reduction (the parts are now expendable). Yet beauty seems to emanate from this thing. Just this particular, unique thing, is the locus of beauty. Everyone in their right mind should find it beautiful, I think, yet if I were to impose this on others, it would ruin the experience. I know my particular experience of beauty is not shared, but I know that you know what beauty is. A certain unconditional freedom opens up, along with a certain coexistence without content. No wonder Kant considered the experience of beauty to be an essential part of democracy. Beauty is an event in being, a sort of gap, a gentle slit. Beauty allows for a cognitive state that is noncoercive and profoundly nonviolent. The master of this realm is Theodor Adorno, whose meditations on Kantian beauty are unsurpassed at this time.

But what are the conditions of possibility for the experience of beauty to occur? What, as it were, are the phenomenological physics of beauty? As we explore these conditions we uncover a remarkable body of work. The name of this body of work is Alphonso Lingis. It is in the mode of Lingis that I have been writing this essay. We may now be in a position to see with some clarity the very special place that aesthetic events have in the philosophy of Lingis.

Kantian beauty tacitly presupposes a being that can be wounded by colors, sounds, smells, textures and tastes: affected by them, so as to resonate such that the tuning process of
beauty can commence. This is not simply a realm of mere appetite, as Kant suggests, because that would reproduce a difference between humans and nonhumans (animals, for instance) that is untenable and problematic. Moreover, in appetite I roam like a hungry wolf over the carcass of things—it seems as if powerful objects at the very least suspend this aggressive craving, always already suspend it be-fore the event of beauty takes hold. And stranger still, as Lacan noted well, there is a symmetry between Kantian beauty and sadism, a cold lust concerning an infinitely opaque object. Before the gentle slit of beauty is made, then, the knife must be ready and the arm must be in range. It is this dimension, a dangerous and uncanny dimension of “levels” and “directives,” that the thinking of Lingis addresses.

What is called aesthetic distance, then, is a misnomer for a nonconceptual aesthetic intimacy in which habitual patterns, taken as objective fact, are suspended. This suspension does not occur around or above things, but rather it emanates from the very heart of things. The thing is a suspension of itself: the I and me of a thing. Aesthetic distance is not “between” an object and another object, or between a subject and an object, but rather it lies between a thing and itself (“What is the difference between a duck?”). It would be better to describe the “distance between” as an aestheticized distance that has nothing to do with primordial aesthetics, the carnival of Liars (“This sentence is false”).

In a car crash, in an ugly divorce, time seems suspended, slow motion. Only afterwards do I start to piece together “what happened.” Time as a regular sequence that acts as a neutral medium for events is a retroactive positing. The car crash, the divorce, is a primordially aesthetic event that has no idea what it is while it is happening. Trauma is not some empty gap or void within the smooth field of regularly functioning time. Rather trauma is the irruption of a “more real,” uncanny “undead” world of aesthetics as the scripted
non-contradictions of “everyday life” shatter of their own accord. Trauma unmasks regularly functioning phantasms (“me,” “my life”) as phantasms. That is precisely why trauma is traumatic. It strips the world bare of the illusion that it isn’t an illusion, and the accompanying illusion that illusions are just candy sprinkles on the surface of a noncontradictory cake.

The aesthetic-causal dimension, then, implies the irreducible coexistence of things. Things are coexistence in their being. Things, with all their gaps and inconsistencies, are enmeshed with one another. A wire mesh is a network of gaps and links. When I pump a bicycle tire, when I look at Napangati’s painting, I am enmeshed in a series of interlinked emanations of beings. Because of this enmeshment, it is not possible to attain transcendental escape velocity from things: the very attempt takes place in the context of enmeshment. There is no way to peel the enmeshment off oneself, since it penetrates into the core of being: beings are self-contradictory, themselves and not-themselves. The mesh is viscous, as if the wires were made of honey: “The vicissitudes of this life are like drowning in a glass pond.”

The very attempt to tear myself away enmeshes me further. Thus conscious coexistence with the mesh involves a form of nonviolence. At the very least, since every act tears at the mesh, and tears me, who is (in) the mesh, it would be best to refrain from harm. Translated by Lingis, Levinas quotes Pascal: “My place in the sun is the beginning of all usurpation.”

Beauty Is Death

“My place in the sun is the beginning of all usurpation”: even my death is a wound to others, not confined to humans. Yet the beauty experience is also evidence that there is something in me that is not my ego. The beauty experience proves to me that there are others. What do we mean then when we say,
“It was so beautiful I almost died”? Is there more than metaphorical truth in this statement? Is beauty an experience of death, or near-death? Adorno writes that the shudder of beauty shatters the encapsulated subject.\textsuperscript{38} When an opera singer sings just the right note, at just the right pitch and volume, the sound waves resonate with the wine glass in such a way as to destroy it. On slow motion film, we can see how just before it is destroyed, the glass undergoes a shudder, a sort of glass orgasm. The resonant frequency matches the glass perfectly.

From the perspective of the alien phenomenology of the glass itself, might this indeed be an “experience” of suddenly losing a sense of boundary? And isn’t this what beauty is? In the event of beauty, a non-self part of my inner space seems to resonate in the colors on the wall, in the sounds pouring into my ears. Hugely amplified, might this resonance actually kill me? “A beautiful way to die”—to be destroyed by vibrations that removed myself from myself.

For beauty to work, then, there must already be a surface capable of receiving the wound. It seems that the knife of beauty is able to insert itself into the slit between an object’s essence and its appearance. Beauty “works itself in” to the already existing rift between an object and that same object, the fact that objects are dialetheic, fork-tongued. This rift is an inconsistency in the object that enables the object to end. It can be thought of as a \textit{hamartia} (Greek, “wound”), which is what Aristotle calls a tragic flaw. When an object is entirely sundered from its appearance, its \textit{hamartia} gets the better of it: that is called \textit{destruction} or \textit{death}. When I disappear into a black hole, you see on the surface an image of me that slowly fades. When someone dies, they leave behind memories, objects that they have handled, wounds. When a realist novel ends, the frequency and duration of the action on the page synchronizes ever more tightly with the action in the chronological sequence of events: ashes to ashes.
The reader’s heart beats faster as the police mount the staircase, only to find the stretched out body of Dorian Gray, and a picture of him into which a knife has been thrust. A dead crow becomes the dust and trees that surround it. When a Dzogchen yogini dies, in one of the spaces between existences (the Bardo of Luminosity), it is said that she allows her being to dissolve into the Clear Light “like a child leaping into its mother’s lap.” It is said that her being shatters like a vase and the space inside the vase merges with the space outside. Or she allows her body to disintegrate into rainbow light (Tibetan, jalu). From her point of view, is as if the body wants to dissolve in this way. Only fragile ego is preventing the inevitable from happening. Yet the fragile ego is what dies a little in the beauty experience. Beauty is a signal from the realm of death.

Beauty, then, is a nonviolent experience of near death, a warning that one is fragile, like everything else in the universe. Beauty is the shadow of the threat to objects, the threat that is objects. Objects as such carry an inner threat, because of the rift between essence and appearance. Beauty is the call of the vulnerable flesh and the fragile glass. This explains perhaps why beauty is associated with experiences of love, empathy and compassion, themes that preoccupy pre-Kantian theories of aesthetic affect such as Adam Smith, and that also preoccupy ethics based on the Buddhist view of anattman (no-self). It is the reason why we can articulate an ethics of nonviolent coexistence based on beauty. This ethics cannot truly be grounded in the abstract, rather cold Kantian version of aesthetic experience, with its rigid anthropocentrism and sadistic shadow side. It must instead be founded in the project laid out by Alphonso Lingis, the project of coming as close as possible to our already shared, disturbing intimacy.

Let us return to the question of a flexible, willow-like thinking that would be able to move with the torrent of
things without becoming brittle and breaking, snapped because of the *hamartia* of its very firmness, its attempt to remain consistent. Surely then this thinking, which almost dies every time it encounters something not itself, is in itself a beautiful thinking? Hegel wrote that thinking is the encounter with non-identity, and Adorno massively adumbrated Hegel’s thought. Like a Mother Theresa of beautiful souls, Adorno’s plea for nonviolence is moving and soothing, but somehow it remains an advertisement, a sermon, a cry of the heart in a heartless world. Thinking needs to risk its sanity a little bit, to put itself in some danger, not endlessly postpone the plunge by talking about how much a plunge is needed. The time for wringing our hands on the edge of the abyss is over, because humans brought about the *Anthropocene*, a geological period of Earth history marked by the deposit of a thin layer of industrial carbon in Earth’s crust since 1790, and likewise, before what is known as the Great Acceleration, a deposit of a layer of radioactive materials in Earth’s crust since 1945. A certain kind of Marxist critique is now irrelevant. The world is too much with us, and when critique tries to wrench us out it only laments how stuck it is.

It is in phenomenology that the task of dwelling in non-identity on non-identity comes about. It is in Lingis, drawing on the richness of the phenomenological tradition, that the encounter with strangers becomes possible, the encounter that, coming close to death by tuning, “saves the Earth.” Lingis thinks beautifully.

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Editors’ note: This chapter’s title is identical to the introductory chapter of Timothy Morton’s *Realist Magic*, published by Open Humanities Press in 2013. The content is not identical, however.

1 I use this term to denote something similar to, but wider than, the traditional phenomenological concept of *intersubjectivity*. See Tim-


4 Contra Phil Dowe, in *Physical Causation*, 75–79.


7 The most recent explication can be found in Anton Zeilinger, *Dance of the Photons: From Einstein to Quantum Teleportation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 45–55.

8 The term is Graham Harman’s in *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 33–44.


13 Dowe, *Physical Causation*, 63.


15 The case against this contraband has never been made any better since Martin Heidegger’s devastating assault in *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). On the notion of the “between,” see especially 124.


Heidegger, Being and Time, 20.

Ian Bogost, Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).


36 Chögyam Trungpa, “Instead of Americanism, Speak the English Language Properly,” in *The Elocution Home Study Course* (Boulder: Vajradhatu, 1983).