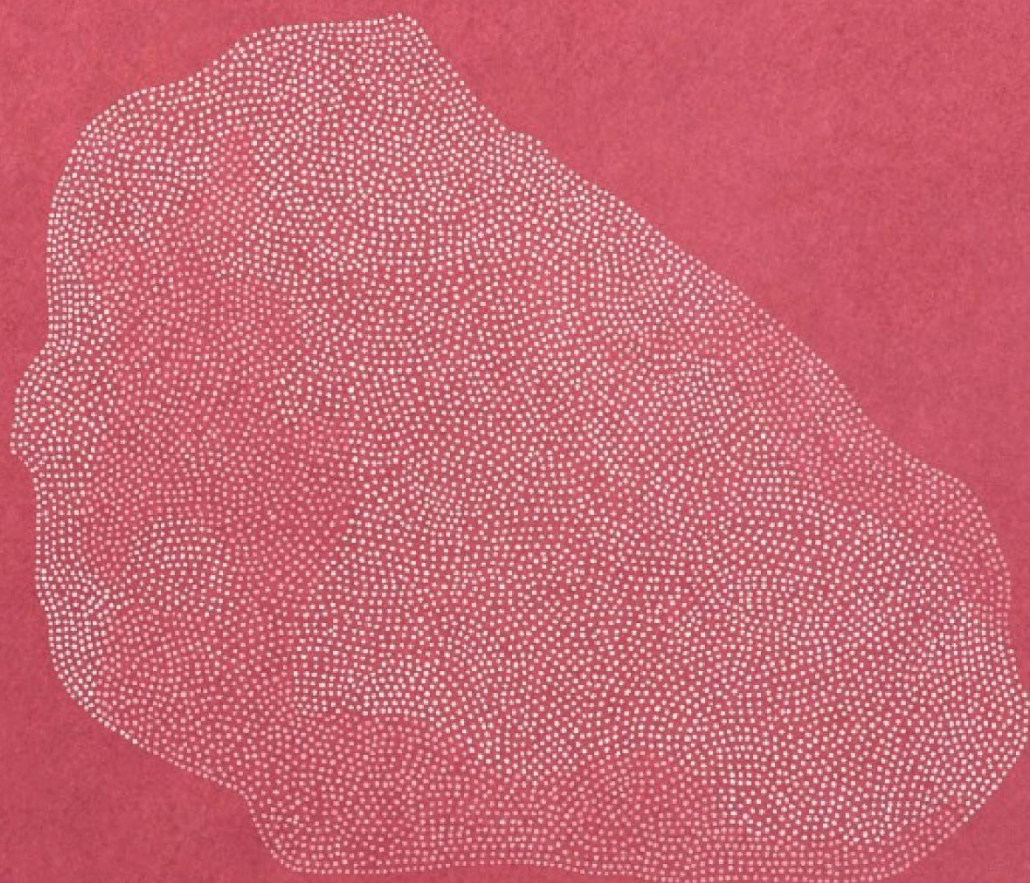


All Art is Ecological

Timothy Morton

GREEN IDEAS 3



Contents

[And You May Find Yourself Living in an Age of Mass Extinction
Tuning](#)

About the Author

Timothy Morton (b.1968) has been called the philosopher prophet of the Anthropocene. Their writing radically reimagines our relationship with the non-human world.

1. Greta Thunberg *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*
2. Naomi Klein *Hot Money*
3. Timothy Morton *All Art is Ecological*
4. George Monbiot *This Can't Be Happening*
5. Bill McKibben *An Idea Can Go Extinct*
6. Amitav Ghosh *Uncanny and Improbable Events*
7. Tim Flannery *A Warning from the Golden Toad*
8. Terry Tempest Williams *The Clan of One-Breasted Women*
9. Michael Pollan *Food Rules*
10. Robin Wall Kimmerer *The Democracy of Species*
11. Dai Qing *The Most Dammed Country in the World*
12. Wangari Maathai *The World We Once Lived In*
13. Jared Diamond *The Last Tree on Easter Island*
14. Wendell Berry *What I Stand for Is What I Stand On*
15. Edward O. Wilson *Every Species is a Masterpiece*
16. James Lovelock *We Belong to Gaia*
17. Masanobu Fukuoka *The Dragonfly Will Be the Messiah*
18. Arne Naess *There is No Point of No Return*
19. Rachel Carson *Man's War Against Nature*
20. Aldo Leopold *Think Like a Mountain*



And You May Find Yourself Living in an Age of Mass Extinction

Exactly what is the current state of play, ecologically speaking? Let's explore this first. When I've told some people about the title of this essay, they have accused me of being weak. That's right: this essay is really lame. Some people wanted me to say 'You ARE Living in an Age of Mass Extinction,' as if the 'You may' was the same as 'You are not'.

This in itself is interesting, this understanding of 'may' as 'not'. It has to do with the logical 'Law' of the Excluded Middle. It affects all kinds of areas of life. The normal rule for voting interprets abstaining as saying 'No' when it comes to counting up the votes. You can't interpret it to mean 'Maybe yes, maybe no'. We live in an indicative age, an active one indeed, where a wordprocessing program is prone to punish you with a little wavy green line for using the passive voice; heaven forbid we use the subjunctive, as in 'you might'.

Not being able to be in the middle is a big problem for ecological thinking.

But not being able to be in the subjunctive is also a big problem for ecological thinking. Not being able to be in 'may' mode. It's all so black and white. And it edits out something vital to our experience of ecology, something we can't actually get rid of: the hesitation quality, feelings of unreality or of distorted or altered reality, feelings of the uncanny: feeling *weird*.

The feeling of not-quite-reality is exactly the feeling of being in a catastrophe. If you've ever been in a car crash, or in that minor catastrophe called jet lag, you probably know what I mean.

little uncanny: strange, yet familiar, yet familiarly strange – yet strangely familiar. The light switch seems a little closer than normal, a little differently placed on the wall. The bed is oddly thin and the pillow isn't quite what you're used to – I'm describing how it feels whenever I arrive in Norway, by the way. Day begins about 10 a.m. during winter. It's pitch dark at 9 a.m. It's still the day, but not quite as you have become habituated to it.

Heidegger's word for how light switches seem to peer out at you like minor characters in an Expressionist painting is *vorhanden*, which means present-at-hand. Normally things kind of disappear as you concentrate on your tasks. The light switch is just part of your daily routine, you flick it on, you want to boil the kettle for some coffee – you are stumbling around, in other words, stumbling around your kitchen in the early morning light of truthiness. Things kind of disappear – they are *merely* there; they don't stick out. It's not that they don't exist at all. It's that they are less weird, less oppressively obvious versions of themselves. This quality of how things seemingly just happen around us, without our paying much attention, is telling us something about how things are: things aren't directly, constantly present. They only appear to be when they malfunction or are different versions of the same thing than we're used to. According to this, you go about your business in the Norwegian hotel room, you go to sleep, and when you wake up, everything is back to normal – and that's how things actually are; they are, as Heidegger says, *zuhanden*, ready-to-hand or handy. You have a grip on them, as in the phrase *Get a grip!* Or the slightly more amusing English version, *Keep your hair on!* (Implying before you quite notice that you are wearing a wig ...)

Things are present to us when they stick out, when they are malfunctioning. You're running through the supermarket hell bent on finishing your shopping trip, when you slip on a slick part of the floor (someone used too much polish). As you slip embarrassingly towards the ground, you notice the floor for the first time, the colour, the pattern, the material composition – even though it was supporting you the whole while you were on your food shop mission. Being present is secondary to just sort of happening, which means, argues Heidegger, that *being isn't present*, which is why he calls his philosophy deconstruction or destructuring. What he is destructuring is the metaphysics of

while the Aborigines are Dasein in the key of Paleolithic hunter-gatherers. Humans don't 'have' Dasein, because Dasein *produces* or *realizes* the human, in the same way that our violinist realizes the Bach sonata. And while there's nothing to suggest that Dasein can't be exclusively human, this is exactly the assertion that Heidegger blunders into. Dasein isn't quite there, constantly – it's a flickering lamplight. But for Heidegger it's exclusively human, and German flickering light is much more authentic than other kinds of flickering light. None of this makes sense. None of it makes sense *on Heidegger's own terms*. This is what OOO is arguing. De-Nazifying Heidegger doesn't mean ignoring him or bypassing him. De-Nazifying Heidegger actually means *being more Heideggerian than Heidegger*.

So if the *truthfeel* of beauty is telling you something true about anything at all – anything at all is called *objects* in OOO, and these sorts of object are sharply different from objectified things, because they are radically mysterious – what truthfeel is telling you is that things are *open*. Also, the beauty experience is telling you that this thing, this thing I can see right here, is ungraspable. It's totally vivid, yet I can't get a grip on it ... I can't keep my hair on at all. It's like what an American car wing mirror is telling you, out of the corner of your eye: *OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR*. Or it's like objects on a shelf by the artist Haim Steinbach. Things are intrinsically kinky, kooky, out of place – this out of place-ness isn't just a function of things breaking and malfunctioning and becoming *vorhanden*. What you experience in jet lag or inside a Haim Steinbach installation is precisely about exactly how things are.

What all this amounts to is that it's the *normalization of things* that is the distortion. A distortion of distortion. Being in a place, being in an era, for instance an era of mass extinction, is intrinsically uncanny. We haven't been paying much attention, and this lack of attention has been going on for about twelve thousand years, since the start of agriculture, which eventually required industrial processes to maintain themselves, hence fossil fuels, hence global warming, hence mass extinction.

Love, Not Efficiency

Restructuring or destructuring this logistics of the world that has grown out of agriculture, which elsewhere I've called

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