

Dirty Being: an Exploration of
Thingness, Being and Hyperobjects in
Relation to Contemporary dialogues
with Earth and Clay.

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Introduction: What is a Thing, it's Being, and its ties to Hyperobjects?

Within this dissertation I will explore through a Phenomenological lens the rhizomatic (interconnected) nature of three key artists material-based practices, the three key artists I will be exploring are Delcy Morelos, Otobong Nkanga and Anya Gallaccio. A key focus within the Dissertation is the interaction with earth in its various states, with a key state being clay. Their approaches to this material are varied and push from sculptural forms to installation.

“... the "they", "idle talk", ambiguity, curiosity, and empty gossip occupy an important place. Heidegger, therefore, posed an authentic Dasein opposite to the inauthentic mode of Being which our industrial society imposes on us,”
(Kockelmans, 1985, p.74.)

To arrive at an authentic viewpoint or stance out of our everyday with which we exist, is to note that this is a fluctuating state, with which one must reassert and to pull oneself into a state of authenticity. The empty gossip is what Heidegger denotes as “Gerede” (Inwood, 2019, p.52.) or the Chatter, with which surrounds us within our everyday, and through ‘Authenticity’ (Eigentlich).

Beyond this, to remove us from our unauthentic or ‘Uneigentlich’, one may consider Heidegger’s authenticity and thus a greater understanding of Dasein (‘Dasein is a Heideggerian way of referring both to the human being and to the type of Being that humans have’) Being comes as a way to understand our place in the world, to come to

understand this, to be able to reassert ones authenticity comes a return to the earth, through earth, dirt (clay), it becomes a building block as which can come to understand our own world, to exist more authentically then can be considered to live consciously.

“Inauthenticity is no unqualified blemish. It is the normal condition of most of us for most of the time, without it we could not make decisions at all.” (Inwood, 2019, p.26-27.)

Through Merleau-Ponty do we then consider perception as something aware of temporality, and can draw this link between perception and Being, as Heidegger denotes, “Dasein is temporal.”(Inwood, 2019, p.67.). This will become relevant when considering the basis of the three key artists.

Furthermore then concept that our Being is not above that of another’s, that our actions often have a negative cause and effect as highlighted within this thesis. Through viewing earth/clay as a thing, it is in turn a way to approach larger issues more penetratingly such as our existence in the age of climate change and the reality of Hyperobjects that loom above us. To understand what a Hyperobject is, do we then begin to understand our own Being. This circular nature and need to reassert this knowledge, is to then develop a new outlook on one’s surroundings and aim to improve them. Our past actions and hierarchies with which, we as humans have developed to stand above the existence of others and their being, which in turn is a toxic reality that undoes this sensitive relationship.

“In *The Thing* Heidegger distinguishes between object and thing, declaring that a thing is an object that sets itself apart from the world it inhabits while simultaneously coming into relation with the existential phenomena surrounding it.”

(Heidegger, 1950 as cited in Livingstone & Petrie, 2020)

Heidegger posits:

“Do not these (things) ‘really’ show us the world we live in? Perhaps in fact, they show us something like the ‘world’ more penetratingly. But these Things too are entities ‘within’ the world.” (Heidegger et al., 2019).

From this, one may approach clay and in turn earth, which becomes the base material for the majority of the works discussed within this dissertation, that the consideration of the thingness of these materials can in turn be considered to expand out of the perception as something that exists both on its own as an entity but equally denotes to the world with which it exists and originates from. This dialogue between the thingness of a material and the associations that it expands from can further emphasis the link between Heidegger’s *Thing* and Morton’s *Hyperobject*. As Morton states ‘Object Orientated Ontology’ or:

“OOO radically displaces the human by insisting that my being is not everything it’s cracked up to be – or rather that the being of a paper cup is as profound as mine.”

(Morton, 2013)

This displacement of human perception as the key figure within our world, placing it alongside that of everything, is a grounding sensation, and when we consider this,

“These surging in, multifarious substances of the Anthropocene are what Timothy Morton calls ‘hyperobjects’: entities that are imposing for us to perceive in their dispersed, ‘viscous’ entirety, and of which we find it hard to speak.”

(Macfarlane, 2020)

Whilst Heidegger states that “the vessel’s thingness does not lie in the material of which it consists, but in the void that it holds” (Heidegger, 1950 as cited in Livingstone & Petrie, 2020) One could approach this statement from the idea that the void created within is defined by the walls of the Thing and one can consider the walls equally define the space around it, creating a supposed void, within which we exist. The void is limitless and undefinable, whilst equally placing us into a state with which one can view their surroundings and the Thing then can “show us something like the ‘world’ more” (Heidegger et al., 2019).

One could attach ‘perceiving’ as an act of Being, and to perceive is to understand Dasein and grow awareness of ‘Uneigentlich’ and the ‘Gerede’ do we then learn to live and think ‘Eigentlich’. Too become more ‘Eigentlich’, I posit that through these series of works, we become aware of a material (earth and clay) and its Thingness, and through such are we then directed to Morton’s Hyperobjects and the issues of climate change, this is the pushing away of the chatter (Gerede) and I would argue then, to live authentically, is to live

in a positive mind set with which one looks to make right or begin to make right the damages a percentage of humans have caused into the negative cause and effect of climate change and global warming. We are exposed to this reality every day, but through this selection of artworks, the issue (Climate Change) is placed front and centre, but we must engage with these works through a phenomenological eye, to begin to think Authentically.

Merleau-Ponty's key work on the development of Phenomenology has shaped the approach to how one understands materiality, the relevance of which can link the key artists which will be discussed. One key point raised is:

“The spatial synthesis and the synthesis of the object are based upon the deployment of time. In every movement of focusing, my body ties a present, a past and a future together” (Merleau-ponty, 2014).

This led to a consideration of how the ideas of perception of clay and fired ceramic in a broader context drawing allegorical links between the human experience and the recognition of time imbedded both in the act of perceiving but within the work itself.

Merleau-Ponty offers an alternative viewpoint when considering clay both perceiving and through tacit and haptic perceiving can affect the works meaning, alongside linking to contemporary dialogues as explored by artists such as Anthony Gormley. Clay can then be considered a fluctuating mass of the undefined and the potentially definable. Clay is the epitome of fluctuation. Through clay, it can be a way of understanding and accepting change; for change like the human condition, is inextricably linked.

The writer Ingrid Schaffner states in the essay *On Dirt* that “Dirt is the antitheists of the virtual and synthetic” (Livingstone et al, 2020) This can offer an alternative viewpoint as with which we can come to understand clay. With this, “Not always politically overt, dirt is packed with demonstrations of clay’s incipient power to usurp or at least mess with establishment” (Livingstone et al, 2020). This highlights an aspect of this thesis; clay as a material of capability to reach into areas of social structures to create possible unease and contributes to ongoing dialogues of usage of naturally sourced materials.

“Our place within the earth’s ecology is of course determined by finite relationships. (...) we cannot continue to extract, manipulate, and exploit natural resources without disturbing a sustainable ecological balance.” (Montag, 2015)

This leads me to the consideration of the problematic nature of the sourcing of material and usage of such and the pursuit for a balance, a structure within a system, with which one can consider and find to a balance.

Chapter 1: Morelos, A Blood-Soaked Land.



Figure 1. No es un río es una Madre

(Morelos, 2018)

Within (*fig. 1*), Morelos takes inspiration for this work from the damming of the River Sinú with which was dammed, and a hydroelectric power plant build at the throat of the river, damaging the ecosystem which exists through the ebb and flow of the River Sinú. These red boards are stacked in manner reminiscent of the stacking of felled trees or the drying of peat once cut and stacked alongside the bed with which it was extracted from. Morelos states:

“I was born by the riverside of Sinú, a land fertilized by the river’s floodings. Twenty-five years ago, that mother-river was imprisoned and massacred by the construction of a large hydroelectric power plant, Urrá.”

(González & Morelos, 2023)

This irreparable damaging of the waterways and land becomes the basis of both the work and Morelos's practice along with drawing personal, cultural, or symbolic connections; this equally can draw a direct link to Timothy Morton's discussion of Hyperobjects and Climate Change. The particularity of the colour red furthers the overall narrative or thematic nature of the work, drawing comparisons to blood, and the connection of the human body to the very land that is being damaged as emphasised, "...the soil is red. What makes soil red is the large amount of iron it contains, the same element that makes the blood that runs through our veins red." (González & Morelos, 2023).

Morelos exploration of changing states can be best emphasised through the breaking down of the clay to a slurry, combining it with the jute, they start off soft and dry to a rigid state, the material has an initial state of manipulation before drying.

"What is at stake in soil art today is an upturning of dominant knowledge frameworks in favour of indigenous, local and rural registers. Knowing the world for many of these artists is to perform it, to work with it and in it, or to ask visitors to perform their bodies in relation to it."

(Perry, 2023)



Figure 2. Still of the making of No es un rio es una madre

(Morelos , 2014)

As evidenced in (fig 2,) the clay-slip is worked into the surface of the jute, without a brush but instead bare feet. Impregnated the material with the clay, impregnate it not only with clay but with colour of the earth, the combining of earth with reconstituted plant matter, jute, it then becomes as Morelos denotes as a “contemporary landscape’ (Medina, 2014)

“Fique is a natural fibre extracted from the leaves of a succulent plant that grows in the region of the Andes where Colombia, Ecuador and Peru join borders. Adapted to survive without water, the fique fibres are, in this case, drawing in a huge red pool.”

(Elderton, 2021)

Clay-soaked strips of fibrous material are diagonally across the space, as the water in the clay evaporations the boards stiffen take on a timber like state, the earthen tones of the

material are imbued by Morelos as having a symbolism of blood, connected to those killed and injured during the tumultuous and violent history of Colombia.

Merleau-Ponty states when we perceive "... our perception is entirely sustained by the certainty of the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014). This certainty is brought to question. To walk over the material, is to touch, and thus communicate though this a form of expression.

Morelos therefore brings to question what we perceive of land, and as stated,

"Her work may have the mien of Land art, but it is unapologetically pregnant with mysticism and poetry and rooted in indigenous mythologies and traditional craft." (Singer, 2020).

Through this process and exploration of a material, using clay outside the history of ceramics; outside of the traditional approach to the material as something with which should be fired and set in its form and shape. With this It does not hold or create a void, it denies the nature of a Thing, by being instead absorbed into a material. It blurs the lines. The void created instead could be the space in-between or existing around the clay, thus resituating the confines of what is, the materials 'walls' with which it creates a void, instead the viewer can inhabit the void and delineation of space created by the work

One question raised is what experience there is, in this void, if one considers a void as material, as something that by nothing being present then suggests or implies that something was or could exist. We may consider then, that the void is equally a material in its own right, for something not to be present is as relevant as if it were present. A void is both a place of possibility and the reality of nothing.

One could consider that the presence of something in which a void is not created by,, instead is a whole could be considered the lack of a void. Yet the completeness of a material could be considered the void in which something else does not exist for it cannot exist. It is a void of limitation. It is a void in which something cannot exist until something is removed, a place of implied existence until it is brought in the existence. Heidegger declination of the relevance of material, instead leads me to consider that if it defines a void within, does the material define a void the Thing is placed in.



Figure 3. River Sinú Hydro-electric power station.

(Lewis, 2023)

The Hydro-electric dam as evidenced in (*Fig 3.*) a concrete mass dominating the landscape emphasis the human usage of technology and commoditization of the river flow to create energy over the ecological damning effect became the basis for the work '*No es un río es*

una madre' as seen in (*fig 1*). Morelos usage of clay and jute become two intermediary states, with which communicate through the drying and stiffening of the work a visual representation of the changing states of the river. The positioning of the work in (*Fig 1.*) propose a direction and suggestion of the Rivers flow, this contrasts with the motion of the viewer passing around the artwork could be viewed as representative of a mourner around the body.

Clay offers the artist to for something beyond the image, beyond the two dimensional, to offer a physical interaction to create something that is physical within a space beyond the wall, something that interacts with the space it is placed in.

The touch of the hand can communicate something far more intrinsic and basic beyond what a brush can convey, yet ceramics in its original use is one of commodities, or vessels for storage and to consume food. It is a medium which in reality can still be considered in its infancy of exploration and understanding for what can be conveyed and communicated from it.

Chapter 2: Nkanga, Leaving our mark on the land – Extraction and its ties to climate change as a Hyperobject.

Otobong Nkanga is a Nigerian born artist concerned with extraction of materials, and the communicating of such with her practice. Working with textiles, performance, installation, and durational works where the state of the work changes over time and is not set via the

usage of organic matter. During her Nigerian upbringing she witnessed the changing and reshaping of land. Key places such as the 'green hill' of copper, which becomes a recurring motif in her practice.

Through extraction and commoditisation of materials by colonisers, she witnessed the scarring and damaging of land and wants to express in the work the disgust and problematic nature of this reality which often goes unseen or discounted.

"... considering the barren pits as social, political and emotional monuments to the destructive history." (Fowkes & Fowkes, 2022)



Figure 4. *Unearthed - Sunlight*

(Tretter, 2021)

As can be seen in Figure 4. clay pools fill the entirety of the Kunsthaus-Bregenz, the concrete walls of the gallery space create a stark contrast between these islands of earth. The tip of the tree protrudes through the cesspool and brings to a culmination the exhibition over the course of the four floors. Each floor focusing on a particular aspect with which there is a thematic evolution of the states of each work changing states of nature, human control and uprising of the materials.

The cause and in turn, negative effect of technological advancements that push the need for extraction of material as highlighted, “With the spread of electromobility the demand for heavy metals increases.” (Nkanga et al., 2022) presents a possible critique of Gallaccio’s *‘Beautiful Mind’* (fig 6.), with the usage of the very technology (3D Printer) that necessitates the need for extraction of raw material, which in turn contribute to the worsening issue of climate change; to then construct a form out of clay with such, presents an opposing stance.

Nkanga like Morelos posits about human existence and interaction with land and thus reiterates Morton’s Hyperobject but equally talks about time and changing states of work as linked to Merleau-Ponty and the association of time to an artwork.

“... we live in an age of oblivion to the essence of being: we lack humility toward the spirits. They are on their way back from suppressed vicinity to disagreeable proximity.” (Nkanga et al., 2022)

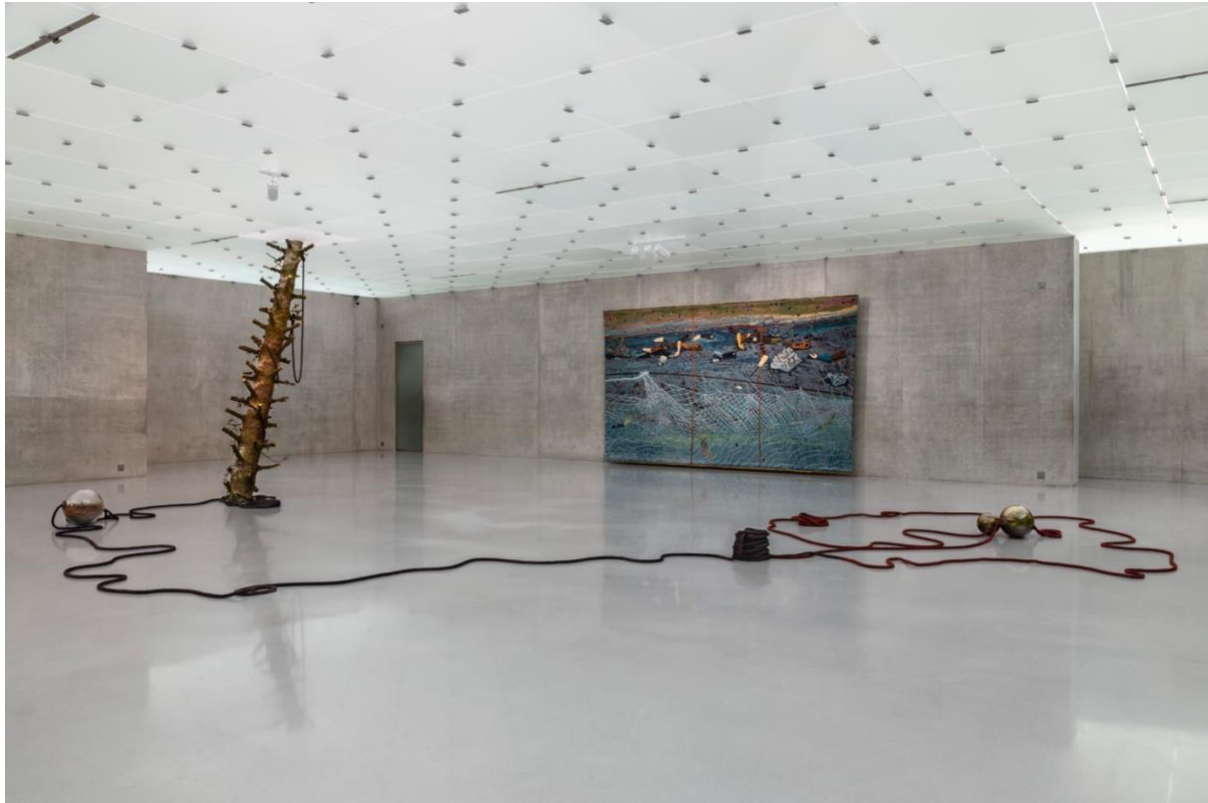


Figure. 5 *Unearthed – Twilight*

(Tretter, 2021)

As evidenced in (Fig. 5), Nkanga's use of earth, clay and water, fabric, glass metal wood along with living plant matter to create a complex variations and exploration of different states of life that are inherently linked to human existence and the ways in which they change are associated to different of the material and different states of the time in which they develop. Clay then as the fluctuating mass of the undefined and the potentially definable,

Ceramics are set in time yet can equally be distorted and development further. Clay once fired is set, it is removed from a formless until being formed state, instead the ceramic then enters a new form of states required to push it, thus the formed, is not truly formed, but temporarily paused until it is pushed into a new state. The heat of the kiln becomes a state

of extreme change, one could compare the extremes of the kiln, with the extreme ways with which human shape the environment to their will and in turn effects its surrounding, thus becoming the extreme with which one understood form, is then forced into a new unknown state, which is held in a temporary state; and thus continues to shift in a unknown/known, stop/start dialogue of material, interaction, and time.

Nkanga's approach to working with clay and earth in its unfired state is which be considered then to be a durational piece for the changing surface of the work with the waterbed drying causing the clay to contract, as seen in (fig. 4) and later crack creating fissures across the surface drawing associations to damaged landscape and earth. Nkanga offers both focal point on the ideas of extraction and implications of materials such as earth and clay, with this the usage of installation across four floors with a tree dissecting through each floor. Whilst also present issues and the implications of the now, this contemporary piece questions through different facets with which the work then can be considered from. One point raised is "What is the conceptual framework of what took the beautiful hills place" (Nkanga, 2022). This offers an interesting viewpoint and argument to consider how an artist approaches the issues of extraction of material and shaping of the natural world and landscape and the inherent link to western philosophy of commoditisation of land through Colonialism.

Chapter 3: Gallaccio, An Unstable Earth.

Anya Gallaccio practice explores the nature of loss, the usage of decomposing and changing matter throughout her work looks to communicate a refined version of nature, and of life in its various states. Gallaccio's usage of a 3D printer to create a work in real time outside of the atypical nature of sculpture, instead exploring time-based and evolving installation. The overall structure and consideration of the failure of the machine in attempt to construct the Devil's Horn as seen in (Fig.7), one issues that arises is the duplicity between the control of land as cited in Nkanga's and Morelos artworks and the problematic nature of technology, and the usage of technology within then Gallaccio work seems to introduce a conflicting point of view.



Figure 6. *Beautiful Minds*

As seen in (*fig.6*) a mound of clay slumps and folds under itself as more is extruded by the mechanical tentacle. This space with a sand like flooring under a softened warm light emphasises internal shadows cast by the growing mass of string-like matter and its fragile state. This construction of a form based on the Devil's Horn, a mountain in Wyoming. This translation of an existing form and natural monument through an unstable construction form is both inherently an act of failure due to the nature of the medium, but the act of forming a natural structure can look to capture the immensity of the natural formation.

The use of a material that is intrinsically linked to the very structure that it looks to mimic, clay being formed through the sedimentation and break down of rock, thus the usage of a clay in its unfired form, becomes a material attempting to recreate its initial form. Equally is an attempt to recreate an existing form whilst also recognising the usage of. Material that can collapse on itself is a part of the very act of creating, this usage of a coiling method to form the structure, and being unsolidified via firing, can in turn be reclaimed and enter a state of formlessness.



Figure 7. *Devils Tower, National Park Service.*

(Locklear, 2019)

As seen in (*Fig. 7*), this jagged precipice protrudes disrupting the landscape surrounding it, formed as denoted here: “... the intrusion of magma into the sedimentary rocks, and the shape of the igneous mass formed by the cooled magma” (Robinson, 1956). A comparison can be drawn between the firing of clay and forming into ceramic, it is interpreted that it is solidified, but instead one may posit that it enters a temporary form state.

Contradicting, thus denying the tradition of the firing of ceramic, Gallaccio plays with the notion of form and formlessness, and shifting how one interacts with a work playing with the notions of destruction and formlessness within the gallery space. The loss of form and breaking of preconceived notions of what a solidified form is, instead the idea of

liquefaction of form, and instead the idea and the Being of an idea, permeate the space and offer a way in which material driven practices interact with a space. This reconstitution of preconceived notion of solidified form into a formless shape, reshapes its being, and thus liquidity offers an alternative way into understanding and observing nature. One artist to note that explores such states of liquidity, is multidisciplinary artist Roger Hiron, a key example of such is *Untitled* where he atomised a jet engine as seen in (fig. 8), “the substance of Hiorn’s sculpture holds objecthood in a state of suspension.” (Carlson, 2012).



Figure 8. *Untitled* (2008)

(Hiorns, 2012)

The duplicity and preconceived notions of materiality are broken, what it can be and what it can take on are unfixed. Such can draw links to temporality and our understanding of various issues such as climate change and technological advancements. Merleau-Ponty offers an alternate viewpoint when considering clay as a material and the interaction with such, the nature of the Being of formlessness can be communicated through touch, in tandem to perception. "Each contact of an object with a part of our body is thus in fact a contact with the totality of the actual or possible phenomenal body" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014)

Our senses literally integrate the things and that the things respond to them" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014)

This sociation between the perceiver and the perceived feed into this bilateral sense of how we perceive and how we exist as Being, "I can only effectively touch if the phenomenon encounters an echo in me," (Merleau-Ponty, 2014), in that we associated and apply from this internal 'echo' with which comes as a recalling of past and thus a resituating of the fact at hand, this usage of such system is what underpins these works in recalling pre-existing sensory and memory 'echos' with which then we seek to understand, and aid in the stepping stone from materiality to climate change and the Hyperobject, the nature of the Hyperobject exists and then is distinguished through the system as which we then come to understand and thus reminded its very existence,



Figure 9. Still from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*

(Spielberg, 1977)

As seen within (Fig. 9) is Roy's (Richard Dreyfuss) decline and obsession with the attempt to translate this vision of the mountain, with his fork and plate of mash. One connection that could be drawn between Gallaccio's *'Beautiful Minds'* is the significance of the Devils Tower, which is the form with which the 3D extruded form intends to construct, is the focal point or culmination and epicentre of Steven Spielberg's 1977 film *'Close Encounters of the Third Kind'*, with actor Richard Dreyfuss's character Roy becoming fixated on what was to be understood as the Mountain, Gallaccio notes of Roy's experience "this obsession leads him on a journey." (Steer, 2017), and in his attempt to recreate the mountain out of Mash initially as seen in (fig. 8), then later detritus gathered in his living room. His obsessive attempt at realising the intention of the mountain with which becomes the epicentre and key location later in the film as of which the aliens make their grand appearance above and land at their base for the meeting point between human and alien.

Within Gallaccio's *'Beautiful Mind'* could then be associated as an emotional recreation of Roy's obsession of the mountain as place of shifting dialogues and communication of information from the unknown, a pinpoint with which we as the viewer could come to recognise a future of construction and intention of coming to achieve a dialogue or return of connection to nature from humanity, "... the maker might not only choreograph a digital data source to shape a vessel, but use it to express a quality and language of being human in material form." (Chittenden, 2018).

As highlighted by Gallaccio

"This cyclical potential and the fact that the clay itself, unfired, holds the possibility of being rehydrated and put back through the machine questions the authority of the object over the process of its creation."

(Gallaccio, 2017)

It is a material unset in its existence, it is a temporally and duration changing both in form, shape, and colour, and thus it is a material that is thus emphasises Heidegger's Thingness through its nature. It is in the nature that is cannot hold itself, it cannot define its own form for it's a material of formless quality thus Gallaccio plays on the very nature of a materials Being in that is stands between the state of being formed and the potential to return to formlessness, do we then understand that she uses the basis of the mountain not for perceiving as a geological form, that has been weathered and shaped over millennia, but instead plays on breaking this set of structures to instead usurp our very understanding of

monument in the that structure cannot withstand itself, thus the ever shifting form becomes an embodiment of Heidegger's Thingness and furthers: '... the content or purpose of the object remains the voids within it and around it, which it brings into a sort of communion with one another' (Livingstone et al, 2020).

Thingness reflects our very understanding of ones preconceived notion of the everyday through the void and that state of normality, equally it draws comparison that, like the clay slip, in that our perceived form, the everyday we construct from our perception is not set, but instead is on the fine knives edge of slipping into a formlessness, or state of destruction though the very existence of climate change pushed into being from our Being, thus our Dasein comes to highlight our demise, it becomes our anti-monument for a possible future of irreparable damage, it becomes a figure for Morton's Hyperobject, in that is meaning transcends its form, but is emphasised by the being of its material properties

Conclusion

One aspect that arose when writing of Nkanga's work was the cause and wholly negative effect of technological advancements that push the need for extraction of material as highlighted, "With the spread of electromobility the demand for heavy metals increases."

(Nkanga et al., 2022) presents a possible critique of Gallaccio's *'Beautiful Mind'*, with the usage of the very technology (3D Printer and computer) that necessitates the need for extraction of raw material; which in turn contributes to the worsening issues of climate change.

To then construct a form out of clay with such technology presents as problematic and counter-intuitive effect of Nkanga's emphasises of the greater issue at hand of the advancement of human usage of technology and its expanding capabilities against an ever-worsening climate and limitations of raw materials being extracted, do we then understand Morton's Hyperobject and interconnected nature of our existence and the negative toll humans can have on our environment.

But if we are to dig deeper, Gallaccio's work can be considered a critique of such problematic systems of cause and effect, (yet feeds into the issue none the less), whilst underhandedly emphasising the inability of technology to truly succeed in having control of the organic material to fit the refined system with which the technology came to exist.

Within recent years Architecture studio Mario Cucinella Architects have constructed a prototype house using, under more controlled conditions, clay, thus offering a potential insight into the future of using natural materials in tandem with technology, as highlighted:

"TECLA shows that a beautiful, healthy, and sustainable home can be built by a machine, giving the essential information to the local raw material," (Parkes, 2021).

The manner in which Earth and Clay have been explored out of the confines of traditional dialogue by three contemporary artists, highlights the nature and being of such materials become the epitome of fluctuation and can be a way of understanding and accepting the changing states of Being. For change within the human condition, and that of existence itself, is undeniably linked. With this, each artist communicates, though, through various means, the state of our world now, and by applying Heideggerian views we may come to take on a clear understanding and intent to right the wrongs that birthed Morton's Hyperobject, and to in turn possibly offer an alternative, positive future.

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