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*After Nature, Follow Where the Rain Goes.*

*Non-human agent, object and our immediate environment.*

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, the University of Auckland, 2021.

## Introduction

The seven-week COVID-19 lockdown in New Zealand resulted in a temporary alteration in the relationship between us and our immediate environment. Heidegger wrote that man will only pay attention to a hammer when it is broken. In other words, we only look carefully at something when it is not performing its intended function. In this case, our world was not functioning as it had previously and we were thus forced to examine it. The limitations placed on daily activities and physical space caused us to pay attention to what was around us, leading us to explore our environment: walking through unfamiliar streets in our neighbourhood, noticing the pattern on the wallpaper in the living room, or realizing the new scratches on the side of the dining table.

This seems linked to the Zen Buddhist practice of observing and paying attention to the here and now; one must be present. Zen Buddhism gives adherents opportunities to interact with the environment and to experience being aware and sympathetic to what is around them; to their immediate environment (temporally and spatially).

I am interested in different philosophical theories, ideas and art that interact with this immediate environment, of the 'here and now'. Different belief systems concerning nature bring different understandings and relations to the environment that we inhabit. This essay follows interwoven threads of research into belief systems (specifically those concerned with nature and objects), philosophy and art practice.

In the first section of this essay, I explore Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), a philosophical concept proposed by Timothy Morton and I also look at the indigenous Japanese belief system concerning nature. The second section investigates the relationship between modernisation, illusion, words (languages) and how these relate to our understanding of our immediate environment. The third investigates forms of art that interact

with the immediate environment. This art has the ability to focus attention on the 'here and now', as discussed by Tetsurō Watsuji.

## Object-Oriented Ontology

Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) is a philosophical school of thought developed by Graham Harman who says the idea is based on the theories of Martin Heidegger. Here, I will introduce a few of the main ideas of OOO that are useful for my research.

OOO does not place man at the centre of the universe, instead admitting that objects exist independently of human perception. This is in opposition to the prevailing stream of Western philosophical rhetoric, founded on the ideas of Immanuel Kant, which proposes that understanding everything and the existence of all things can only be understood in relation to humans. The commonly heard philosophical statement, when a tree falls in the woods and no one hears it, Kant would say that the event did not happen because no one heard it. Harman would say that the tree did fall regardless of whether anyone witnessed it or not. Be it a tree or another object, it exists whether or not man experiences it. Objects live in their own reality and man do not have full understanding of them (Graham Harman: *Heidegger & the Arts* 01:14-12:00).

According to Harman, OOO follows Martin Heidegger's idea of object withdrawnness. Harman understands this 'withdrawnness' 'to mean that "there are something in the things that is invisible"; therefore, it is not possible to understand them. One can understand Heidegger's concept of withdrawnness of an object in the following. There is a cup on the kitchen table. A busy mind prevents one from actually observing it (a distinction is made between seeing and observing). One sees the image of that cup out of the corner of one's eye and believes it to be a regular coffee cup, but it is not studied carefully, [assuming the identity of the object from its functionality/wording. The object seems to be withdrawn from us because

we only glance at its surface. Harman claims all objects are withdrawn and exist independently of man's recognition of them stating "Any knowledge of things no matter how good, would never exhaust that things" (*Heidegger & the Arts* 11:04). As an example, imagine trying to explain rain to the person who has never experienced it. There is no way to make them feel the rain, the drops on their skin. Knowing about rain is not equal to understanding rain as an object. "There is no direct access to reality. That is one of the main principles of OOO (*Objects and the Arts* 15:35)". We can think and try to understand the objects, but the actions of thinking about them are not equal to the objects. Therefore, Harman claims that there is always something about objects that will be beyond understanding (*Heidegger & the Arts* 07:20-12:00).

Another primary agenda of OOO is to make it clear that "the whole is not larger than the sum of its parts" and "the part is not smaller than the whole" (Harman 53). This is in contrast to Heidegger who considered a hammer, for example, to be an object composed of different parts – iron head, wooden handle, etc. – and the pieces compose the whole.[wording/dash formats throughout] According to Harman, Heidegger considered that a part of a hammer is less than a hammer as a complete object, and the hammer itself forms a part of an even larger 'system'. Heidegger states that once broken, when outcast from a system, the hammer becomes 'independent'. Harman disagrees with this. Harman sees all objects as usually being independent, however, when a hammer is broken and man pays attention to it, it then becomes 'locked into a you and hammer' correlation. Thus, the hammer and the observer become 'non-independent'. There is no 'system' according to OOO and objects are simply existing within their own independent realm. OOO denies any relationship or correlation between 'human-objects' or 'object-objects' because when there are more than two things, the ontology will be distorted. [are in text citations within the full stop?] (*Heidegger & the Arts* 12:00-15:00).

OOO considers natural, artificial, and the intangible things – like ideas and events all as being objects. There is no hierarchy, of superior and inferior objects, as "the external world exists independently of human awareness" (Harman 10).

OOO is often criticized for placing equal value on every object. Treating a baby the same as a plastic bag or toxic gas sounds unethical. However, some aspects of OOO will likely be familiar to those with polytheistic cultural backgrounds. Cultures with animistic beliefs welcome all objects like rivers, stones, trees and even local gods into one field.

### Ecology without nature

In his book in *Ecology without Nature*, fellow OOO thinker Timothy Morton encourages us to be more aware of our thinking about the 'idea' of nature. Being aware, means to observe your thinking process – what are you thinking about when you hear the words 'nature' and why do you think these things? Morton argues the 18th Century Romanticism movement in Europe made nature into something 'over there' as opposed to 'over here', which is an invention of the aesthetic belief (*Ecology without Nature* 22). Writers like William Wordsworth saw it as something ideal, untouched and remote from mankind, glorifying the 'over there' (36). Morton uses the term "over here" for the things that are actually in our everyday lives – my house key, car, studio space and supermarket. He uses 'over there' for the things we possess as knowledge or ideas but not something we can see or touch easily, for example: mountains, glacier ice, Paris or whales. We tend to think of the objects that are 'over there' as separate to those objects "over here". Morton suggests re-thinking ecology without the modern idea of 'nature as natural': nature is not green or pure but all-inclusive of 'over here' (24). This re-thinking and being aware is the core tenet of this book encouraging a reconsideration of what we think we know. By giving up the fixed notion of nature, Morton encourages to view nature outside modernism.

Most people would agree with scientific consensus that glaciers in Antarctica are melting due to global warming, but this is often seen as something happening 'over there' as Morton puts it. I see things as being more closely linked. I believe what Morton means is that – as strange as it seems, my kitchen sink 'over here' is linked with Antarctica "over there" ( The Ecological Thought 39). The water going down the sink in the kitchen will eventually travel to every part of the Earth. I was listening to a BBC World News podcast one day which had an environmental analyst Roger Harrabin who said that not only do we consume small particles of plastic in our food but also breathe small plastic fragments. The analyst talked about his experience in the Arctic witnessing plastic 'snow' (BBC 23:50).

Accepting nature as 'over here', means we are among this non-pure, polluted and distorted nature (Morton *Ecology without Nature* 79-85). Everything produced by man is from using resources available from the Earth, and hence is part of Mother Nature; plastic bags, metal, chemicals, cars, your living room, the supermarket, the community, the nation, are all nature. Hence, there is no 'pure green' untouched 'natural' nature anywhere.

Satellite images were shown of a Venice canal on CNN news a few weeks after COVID-19 shutdown tourism in Venice, Italy, comparing pre- and post-lockdown, the change in the clearness of the waterway in the photos is obvious. Water may not be cleaner, but it seems clearer – because of less boat traffic stirring the water. The news read the quick change in the environment as evidence of the human impact on the environment (Spary). There are numerous similar news items with photos of rivers and cities depicting the changes as a result of less human interaction. However, if you accept that we are a part of nature, there is no separation between man and nature. A lioness on the African savanna would not discuss how nature would look without their interaction with the

environment (how terrible their effect has been on the zebra population). The wording of environmental 'protection' or 'conservation' puts man in the superior position, that of being in control. At the foundation of the modern environmental attitude, there is a human-centric idea of 'us being in charge' over the fate of nature.

Morton's idea reads like a form of Japanese animism like Shintoism or resembles Zen Buddhist beliefs. Zen Buddhists accept life 'as it is': there is no idealisation, but observing things as they are and as they change over time – Everything is impermanent and nothing is consistent. Japanese animism involves the belief that inanimate objects like a tree, a waterfall or a rock can be gods or spirits. It is a nature-worshipping belief that accepts the co-existence of nature and man. Morton encourages us to be aware of this anthropocentric human-centric pre-existing attitude towards nature and start accepting the current polluted world and man together. There is no such thing as magical untouched nature. This acceptance may be the first step for us in our journey to co-existing with nature (Morton *Ecology without Nature* 204).

#### Nature – Japan and animism

Japanese indigenous religion, Shintoism, [*the way of the gods*], sees men as living within nature. It has a few creation myths but has no scripts or doctrine except for those preserved through attitudes and rituals (Yuasa 38). Charles Inouye, a Professor of Japanese Literature, explains in *Evanescence and Form*, that Japanese animism and "world with many gods" – the ancient belief that a tree, a waterfall, a rock can be a god – persists even today. People's view of daily lives reflects this Polytheistic belief.

Shintoism has "yaorozu no kami" [*eight million gods*], giving objects and places (mountains, rivers, foxes, etc) nicknames and treating them like humans (Ames 115). This is anthropomorphism, the attribution of human

characteristics to non-human, inanimate things. Anthropomorphism creates a sympathetic feeling towards inanimate objects. In this regard, it is easy to understand a mundane space, an inanimate object and gods as being in the same ontological field. *Encounter with Enlightenment* discusses Animistic beliefs in Japan. “It is true that anything and everything may be kami [gods]” (Carter 42). In Japan, ordinary objects, places, and creatures can possess distinct spiritual essence.

Subsequently, treating tools and space with utmost respect was a part of training when I learnt Japanese calligraphy (traditional art) or Judo (traditional martial arts) at school in Japan. When entering the gym for practice, we had to bow our heads while facing towards the training space. Treating tools and spaces with respect is the essential attitude one learns first when studying [or another word so not repeating traditional Japanese arts.

People share the space (e.g. mountains and village) with divinities, and by that make these spaces sacred. From my experience, this belief makes people care for their spaces/objects – for example keeping the local river, and streets clean whether it belongs to the individual or not. Spaces are sacred because of the existing deities and divinities, but man also co-exists and inhabits the same spaces. This is a common belief even today (Inouye 11).

Among those spaces, the Japanese found the mountain especially sacred. Yoshinori Yasuda is an environmental archaeologist and editor of the book *Sangaku Shinkō to Nihonjin (The Mountain Worship and the Japanese)* claiming water was a critical source for *inasaku* [rice farming] which is the origin of the mountain worship culture. The round river pebbles became a symbol of the ecosystem or of life. The big rocks in the mountains are washed down the rivers and with time become small and round. People used to bring these pebbles back home to pray for a good harvest (my trans; 6-9).

The opening chapter in Hiroshi Sugimoto’s book, *Art no Kigen [Origin of Art]*, is titled “*There is a demon in the darkroom*”. For years Sugimoto, a Japanese visual artist, struggled with static electricity causing white lines on the black and white photo processing paper in his darkroom. These naturally occurring phenomena ruined his images. Sugimoto tried to find a method to prevent this from occurring, but one day decided to do a project that let this phenomenon live, the *Lightning Fields*. The artist accepted the natural uncontrollable events and made works about it.

Inouye looked into Japanese history in an effort to understand the relationship between the people and nature. He analysed one of the oldest collection of poems, *Kokinshū* (古今集), from the 10th Century and determined that one-third of the thousands of poems are about seasons and nature (15). Inouye quotes Ki no Tsurayuki (ca. 868–ca. 945): this ancient “poetry helps people remember a world where neither God nor Man dominates as master” (34). Inouye concludes Japanese attitudes towards nature: man is not superior to nature so it is not something to “be tamed, overcome, and subdued” but instead man should learn to appreciate from it (40).

Therefore, the OOO idea of all objects existing in one field may not be new to those of us with a non-human-centric view of life. However, even for people with animistic cultural values to accept gas stations and plastic bags as a part of nature, “over here”, and part of the idea of ecological coexistence is still challenging. We can assume this is due to the nature-worshipping attitude where the wish is to keep nature sacred and separate from civilisation, where civilisation is seen as a disgrace to nature. This is, in a way, the same with European modernisation: glorifying nature –[] worshipping some objects above others.

Idea of modernisation and illusion

As written in the previous sections, if 'European Romanticism' conceives nature as some invention of the aesthetic belief and 'Shintoism' made nature into something to learn from, cultural processes seem to direct people's attitudes to the things around them. This then leads to the question, what other cultural rhetoric have we been influenced by?

A founding thinker in the field of decolonial studies, Walter D. Mignolo discusses the "rhetoric of modernity". In his book *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, the scholar develops the argument that modernity and coloniality come together like light and shadow. The salvation, westernisation, civilisation, and modernisation of/over the past 500 years were brought by Western countries through colonisation, and those movements inevitably mean coloniality because it started from the West by force (Mignolo xiii, *Coloniality and Western Modernity*: 16:00-19:50). I agree with this idea. Modernisation is quite visible from my own experience. When I visit malls in Tokyo, Los Angeles, or London I find the same stores and restaurant chains. The reason for this is because large retail chains have displaced the small local family businesses. The train station in Japan near where I used to live in my childhood once had a butchery and small seaweed, tofu, tea and toy shops. Now it has been turned into a large shopping mall complex full of white walls and high ceilings that look very similar to the ones I find here in Auckland. When I go home to Kyoto, the first thing I see after stepping off the train are GAP and Adidas stores, the Western retail businesses. The wave of homogenisation continues as globalisation and capitalism swallow the old cities everywhere in the world.

When I was growing up, modernisation resulted in the desire to be part of 'the globalised' countries, whatever that meant. It was a devastatingly strong undercurrent in Japan that dragged society in one direction. This force acted on me too. I remember how bright and attractive McDonalds appeared to me as a child. There is something irresistibly colourful and there is that sense that one is 'joining the club', sharing the same experiences not only with my friends but with the Hollywood movies. I

believed that this sort of culture was leading the progressive line of history. Only later, I understood the reality of the fast-food chain industry, that it is an industry perpetrated by a foundation of marketing illusions. I believe this desire to join the club is based on the inferiority one feels towards one's own culture – that it is 'traditional' rather than 'modern'.

Without the idea of 'modern', there was no 'traditional', because the cultural heritage of each tribe becomes 'traditional' once the 'rhetoric of modernity' arrives, Mignolo claims. Without modernisation, there is no 'indigenous' because all our ancestors were indigenous at one point in their history. Modernisation yields hierarchy, labelling one as developed and another undeveloped. Mignolo states "Modernity is a narrative fiction to convince people that there is a progressive line of the history to follow" to separate those who do not follow 'modernity' as "uncivilized, primitive (...)" (Mignolo, *On Coloniality* 163).

Morton talks about Capitalism as not only an idea but that it is "actually existing (as) concrete space" (*Ecology without Nature* 85). Although the idea is intangible modernisation takes over the spaces through capitalism. It is projecting the image of wealth and future prosperity. I witnessed people chasing this 'progressive line of history' when growing up in Japan. There were strong elitist and capitalist views of success in society in the 80s. Everyone was competing to get into prestigious schools, and corporations and to earn the most money, to live overseas and to speak English. I was playing this game before I even knew it (I had an English tutor since I was five). I believe the motivation is rooted in the inferiority produced by the defeat to the West in WWII. I did not realise this until I read Mignolo's books.

Mignolo warns that the critical agenda about this "idea of modernization" is that whether we are aware or not we are all living in this "colonial matrix of power". Regardless of nationality or race, the idea of modernity is an invisible power taking over the world. We are all trapped in this fictional idea of prosperity like as portrayed in Hollywood movies. The "Progressive

line of history” is a myth: there is no such thing if no one is subscribes to this idea. However, people are trapped into following this imagined line because they want prosperity for their own people. Recognising the influence of modernity could be the first step to being aware of the illusion and starting to oppose coloniality (Mignolo *The Decolonial Option* 108).

Words are powerful and immediate. According to Morton they “make the absent present” (Morton, *Lecture: William Wordsworth: Dark Ecology* 11:33). Say, ‘snow’, and you see it as soon as you hear the words. Like magic, words make things that are not physically present appear. Hence, even if you are alone in a room with no objects, you can project all sorts of objects and thoughts in your mind because we are constantly thinking. Even after writing in the previous section that pure nature does not exist, when I hear the words ‘nature’, I visualize native bush. Images we project with words are instant and powerful; however, they are all illusions unless you are physically experiencing the object in front of you.

Neither the future nor past exist, writes Mignolo. Nevertheless “we all (...) live in a constant and always fluctuating present carrying the burden of the past and the hopes for the future.” (*The Decolonial Option* 115). How can we divert ourselves away from this flow? The idea that neither the future nor the past exists reminds me of the Zen Buddhist teaching: there is no past or future but the present. And yet this present is constantly changing (Ōmori 3-20). One of the solutions might be trying to keep our attention on the present moment. On the contrary, words take our attention from ‘over here’ to ‘over there’. Keeping our attention ‘over here’ in the physical space one is occupying at this moment in time is important. As the tenet of Buddhism goes, it is critical to put one’s attention on the given moment and realise everything changes from moment to moment, so that there is no such narrative line of fiction.

### Story of genius

Both Mignolo and Morton discuss the word ‘genius’ in different lectures. Morton discusses how modernisation changed the meaning of the word. The idea of ‘genius’ changed before and after the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Europe Romanticism movement. Originally, the Latin meaning of the word ‘genius’ meant spirits or deities belonging to places. ‘She has genius’ was used when the artist was imbued with the spirit of the particular place or of their person; ‘She is with genius’, the spirit inspired, protected, and empowered the person. This idea seems close to animistic cultural values where the power belongs to the places and not to men. Similarly, Morton discusses ecological art as being something that does not objectify artistic fantasy and that reflects the artist’s attempt to surrender the power. Without spirit, the man did not have the power to create. Modernisation changed the meaning and gave the power to man, resulting in ‘artist as genius’ - a power originating within the individual (Morton *Future environmental art I*: 01:40-10:20). Mignolo discusses this in the Guggenheim symposium in 2017 claiming the new definition of the words glorifies a handful of artists as geniuses. It gives the power to some, leading to an inferior/superior dynamic in culture. This creation of hierarchy seems to be a tendency in modernisation (Mignolo *on Coloniality and Western Modernity* 34:00-38:20).

How can we eliminate this hierarchy? Regardless of one’s belief in deities, returning the power to its origins (spaces/places/objects) seems important. Artists working with the sources of creativity to be something from the site, something not originated from the individual ego, may prevent projecting the illusion, rhetoric of modernity, in the future. The idea of researching external objects sounds closer to scientific research: observing objects, collecting data, studying the site, and synthesising some outcome. In this process, the artist is merely an agent connecting the place and the artwork. Shamans also use their bodies as an agent connecting the deities (of the land) and deliver their messages. Perhaps the two are not that

different. Both return the power to where it belongs, bringing the objects 'over here' into the immediate physical space and time. Unique characteristics of the mundane sites one visits during the day can be viewed as divine; the work of deities even.

Artworks that bring attention to the immediate physical environment provide opportunities for the viewer to meet the objects of that environment in the present time. In Zen Buddhism, being means learning to clear the mind and to be empty of thoughts: one is not thinking about past incidents or future troubles. With this condition, there is no line connecting the past to the future. Without this, your thoughts rush back and forth freely projecting anything and everything. However, one's body is always in the present regardless of your mind. The chair you are sitting on is real. The keyboard your fingers touch as you are typing is real. Paying attention to the literal space one inhabits, observing what is in front of you, pulls you to the present time of 'now'. The pen I am holding in my hand is as genuine of an experience as it can ever be. Being aware and working with the immediate environment of 'over here' may be the key to returning the power to where it belongs.

### Art that interacts with, 'over here'

In this section, I will investigate some artists whose works relate to the immediate environment and present the 'over here'.

Olafur Eliasson, a Danish-Icelandic artist literally brought thirty small icebergs that had broken off the Greenland ice sheet to London in 2018, exhibiting the work titled *Ice Watch London* outside the Tate Modern. The artist is simply bringing the icebergs 'over here' so that viewers can experience millennia-old objects melting in front of their eyes (*ArtNet*, Rae). The viewers can stand next to the blue opaque objects larger than themselves, feel the chilled air, see the continual melting and hear the

small bubbles of air trapped when the ice was formed make a quiet popping noise as their air is released. We generally know that icebergs are melting, but we are not fully aware of such processes unless we have first-hand experience in the same space. Eliasson's installation of icebergs is like a science museum display, offering the viewer to meet objects that usually belong to 'over there'. This relates to Robert Smithson's Non-site 1968 series of works. Objects were installed into the exhibition space coming from a particular site and reflecting the geography and geology of that site (Kaye 92). Smithson's work *Line of Wreckage* consists of concrete from the demolished New Jersey highway inside a steel box with horizontal openings (Smithson Foundation). Nick Kaye, the author of *Site-Specific Art* explains 'Non-Site asserts (...) that the site against which claims definition is elsewhere (92). This science museum display concept can be extended to purely artistic exhibits too. Paintings are usually created in the artist's studio, the 'elsewhere' is displayed in the gallery space. Such objects intend to offer an 'experience' of meeting the remote in the local and the present.

The Swiss artist, Vivian Suter works with the immediate environment surrounding her studio in the Guatemalan bush. The artist worked many years in a remote studio after leaving the European art scene in the early '80s. In 2005, a traumatic hurricane destroyed her studio and her paintings were washed away in a torrent of mud and rainwater. The artist eventually came to accept the natural surroundings; natural surroundings that included the rainwater and the mud and the colours of aged leaves, such that her work merged into the environment (Armitstead *the Guardian*). By including the immediate natural environment in her practice, she produces works that are, in effect, controlled by the environment. *Untitled* was installed at the former Buenos Aires Cervecería open poach in Munich in 2008. The unstretched paintings were hung like washing, allowing the work to move with the wind and for viewers to freely walk between and behind the works. Suter's works seem to be free from conventional painting, being neither landscape nor portrait. They do not seem to bear

the heavy burden of western painting history. Suter works in the 'over here' in her studio space; accepting the conditions from the immediate environment. By doing so she produces things that are genius in the pre-Romanticist sense; by considering the immediate environment of the spaces, the story she tells gives the power back to where it belongs.

*"When I am (...) [in the] exhibition space, it is as if I receive a kind of parcel, a packet of air."* (qtd. in Newman 31)

This quote evokes the ambient quality of the exhibition space. Tuerlinckx, a Belgian installation artist since the 1970s, is highly aware of her exhibition site and how the objects are placed in relation to the already existing characteristics of the space. In her exhibition, "What is put on display differs only slightly from what was already there, what is and what can become are of equal value." (*Contemporary diary*). In order not to misrepresent that which is already present in the environment, Tuerlinckx tries to leave the room as empty as possible (*artnet*).

One of the ideas Tuerlinckx works with is the notion of two spaces and two times, 'time/space'. She incorporates the elements of 'over there (studio time/space)' into 'over here (exhibition time/space)' regardless of the concept of the exhibition. She explains this in her artist talk at *Les Salons Paléolithiques [pre-historical hand]*, which is the artist's exhibition at Galerie nächst St. Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwälder in 2017 (*Joëlle Tuerlinckx*, 4:25-6:45). Tuerlinckx considers the importance of the place where the work is created, influencing colour, shape and materials. She takes the reference from her studio wall when deciding the colour of her work (orange-red of the brick wall). Her studio has an accumulation of colours and shapes, the remnants from the construction of previous works. The artist recreates these marks in the exhibition space. It is like the deities of the studio breathing through the artist.

Another notable Tuerlinckx concept is the artist's awareness of the present time – when the viewer meets the artwork in the exhibition. With the title,

the artist is working with the idea of accumulation and development of the works over time by human hands. There is a sense of an unimaginably long time-line of Homo sapiens. The viewer is standing at the exhibition at one dot in that time-line. In Tuerlinckx's work, "while time (...) [is] passing, the present [is] put on display" (*Contemporary Art Daily*). To document this dot in time, Tuerlinckx "photographs" the gallery floor by tracing the floorboard with a pencil and includes it in the exhibition, thus emphasising the 'over here'. (*Joëlle Tuerlinckx*, 21:17- 22:14).

*'site': substantive (...)local position(...)The place or position occupied by some specified thing. Frequently implying original or fixed position (Kaye 1)(onion 1973)*

During the COVID-19 lockdown I was confined to the limited space of my residence. This made me realize how unordinary the white gallery spaces are. The ordinary residential space has different functionality from the gallery. The galleries are meant to be a place to exhibit artworks with an attempt to minimise viewer's subjectivity by creating the minimalistic aesthetic. As Brian O'Doherty describes in *Inside the White Cube*, 'basic principles' behind the 'White Cube' space is that 'the outside world must not come in' (7). This space is meant to build walls between 'outside' and 'inside' so what's inside remains sacred. It might be a possibility that this idea may create the hierarchical culture. It can give power and approval to the works displayed within. People may blindly accept that whatever that church-like place is presenting must be extraordinary. This reminds me of Mignolo's idea of modernity: that institution (gallery) glorifies a handful of artists. In the lecture *Black Space*, Jeremy Lecomte, a French researcher and theoretician working between political philosophy and art, urges the adoption into contemporary practice of the White Cube such that it contributes to the creation of a hierarchy. Because of the prestigiousness of the gallery and the power it has it can convince that whatever is exhibited inside is superior to the works exhibited outside their space. In this hierarchy, it is not what the artist has shown but where the artist has

shown that convinces people their greatness. Lecomte claims the White Cube has the power to turn that which is exhibited in the space into sacred contemporary art (*Blank Space* 27:50) If the white cube exhibits a tea cup in the gallery, the viewer will be convinced that it is some sort of significant work. In addition, it is doubtful that there is any space for the local deities in the White Cube. To me it is questionable whether shutting out the immediate environment is the best way to create an exhibition space.

In the monograph on Kate Newby *Incredible Feeling*, writer Sarah Hopkinson states that Newby “resisted showing in the gallery context for a long time.” The reason for this is that she “has more faith in things” that already exist in the surrounding environment rather than presenting “artworks”(19). I understand this to imply that she considers the unique characteristics of the already existing site as part of her work.

Often Newby’s installations pull the viewers to meet the place ‘here’ and ‘now’ with fresh eyes. Titled “*Nothing that’s over so soon should give you that much strength*”, her exhibition at Hordaland Kunstsenter in Norway: displays small metal works cast in brass, copper and silver that look like coins accidentally dropped on the floor. These pieces are hammered between the wooden floorboards making the lines of floorboards stand out (Hordaland Kunstsenter, *Art Viewer*). The exhibition space/place seems to be the main subject for Newby. If the exhibition spaces were like the main phrases then her installed works of art act like the conjunctions to create the sentences (the floor, the window, the pattern on the window and then outside the gallery reword). Without these conjunctions, we take for granted what the floor is made out of, how the window connects the inside to the outside and how the walls and windows are in between two spaces, the outside and the inside. The blue rope that was produced by a local rope factory is wrapped around the window through holes in the wall. Ropes are visible from both inside and outside in the car park. The art centre has old cobblestones outside. Newby has replaced these with some made from glass. Floor pattern, ground, wall and window are the built space, the environment that we usually take for granted and usually

do not observe. As discussed before when describing the idea of Heidegger’s broken hammer, Newby’s work is done in a way so that the viewer’s attention actually goes to the ‘unbroken’ environment – for our perspective to meet the detailed characteristics of the space ‘here’ and ‘now’ in present time. *Let the Other Thing* was published for the exhibition in Fago Island Gallery in 2013. In it Rosemary Heather and Nicolaus Schaffhausen close the preface of the book by saying Newby’s art practice helps us become grounded in the moment of our immediate experience. (12).

Newby, in the conversation with geologist Paul Dean (*Incredible Feeling* 70), says her work is ‘semi-permanent’, being in between permanent and impermanent; however, the artist dislikes permanent things because “permanent things stop being seen”. Mami Kataoka, current curator at Mori Museum in Tokyo says that Newby’s works have the quality of being ‘semi-permanent’ (*Incredible Feeling* 26). Kataoka sees similarities in Newby’s works of being present in time and the tenets of Zen. Zen Buddhism sees nothing as permanent, since everything is changing every moment, so presence is the most important idea. She asks the artist what she thinks about the idea of impermanence. Newby considers the idea of “impermanence” constantly while working on her practice and “instability as well (... ) I am particularly interested in nature, social behaviour and the rhythms of a city (34)“

The artist gives names to her rock works (porcelain painted to imitate real rocks). They seem more like nicknames than titles; there is something intimate about these: categorised like artefacts with names such as “tickle”, “maureen’s” and “messy street” (84,72,66) it “alludes to their human origins” that the “artist feels the work embodies” (*Let the other things in* 9). In the discussion of animism earlier, I made mention of anthropomorphism, the naming of non-human, non-animate things and having sympathy towards them. I am not claiming that the artist believes in the deities that inhabit spaces or she is aware of the idea of Zen. Working with the idea of ‘over here’ often inherently brings with it the notion of the

present time, paralleling the tenets of Zen. Paying attention to the immediate surroundings of 'over here' – being aware of the cup you are holding, encountering how the steam is coming up from the tea, is being in the present. It is about being aware of the environment one is in as well as about ourselves.

### Tetsurō Watsuji and immediate environment

When we talk about the present time, we can only explain our 'now' with reference to our activities or the place/space/object we are physically occupying at the given moment: 'I am reading a book at the library now' or 'I am cooking lunch in the kitchen now'. Activities are not tangible objects, but sites and things are. In other words, paying attention to the immediate objects or space – the floor underneath your feet, the phone you are holding – may help you connect to the present.

In this section, I will look into Tetsurō Watsuji, a Japanese 20th Century philosopher, who argues our relationship to the place/space we inhabit forms 'who we are'. Watsuji discusses man's existence concerning space/place and the natural environment in *Fudo* ('*Climate and Culture*') in 1935. Watsuji initiated thinking about his idea of climate when he read Martin Heidegger's *Zein und Seit* [*Being and Time*] published in 1927, then he developed the idea with his research of Buddhism (Watsuji, *Climate and Culture* v).

In *Fudo*, Watsuji claims that we and our culture are shaped by the land, the geography, and the climate because we know who we are in relation to the environment and ecology around us. *Fudo* discusses that we are the product of our surroundings as a result of living between climate, environment, community and society. When it is cold outside, we feel cold. Watsuji argues that with the feeling of 'coldness' we realise our 'being.' I am not always aware of my arms but when it is cold, I notice I am wearing a sleeveless T-shirt, and my arms are getting cold; therefore, I have noticed my arms, and I have recognised my 'being' with respect to the outer environment (Watsuji, *Climate and Culture* 1-18). Therefore, the

immediate environment not only grounds you in the present moment by paying attention to the objects in the space, but also because we are part of it. 'Aidagara' [betweenness] is one of his main philosophical ideas of Watsuji written in the book *Rinrigaku* (Ethics) published a year before *Fudo* that propounds being aware of oneself in relation to the immediate environment of the person (my trans; *Rinrigaku* 33). I believe *Fudo* is written with this idea. We are constantly engaging in activities, communicating with others, moving around the community and space where we live (the 'in-betweenness' of environment and ourselves). Thus, our being is not defined but ephemeral, going through moment-to-moment changes.

Lucy Schultz, an expert in Japanese philosophy, discusses Watsuji's understanding of places and objects in her essay *Creative Climate*. She quotes Yuriko Saito, a professor of philosophy at Rhode Island School of Design, to explain the nature of Japanese aesthetics and its emphasis on "respecting the innate characteristics of objects", which is an object-centered approach rather than the subject-centered. The implication of which is that one needs to be quiet to listen to the objects and their placement in the space rather than projecting one's own opinions onto the objects (Saito 85-86). For place and object to align in time, "the person becomes immersed in the space of between-ness, thereby raising the degree of intimacy with the other constituents of the space" (Schultz 68). The writer mentions Watsuji's comment on designing Japanese gardens as a process of listening to the "spirit" (70). I understand this to mean being aware of the immediate environment, observing the objects around you and trying to understand them. At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned Harman's statement that we never quite know what objects are. Watsuji seems to agree with this. Our relationship to our surroundings and our environment will be more respectful if we accept that we don't know as much as we think we do about things.

## Conclusion

Being aware of the unique quality of the mundane everyday space/place, listening to the objects/things within them eventually means being ecological because you care for them. It is not the knowledge in the head, but it is those marks on the wall that ground you in the reality of 'here and now'. Considering one's fate being only as important as other objects puts things in perspective. Robert Smithson understood that the "Future does not exist" (...) because he saw "his art and works of humankind as a part of Earth's story" in geological time and there is nothing "beyond or outside the history of nature" (Dion 37:30). Even if we only have the Frankenstein version of nature – where plastic fragments are snowing – I still would like to meet objects in person, not in illusion, to observe and experience, to attempt to experience the ontology of the objects, where our subjectivity disappears and objects can be heard and seen as clearly as possible without any notion of the past or future. Rain touches all the surfaces of the things equally – roofs, soles of the shoes – objects we will never actually try to learn. Watch a drop of rainwater and follow where it runs – you will never encounter the same drop of rain again. This is the quiet place I search for.

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