



# Wrecking Balls and Talking Heads:

The New Materialism of Brent  
Everett Dickinson

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By Nicole Miller



**The object in contemporary culture occupies a conflicted position: on the one hand, mass-produced and disposable, caught in the currents of a throwaway economy; on the other, cherished, petted, approaching ever novel forms of intimacy with the human subject. Perhaps this ambivalence accounts for our querulous relations with Alexa; our squeezing possession of things that are cute; the pleasures of purging — its heartbreak, too — and the warm reassurance of our phone between the sheets.**

Brent Everett Dickinson's work clamors with this conflict. In *Babbling Objects: An Indoor Earthwork*, the artist assembles pop cultural trash, historical detritus, or produce dug from the garden, inspiring his sculpture, drawing, and photography with sound and video works. His objects murmur, crackle, buzz, coo—their aural exhalations intimating an eerie immanence or enchantment.

In one wall-sized installation, plastic rocks bolted to photomural wallpaper depicting a picturesque mountain scene seem to talk to neighboring work in the gallery. They direct their attention to Miley Cyrus, a hand drawn calculation of the momentum, mass, and velocity of a wrecking ball. The equation was worked out by a student at the University of Leicester, David McDonagh, to test the the viability of the singer's 2013 pop hit "Wrecking Ball." Like many of the works in this show, *Wrecking Ball* demonstrates Dickinson's interest in language—the performative possibilities of speech, the reticulations of metaphor, and the humor of the gimmick or pun. *Vibrator*, for example, serves up a visual pun: a Bible opened to the book *Song of Songs*, jostled gently by an asymmetrical motor installed inside the book.

What does it mean for an object to assume an audible register? Or for the artist to elicit or affirm the subjectivity of the thing? Dickinson's work reflects a turn in contemporary art, evident in diverse media over the last decade, toward objects.

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<sup>1</sup>Graham Harman, "On the Undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno, and Radical Philosophy," *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 26.



Of course, most works of art can be located in the realm of objects. But the recent impulse among artists and curators to recognize the vital power of nonhuman entities is a response to both technological advancements and an emerging ecological consciousness. This new materialism, which seems to address the philosophical implications of our networked systems as well as their environmental, social, and political impact, can be seen in the work of artists such as Pierre Huyghe, Edward Navarro, Pamela Rosenkranz, and curators such as Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, whose 2012 curatorial statement for Documenta speculated about the desire of a meteorite.

Dickinson cites the work of philosopher Graham Harman as an influence on his work. Along with diverse thinkers such as Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, and Timothy Morton, Harman is one of the most visible contemporary theorists whose work aims to de-center humans from the world-picture, revealing an egalitarian mesh of human and nonhuman agents across the ontological web. Harman's object-oriented ontology, or OOO, includes the Kantian perception that the world of things—from baseballs to solar flares—exists independently of human knowing and that the totality of a thing exceeds our ability to know it. As Harman writes, "The world is not the world as manifest to humans; to think a reality beyond our thinking is not nonsense, but obligatory."<sup>1</sup>

For artists, attempts to address the implications of OOO often takes two forms: humanizing the object world or conversely, evacuating the world of human content in post-apocalyptic or post-human scenarios. Dickinson's anthropomorphisms are concerned with communicating diverse ways of knowing and relating. He explores the animate potential of ordinary things: a smudge on a window pane that resembles the shape of a woman's face or a garden carrot whose forked limbs suggest the form of a man. This is the stuff of internet memes, which for Dickinson, hoovering up stock photos and digital flotsam, may be precisely the point. Perhaps for Dickinson, an object-oriented ontology addresses the problem of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, the image degraded through mass production and rapid, global circulation. For its adherents, an object-oriented ontology affirms the autonomy and equality of even the dumbest gimmick or kitsch, imbuing it with a quality Timothy Morton calls "charisma."



Of course, this was Duchamp's insight as well, when he installed a urinal in New York's Grand Central Palace. Indeed, the spirit of the readymade haunts object-oriented art—things wrested from their everyday use, re-articulated in an art environment and insisting on their own reality or volition.

Babbling Objects includes two toilets, featured in the video works *Black Swan / That Which Lurks Below*, which depicts the life cycle of an ice sculpture melting in a toilet bowl, and *Toilet / Take Up Your Cross*, which logs a toilet's journey around the globe using a Google map. The toilet that inspired the work was once installed on a 400-foot yacht owned by Hitler. After the war ended, the yacht was taken to the United States, where it arrived in a salvage yard in New Jersey, before it was sold to the owner of an auto repair shop and installed in the mechanic's bathroom. In the video, a picture of the toilet hovers over a computer screen where the artist navigates the map using his cursor, accompanied by ambient sounds of travel through various regions and dialects.

What is the status of this toilet? Is it an artifact of Western civilization rescued by the artist from oblivion—or an emblem of waste relegated to the no-place of digital topography, where it serves, in the video's final moments, as a scatological punchline?

The toilet illustrates the conundrum that confronts thing theorists like Harman and Morton: attempting to articulate the reality of objects outside our systems of knowledge, we nonetheless have no alternative for describing the world. What does the toilet know or desire en route from Florence, New Jersey to Lisbon? Who knows? The pot still gets pissed in.

Here and throughout the exhibition, Dickinson explores the scatological implications of language, including the trope of incontinent speech—that which is excessive and therefore expelled, expunged, expressed. (Think of the toilet: a discarded artifact of historical memory hovering in the geontological limbo of a Google map and the mists of glossolalia.)

Considering the artist's methods as a scavenger of the web, we may note that the word google (or g000gle), whether a noun and a verb, is itself a kind of babble. The word, which denotes the task of seeking information, echoes the scumbled sounds or non-discursive language of infants.

Dickinson's interest in the gastric and scatological connotations of making or poesis has antecedents in literary modernism, from Kafka to Gertrude Stein to James Joyce (who beat Graham Harman to the punch, elevating human poo to the ontological status of speech). In *The Making of Americans*, Gertrude Stein describes and enacts her own writing process in distinctly gastronomical terms, her discharge triggering both desire and disgust: "...sometimes it comes out of me and I am filled full of knowing and it bursts from me, sometimes it comes sharply from me, sometimes it comes out of me to amuse me, sometimes it comes out of me as a way of doing a duty for me, sometimes it comes brilliantly out of me, sometimes it comes as a way of playing by me...sometimes it comes very repeatedly, sometimes very willingly out of me, sometimes not very willingly, always then it comes out of me."<sup>2</sup>

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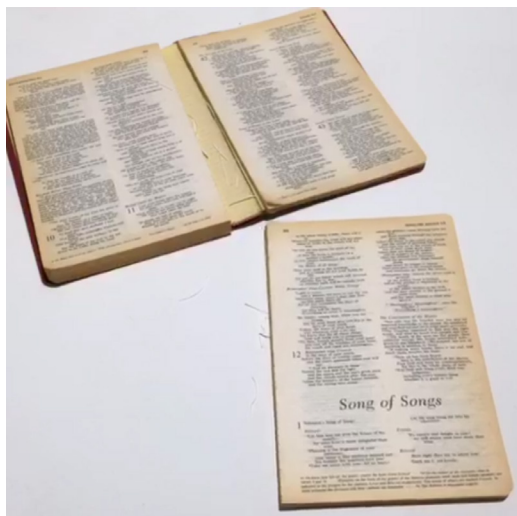
<sup>2</sup>Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans* (New York: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), 327.

The babble of high-modernism sprang up at the turn of the last century alongside an emerging commodity culture. As we consider the impact of a new materialism on contemporary art, it's worth remembering this older materialism. Marx also recognized the peculiar animation of objects in his depiction of the commodity fetish. In *Capital*, he pictured a wooden table, charged with the mystical force of the market, standing like an acrobat on its head, evolving "grotesque ideas" in its "wooden brain." More wonderful—more lurid and strange—was what happened when Marx loosened its tongue: "Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: Our use value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects, is our value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it. In the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange values."<sup>3</sup>

Through this commodity babble, we see an object whose value is determined by the market; its exchange value, not its usefulness, distinguishes it from other objects. The exchange value of the table is, according to Marx, an abstraction that alienates the object from the labor that made it. The table's acrobatic contortions—its uncanny soliloquy—demonstrate the autonomous life of the object, untouched by human labor or use. I'm not sure this sort of autonomy is what OOO theorists have in mind. But one of the criticisms of the new materialism is that its particular strain of animism reifies the commodity fetish. How might an object-oriented art practice make a significant and novel intervention in the object relations of the art market?

Dickinson may also have this question in mind. His new, ongoing project, the Marcel Maus Hermeneutical Think Tank, exists as a virtual entity. The project advances Dickinson's conceptual interests using the platform of the artist's website, which serves as an unwitting host for the MMHTT. "They've hacked my body-site and identity-site, so I'm no longer the creature who existed before," says Dickinson. "I'm no longer the solo artist. I'm an artist-in-residence. I reside deep within the MMHTT." This premise—the artist as a platform for the command structure of a fictional, hacktivist entity—perhaps suggests a vital strain of OOO.

Still, watching *Speculative Engastration*, a performance work by the MMHTT presented in connection with this exhibition, I thought again of Marx. Using the conceit of a conceptual turducken, the work illustrates a central tenet of the MMHTT project—its commitment to the "radical entanglement" of all things (a viscous space that it calls Art). Picture a



moist aggregation of heterogeneous substances, converted into a single, gluey mass. This gastric conversion—"to make our object edges soft and permeable," as the MMHTT puts it—resembles Marx's description of the commodity. The German word used by Marx to denote the commodity is Gallerte, which is often translated as "congealed quantities of homogenous labor." Cultural theorist Sianne Ngai, drawing on the work of Keston Sutherland, points out that Marx's German readers would've known Gallerte as "a specific food product, an aspic or jelly made from the ground-up body parts of animals."<sup>4</sup> According to Ngai, "undifferentiated labor in this text gets figured as a quivering, gelatinous food implicitly made up of ground-up human workers [...] Gallerte is a horrific version of how a person might disappear into an object..."<sup>5</sup> So the MMHTT's description of art making and art appreciating resembles the relentless, all-absorbing appetite of late capitalist commodity culture. This is satire, surely.

But I can't quite tell which direction the satire is aimed: whether the artist is coming for the glutinous market or whether he takes the confluence of categories—mingling mass culture with sacred language—as an object-oriented action intent on dismantling ontological hierarchy. Speculative Engastration surely defies the OOO's commitment to the autonomy of objects, separate but equal and ultimately unknowable to one another.

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<sup>3</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, *A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1992), 176-177.

<sup>4</sup>Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) 67.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 100.

And thing theorists like Morton perhaps miss the way their concepts resemble Marx's commodity spectacle. As Morton writes: "...an artwork cannot be reduced to its parts or its materials, nor can it be reduced to its creator's life, nor to some other context, however defined [...] Art is charisma, pouring out of anything whatsoever, whether we humans consider it to be alive or sentient or not."<sup>6</sup> This sounds like Gallerte or Gertrude Stein's reverent shitting.

But Dickinson's work is imbued not only with the new materialism, but also with historical systems predicated on human community. In the MMHTT project, longing for community is routed through Marcel Mauss—the twentieth-century French sociologist—by way of Marcel Maus, the five-eyed, German mouse at the helm of the project. The sociologist Mauss is best known for his study of gift-economies in indigenous cultures. The potlatch, as Mauss described it in his 1925 book *The Gift*, was a system of communal exchange that relied on the gift as a form of communication and reciprocity. In the gift economy, the object served to cement social ties rather than index exchange value. "Mauss saw the potlatch as a negation of division, as an affirmation of community," according to critic Greil Marcus. "It was, he said, the first round table, 'from which none need be excluded.'"<sup>7</sup> This is the spirit that animates Dickinson's work: a sincere faith in the art object as a corporeal medium capable of extending this sort of embrace.

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<sup>6</sup>Timothy Morton, "Charisma and Causality." *Art Review*, November 2015, [https://artreview.com/features/november\\_2015\\_feature\\_timothy\\_morton\\_charisma\\_causality/](https://artreview.com/features/november_2015_feature_timothy_morton_charisma_causality/). Accessed 17 October 2018.

<sup>7</sup>Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 394.

## Author Bio

Nicole Miller is a writer living in Brooklyn. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Guernica*, *Fence*, *The Atlas Review*, *Hyperallergic*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Catapult*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. She serves as an editor for the digital arts journal *Underwater New York* and was a participant in the 2017–18 Arts Writing Workshop sponsored by the AICA/USA and Creative Capital/The Andy Warhol Foundation.



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