

A Study of Dis- placement

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An essay of ideas co-conceived with artist Louise Oates for the exhibition, *An Equal and Opposite Reaction*.

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Seeking out the gaps, striving for the path of least resistance, water is ever in flux. Shifting states in search of an ever-escaping equilibrium, it flows on.

This dynamism is typified by two volumes of water constantly moving through the Earth's oceans. Each buoyed up by displacement of a kind, they cross paths without commingling. One body streams through itself (unconfined, performing as both vehicle and vector. Dubbed the thermohaline circulation (THC), it consists of a global system of currents driven by density gradients created by surface heat and saline fluxes. It is believed to be responsible for regulating polar sea ice, granting Western Europe its temperate climate and mitigating the heat load on the planet from the Sun. In short, it underwrites the present landscape of human life. Flowing concurrently against this liquid bulk is its ideological inverse – bottled water. (Some 400,000,000,000 litres of it will be floated across the planet this year, contained and commodified, driven by diesel engines and the economic exploitation of fear and vanity surrounding its relationship with human health.

Both collective volumes meet the definition of *hyperobjects*, as outlined by philosopher Timothy Morton. This is a category of object primarily defined by the inability of a single human to experience it, such as the solar system or the sum total of plutonium produced since the element was isolated in 1940. They stand as constellations we might more readily recognise as networks of disparate objects, yet Morton urges us to acknowledge their additional status as single bodies.

Like all hyperobjects, these contrasting aggregations of water are only partially visible to an individual through their local manifestations. One cannot hope to fully witness the shifting of the planet's tectonic plates, for example, but one can climb one of the resulting mountains. Similarly the volumes of water circulated by these systems are only hinted at through snapshots, perhaps in the sublime awe inspired by a photograph of an iceberg or in the guilt triggered by media coverage of the plastic bottles adding to the Great Pacific garbage patch.

Yet in each instance, one remains compelled to experience the hyperobject as mediated by an additional layer of subjective interpretation, thus compounding its ungraspable distance. This dissonant friction between human and geological scales of time and geography represents an increasing danger today given the efforts of our culture to achieve what are presented as improvements and efficiencies. As Morton warns, hyperobjects often only become apparent to humans when they qualify as existential threats.

An Equal and Opposite Reaction thus reflects the newly awoken attention to the systems by which water moves and is moved, and the ecological impact of their interrelation. As the global demand for bottled water is stoked by brands leveraging notions of purity and naturalness, the greenhouse gases produced by its transportation threaten to bring an end to THC. For this pollution contributes to the accelerated melting of the polar icecaps, and thus to the release of the fresh water that is unbalancing global salinity concentrations.

Oates' approach borrows from the material and formal language of both the natural and human water flows. The work's submission to crystalline growth throws in sharp relief the false sense of control that often precedes human self-sabotage. Though it requires initiation, once underway her process demonstrates the material's agency by following its own model according to the inbuilt intelligence of crystalline structures and interrelations with the environment's temperature and airflow too complex to possibly model.

The painful irony of the past century of plastic proliferation is that while products such as water bottles will take up to a millennium to completely decay, at least to the extent believed possible, the first stages of this process are already poisoning our oceans. The true victim of this clash of water will not be the planet as it so often erroneously inferred, but human life, for we cannot escape the fate we have constructed for ourselves. Indeed Morton's first test for a hyperobject is its viciousness – its stickiness or resistance to flow. While the Earth will certainly endure the throes of the Anthropocene age, the ones at risk of displacement are us.

— James Haldane