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## FCJ-226 'And they are like wild beasts':<sup>[1]</sup> Violent Things in the Anthropocene

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**Abstract:** What can a chair, spoon, table, horse, sow, or wheel do when accused of murder? The Anthropocene has rearranged our material relationships: humans are a geological force ensnaring every object within reach into our diabolical plan to reconfigure the planet through increasing networks of violence. We could refuse to look, but the continual arrival of data across the networks means that more of these violent objects are uncovered, and more and more we are asked to account for their actions. This essay is a critical melodrama set amidst the debris of history. It engages with the common law of deodand that existed in England from 1066 until 1846, placing deodand alongside the vital living objects that pervaded the writing of Anne Conway in the seventeenth century and extending its thoughts into the new world we name the Anthropocene. Perhaps in this unusual genealogy is a way of considering the vitality of objects in the Anthropocene as nature and humans, stones and chairs, bodies and objects emerge anew.

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FCJ-226 'And they are like wild beasts':<sup>[1]</sup>  
Violent Things in the Anthropocene

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Figure 1: Francisco de Goya, *Y son fieras* (And they are like wild beasts) Plate 5 from *The Disasters of War* (*Los Desastres de la Guerra*) 1810 (published 1863). Etching, burnished aquatint and drypoint, 15.2 x 20.7cm. This reproduction sourced from Wikimedia Commons, and donated to Wikimedia Commons by the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

## Disappearance



Figure 2: Ruth Buchanan, *Circular Facts* (2009/2010), coated MDF board, powder coated steel frames, brushed cotton, coated 35mm slide projector stand, audio and 35mm slide on synchronised loop on headphones, two chairs borrowed from Hotel Bad Toelz, dimensions and duration variable. Installation view: Monumentalism, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Image courtesy the artist and Hopkinson Mossman.

At the opening of the temporary Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2010 there was a room curtained off from all the others. Looking behind the curtain I found two chairs, headphones, a silently meditative voice, a highly-reflective dark blue leaning-yet-standing wooden panel, a rug, and a humming slide projection of an old ballroom. Of all the various objects somehow existing together for this moment, it was the chairs that held my attention. They were just chairs but they seemed important. The work was *Circular Facts* (2009, figure 2) by New Zealand artist Ruth Buchanan: an installation based on the script of a performance Buchanan staged after researching the strange and highly publicised disappearance of British writer Agatha Christie.<sup>[2]</sup>

In 1926 Christie vanished for eleven days until she 'was found staying in a hotel under a pseudonym after having suffered what she claimed to be a case of amnesia' (Bouwhuis, 2010: 202). Buchanan's fascination with the story lead her to spend a summer living in a hotel; the two chairs in the installation are from this hotel. The slide is an image taken in the ballroom of



the hotel where Christie stayed, it is projected onto the tilted dark blue panel, becoming simultaneously a reflection and a metaphorical rabbit hole. In this context the curtain also changes its nature, becoming a different kind of curtain; perhaps now a bedside privacy screen found in a hospital ward. Individually these things are not monumental, nor do they really narrate a fiction about Christie. They are however meaningful objects. Together their variations mark out an installation in an art gallery that makes us stop, wonder and begin to connect – things with other things, bodies with objects, violence with absence. Buchanan, like many contemporary artists, has an uncanny ability to imbue objects with what we used to call “aura”, and now call “vitality”. These choreographed objects seem to vibrate with life energy.

Can a chair have life energy?<sup>[3]</sup> Can it actively contribute to unravelling a mystery? Could it have actually participated in the perpetration of the mystery? Can it retain a vital force as it shifts form between countries, between bodies, and across time?

Later, I walk into another gallery and my child, exhausted with yet-another Biennale outing, flops into the closest chair and starts fiddling with a glass box on a table. Surrounding us hang strange virtual reality helmets: hoods with golden protuberances and layers of aluminium foil and PVA glue that seem to have been left behind by a recent school visit. I put one over my head and am overwhelmed by the odour of previous bodies. Inside I’m in the backseat of a car driving through desolation. There is a strange beeping, people in white Teflon overalls sit in the front seat and talk in hushed tones. We pull up in a small village, and everyone gets out of the car, they sweep their bodies with the blinking beeping devices, and we enter a room. On the floor is a glowing green cube. I recognise it. This is Trevor Paglen’s *Trinity Cube* (2015), a cube of Trinitite (the new mineral created in the New Mexico desert with the explosion of the first nuclear device on July 16, 1945), encased in irradiated melted glass taken from the windows of a restaurant inside the Fukushima Exclusion Zone.<sup>[4]</sup> One radioactive body inside another. And here we are, more bodies inside other bodies and travelling around the site of an exhibition that we will never be able to visit until the radioactive contamination from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant drops to a “safe” level (estimated to be anytime between 3 and 30,000 years from the present). And here are the tables and chairs. The same table and chairs that my daughter is currently sitting at. I find myself choking inside the helmet. I pull the helmet off and guide her

to the bathroom, we wash our hands and head out for ice-cream. VR always makes me nauseous.

Can a chair die? Could it kill me? My child? Could it carry contamination from one place to another? Can it retain a vital force as it shifts form between countries, between bodies, and across time?

In the Holocene, relationships between humans and chairs and art galleries were reasonably straightforward. After 11,500 years of planetary stability, humans had the measure of stuff, rules were in place to keep everything in its place, and laws enforced any abhorrent behaviours. So when in 1716 a clapper from a bell fell on a man's head, the judge could assert that as it was ringing at the time, the whole bell was forfeit to the crown. And when a flock of 58 sheep all moved to one end of a boat crossing a river and two men died, the law declared the boat (in this case – not the sheep) deodand because the boat was moving and had caused death (Sutton, 1997: 44-45).

In a passing discussion of what it might be to be a Latourian 'actant', Jane Bennett raises this historical figure of the 'deodand' (Bennett, 2010: 9). Enshrined in English Law for nearly six hundred years the deodand was an inanimate chattel (object or animal) that when in motion had caused the death of a human, and as a result must be legally forfeited to God via the 'King's almoner who would eventually apply them to some pious use' (Pervukhin, 2005: 237). The law of deodand replaced the laws of 'noxal surrender' (the payment of banes direct to the victim) in 1066. A twelfth century statute states: 'concerning horses, boats, carts and things belonging to a mill by which someone is killed, which things are properly called banes, they are to be arrested and, afterwards, handed over to the township' (cited in Pervukhin, 2005: 251). Historians highlight the active role of the deodand, for example: a vat of boiling water, carving knife, falling tree, horse, bundle of straw, fishing net, or a tram, rope, spoon, pig, ladder or brewery floor were all causes of misadventure, contributing to the accident and thus could be confiscated. Significantly, once it became established the common law of deodand distinguished between a thing in motion and a thing standing still. A cart in motion required the whole cart to be forfeited, whereas a fall from a stationary cart (a resting object) would require the forfeit of just the wheel. These guilty objects in motion were afforded agency by ancient

juries who apparently 'ascribed free will to horses, carriages, and spoons' (Pervukhin, 2005: 252).

Over time the nature and enforcement of deodand changed and the practice was abolished in 1846; not coincidentally after the exponential rise of railways. Too many accidents meant that the ongoing surrender of guilty things would remove most trains from the newly built tracks, and the substitution of cash levies was becoming unsustainable. William Pietz notes that the abolition of the law of deodand was part of a change to a raft of social institutions in the 1840s that 'established legal structures better suited to capitalist enterprise and liberal society' (1997: 98). Fault had to lie elsewhere — with humans not objects. Increasingly complex laws of compensation, cause and effect replaced the deodand, but the nonhuman objects and their crimes did not go away.

Let's for a minute return to the definition of the object offered in the 1846 'Act to Abolish Deodands'. The deodand was a nonhuman material object, an 'accursed thing' that when in motion had killed a person. For example, to remove the requirement for deodand when a person had been dragged to his death by the workings of a mill, the law had to prove that 'the accident which happened was a mere accident, and had not happened through any fault of the machinery' (Pietz, 1997: 91). By the time that the concept of deodand was overthrown objects were becoming stabilised by capital. For example, the deodand required for the Sonning Cutting railway disaster in 1841 of two trucks and the engine was considered impossible to pay, even if financially it would mean compensation for the families of those killed. Instead new laws regarding fatal accidents shifted blame away from the moving object and towards adjudication of the impact and severity of the injury. The nonhuman object in motion lost its place to a humanist rationale that turned its focus towards mitigating the impacts of increasing industrial and railroad accidents.

The rise of industrial capitalism meant that the agency of objects became reduced to one of exchange. The "death of the deodand" created money. Instead of the object becoming forfeit, compensation could be financial; another form of debt exchange. Slipping away were the objects themselves. Taking up the place of the deodand were objects of industrialisation that could be bought and sold within a monetary economy. This transformation also included art

objects, which due to the professionalisation of the art dealer were also becoming publicly exchangeable commodities.

Today the concept of deodand holds a place in legal history alongside sows charged with criminal offences, and cats hung to death in public spaces.<sup>[5]</sup> It offers a useful way to think of the way that nonhuman things remain potent objects, not for just what they mean to us, but for what they mean in relation to other objects.

## Motion

In 1982 Korean-American artist Nam June Paik's robot *K-456* was removed from its pedestal at the Whitney Museum and guided by the artist down Madison Avenue where it walked out into the street and was hit by a passing car.<sup>[6]</sup> Paik said that *K-456* represented 'the catastrophe of technology in the twenty-first century. And we are learning how to cope with it' (cited in Hanhardt, 2006).

In 1996 Belgian artist Francis Alÿs made a film in which he kicked a bottle around a square in his home town of Mexico City. *If you are a Typical Spectator, What you are Really Doing is Waiting for the Accident to Happen* (1996) ended when Alÿs wandered into the road and got hit by a passing car.<sup>[7]</sup>

A trend begins to emerge.

An image now hailed as one of the touchstones of the Anthropocene is British artist JMW Turner's *Rain, Steam and Speed—The Great Western Railway* (1844). A black locomotive pulling a series of open-topped carriages is approaching at speed over a bridge from the top left of the image. Dense rain is being turned into steam by the metal against metal of the wheels and tracks, and the towering height of the bridge feels suddenly precarious as heavy industry bears down towards the green fields hidden in fog at the front of the image. The concept of deodand had not yet been overruled, and Turner like many others at the time had been witness to many train and automobile accidents.

In a review William Makepeace Thackeray described the painting for his readers:

*He has made a picture with real rain, behind which is real sunshine, and you expect a rainbow every minute. Meanwhile, there comes a train down upon you, really moving at the rate of fifty miles an hour, and which the reader had best make haste to see, lest it should dash out of the picture, and be away up Charing Cross through the wall opposite.*  
(Thackerary, 1844: 712-13)

But the viewer does not run, instead we are frozen in horror. There is a tiny hare on the tracks. An animal so insignificant that its death will not result in the extinction of its species; instead its networks of family and society will rebuild, and children's stories will be written about the day that Peter's father decided to cross the train tracks to see what was in the green fields over the line. None of this has happened yet. Right now, here in the painting the hare is stationary, and the train is a 'hunter in motion' (Thomas, 2016).

Turner said, 'Always take advantage of an accident' (cited in Thomas, 2016).

But why this image over any other as a marker of the Anthropocene? It is the Industrial Revolution. Britain is making the transition to an industrial society, and Turner is there to witness it. In one of the foundational documents of the Anthropocene, Paul Crutzen points to Boulton and Watts' new and improved harnessing of steam to drive extraction machines for coal mines in 1784 as the key moment when humans mastered geological control of their materials (Crutzen, 2006; see also Steffen, Grinevald et al, 2011: 842-867). Under pressure coal is converted into hydrogen and carbon monoxide in the heat of the steam compressors and ancient geologic carbon re-enters the contemporary carbon cycle (Ziolkowski, 2016, 35-40). First in machinery and then in transportation the power of steam replaced the motion of animals. It seemed to be an unstoppable ecological transformation. EA Wrigley called it an 'energy revolution' on an island nation (Wrigley, 2010; see also Moore, 2011: 108-47). Steam trains were the next logical step when the steam engines gained the power of motion and travelled to and from the abundant and accessible coal fields that contained an inexhaustible supply of cheap energy and cheap labour. Predictably, the transformation came with uneven social costs. Maybe the people in the carriages in Turner's painting are returning from a day out in the country, or maybe they are workers from one of the new industrial factories on the outskirts of London returning home to see their loved ones. Their labour is regulated, and their city is being reshaped.



The Sonning Cutting railway disaster on a section of the Great Western Railway happened on Christmas Eve in 1841, three years before Turner's painting was exhibited. The train was transporting two carriages of passengers at the front of the train, next to the tender, followed by a truck for the passengers' luggage and sixteen wagons of freight. The passengers were 'chiefly of the poorer classes', in this case, stonemasons returning home for Christmas. When a large rock from a slip above the track derailed the locomotive, the passengers were crushed by the motion of the freight. The trial was widely reported in the newspapers — 'Eight persons in an instant dashed to atoms, and twice as many grievously wounded!' (E.A.M., 1842: 5-8) — with blame laid on the rock. Because everything was in motion at the time, a deodand based on the value of the locomotive and the carriages was ordered payable by the owner of the railway to the lord of the manor on whose land the accident occurred. He was meant to then share the money amongst the families of the injured and killed. He never did, nor was the money ever paid, nor was the engine forfeited. The age of moving objects being at fault for causing death was over.

## Dead matter

In another gallery, on another day, there is an elephant. The gallery is a white cube, every surface shines, reflecting the elephant's pitted grey skin. The elephant paces around the cube, its feet mirrored in the polished concrete. After a while the elephant slumps to the ground and rolls onto its side. Resting. Dead? In *Vibrant Matter* Jane Bennett identifies how in the years after the deodand we learnt to divide the world into dull matter (it/things) and vibrant life (us/beings). Her focus on vitality, movement, and circulation is not just about physical relationships, it is about a political ecology of things. Art, in this context, is the drawing of relationships between substances. The energy moving between the elephant in Douglas Gordon's *Play Dead: Real Time* (2003) and anyone that stands in this space before the three projection screens that record and watch the elephant, constantly shifts and moves.<sup>[8]</sup> This is not dead matter, we can all see it is a living elephant. What Gordon raises is a questioning of the way that we think about energy. Is what we see in *Play Dead* a revisitation of energy rather than the object as a material? Despite the possibilities that objects have to flow, to merge and meld with other objects, matter-energy can do things that objects can't. It can compose as well as destroy:

*we know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or join with it in composing a more powerful body.*  
(Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 257)

Bennett equates affect with materiality, and makes clear the extension of Deleuze and Guattari's ideas into the realms of what she terms not-quite-bodies (Bennett, 2010: 108). She stretches us to think about not only things and objects (nouns) as bodies, she doesn't quite suggest we return to the age of the deodand.

Alongside the deodand, some philosophies of matter already contained evidence of death. From 1640 to 1679 Anne Conway worked from her bedroom at Ragley Hall in Warwickshire, England. She was tutored "at a distance" by the Cambridge Platonist Henry More and visited by many other thinkers. Living in her home was the travelling scholar Francis Mercury van Helmont who would later carry her writing to Holland for publication and also introduce his friend Gotthold Leibniz to her notion of the monad, developed from her readings of the Kabbala (Hutton, 2015).

Conway was deeply informed by her religious beliefs and practices. Her concerns were with substance, time, essence and people. Her contemporary René Descartes had proposed a view of a mechanistic science where all natural phenomena could be explained in terms of simple observations of matter in motion. In her treatise *The Principles of the most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* published after her death in 1690, Conway explicitly counters Descartes with a concept of processual nature. Her aim was to challenge science as it was articulated by the mechanists. Descartes' mechanistic world was full of causality and death. Conway's world, on the other hand, is based in a logic of physics (movement) that is vitalist (specifically there is not a pre-existent matter that moved, but moving matter.) She argued that all substance is living, perceptive, and always in motion. As a result there is no such thing as a material body (for if it was inert it would contradict God—who is life itself).

Like Leibniz she argued that all of reality (both inorganic and organic) was made up of an infinite number of living atoms, each substance contains within itself infinitely many smaller substances. These substances she called monads. The monad contained attributes of internal energy and perception and no two were alike (Conway, 1996).

Arguing that her views were explicitly “anti-Cartesian”, Conway stated that there was no such thing as dead matter, only matter in which the soul was transforming into a new material by continuously travelling up and down a dynamic, energetic and infinite staircase (Wayne White, 2008: 48, 52). By engaging an open definition of the body that included all forms of matter Conway demonstrated that if matter were dead it would not be able to be penetrated by other matter. Bodies are alive, self-moving, divisible, and capable of being penetrable. Her examples are abundant: although it may be true that iron cannot be penetrated by an ‘equally coarse body’, she writes, in-fact ‘subtle bodies such as fire’ can completely transform it. ‘All things have life and really live in some degree or measure’ (Conway, 1996: 45-46).

At the time statements like this were in line with scientific understandings of the geology of the earth. It was in 1659 that Nicolas Steno had begun to question the received scientific wisdom that fossils grew in the ground (Davidson, 2000: 329-44). The fundamental organic unity of nature was not yet in question. The living rocks of Lady Conway shifted the opposition of organic and inorganic matter into tonal flow and flux. The most fascinating part of her thesis is the changeability of species into each other at a material level. Wheat turns into barley, worms into flies (Wayne White, 2008: 53). It is a theory of spontaneous generation. And rocks can change into anything: ‘stone and dust could eventually be transformed (logically) into human beings. The reverse was also true. An individual could become a stone or a horse could become a shrub’ (Wayne White, 2008: 53). The marble that fascinated Conway is formed from the compression of ancient and once animate beings. It is a metamorphic rock; meaning that it is formed from other rocks such as limestone or dolomite. The changes in form occur due to extreme pressure and heat.

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One hundred and fifty years later, on the other side of the earth, new colonisers of a hot land began carving buildings out of sandstone. Until the 1890s sandstone — a sedimentary rock

consisting of compacted sand that is usually a majority of quartz grains — was the dominant building medium in Sydney, Australia. Mikala Dwyer's *The Apparition of a Subtraction* (2010, figure 3) is a collection of sandstone 'zeros' carved from blocks quarried from Cockatoo Island in the middle of Sydney harbour and left over in the construction of her parent's house.<sup>[9]</sup> The zeros stand in a circle with other domesticated objects. Circles are a way of shaping thoughts. Dwyer says there is also something about the circle that 'invokes a threshold' (Parker, 2015: 64). The circle is a tight form of geometry, a closed system that can hold together disparate objects. The work fuses sound, smoke and stone into a séance that proceeds via metamorphism to address the vitality of the rock.



Figure 3. Mikala Dwyer, *An Apparition of a Subtraction* (2010) audio, smoke machines, sandstone, plants, lights, acrylic, chair, wood, clay, plastic, ashes (grandmother), wood carving (father in law-Leslie Corben), table, electrical cord, dimensions variable. 17th Biennale of Sydney (2010) at Cockatoo Island curated by David Elliot. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

At unexpected moments the work produces a smoky apparition. At others the room is filled with the dense noise of chipping and scraping. Dwyer describes how she used sound to refill the rocks and manufacture a solid from air. The sound was recorded from within the stone as it was carved.



*I had this idea, that I could create a sonic object from the negative space of the stone, by layering the sound of the chipping so many times that it became dense again. And that by directing the sound into one spot through speaker cones, it would be possible to form an object that the ghosts could manifest through; a sort of summoning through the sound becoming matter again. (in Byrt, 2011)*

The work had a second part hidden at the end of one of the long tunnels that pierce the island (figure 4). Disguised within the arcane bowels of the Island the sound of chipping stone was only visible in passing. Red light glowed, bodies rustled and water dripped. Puffs of fog or smoke indicated life.



Figure 4. Mikala Dwyer, *An Apparition of a Subtraction* (2010) audio, smoke machines, sandstone, plants, lights, acrylic, chair, wood, clay, plastic, ashes (grandmother), wood carving (father in law-Leslie Corben), table, electrical cord, dimensions variable. 17th Biennale of Sydney (2010) at Cockatoo Island curated by David Elliot. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

By splitting the work across two locations, Dwyer includes the working practice as a live activity: stone and steam. Like Conway's water that breeds fish, these are rocks that can animate the ghosts of bodies that previously lived here and hewed the stone that now waits in



the circle. The fossils are growing in the rocks. It offers both a negative and a positive to the work itself. One is calm controlled visible, the other hidden, violent.

Conway and Dwyer speak of vitality and material in the same way: Dwyer says, 'Stone here, for example, is very loaded. It has its own consciousness but it's made up of particles and densities. It has its own memory, its own geological memory, and I'm working in dialogue with that' (Dwyer and Watts, 2010). For Conway every substance 'reacts' to the substances in its vicinity. It is a constant process of permeability and obstruction. 'Wood is potentially Fire, that is, can be turned into Fire; Water is potentially Air, that is, may be changed into Air' (Conway, 1996: 39). Obstruction is key, it is what enables movement. She describes the manner in which a sail instead of a net contains movement. Without the resistance of the sail there would be no wind. 'In every creature, whether the same be a spirit or a body, there is an infinity of creatures, each whereof contains an infinity, and again each of these, and so ad infinitum' (Wayne White, 2008: 52). The nonhuman is not reducible to what the human can know about it. Rather the understanding of matter that was central to Conway's development of the notion of the monad was not about enfolding (as it was to be with Leibniz) but the "aliveness" of matter.

The step between a rational system of vital matter and the potential irrationality of the supernatural is small. Conway's processual, organic life offers a vitalistic metaphysics that will be developed further by Leibniz. It is magical: 'Each part of matter can be thought of as a garden full of plants or a pond full of fish. But each branch of the plant, each member of the animal, each drop of its humours, is also such a garden or such a pond' (Merchant, 1979: 268).

When Anne Conway was writing the earth was much cooler than it is today. And Australia was a vibrant and living environment of people, plants, animals and rocks that had not yet been disseminated by colonial and industrial forces. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many of the rocks on Cockatoo Island bore witness to unspeakable human atrocities. If there is to be infinite matter, that is a malleable and transformative living matter as Conway imagined, a level of care needs to be enacted. Like humans, rocks can be careless too, railway disasters are evidence of this. Leibniz wrote to Conway: 'Everywhere the subject swirls in the midst of forces they exert stress that defines the individual body, its elasticity, and its bending motions in volumes that produce movement in and of extension' (quoted in Merchant, 1979: 268; see also Conley in Deleuze, 1993: xvii). An equation emerges: beings in motion, rocks in motion,

bodies in motion, but motion is not always life. We listen to the chipping of the rocks in Dwyer's *Apparition of a Subtraction* and the pain of the rocks is somewhat different to our own. Although equally fragile, the rocks can withstand heat and can adapt at a molecular level. Dwyer reminds us that we are yet to see if humans can do the same.

## Under cover of darkness

From 1814 to 1820 the ageing Spanish artist Francisco Goya began the process of engraving 83 copper plates with a series of images reflecting on the worst possible effects of human activity (figure 1). The Disasters of War contain an 'unstinting portrayal of rape, genocide, torture and ritual mutilation' (Shaw, 2003: 480). Together the plates make up what Philip Shaw has called 'the abject at its most insistent' (Shaw, 2003: 480; I follow Shaw's argument closely in what follows). Viewing the plates consecutively the horrors become overwhelming. Goya was responding to the Napoleonic occupation of Spain, its aftermath, and the atrocities committed during this time. The plates are full of humans, animals and violent objects of all kinds. The Disasters of War contain such horror it could not be published until 1863, 35 years after Goya's death.

Can we take a different angle? First there was war. And hate. Across the plates that make up the *Disasters of War* there is a movement towards the nonhuman: animals and objects commit crimes but they are also victims. The etchings tell a horrifying story of the Spanish nationalist insurrection that began in 1808. The works record a modernity that knew too much about the world and was now turning in on itself. Goya marks his harrowing complicity in his captions: plate 44: 'Yo lo vi' (I saw it), plate 45: 'Y esto tambien' (And this too). It is the last 16 plates that move the narrative on. No longer reporting objectively on the violence, Goya immerses us inside it as animals perform the allegorical role of suffering. In plate 76 'El buitre carnívoro' (The carnivorous vulture), is the "vulture" the giant bird who catches our eye? Or is it the crowds who are weak and sick with famine, or, the workers armed with pitchforks who are trying to oust the creature? Who is consuming who? On the right a huddle of cloaked and hatted figures turn their backs to us, planning a moment beyond the animal's pain. In Goya's ageing eyes we are bound together as creatures in a web of violence.

The images are neither rational nor ethical. In some situations humans use artworks as a means for narrative; a way to get a message across. In this context we might choose to read Goya's images as allegory, a means towards the truth. Yet, the *Disasters of War* are not just objects made by one human for other humans to look at, but objects that contain affective resonances of their own. They actively generate behaviours. This is why we continue to look at them today. The objects do not reflect on or represent, but contain the very taboos the artist sought to highlight. If we stop thinking of the plates as representations of humanist desire, and instead start to think about them as active nonhuman objects, the *Disasters of War* become participants in the telling of tales of brutality. Goya's prints are not mere tools for the telling of stories of war. They have contributed to and changed behaviours.

It is hard to know what models of survival or punishment Goya was using, but the figures in the etchings map a global warning system. In 1808 similar disasters were happening in New Zealand and Australia. Racially-driven Massacres and murder were a key part of the development of two prosperous and sovereign nations blessed with the potential to provide an endless supply of meat and grain for the Mother country. The development of a distributed south seas food bowl was accompanied by the ever accelerating disappearance of species from the land and sky. But that, is perhaps a tangent.

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In 2002 British artists Jake and Dinos Chapman purchased a historically significant edition of Goya's prints. Republished in 1937 as a reminder once again of the atrocities of war (this time of Fascism in Spain) the edition includes a frontispiece showing a photograph of bomb damage to the Goya Foundation. Dinos Chapman says that 'We had it sitting around for a couple of years, every so often taking it out and having a look at it'. Jake picks up the story: 'We always had the intention of rectifying it, to take that nice word from *The Shining*, when the butler's trying to encourage Jack Nicholson to kill his family – to rectify the situation' (Jones, 2003).

Working with pen ink and gouache across all 83 plates, the Chapman brothers replaced the heads of the victims in the images with grotesque and distorted nonhuman forms including clown and puppy faces. The Chapmans sought to draw a direct parallel 'between the "enlightened" annexation of Spain and the recent "humanitarian" interventions in Iraq' (Jones,

2003). As Jonathan Jones says 'The Chapmans have remade Goya's masterpiece for a century which has rediscovered evil' (Jones, 2003). The series was retitled *Insult to Injury*. In this process of defamiliarisation the artworks become stranger. Their tattooed and scarified surfaces result in a new energy.

Different ways of thinking vitality emerge when I think through the agency of the deodand amid these newly reworked images. Objects do things. The objects and bodies within the images don't just contain affective powers, but as actants (things in motion that relate to other things) they make things happen that are not just about and directed towards the human. Occasionally things go wrong, and this was the logic of the deodand. Take the knife from the man and the knife will not kill. Take the wheel from the cart and it cannot hurt again. Place the knife in the hand of a dog and it becomes a different knife. Full of potential.

The 'rectifying' of the *Disasters of War* was not the first time the Chapmans had reworked Goya. Another of their works forms the centre of a room at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart. *Great Deeds against the Dead 2* (1994) is a simultaneously graphic and sanitised reworking of plate 39 *Grands Hazana! Con Muertos!* (Great deeds! Against the dead!) from the *Disasters of War*.<sup>[10]</sup> But this is not a reanimation. This object is dead. The Chapmans describe it as such: '[we] were interested in making a dead sculpture. Dead in content and dead – or inert — in materiality' (Jones, 2003). This is a nonhuman object with no agency. The violence committed is as standardised as the bodies, the 'plasticised wounds... nullify the gaze' (Chapmans quoted in Jones, 2003). Goya's tree that once had life — branches, buds and leaves — has been stripped and rendered in the same dead material as the human bodies impaled upon it.

A central part of Jane Bennett's discussion of vital materiality is about the liveness or vitality of nonhuman objects. In keeping these objects discrete and separate to ourselves, Bennett says:

*the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalised matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies. (Bennett, 2010: ix-x)*

Bennett's point is that we need to be able to recognise vitality in nonhuman objects as well as in human ones. A focus on vitality, motion, movement or circulation emphasises just how dead this particular object is.

Goya was working in Spain at the same time that moves were beginning to overturn the law of deodand in England. With the loss of the law of the deodand we no longer have a law protecting nonhuman objects. Where once they were able to take responsibility for the harm they have caused, now objects are just another group of silenced witnesses.

## The accident

I was visiting the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam, it was opening day, the first reopening of the 'The Temporary Stedelijk'. The museum had been closed since 2004 and due to a continual and terrible process of transformation, they were temporarily re-occupying their own galleries. The opening of the temporary was my first day in Amsterdam. Quietly occupying myself in the exhibition I skirted around the edge of a large swirling sand mandala in the midst of the gallery floor. And then something happened. As I was walking around the work, suddenly and somehow, because I never quite saw how it happened, a small plastic "keep off" sign was kicked into the middle of the pattern. I started to film.

What I captured was a sense that something had happened, but only just. The video shows other gallery visitors walking into the room, and the guards fussing in a guard-like way. One mimes holding a large stick as he thinks through how to remove the sign, another person enters the room and nearly trips on a similar sign. The air is charged, something has happened that was not meant to happen. We were all in an art gallery, we were all looking at the work, but no one is really looking at the work anymore. Everyone is fixated on a small piece of plastic that is somewhere it shouldn't be, and the work is forever transformed.

The work, (*Nursery Piece*, 2010 by Job Koelewijn) is a sand drawing beneath which loose pages from Spinoza's *Ethics* are visible. Made up of vibrations of blue and green sand, the work has been painstakingly built up and swept together. The gallery catalogue says: 'The powerful optical effect of the drawing and the penetrating scent of eucalyptus massage the wisdom of



Spinoza into our minds'.<sup>[11]</sup> What was this moment that I was experiencing? It was an accident. Already in the text on the floor was a description of the experience.

In the *Ethics* Spinoza argues that the belief that something is accidental or spontaneous can be based only on an inadequate grasp of the thing's causal explanation, on a partial and 'mutilated' familiarity with it (Nadler, 2018). For Spinoza, thought involves grasping the causal connections between things. We understand things and objects as well as bodies as entities in relationship with other entities; a thing's causal connections reach not just to other objects but, more importantly, to the infinite modes that follow immediately from them. In this case, the object was more than present, it had things that it did to me, to the people around it, to other objects, ... and it misbehaved. The small plastic label had met with some kind of force and launched itself into the centre of the artwork, a sudden transformation from an object designed to protect an object; to one enmeshed deeply inside and potentially destroying the object. Who should pay the forfeit for the small piece of plastic in motion in the gallery, that caused irreparable damage, not to a human, but to another object?

## The end of the world

It strikes me that the concept of deodand might return as we struggle to find ways to account for our ongoing behaviour in the Anthropocene. Timothy Morton: 'There you are, turning the ignition of your car ... And it creeps up on you'. Every time you fire up your engine you don't mean to harm the Earth, 'let alone cause the Sixth Mass Extinction Event in the four-and-a-half billion-year history of life on this planet'. But 'harm to Earth is precisely what is happening' (Morton, 2016: 9). Purchasing a flight online I am given the choice to offset my carbon emissions. A report from the Centre for Biological Diversity in 2015 tells me that air travel will have generated 43 Gigatonne of carbon pollution by 2050 (almost 5% of the remaining global climate budget) (Sullivan and Siegel, 2015). That is about 3 Gigatonne of carbon annually, but only one in ten of us choose to pay to offset the emissions by planting trees (although the futility of this action is not lost on us). Burning fossil fuels produces about 6.5 times as much carbon as the land can sequester, meaning we can never plant enough trees to offset the full environmental cost of a flight. Like deodand the payment of carbon emissions does not fully rectify the damage done. Martin Rice and Will Steffen explain that 'Burning fossil fuels and

releasing CO<sub>2</sub> to the atmosphere thus introduces new and additional carbon into the land-atmosphere-ocean cycle. It does not simply redistribute existing carbon in the cycle' (Rice and Steffen, 2016). I decide not to fly.

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An essay like this is written in ripples. I have taken on board Jane Bennett's challenge to employ a process of 'strategic anthropomorphizing': 'allowing yourself to relax into resemblances between your-body-and-its-operations and the bodies-of-things-outside' (Bennett in Gratton, 2010). For now it seems plausible to say that chairs, trees, airplanes, spoons, pigs, trains, millstones, and vats of boiling water do something, that they have agency. But we hold art and writing apart from these everyday relations. Art makes things behave differently. When we go into the charged space of the art gallery, we have an experience we can't have anywhere else. We have an experience of things behaving differently. Writing is the same, except it enters our bodies and forms networks. Words are experienced more than digested, they are immediate, complex and impossible. Carolyn Merchant writes that Conway's

*Vitalism in its monistic form was inherently anti-exploitative. Its emphasis on the life of all things as gradations of soul, its lack of a separate distinction between matter and spirit, its principle of an immanent activity permeating nature, and its reverence for the nurturing power of the earth endowed it with an ethic of the inherent worth of everything alive.*  
(Merchant, 1983: 254)

Conway argued that there was no such thing as dead matter, only matter in which the soul was moving and transforming into a new material. The law of deodand was one way to account for the actions of this living matter. Over time objects have become strange again, not just as markers of war and violence but of a time where nonhuman things once again have agency, and their impacts can be taken seriously (even in a court of law). The Anthropocene has rearranged our material relationships: humans are a geological force ensnaring every object within reach into our diabolical plan to reconfigure the planet through increasing networks of violence. We could refuse to look, but the continual arrival of data across the networks means that more and more of these violent objects are uncovered, and more and more we are asked to account for their actions. The relationship between human and nonhuman things has been

enlarged to tragi-comic levels. There is nothing to forfeit, no sacrifice can be made that is greater than the violated and distorted planet. We are dead.

## Biographical Note

Susan Ballard is the co-director of the C3P Research Centre at the University of Wollongong, Australia and leader of MECO, the Material Ecologies research network. Recent essays in *Energies in the Arts* (MIT) *The Anthropocene Review*, *Environmental Humanities*, and *Art and Australia* are concerned with the ways in which contemporary art and writing address big ideas about species extinction, energy, geology, and the politics of culture. She is one of the multi-authors of *100 Atmospheres: Studies in Scale and Wonder* (Open Humanities Press, 2019). With Christine Eriksen, Su is the co-author of *Alliances in the Anthropocene: Humans, Plants, and Fire* (Palgrave Pivot, 2020) and her monograph *Art and Nature in the Anthropocene: Planetary Aesthetics* will also be out with Routledge in 2020. Su teaches contemporary art history, and critical theory, and is Head of Postgraduate Studies in the School of the Arts, English and Media at the University of Wollongong. <http://suballard.net.nz>

## Notes

[1] Francisco de Goya, *Y son fieras* (And they are like wild beasts) Plate 5 from *The Disasters of War* (*Los Desastres de la Guerra*) 1810 (published 1863) Etching, burnished aquatint and drypoint, 15.2 x 20.7cm. This reproduction sourced from Wikimedia Commons, and donated to Wikimedia Commons by the National Gallery of Art, Washington. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Goya\\_-\\_Y\\_son\\_fieras\\_\(And\\_They\\_Are\\_Like\\_Wild\\_Beasts\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Goya_-_Y_son_fieras_(And_They_Are_Like_Wild_Beasts).jpg)

[2] Ruth Buchanan, *Circular Facts* (2009/2010), coated MDF board, powder coated steel frames, brushed cotton, coated 35mm slide projector stand, audio and 35mm slide on synchronised loop on headphones, two chairs borrowed from Hotel Bad Toelz, dimensions and duration variable. Installation view: Monumentalism, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. <https://ocula.com/artists/ruth-buchanan/>

[3] Sue Turnbull asked me this question during a panel presentation following a very early version of these thoughts at *Telling Truths: Crime Fiction and National Allegory* (UOW, December 2012). I hope the essay below begins to answer her misgivings. I thank Sue for the provocation, and also my co-authors in MECO, The Material Ecologies research network, and the Centre for Critical Creative Practice at UOW for ongoing conversations about what art and

writing can do.

[4] Trevor Paglen, *Trinity Cube*, (2015) Irradiated glass and Trinitite (purchased off the internet), 20 x 20 x 20cm. Installed as part of Chim↑Pom's Don't Follow the Wind, Fukushima exclusion zone, Japan 11 March 2015 – XX XX XXXX. *Don't Follow the Wind: A Walk in Fukushima*, 360 degree video, headsets, cafe furniture from Fukushima, Australian uranium, maps, installation commissioned by the 20th Biennale of Sydney, 20th Biennale of Sydney, Carriageworks, 18 March 2016 – 5 June 2016. *Don't Follow the Wind* is long term exhibition inside the inaccessible radioactive Fukushima exclusion zone formed after the nuclear disaster. Initiated by Chim↑Pom and co-developed with the curators Kenji Kubota, Eva and Franco Mattes, and Jason Waite. The project collaborates with displaced local residents and includes 12 artists developing new work inside the zone: Ai Weiwei, Aiko Miyana, Chim↑Pom, Grand Guignol Mirai, Nikolaus Hirsch and Jorge Otero-Pailos, Kota Takeuchi, Eva and Franco Mattes, Meiro Koizumi, Nobuaki Takekawa, Ahmet Ögüt, Trevor Paglen, and Taryn Simon. More details at [dontfollowthewind.info](http://dontfollowthewind.info)

[5] See 'Trial of a Sow and Pigs at Lavegny' from Robert Chambers (ed) *The book of days, a miscellany of popular antiquities in connection with the calendar, including anecdote, biography, & history, curiosities of literature and oddities of human life and character*. [https://archive.org/details/bookofdaysmiscelo1cham\\_1](https://archive.org/details/bookofdaysmiscelo1cham_1)

[6] The entire event was staged, with the car driven by a friend of Paik's. <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/robot-k-456/>

[7] Francis Alÿs, *If you are a Typical Spectator, What you are Really Doing is Waiting for the Accident to Happen* (1996) performance, Mexico City. <http://francisalys.com/if-you-are-a-typical-spectator-what-you-are-really-doing-is-waiting-for-the-accident-to-happen-bottle/>

[8] Douglas Gordon, *Play Dead: Real Time*, Three channel video (colour silent) two projectors, two screens, monitor, 19:11min. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/100620>

[9] Mikala Dwyer, *An Apparition of a Subtraction* (2010) audio, smoke machines, sandstone, plants, lights, acrylic, chair, wood, clay, plastic, ashes ( grandmother), wood carving ( father in law- Leslie Corben), table, electrical cord, dimensions variable. 17th Biennale of Sydney (2010) at Cockatoo Island curated by David Elliot. <http://www.mikaladwyer.com/an-apparition-of-a-subtraction-2010/>

[10] Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Great Deeds Against the Dead 2* (1994) Disasters of War, Goya, Mannequin, Mixed Media, 277 x 244 x 152.5cm. MONA, Tasmania. <http://jakeanddinoschapman.com/works/great-deeds-against-the-dead-2/>

[11] Wall text, transcribed from exhibition room. See also: <http://www.jobkoelewyn.nl/work/2009/the-nursery-piece/>

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