

Unearthed Objects: S3026 and Michael Marder's *object earth*

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Introduction

This text is a theoretical companion for a web-based iteration of *object earth*¹, an ongoing media arts project by the S3026 collective and the phenomenologist Michael Marder. *object earth* operates as an open-ended, fieldwork-driven, stratigraphic investigation into the dimensions of extractive human practices. Starting with a query into the ecological ambiguity of a wind turbine graveyard outside Casper, Wyoming, and expanding to wind farming, cattle ranching, and oil drilling, the project contemplates the vertical plane of extraction, whether below the earth's crust, into the atmosphere, or beyond. Along this vertiginous trajectory, residue, fragments, crud, debris, kernels, and clingy mutable seeds are tracked—composing and decomposing—forming new constellations of material relations with pedagogical potential.

¹ <https://s3026.art/unearthedobjects>

At the beginning of the film *The Beaches of Agnès*, Agnès Varda—putzing around a beach amongst the seaweed at low tide—turns to the camera and says, “If you opened up other people you’d find landscapes. If you opened me up you would find beaches” (01:08). Similarly, the perpetual travelogue that is *object earth* is an exploration of both inner and outer stratigraphic landscapes, viewing the past in the light of an angst-ridden future.

object earth is characterized by collaboration and adaptation, engaging in continuous dialogue across disciplines and ecologies to deepen our understanding of the planet’s interconnected systems, both conceptually and poetically. The project is always evolving designed not to reach completion or finality. In this way, *object earth* remains a constantly evolving entity, where each iteration opens possibilities for new relations, transformations, and learning. These iterations may take the forms of media installations, single-channel videos, performances, or web-based pieces. This is one such iteration.

The arguments presented in this paper do not intend to explain or summarize the associated media artwork. Rather, they provide the scaffolding for the project’s epistemic concerns. In each iteration, *object earth* employs new processes that suggest theories of practice. In this case, these theories are grounded in two metaphors drawn from the geological formations of deserts and plains: mirage and qanat. We deploy these metaphors as processual concepts that arise from the production of the work itself, reinforced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notions of the horizon and body perception as well as Maya Deren’s conception of vertical poesis. Each metaphor is a fragment, a synecdoche that, like a shard of ancient pottery, suggests the whole without losing specificity.

Working through these metaphors, we arrive at Siegfried Zielinski’s definition of media and Michel Foucault’s concept of archaeological comparison, both of which help us frame media

archaeology as a potential artistic practice. In *object earth*, this is achieved in part by using the technique of archaeological montage, as theorized by Harun Farocki and Wolfgang Ernst. Rather than conceiving media archaeology as a method for interpreting, analyzing, or historicizing artworks, we demonstrate how art itself can perform media archaeology.



Fig 1. Avatars from *object earth*.

Mirage is a function of the horizon. Every image is produced by way of mirage.

I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception. (Merleau-Ponty 354)

In this passage from *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the role of the experiencer in what they experience by holding them accountable for their point-of-view, which in turn makes the horizon possible. The finiteness of perception is constituted by the absolute nature of what lies beyond the horizon, as the horizon itself only takes shape by delineating the possibility of experiences that it occludes. Therefore, it is the limit of the horizon that delimits the infinite for all experiencers. Merleau-Ponty continues,

...it is simply that this horizon is the horizon of my immediate environment...the perception of the world is simply an expansion of my field of presence...and the body remains in it but at no time becomes an object in it. (354)

The horizon moves with the body, providing a boundary for the objects within it, yet the body itself never becomes an object in the field of presence it generates. This field of presence is distinctly finite, and its horizontal delimitation yields a temporal field of asymptotic infinity. This is an enumerated infinity, where we can perpetually count the steps we take toward the horizon without ever getting closer to it. Beyond the horizon lies what also constitutes it: an absolute infinity that cannot be enumerated, because it contains the infinity of all possibilities, including countlessness. It is the vibration between the horizon and what lies beyond that produces the mirage—the light bending through layers of varying densities to form an *image*. In *object earth*, images are created at this boundary, making all images the products of mirage. While mirage is real, it is part of a subjective field of presence emanating from bodies. All images are products of the mirage function of the horizon—a mobile, enumerable, but never approachable delimitation of the absolute, manifesting as finitude. This optical horizontality produces a temporal horizontality by the conflation of an infinitely enumerable space with the duration of its traverse. This results in time, as it is commonly understood, measured in a

particular dimension. Horizontal time is the time of causal histories, a reactionary time that privileges axiomatic logics of autochthony, topography, and telos. It is the time of progress, efficiency, discipline, and control.

It is particularly true that an object is an object only in so far as it can be moved away from me, and ultimately disappear from my field of vision. Its presence is such that it entails a possible absence. (Merleau-Ponty 102)

In the same way that the horizon is defined by what it delimits as its beyond, an object is only an object if it can be removed from the subject's field of presence. Furthermore, what makes an object an object is determined not only by its potential absence but by an infinite number of partial absences that are dictated by subjects' changes in perspective. Merleau-Ponty writes, "If the object is an invariable structure, it is not one *in spite of* the changes of perspective, but *in* that change or *through* it" (102). In other words, it is not an object's permanency that defines it as such, but its lack thereof. Objects change *for* subjects, like shapeshifters hiding alternate forms, only to reveal them again upon a shift in perspective. As we move around and through a gallery installation of *object earth*, the screens, images, and architectural elements present themselves as objects because they change according to our point of view. That they can be removed from our bodies' fields of presence suggests their infinite capacity for modulation under our gaze.

Mirage, sewn to the horizon like a fringe, remains fixed in its position, perpetually within our field of presence. As such, it cannot be considered an object because it lacks the fundamental capacity for absence and change. Instead, mirage is subject, and as such, it must be properly part of the body, integral to what Merleau-Ponty describes as the "subject of perception" (239). The representational quality of an image is the result of the objectification of this mirage-subject, endowing it with the capacity to be removed from our field of presence. The representation of

subjectivities is not subjectivity itself but rather a transformation from subject to object, as a function of horizontal time. This is the content of *object earth*, where images are created by objectifying the mirages pinned to the horizon of asymptotic infinities; thus, *object earth* is an earth capable of both absence and change.



Fig 2. The Philosopher's Footsteps/Qanat from *object earth*.

We become objects to the objects that are always already subjects. The body, construed as the subject of perception, is not an object to itself,² however, it is an object to other bodies. Our

² The Foucauldian conception of ethics as an encounter with the self-as-other would contradict this claim, and indeed it is more complicated than our simple statement suggests. There may be ways for our bodies to become objects to themselves, therefore simultaneously becoming the

objectified bodies are *avatars* of our perception in the same way that images are the avatars of mirages. The avatar-object may leave the field of presence of another body-subject. As avatars, we change for each other in acts of unconditional generosity. To be objectified is to become open, giving, and malleable to another's point of view. Therefore, being objectified is to be available for exploitation. This vulnerability is not an exploitation in itself but rather an ethical obligation for being among beings. While the exploitation of vulnerability is inevitable, given that all avatars of subjectivity are objects, it allows for the possibility of mutual exploitation.

Qanat (قنات) is a system for transporting water in desert climates with minimal evaporation. A vertical channel is drilled into the earth until it reaches an underground aquifer, known as the Mother Well. From this well, a horizontal channel known as the Gallery is opened, with additional vertical channels drilled along its length for access. *object earth* operates as qanat. The avatar images are vertical channels drilled into the earth, forming voids in the strata that allow access to the underlying torrent. The spaces between these channels are wellsprings of fluid knowledges that defy the frozen epistemologies of surface topographies. These are not the oases of mirages on the horizon but deep plunges into the depths of vertical time, whose waters are wet enough to quench and even drown.

Vertical time occurs when the gaps between representations swallow our footsteps as we walk toward horizons we can never approach, akin to the feeling of taking another step down a staircase only to realize you have already reached the bottom. Each representational object, emerging from the mirage-subject, is inherently constituted by its own absence as part of the

subjects and objects of perception, either through dissociation (meditation, chemical modification, or psychiatric malady) or through sociality (that is, to encounter the self in conversation with others).

void defined by the horizon. Vertical time is poetic time. Unlike traversing static epistemes, vertical time invites us to delve.

...the poetic construct arises from ...a “vertical” investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth so that you have poetry concerned in a sense not with what is occurring, but with what it feels like or what it means. (Deren)

The poetics of vertical time was described by Maya Deren in a 1956 Cinema 16 symposium on “Poetry and the Film,” where she outlined the distinction between the horizontal time of dramaturgy (which produces representational objects) and the vertical “attack” of poetry. She characterized the latter as “a logic of a central emotion or idea which attracts to itself even disparate images which contain that central core which they have in common.” While the horizontal attack demands a progressive, asymptotic logic, verticality plumbs the depths of



Fig 3. Pumpjack from *object earth*.

epistemological strata using the logic of the absolute. Vertical poetry enables the colocation of images independent of their causal or historical associations. That is not to say that all horizontal associations are stripped from them; instead, it is in the relative lack of seamlessness—similar to fissures in reconstructed ceramics—that they find meaning. These cracks are not simple continuity errors, but rather sites for our investigations. They encapsulate both meaning and affect, approaching nothing but the Gallery of absolute possibilities.

Archaeology, broadly speaking, requires excavation; it is extractive, violent, penetrating, and overtly (re)constructive. Its posterior agenda is fundamentally reactionary. However, there is another aspect to archaeology insofar as it is a technique. It has tools and procedures that can be implemented within alternative frameworks—in this case, the framework of vertical poesis.

Media are spaces of action for constructed attempts to connect what is separated.

(Zielinski 7)

For Zielinski, the precondition for a mediatic connection is separation, rather than continuity. In other words, spatiotemporal *discontinuity* is what media archaeology navigates. Rather than traversing frozen horizontal epistemes, media archaeology takes core samples—cross-sections of epistemological strata—drawing them up and (re)constructing objects with disparate materials. Viewed in this way, media archaeology is not a nostalgic preoccupation with old tech, or an analytical method for interpreting art, but a vertical attack on the past. In *object earth*, a suite of tools and techniques are used to bore, excavate, reveal, and (re)construct alternatives to spatiotemporally causal histories of the earth. *object earth* remediates the telos of technologically driven climate catastrophe narratives to reveal the sociocultural dimensions of such horizontal dramatizations. The wind turbine and the oil well, the sniper and the refugee, the fossilized

digital footprint and the undulating greens and purples of the clear blue sky are brought together to reveal *atopographic* knowledges that were already embedded in the mythological axioms of contemporary narratives. The atopographic, in *object earth*, is the investigation of vertical relationships to produce non-surface-based knowledge. Just as in reassembled earthenware, there are gaps in continuity that characterize such assemblages from which knowledge can spring. Rather than succumbing to epistemological fatalism, the core sample is an implementation of non-causal logic that does not only ask how and why materials are present, but it also examines what their presence can mean for the future. Each stratum exists on its own frozen horizontal episteme, but if you were to follow the vertical logic of the qanat, you would reach the fluid torrent below.

Foucault, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, refers to this as “archaeological comparison,” which he says, “does not have a unifying, but diversifying effect” (160). *object earth* is not a simplification of the earth as an object, but a complicating—even confounding—work of media archaeological comparison, akin to what Ernst and Farocki have described as “archaeological montage” (264). It brings disparate elements together to complicate the assumptions of the contemporary episteme, rather than to answer them. Foucault elaborates, “what archaeology wishes to uncover is primarily—in the specificity and distance maintained in various discursive formations—the play of analogies and differences as they appear at the level of rules of formation” (160). The stratigraphic formations of *object earth* maintain their specificity and, crucially, are not brought together to be close, but in fact, to demonstrate how far apart they really are. Rather than applying general theories to each unearthed object, *object earth* allows each fragment its autonomy as an avatar-object of its own body-subject by bringing each fragment into the other’s field of presence. This necessarily implies the possibility of their

mutual absence. The rules of any given formation are never applied to another. Instead, *object earth* demonstrates the rules of each, by way of archaeological montage, “to show the proximities, symmetries, or analogies that have made generalizations possible” (161). This reveals the mythological bases of what are presumed to be factual axioms, undermining narratives built on static horizons and opening new spaces for action.

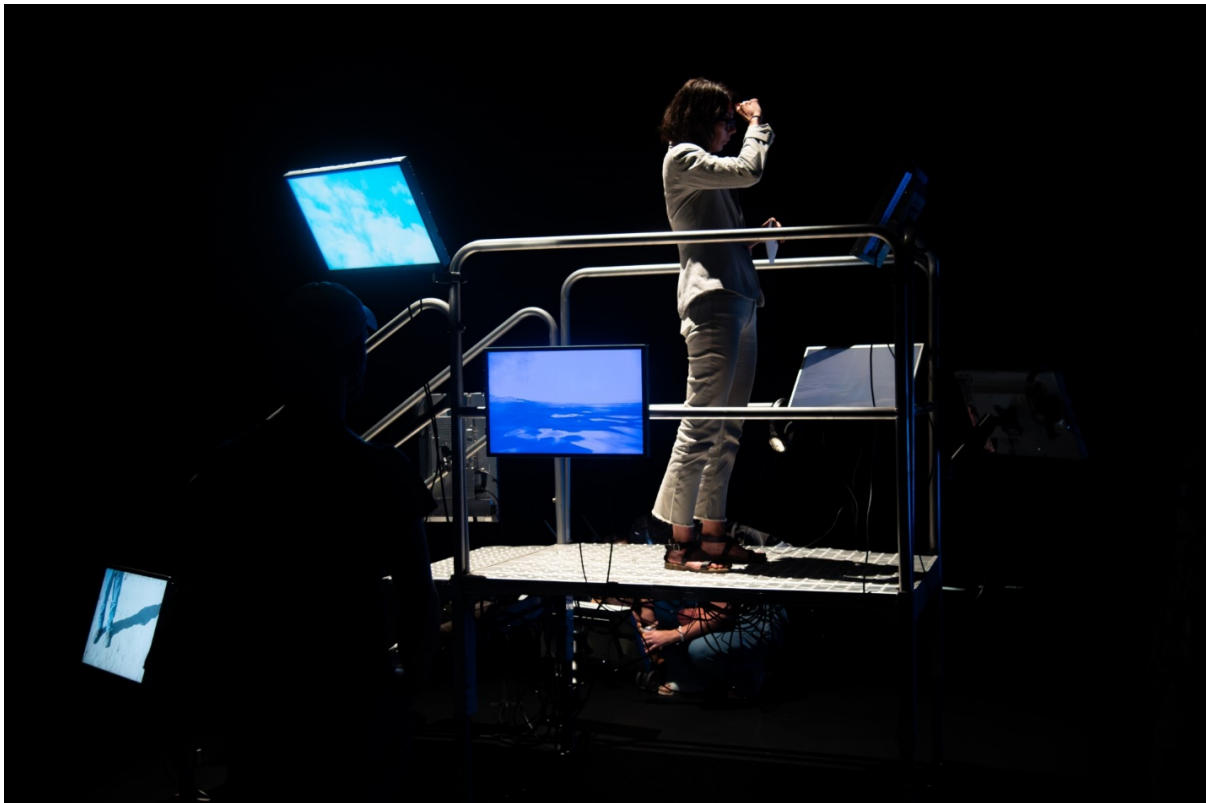


Fig 4. *object earth* installed at the Mimesis Documentary Festival, 2023.

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