



Specials > OBJECTHOOD

The *Specials* podcasts focus on projects by artists and curators who have some kind of connection to the Museum's programme and the MACBA Collection. **OBJECTHOOD** is a series of podcasts on new approaches to the role of the object in contemporary art and philosophy.

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Produced in collaboration with **Sonic Acts / Dark Ecology**.
Production, interviews and documentation: **Roc Jiménez de Cisneros**. Reading of Vilém Flusser's *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* excerpt by Antye Greie-Ripatti

Roc Jiménez de Cisneros is an artist. He lives and works in Barcelona. vivapunani.org

OBJECTHOOD #4

This podcast is about objects, but more importantly, it is about some of the recent theories that offer new conceptualisations of objects in contemporary philosophy and art. In this episode, we go underground, but also under water, where development clashes with strange hyperobjects such as poison, where geology meets politics, where horror meets daily life.

01. Introduction

In his 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Philip K. Dick coined the term kipple to refer to a weird kind of garbage which builds up without any 'human intervention'. In the novel, J.R. Isidore defines kipple as 'useless objects, like junk mail or match folders after you use the last match or gum wrappers of yesterday's homeopape. When nobody's around, kipple reproduces itself. For instance, if you go to bed leaving any kipple around your apartment, when you wake up the next morning there's twice as much of it. It always gets more and more (...) No one can win against kipple.'

Since the eighties, Japanese-born, New York-based artist Yuji Agematsu has been meticulously collecting things he finds in his walks around the city. Junk, detritus, trash, kipple. Pieces of broken things, cigarette butts, chewing gum stuck to hydrants, paint scales, unidentified plastic scraps and tons of unrecognisable bits of stuff silently scattered on the sidewalks of New York. 'The city is a machine that creates a new city, new buildings, new shit, and each day I walk around observing and collecting it,' Agematsu says. He displays these objects inside cellophane wrappers from cigarette packs, carefully pinned to boards, or simply photographed. His photographs don't feature any humans though one could say that his work documents human activity in great detail. He even considers things like gum as human. As he points out in the pamphlet for his 2014 solo show at Yale Union: 'They carry DNA. You can read them, or I can, a little. Each piece indicates some psychology of the chewer. Like down on Wall Street, all the gum is so tiny, so chewed down, you know, it's really hard, and then around playgrounds and Times Square you can find huge suckers, real fat pieces.' Agematsu's work speaks of finitude, entropy, decay, accumulation, omission and, among other things, value.

Philosopher Roberto Casati makes an interesting remark about a subtle but strong divide in our world view, in which 'Some entities have traditionally been considered major, relative to other, minor entities'. That is, a hierarchy that gives more value to solid things, things you can hold in your hand, over things you cannot touch, sell, trade, buy, eat and so on. Just like Martin Holbraad used the metaphor of the circle in our previous episode, here you could picture an imaginary ladder along which you distribute objects, from the most valued commodities down to the less precious ones. So (whether we like it or not) oil, water, diamonds, gold, copper, uranium and the like would be somewhere around the top of the ladder, above other materials and perhaps less crucial (yet highly regarded) stuff such as Michael Jordan autographs, Scarlett Johansson DNA samples, the Mona Lisa, pink Lamborghinis, then going down to pencils, then old pencils, then broken old pencils, all the way down to chewing gum, expired chewing gum, mouldy expired chewing gum, etc. – you get the picture. And sure, the picture varies a whole lot depending on who imagines the ladder, but Agematsu's finds around Manhattan will generally always belong to the lower end of the ladder – before he pins them to a board inside a white cube, that is.

In a twisted way, Agematsu's practice parallels the birth of paleontology in the eighteenth century, when a new kind of object, the fossil, was brought to public attention by French naturalist and zoologist Georges Cuvier. With his theories on fossils, Cuvier proposed a new way of thinking about anatomy, temporality, change, the environment and our effects on it. A fossil is only called a fossil if it is older than 10,000 years – an arbitrary figure which immediately forces us, not just paleontologists, to rethink our sense of history. These new objects of scientific study containing traces of long gone objects and specimens brought



[Chewing gum and other detritus collected from New York's streets by Japanese artist Yuji Agematsu]

about an epistemic revolution in the Romantic period that shook the very notions of mortality, absence and most of all, scale.

Physicist Lisa Randall explains the constant loss of information in our everyday experience with what she calls 'effective theory', which 'only asks about things you could hope to measure or see. If something is beyond the resolution of the scales at which you are working, you don't need its detailed structure. (...) The paint on a wall, or a clothesline viewed from far away, are examples of things that seem to extend in fewer than three dimensions. We overlook the paint's depth and the clothesline's thickness'. Indeed, we fail to see a lot of stuff around us because of this resolution bias. Because we feel comfortable in what Richard Dawkins calls the Middle World ('the narrow range of reality which we judge to be normal as opposed to the queerness of the very small, the very large and the very fast'). There are also things we fail to see because of the hierarchy bias suggested above by Casati. And lastly, we fail to see other kinds of objects because we effectively manage to hide them from view, like the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a giant amalgamation of marine debris particles in the central North Pacific Ocean, a Katamari-style cloud of neglect which, sadly, could provide materials for thousands of Yuji Agematsu solo shows.

This fourth episode of OBJECTHOOD, produced in collaboration with Sonic Acts/Dark Ecology, looks at untraceable objects as well as matters of scale and resolution. It focuses on objects we don't notice around us, even if they are unmistakably part of the world, and ideas about how our view of that world is deeply affected by our visual and conceptual scales and levels of resolution. OBJECTHOOD #4 features an interview with **Nabil Ahmed**, part of the forensic architecture group at Goldsmiths, who has been researching arsenic, one of the deadliest and more elusive earth poisons. His investigation aims to prove that 'in contemporary times the entanglement of natural and political violence is so extreme that forensic investigations must look at complex and diffused structures of causality. It is in response to these entangled causalities, involving human and nonhuman actors alike, that the legal forums of the future must emerge'.

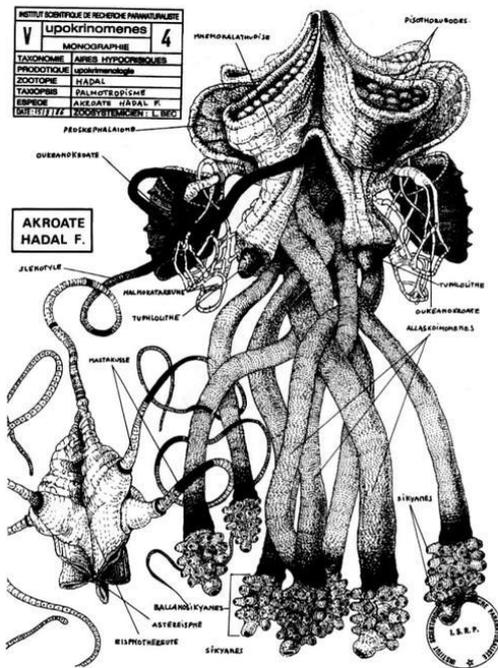
The episode has a double coda. In the first one, literary scholar **Arie Altena** takes the Kola Superdeep Borehole in Russia, the deepest man-made point on Earth, as a starting point to talk about our relationship with the underground world, often plagued by visions of the supernatural and all sorts of evil objects. The second coda is an excerpt of Vilém Flusser's *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* read by **Antye Greie-Ripatti**. Flusser's work is a unique work of philosophical fiction originally published in 1987, which uses the mythical figure of the so called 'vampire squid from hell' to address the essence of life, molluscan perspective, deep-sea art, and objects.

02. Biographies

Nabil Ahmed is a contemporary visual artist, writer, researcher, and musician. His work and various collaborative projects have been presented internationally. He is a member of the Forensic Architecture team at Goldsmiths and co-founder of Call & Response, a sound art collective and curatorial project based in London.

Arie Altena is a Dutch literary scholar, writer and teacher. He writes about art, culture, literature and the Internet for various magazines and publications including Metropolis M. He also works as editor / researcher for V2 Institute for the Unstable Media, and he's part of the team that organizes the Sonic Acts Festival and Dark Ecology.

Antye Greie-Ripatti aka AGF or poemproducer is a vocalist, musician, composer, producer, and new media artist. Her work explores speech and spoken word combined with electronic music, and takes the form of sound installations, pop songs or calligraphy among other media. In 2011 she initiated the arts organization Hai Art on the island of Hailuoto in Finland and acts as curator and executive producer since.



[The Vampire Squid]

03. Timeline

- 00:16 Introduction
- 08:48 Nabil Ahmed: Arsenic poisoning in Bangladesh
- 15:32 Forensic Architecture
- 17:13 Arsenic in the history of toxicology
- 23:36 The devil in the water
- 24:55 How arsenic poisoned the water
- 26:31 Perspectivism
- 29:42 A pharmakon par excellence
- 35:17 Arie Altena: The Kola Superdeep Borehole
- 39:07 Yuri Smirnov and the legacy of the Kola Superdeep
- 40:57 The well to hell myth
- 47:37 Excerpt of Vilém Flusser's *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, read by AGF (Antye Greie-Ripatti)

04. Related links

Forensic Architecture
www.forensic-architecture.org

Dark Ecology
www.darkecology.net

Sonic Acts
www.sonicacts.com

Haiart
www.haiart.net

Kola Superdeep Borehole
www.atlasobscura.com/places/kola-superdeep-borehole

Vilém Flusser's archive
www.flusser-archive.org

Vilém Flusser's studies
www.flusserstudies.net

Arie Altena
ariealt.net

AGF
www.poemproducer.com

Yugi Agematsu
yaleunion.org/agematsu

05. Credits

Produced by Roc Jiménez de Cisneros. Intro (voice): Barbara Held. Reading of Vilém Flusser's *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* excerpt by Antye Greie-Ripatti. Recorded in Barcelona, London, Amsterdam and Hailuoto. Edited with Sound Studio and loads of patience and love.

Dark Ecology is a three-year art, research and commissioning project, initiated by the Dutch Sonic Acts and Kirkenes-based curator Hilde Methi, and in collaboration with Norwegian, Russian and other European partners. Dark Ecology unfolds through research, the creation of new artworks, and a public programme that will be presented in the zone on both sides of the border in 2014, 2015 and 2016.



[The Kola Superdeep Borehole]

Sonic Acts was founded in 1994. Over the years, it has established itself as a thematic festival with a strong focus on contemporary and historical developments at the intersections of art, technology, music and science. Recently, Sonic Acts has developed into an international platform for the research, development and production of works at the intersection of art, science and theory.

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