



## COLLAPSE VI

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### Editorial Introduction

Robin Mackay



As far as we know, philosophy, indeed thinking as such, happens only on one planet. In our previous volume, we examined the ways in which philosophical and scientific thought pursued a liberation from the local conditions of ‘earthly thought’, counteracting the limitations imposed by our terrestrial locale and the biological heredity that binds our cognition to it. In this volume, we turn our gaze back towards our home planet to ask how, as products of the Earth, philosophers, scientists and artists have attempted to encompass it in thought; and how the philosophical enterprise of thinking ‘the whole’ has been, and continues to be, determined by our belonging to the Earth.

There is a timely aspect to this inquiry: Whereas the optimism of the late twentieth century saw ‘globalisation’ become a byword for limitless expansion, our image of the global in the first decade of the twenty-first century was



characterised instead by contraction, by a forced recognition that the increasing technological interconnection and ever-intensifying exploitation of the Earth by humans was exposing finite limits, economic and ecological, of the planet upon which their world-systems are imposed.

Much of the response to the ensuing crises has remained entrenched within nostalgic regret, emotional imprecation and moral imperative. In this volume we attempt to forego this panic response and instead to present a diverse selection of contributions which demonstrate that philosophy, science and contemporary art continue to address the condition of thinking on and of Earth in original and engaging manners.

We know that thinkers have long used the surface of the Earth as a rich source of metaphor: in so far as it seeks for secure ‘ground’ on which to place thought, geographic cartographic and geological metaphors are endemic to philosophy. But beyond this metaphoric, as **NICOLA MASCIANDARO** argues in his ‘Becoming Spice: Commentary as Geophilosophy’, the practice of philosophy itself can be seen as a continual process of ‘worlding’.

Beginning with the failure of the ‘philosophical flight’ from the earthbound in Dante, Masciandaro argues that philosophy belongs not to the ‘folly’ of a vertically-oriented ‘straight path’ but to a ‘circular and endless’ movement on the surface of the earth. And for Masciandaro, who directs the project *Glossator*,<sup>1</sup> dedicated to a contemporary revivification of the practice of commentary, it is the latter that provides the key to understanding this endless movement: commentary as the continual production of knowledge, a practice that ‘proceeds by staying’. Philosophy’s aim ‘to

1. See <http://www.glossator.org/>.

render actual its absoluteness’, to enter into self-immanence – the ‘Copernican’ impulse to absolutise – only proceeds, according to Masciandaro, through commentary’s continual ‘dwelling on the problem’. He further sees this role of commentary as being encoded in spice, as a global commodity whose currency and commercial movement figures the production of understanding through continual differentiation and distribution. Thus, commentary is not a mere ‘condiment’, but figures a peripatetic wandering and returning that draws forth the immanence of what is, only by adding to it, by ‘spicing’ it and thereby ‘bringing out’ the mode in which it is *more* than it is. For Masciandaro, therefore, ‘the *telos* of commentary, its far-off end, is *tellus*, what bears us’; thinking brings us back to a continually-differentiated Earth.

One significant modern attempt to create a philosophy that addresses the Earth system as an ‘All’ is **F. W. J. SCHELLING**’s *Naturphilosophie*, which sought to encompass within a single set of philosophical principles the production of nature and thought; of thought out of and as a part of nature. In Schelling’s 1798 work, previously unavailable in translation, the philosopher revivifies the ancient theory of the ‘World-Soul’, entirely reconstructing it through the contemporary science of his time, which he supplements with the necessary speculative basis that will allow him to effect his grand synthesis. As **IAIN HAMILTON GRANT** tells us in his introduction to his new translation, Schelling’s book must be understood as a bold experiment in systematically thinking ‘the All’: Not content with providing a transcendental account of thought’s *a priori* determination of its object, Schelling attempts to ground this determination in a Nature conceived as a *prius*, the polarisation of

whose primitive forces can be traced through all of natural organisation, conditioning even the consciousness through which they become manifest as concept.

The contemporary ecological crisis demands a (somewhat more modest) reframing of the task of conceiving systematically the ‘All’ of nature – the biosphere within which human beings are increasingly aware of their implication. We are all well acquainted with the dread auguries emerging from what the media generically refer to as ‘scientists’; but this reception reveals little as to the difficulties that beset those tasked with making such projections.

Our interviews with **STEPHEN EMMOTT**, **DREW PURVES**, **RICH WILLIAMS** and **GREG MCINERNY**, scientists working in Computational Ecology and Environmental Science at Microsoft’s Research Laboratory in Cambridge, England, offer some insight into the contemporary stakes of ecological thought, revealing ecology as a science in a state of flux and renegotiation.

They describe how, combining empirical knowledge of the mechanisms of growth, evolution and competition with an arsenal of statistical and computational techniques, their virtual ‘in-silico’ world-systems – Purves talks of them as involving a selection from a ‘universe of universes’ – aim to refine hypotheses and constrain predictions regarding the effects of climate change. As the interviewees reveal, the challenges they face make necessary a ‘new kind of science’ in which the barriers between disciplines are being broken down, and the order of scientific research disrupted or reversed. Negotiating the fearsome task of creating, in Emmott’s words, ‘a precise, predictive science of complex natural systems’ calls for a meticulous questioning of received truths, and a triage between abstraction, accuracy,

and uncertainty, in a quest for a ‘simplicity on the other side of complexity’. As Purves suggests, it is ecologists who are above all properly placed to give a ‘high-level view’; but as we see in McInerny’s description of his work, the indications of such a high-level view depend crucially on the selection of theoretical frameworks and on our understanding of low-level biological and genetic factors, shifts in the understanding of which can have radical consequences for prediction. In incorporating them into new computational models, Purves, McInerny and Williams have shown that the presence and interaction of these additional factors can crucially alter our understanding of global processes.

As well as exploring the details of the research underway, it was also important in these conversations to reflect on the predicament of the scientist called on to estimate the fate of the planet; a specialist whose area of research has been reinvigorated by the ecological crisis, but who must remain vigilant against overconfidence and oversimplification. Despite their optimism, the unanimous conclusion of our interviewees is that ecology remains a ‘young science’: a science already capable of providing an adumbration of the future of the biosphere, but which still faces a great many ‘unknown unknowns’.

In addition, it emerges that this work is constrained on all sides by the contingencies of its history: dependent on legacy data and the choices made by those who preceded them, ecologists are involved in a continual reevaluation of their scientific and theoretical inheritance. Perhaps the most serious constraint, however, lies in the additional task of presenting their results to a concerned public. Struggling to be heard clearly amidst political manoeuvring, economic exigencies, and the evangelising of activists and

conservationists, as Emmott remarks, ecology today must concern itself not only with theorisation and analysis, but also with clear communication of its point of view as a science.

As McInerney points out, ‘activism’ often reflects the uninterrogated prejudices and desires of those involved more than the state of scientific knowledge. **TIMOTHY MORTON**’s work in ecocriticism dissects the ways in which the narratives and aesthetics of ‘environmentalism’ remain captive to such unavowed assumptions. Morton’s *Ecology Without Nature*,<sup>2</sup> which argued that the idea of ‘Nature’ is only ever an obstruction to ecological thinking, opened by making a heartfelt case for the importance of philosophical thinking and the creation of new concepts in order to prevent our sense of ecological emergency from precipitating a retreat into nostalgia and the safety of thinking ‘Nature’ as ‘something over there’. In his article for **COLLAPSE**, ‘Thinking Ecology’ – a preview of his forthcoming book *The Ecological Thought*<sup>3</sup> – Morton proceeds to pick apart the ideological attitudes, still in thrall to the Romantic view of ‘Nature’, that allow environmentalism, under cover of a naive sincerity, to avoid thinking ecological interdependence. As he argues, the latter thought is not to be attained through blithely asserting our ‘community’ with the denizens of nature. Simple denial of our own gaze, and the ‘framing’ it imposes on nature, is not an option: it amounts, as he argues, to the perpetuation of a ‘beautiful soul syndrome’. Instead Morton invites us to experience the ‘humiliation’ of recognising our disturbing collective intimacy with ‘life’ as a

2. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007)

3. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, forthcoming 2010.

‘strange stranger’, drawing us into a ‘dark ecology’ in which awareness, rather than implying a contemplative ‘letting-be’ of ‘Nature’, delivers a melancholy, ironic recognition that our very rendering of the ‘crime scene’ implies our necessary and constitutive implication in the crime.

This critique of the ideology of environmentalism is extended and dramatised by UK artist collective **F I E L D C L U B**. Their work explores the humour that emerges in actually following self-sufficiency edicts ‘on the ground’; and the irony that comes from raising the principles of ecology to the most general context imaginable. Underpinned by a theoretical position drawing on the long-forgotten neo-Gnostic lore of ‘agrosophy’,<sup>4</sup> **F I E L D C L U B** remove ecology and the ‘anthropic technosphere’ from the parochial domain of environmental politics and replace it within the framework of a Batailleian ‘solar economy’.

Their irony is not the cynical resignation of the city-dweller; for their work documents a continuing attempt to live ‘off-grid’, disconnected from public utilities and drawing as little on outside resources as possible. Much of the collective’s work draws wryly on incidents in the day-to-day course of this experiment in living, small occurrences that never fail to blacken the name of Eden. This intimate engagement allows them to challenge the credo according to which just a little goodwill and a little less technology could enable humans to temper their depredations in favour of a more gentle and wholesome coexistence with nature.

**F I E L D C L U B**’s concern with this uneasy ‘complicity’ with other living beings leads precisely into what can be

4. See <http://www.fieldclub.co.uk/texts.php>

seen as assays into Morton's 'dark ecology'. To become close to nature, they demonstrate, is at the very least to repudiate the notion that the Earth is something unreservedly worthy of our admiration, and from which we can draw comforting meaning. The series of devices exhibited in **F I E L D C L U B**'s contribution to this volume intimate that man's relation to the soil, no matter how 'traditional' or 'simple', strips us of our 'beautiful soul' credentials and reminds us we must 'kill to live'; at the same time, they lampoon the efforts made through technological mediation to flee the 'scene of the crime'.

Evidently, any examination of the relation of thought to the Earth must address the way in which we dwell upon, thus transforming, its surface. **OWEN HATHERLEY**'s project to rescue architectural modernism from the 'Ikea modernism' of 'light and airy' interior design belonging to the vacuous economic optimism of the late twentieth-century<sup>5</sup> leads him to the contention that, in restoring the links of modernism with its less palatable predecessors – such as the proto-brutalism of Hitler's Atlantic Wall – we reawaken a suppressed, but rich and provocative, historical lineage. Hatherley's analysis is inspired by Ballard's discovery of a 'warped modernism' in the structures of the Atlantic Wall. And as Hatherley's discussion implies, if we are to consider Ballard as a precursor to 'psychogeography', the latter must be understood in terms of *regression*, so that, as in Ballard's novels, in the contemplation of these (non)structures we experience an 'end-point of architecture': The enterprise of design and construction degenerates into an atavism where 'primal impulses and prehistoric building forms recur', but which paradoxically (as evidenced by Virilio's adaptation of this aesthetic for his brutalist church)

5. See Hatherley's *Militant Modernism* (London: Zer0 Books, 2009)

also communicates with an impulse to the sacred. These 'instant ruins' thus tap into an architectural phylum which, actualised by a military 'science of compaction and impact', marries emergency with eternity.

Hatherley traces the few instances in which this rich seam resurfaces in architecture, but as he observes, in an increasingly hygienically-conservative architectural climate, it now belongs more to speculative thinking and to the work of artists such as Nicholas Moulin. The suggestion that with more attention, it might fuel an 'apocalyptic pulp of our own time' brings to mind the fact that, of course, Ballard's apocalyptic *Drowned World* must be considered the first science-fictional treatment of climate change. From Ballard's reflections on these forgotten structures, Hatherley thus draws out a as-yet unrealised 'earth-philosophy' as remote from tree-hugging as Ikea is from the Atlantic Wall; one that, via the exigencies of total war, sets the chthonic forces of the inner earth flowing through the Apollonian veins of modernism.

Architect and theorist **EYAL WEIZMAN** transports this immanence with the 'chthonic' into architectural practice: His project *Decolonizing Architecture* seeks to apply an 'ungrounding' process to spaces previously invested with colonialism, practicing 'design by destruction'. *DA* has evolved from Weizman's examination of the role that architecture has played in the Israeli occupation of Palestine; in our interview, he describes the way in which he sees architecture per se as interacting with the 'political architecture' of this occupation, and how the structure of the latter has entered into conceptual commerce with theory. Weizman's conception of 'forensic architecture', in seeking to read the nature of historical events through their material traces, implies a new articulation of 'forces and

forms', wherein forms not only register the multiplicity of forces that bear upon them, but in turn become actors in this political 'forcefield'. We discuss the way in which this materialist-pluralist conception of politics demands a rethinking of the notions of responsibility, ideology, and resistance, and how *DA's* processes of 'design by destruction' and 'ungrounding' seek to disrupt the temporalities according to which the very question of a 'solution' to the problem of occupation has been posed.

Discussing the in some cases hostile reception to this work, Weizman also describes how it has led him to reconsider the very function of theory in the context of global politics: The theoretical enterprise can only operate, he argues, through an engagement with actual protagonists, whose functional roles within twenty-first century conflict bring to light the new conceptual frameworks within which that conflict is being conducted. Thus, concepts are not 'in the head' but 'in the world', and only by affirming this embeddedness of theory – by forensically examining the material traces of specific sites, and by journalistically naming names – can theory become a weapon of resistance.

Weizman's examination of the bonds between architecture and the martial recoding and territorialization of the Earth is further developed in **MANABRATA GUHA's** 'Introduction to SIMADology'. Surveying today's 'global security ecology' Guha suggests that its regime of thinking the relation of war to the Earth – inherited, as he suggests, from the 'father' of the theory of warfare, Clausewitz – fails to register the radical difference that terror-operations impose upon the martial landscape. What Guha calls the SIMAD – Singularly Intensive Mobile Agency of Decay – disrupts the Clausewitzian paradigm, drawing

war-machines into a 'chthonic battlespace' which they are constitutively incapable of navigating. Even within the new paradigms of warfare which seek to confront changing conditions through 'network' or 'swarm' paradigms, the weapons of 'surprise' and 'terror' are read in the terms of a political and martial imaginary whose inappropriate causal and economic principles doom them to become, ultimately, a component of the threat they aim to neutralise. Extending Reza Negarestani's analysis of 'hypercamouflage',<sup>6</sup> and through a critique of the conclusions of prominent contemporary theorists of war, Guha depicts terror-operations as effecting a transformation on the instrumentalised war-machine of the state, causing it to proliferate and morph uncontrollably as it confronts the chthonic forces against which it attempts to differentiate itself – forces that owe nothing to tellurian structures, and whose eruption can only be registered as having already taken place. In attempting to 'seal off the tellurian surface' from these terror-Events, Guha suggests, war-machines operating on the Clausewitzian model merely generate self-deceiving fictions – bringing about a 'process of ontological decay' whose nature is opaque to strategic thinking. Maintaining the state at a 'tipping point [...] between self-destruction and absolute consolidation', the SIMAD thus becomes the co-ordinator of 'global security governance' and the 'biopolitical model of the post-modern state'.

Confronting this 'complicity of visions' and drawing on **REZA NEGARESTANI's** contribution to **COLLAPSE IV**,<sup>7</sup>

6. R. Negarestani, 'The Militarization of Peace: Absence of Terror or Terror of Absence?', **COLLAPSE I**, 53-91.

7. R. Negarestani, 'The Corpse Bride: Thinking with Nigredo', **COLLAPSE IV**, 129-61.

Guha in closing declares that '[w]e are that which decays and the agents of decay. We are expressions of the terrifying envolding chemistry of decay'. Negarestani's contribution to the present volume expands this theme into the analytic description of an 'architecture and politics of decay'. Excavating some of the more bizarre preoccupations of mediaeval thought, and tracing their influence on early-modern mathematics, Negarestani suggests that they offer us the formal basis for an 'architecture, mathesis and politics of decay'.

This mathesis, of which Negarestani finds 'the most refined expression' in politics, sees the interior ideal of a form not as an origin, but as emerging processually through its decay, in tandem with a production of exteriorised derivatives. Distancing his thesis from any nostalgic fetishising of ruins and insisting that it not only applies to superficially 'decayed' states but must be thought of as a general principle, Negarestani notes that a 'politics of decay' is disturbing precisely because – like Guha's *SIMAD* – it invokes a universal dynamic principle that undermines any claims to wholeness and wholesomeness.

Notably, Negarestani's argument also contains a confrontation with the nihilism expounded by Ray Brassier in his *Nihil Unbound*:<sup>8</sup> Science's evacuation of the realm of organic interiority into the exteriority of space, Negarestani suggests, does not take place without a 'twisting' in time and in space. His suggestion of a calculus of decay as 'mathematics with a chemical disposition or chemical revolution via mathematical distributions' problematises any straightforward vector of exteriorization, both in the

8. R. Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

realm of in/organic matter and in the history of thought, by locating both within a *humus* whose vermicular twisting can never fully be 'worked out'. In a parallel to his remarkable book *Cyclonopedia*, where the molten core of the Earth attests to its immanence with the sun – and again, recalling Guha's *SIMAD* – for Negarestani exteriority is already a chthonic 'insider'.

In his precise definition of this positive process of 'decay as a building process', Negarestani in fact provides the abstract key to the strange confluences not only in Hatherley, Weizman and Guha's analyses, but also in Masciandaro's account of the continual self-differentiation of knowledge. As Masciandaro reminds us, commentary's addressing of the earthly condition constitutes, not a resignation to the inescapable finitude of the text, but philosophy's very 'boldness', its 'monstrous' aspiration to continually deform, denature and multiply what it attends to, in a twisting wherein the poetic impulse rejoins with the philosophical imperative, the wandering on the Earth with the will to flight. Negarestani's turn towards those incorrigible commentators, the Scholastics, elicits the formal identity of his vermicular chemico-mathematics with this process of exegetical 'twisting'. Perhaps then Negarestani not only succeeds Schelling as 'the philosopher of the new chemistry' – albeit, as Iain Hamilton Grant has suggested, a 'chemistry of darkness' – but also presents us with a 'chemistry of (the history of) philosophy'.

Needless to say, the Earth, in our dealings with it and our navigations on it, exists for us not in 'immediate experience', but in coded form. The work of artists **ANGELA DETANICO AND RAFAEL LAIN** examines the many ways in which the surface of the planet is coded, and their playful

constructions explore the peculiar grammatologies that emerge once this stenography between the geographical and the symbolic is in place; its disorientations highlighting the faith we place in our mediated figure of the world, often mistaking the map for the territory.

**CHARLES AVERY**'s work returns to what has long been a favourite geographical trope for philosophy. At a certain point in his practice, Avery decided to locate all of his future work within an imaginary Island, whose locations, inhabitants and culture he continues to render beautifully in a variety of media – including text, as in the enigmatic travelogue *The Islanders: An Introduction*,<sup>9</sup> an 'epilogue' to which Avery contributes to this volume. In **COLLAPSE V** one of Avery's maps accompanied cosmologist Milan Ćirković's discussion of the 'archipelago of habitability'.<sup>10</sup> Setting out from this pairing, **ROBIN MACKAY**'s prefatory essay to our presentation of Avery's work seeks to locate the latter as a possible contemporary successor to a rich history of 'Philosophers' Islands'. As Mackay remarks, the nature of Avery's project demands that 'the work' and its significance be sought, not in any one of the exquisite pieces exhibited by Avery, but in the Island 'itself' – the (unfinished) structural whole that will bind them together.

Our volume closes with two contributions that in very different ways address this philosophical obsession with the island and with the ocean that surrounds it. **GILLES GRELET** presents us with a manifesto of refusal: the task of philosophy as conceived by Althusser and systematically diagnosed by François Laruelle's 'non-

9. C. Avery, *The Islanders: An Introduction* (London: Parasol Unit/Koenig, 2008).

10. M. Ćirković, 'Sailing the Archipelago', **COLLAPSE V**, 292-329.

philosophy' – as a series of 'decisions' producing trenchant lines of demarcation that partition the ground of thought – is rejected. 'Ungrounding' himself by taking to the other, predominating element of the planet, with a boat as his 'theory-body', Grelet extols theory as 'world-less', indeed as 'a full-on attack on the world', an angelic thought whose 'crossings' operate without the territorial imperatives of the 'worldly'.

**RENÉE GREEN**'s film 'Endless Dreams and Water Between', originally shown in 2009 as part of an installation at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, uses the island and its surroundings as the setting for an interrogation into the making of thought in-between four protagonists. Inconclusive, dreamlike and – recalling Masciandaro's opening contribution – both referential and peripatetic, Green's film, the script of which is presented here, concerns itself with the geophilosophical precipitation of thought, as four women driven by a curiosity about their own location and inclinations move toward a speculative coherence that the work preserves in a state of 'clear-obscurity'. The island, a 'non-location' which serves as a navigational point of reference, also allows its inhabitants those uninterrupted vistas for the imagination that have provided writers with (sometimes, as in the case of George Sands, ultimately disappointed) dreams of freedom. As suggested by Masciandaro, it is by 'staying', by contemplating their island locations, that Green's protagonists move towards a collective thinking that expands into the realms of the abstract only on the basis of their localisation and the contingency of their respective interests and circumstances.

Like Avery's, Green's work highlights shifting relations between fiction and fact, physical geography and imaginary geography, that govern our thinking of the Earth and the

worlds we build upon it. They join the other contributions to this volume in demonstrating that ‘Planet Earth’ qua terrestrial entity or biosphere is but one among those many inextricable ‘wholes’. Even new efforts at reconstructing it in scientific models are never entirely free from evolutions and selections of their own, from the contingencies of history, and from the legacy of its duality in thought as ‘object and omnipresence’.

The bringing together of apparently divergent perspectives within this volume is, we must as ever insist, not merely whimsical. It aims to bring into view avenues of thought which run between them and which may lead to new spaces outside the rigid boundaries of disciplinarity. In our introduction, as in previous volumes, we hope to have indicated some of these; others it will be the reader’s business (and, we hope, pleasure) to trace.

It seems appropriate in closing to reflect briefly on the coherence, not only of this particular volume, but of the project as a whole; a coherence which, as is appropriate for a journal of ‘research and development’, has slowly come to light only in the process of working on the series. Through the creation of these volumes, from the beginning deliberately and sincerely billed as an ‘experiment’, has emerged a curatorial model in which, rather than all of the contributions to a publication falling within a circumscribed discipline or subject, a broad theme allows contributions from diverse practitioners to form an overlapping chain or (adopting Timothy Morton’s term) mesh, whose intermediate links span otherwise disparate elements. The hope is that this connectivity should reproduce itself in the broad audience that **COLLAPSE** assembles; that the ‘forced collaboration’ operated within these pages should

find its counterpart in a strange collectivity of readers who, drawn in by one or two contributions appropriate to their interests, find themselves unexpectedly befriended by writers and thinkers from entirely different ‘mindsets’. This in turn suggests a model of the concept according to which the latter resides, not in an hierarchical structure of progressive generalisation (a structure which reproduces and is reproduced in institutional specialisation), but in transversal connections discovered, or produced, ‘in the making’. Thanks to a growing network of contributors and readers, each volume brings with it such discoveries, so that its finished state bears but a faint resemblance to the terms of its initial conception.

If, in search of this conceptual consistency, we have traversed the abstractions of mathematics (Volume I), the emerging paradigms of Speculative Realism (Volumes II and III), the legacy of Deleuze (Volume III), the horrors of thought and the thinking of horror (Volume IV) and the Copernican Turn in its many guises (Volume V), only to come back ‘down to Earth’, it is an Earth which we no longer fully recognise, and which continues to offer numerous challenges – by turns urgent, melancholy, and twisted – to the thought it has given birth to.

We would like to conclude by thanking all of our contributors for their work and their patience in collaborating on this volume, and to our readers for their continued enthusiasm for this process of ‘research and development’.

Robin Mackay,  
Falmouth, January 2010.