

Or, #not-islands

By Harry Dodge

I'm an artist. I accumulate objects, ideas: messy collections, items in oblique relation, grisly correlates, fickle concerts, false analogies. Color might draw items together or patterns just misregistered enough to set off something new (blocky conceptual moiré). I actually happen to have a folder called Islands (the word written on front with a soft graphite that is now smudged and which I try not to touch). The following is an (appended) accounting of its contents, a set of things which would more correctly be characterized as *not-islands*, but of course that is my interest and the whole point.

When Lenny was two, I obtained a handsome picture book called *The Little Island* which we read every day for months. First the author describes all aspects of the isle: wind-swept, rocky, a spindly pear tree, a kingfisher, a spider, one wild strawberry. *And herring and mackerel leaped out of the water all silver in the moonlight.* Suddenly a cat is talking straight to the Island who also talks (!), and they crack open a debate on how separateness works, *Maybe I am a little Island too*, the cat says, *A little fur Island in the air.* Cat-like, he jumps off the ground to make his point. The Island accedes, *That is just what you are.* But suddenly the cat rethinks everything, *I am part of this big world though. My feet are on it!* The Island says she, too, is part of the larger whole but the cat says, *No you're not. Water is all around you and cuts you off from the land.* At this point the Island tells the cat, hey go ahead and ask any fish—fish know the facts. One page later the cat gets with a fish, and—upon threat of being eaten—the fish gives up the secrets of the deep. *The fish told the kitten how all land is one land under the sea. The cat's eyes were shining with the secret of it. Secret?*

Cosmic mutuality, or interconnectedness, if one discovers it all, is not something discovered a single time. We must learn it repeatedly. (Likely tomorrow—"waking again into separateness.") More than *secret* it is unctuous, canny. An experience that vibrates at frequencies we largely cannot possess—either too fast to see or hold, or too slow.

I have, for years, demonized *distinction* (this idea of *separability*), I suppose as a result of having been tortured by categories. Forgive me. Perhaps there *are* things that are, in fact, separate from other things (never devolving into a full *purity*) which are nonetheless (not quite paradoxically) enmeshed in some larger ultrasensitive field of conveyance. (If I sound skeptical, that's because I am.) Maybe every distinction (in the case of mentation) or illusion of separateness (in the case of non-mental objects) is an *island-of-sorts*, and also a *premise*.

Purchased a chainsaw one day (could that have been twenty years ago?)—brought it home, eager. The instruction book was elaborate. At the top of every page the manufacturer had repeated a pictogram of a

person holding a chainsaw kicking back (curved arrows) and cutting the user's head in half (two little dark halfmoons spurting drops of pictogram blood that looked like frizzy hair). It was meant, I'm assuming, to ward off inattention, megalomania, etc. *Sober up!*, it pled. *Be deliberate here*. I was one-hundred percent perturbed by the creepy repetitive covenant and sold the unused saw soon thereafter. Another way of talking about categorical thinking—which is how intelligence basically works (so you can't just throw it away)—is as *strategic affiliation*, or as a *tool*. Something we pick up, alright, ok—an awful, sexy cutter (*Sober up!*). We must be aware that we're creating inaccuracies, maybe to bolster a point, or breeze over a bit of dissonance. The fast-food of excogitation. Always virtual—*category* scrapes details, suspends opacities; category *reduces*.

*Displace all reduction.*¹

If everything is interconnected, why do people feel lonely? Why do I? It must be that I've allowed some illusion to take hold.

The great lockdown was initially—in part—exhilarating: some (apparently prefab) parallel universe we all simply stepped into. (Island) The suddenness was breathtaking: a soporific urban stillness. Bearing witness to and participating in this unprecedented collective mass action caused in me a kind of (surprising, shaky) buoyancy. If, as Anthony McCann recently wrote² “...we could shut it all down in the name of **mutual care**, which we just had, if we could do really do **that**, well, then what else could we do?” While widespread economic suffering, rightly or wrongly, quickly attenuated hope for *ease* with regard to near-future, global economic paradigm shifts, it does seem that this mass experiment in remoteness revealed something about what matters in our relationships. Additionally, certain images cannot be unseen. Any *present* (think history, language, etc) is fat with all other time, and never tidy. No clean breaks, *and that's ok*=necrosocial sedimentation. (Only we must get better at this swimming in mud.)

For those who work from home pandemic living is a strange blend of, among other things, being intensely aware of the radical raw commons (air that was inside of you is now inside of me), banal repetition, and a greatly diminished set of haptic experiences. *Not much touching*. After months, I admit, this latter diminishment is registering as an intense lack.

*When we are apart we are not alone.*³

When I say *nothing really has clean edges* or I try to imagine *contaminatedness* or teeming *interconnectedness*—I envisage sensitive, fuzzy-edged, permeable, heterogenous blobs in a very sensitive

goop (a cosmic continuum), wherein each muddied threshold comprises a dimension (like tidal zones) and each entity affects and is affected (more and less) by all others continuously.

A handful of years ago, here in Los Angeles, I saw philosopher Catherine Malabou lecture on her notions of *PLASTICITY and RESISTANCE*. From what I recall, she had insisted, “There is no such thing as transcendence—we are in a closed totality so that resistance is going to come from a *difference within*, and the *difference-that-will-provide-resistance* is not like a *tumor* or a *nugget*.” She had repeated—“It is *immanent*.” (I kept thinking of the *resistance-within* as a little rocky island even though she had precisely said it wasn’t that.) Simply put, how could a thing or substance be *suffused* with *difference*? This question plagued me over years! (And thus the mental image of the *nugget* persisted.) Recently, however, I read through an interview⁴ with Malabou, wherein she added the idea of *flexibility* to her schema, suggesting that her ideas of plasticity and resistance rhyme with observations about the physics of materials. Suddenly the mental image of the little island vanished, and became one of a simple field (no figure). I quickly unearthed one of my favorite charts⁵, ah yes, *Approximate Tensile Strengths of Various Solids*. Strength (measured in pounds-per-square-inch) is measured by tracking the *stress* required to break a piece of a material from itself—and apparently flexibility is one of the important factors in the characteristic breaking point of any substance.

Muscle tissue (fresh but dead)	15
Cement and concrete	600
Fresh skin	1500
Human hair	28,000
Modern Cast Iron	30,000
Spider’s web	35,000

What is *immanent difference*? Is it strength? (Is this a *version of resistance* that leaves behind polarization, purity, and distinction?) How does this map onto learning (being able to withstand the discomfort of holding incompatible ideas in your head for long enough to develop new thoughts)?

The word *digital* when I use it doesn’t mean *vaguely electronic*. I’m not pointing to computer technology in general as in *the digital revolution*, and I don’t mean *all* machines or robots. Neither is the word *digital*, for me, a shorthand for online socializing. *Digital* pointedly refers to signals or data comprised by (or expressed as) a series of the digits 0 and 1, or otherwise arising from a strictly *binary* logic or function. It indicates a signal or percept that is particulate, characterized by distinct or *separate* parts.

In 1973, in a book called *System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange*, Anthony Wilden explains that pretty much all systems comprise a combination of analog and digital functions. He gives the example of a thermostat: a sliver of mercury expands and rises when heated (analog), eventually

reaching an inflection point which activates a different mechanism—a “digital” or “binary” switch—that turns the air conditioner ON. *Click*. Wilder describes neural synapses as having *fired or not* (digital) triggered in much the same way, by these frothy analog conditions. He suggests that verbal communication is hybrid in a slightly different manner; words are symbols, pointing and plaintive (digital), but deployed bathed in and functionally warped by a set of analog flows: syntax, volume, gesture, tempo, etc.

The island is never pure—just saying.

The way I figure it, there’s an immediately perceivable *surface of material reality*, a fabric or expansive field: all the *seemings* that comprise the *here and now*. But at absolutely every point there are also these *folds* that droop down, pockets of a sort (innumerable, legion, out of sight), an *infinite* number of these pockets slouching down from the *surface of the outermost and visible fabric of reality*. Each of those folds, or pockets, has a surface too, and every point of every bit of *that* surface gives way again to (perhaps even smaller) pockets. This goes on forever, and I imagine that each of the pockets therefore comprises an infinity (Mandelbrot Set?) and also that every part is always affecting every other part and that that is the shape of our world. We perceive it all but infra-consciously. The cosmic filigree glows, it animates us. This is how I think of the continuous signal, affect, poetics, or teeming totality. As opposed to the digital signal which *by definition can contain no infinities*.

What to make of reportage that folks secrete comparable amounts of beneficial hormones (dopamine, oxytocin, endorphins) chatting with *social robots* as they do in talking to human persons? For the elderly these conversations have even been found to wholly mitigate physical illnesses caused by loneliness. A 92-year old man in England is quoted as saying, *I really love it. I couldn’t do without it now. It is certainly my friend in the corner*. (Dolls large and small have long been object-catalysts for a panoply of intimate opportunities from ministration to catharsis—and beyond.) Replika (an app that grows a specific AI companion in response to each client’s ongoing input) users report, *These are ones and zeros but the connection feels very real*. One woman’s AI, “Mike,” remembered, for example, that she’d had trouble sleeping and so inquired as to whether she’d been able to *get a little rest this week*. This attention, she said, felt great—*like he cared*.

Looking at these studies I realize I have vastly overestimated or, you know, made unnecessary generalizations with regard to the keenness (or maybe just the needs?) of the human organism. This is not to suggest that all activities that release equal amounts of feel-good hormones are therefore comparable in value, but simply to suggest that the relative aridity of the digital signal—its lack of infinities—does not of itself cause *mass depression*. (My sense is that, with regard to AI companions produced—even indirectly—by big tech, concern about the barrenness of the machine/human relation is misdirected and

the real concern ought to be the all-but-inevitable mind control malignancies that spawn in chemical baths of surveillance, greed and emotional heatedness.) Just google search *Insurrection at the Capitol* to see what I mean.

At this point, machine intelligences can surpass human abilities but only in narrow sets of tasks—think of the Mars Rover, cell phones, Google searches. But a new and expanding flow of Big Data provides a roaring, colossal updraft to the (formerly cozy) brushfire of our computers' inbuilt proficiency, which is essentially *relentless iterative speed*. And remember, a preponderance of information + processing power enables increasingly high-resolution operations, computations, and, therefore, *output signals*. These signals might become so fine and so profuse that they approximate or actually produce affect, which (radiant) might also then leap, invisibly, from person to person or even thing to person, e.g., love.⁶

What makes love? What is the relationship of poetics (or other flows that work on us partially infra-consciously) to current machine intelligences? Will we ever produce a machine that can, like a human brain, identify clear-cut patterns but also preserve the murkiness that is crucial to dealing with ambiguity? (Yup.)

Meanwhile, our phones and laptops are gradually morphing into other devices which (for any number of reasons) we continue to identify with, and which interact with us in ways we experience as (more and more) *social*. These resonant devices, these technologies will continue to arrive, as they always have, by night (remember that matter speaks and hears in a thoroughgoing phatic communion). *Cyborg* is a portmanteau-word that describes a portmanteau-being.

Humans have been shot through with the world since skin was invented and before that too. How would the nature of our interactions change if, especially in every face-off, we also carried a sense of the *other-within*? Ecstatic contamination—a felt sense of being tainted by the thing you most judge in others—is one form of humility and is fundamental to practicing “against purity.”

Self-governance is difficult—apparently this is why people lean toward autocracy, they get tired of the compromise required in democracy. They just want it their way.

Édouard Glissant wrote, *Diversity, the quantifiable totality of every possible difference, is the motor driving universal energy*. This proposal I understand to be self-evident, though not at all banal (like gravity—a matter of physics). Fomenting this difference, as creatures, in relation, is a matter of *practice*: distrust the general (while minding its violent fruits), apprise specificity, feast on debate (as solidarity). Affinity

groups=temporary island; any huddle or meeting, or congregation (including a *self*) can and should sustain dissonant viewpoints and also remember: #nobodyisperfect). Daunting collectivity, filigree in the extreme (the crackle of its untrackable texture), the tender miscellany, a fecund multiformity which (at great distance anyway) becomes a kind of fur, (and which is also not precisely *random*) is the stuff that occasions what is new between us all, a fuel and fire both.

¹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

² Anthony McCann, *Crowd-Monument-Corpse: A Pandemic Journal*, 2020.

³ Fred Moten & Stefano Harney, *When We Are Apart We Are Not Alone*, Intv'w by Zach Ngin, Sara Van Horn & Alex Westfall, May 2020.

⁴ Interview with Catherine Malabou, <http://figureground.org/interview-with-catherine-malabou/>, 2017.

⁵ Structures, or Why Things Don't Fall Down, J.E. Gordon, Da Capo Press, Inc., 1978.

⁶ Excerpt from *My Meteorite: Or, Without The Random There Can Be No New Thing*, Harry Dodge, Penguin Press, 2020.