

## All the Styrofoam in the World

*All the Styrofoam in the World* unravels the obscurity of a manufactured product that is representative of an ecological threat, and elaborates on the ways human consciousness deals with the existence of a massively-produced single-use product at the interstice between being serviceable and (polluting) waste. In the context of our programmatic societies, this moment represents a limbo between the values of *purpose* and *uselessness*.

Photographs and commodities share the qualities of ubiquity and free circulation. This superlative presence and movement in the world implies the impossibility to localize them. Ubiquity and non-locality are the two sides of the same coin. Philosopher Timothy Morton coined the term *hyperobjects* to refer to those entities that exceed humanity in space and time. Humans can only interact with parts of them because their totalities exist in other dimensions beyond our reach. The Earth, global warming and Styrofoam are examples of hyperobjects. Sensorial experiences give us access to their corporealities through a local expression of the hyperobject occurring at the intersection of these dimensions. Due to its self-containment, the hyperobject withdraws from human understanding while rejecting the notions of foreground and background.<sup>1</sup> It does not exist in an exclusive relationship to everything else, but in a phased interrelation to multiple entities.

What we once called *Nature* is now mere context. It is not an entity different from, but an ambience within which human efforts to dominate and exploit the planet's resources have proven successful under the logics of utilitarian material culture. The capitalist relations among resources, capital, profit, labour, wants, and needs are organized into programs which pursue the perpetuation of

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<sup>1</sup> The autonomy of the hyperobject represents a risk for human self-indulgence. The responsibility humanity has over human-made objects is not discussed here but it is a relevant matter to the intentions of this project. See Andrew Cole, "A Questionnaire on Materialisms," in *October 155, Winter 2016*, 23-25, accessed March 20, 2017, doi:10.1162/OCTO\_a\_00243.

an efficient consumerist society whose ulterior objective is to embed as much symbolic value as possible into otherwise banal material goods. Within this scheme, commodities coexist in hierarchical tension among each other. Among other possible approaches, we can recognize a significant difference between the wanted (and/or needed) product and a lower kind which exists to facilitate the consumption of the desired item. Packages and single-use items belong to the latter group.

The unstable antagonism between programatic purposefulness and waste speaks to the delicate relations between consciousness and matter. An object's purpose is the result of human and nonhuman effort through the accumulation of material transformation and sociocultural judgment. As a petroleum derivative, polystyrene is the consequence of intricate biological and cultural collaborative processes throughout the geological history of the planet. Its matter's reality comes to being due to dinosaurs, geological processes, weather, human technology, and use values, equally. Human reason fails at grasping the scope of its interobjective existence. Polystyrene's gigantic scale manifests when its endurance clashes with the loss of symbolic value. In our spacetime, dinosaurs are, at best, an abstraction of polystyrene's remote past. In a higher dimension they exist as immediate contiguous moments in the existence of one object. A polystyrene tray is a temporal intersection of a hyperobject's time with our time. Its seeable part is only the shadow of the unseeable nonlocal *hyperobject* whose extent covers all human conceptions of distance within our planet.

Styrofoam is the most popular trademarked brand of expanded polystyrene, widely used for the production of polystyrene trays. These are massively produced, distributed, used and consequently disposed of. Due to their low density, recycling them is costly and therefore an unprofitable endeavour. Polystyrene trays are deceitful commodities that embody involuntary and seemingly unavoidable purchases in urban contexts. In practice, the final consumer acquires these objects as the consequence of wanting something else. The product's purpose is, of course, temporal. More often than not, their

material qualities do not change once used. Nevertheless, the item becomes a piece of waste to the eyes of the user after the program has been exhausted. As everything else that falls into the category of “waste,” the purposeless article needs to be removed from the user’s life: it has to be sent “away”. The material accumulation at both sides of the separating line of use points out the presence of an object that exists at a gigantic scale not only in space but also in time: all the polystyrene in the world.

Photography is efficient at recalibrating human perception of time and space. The dissection of electromagnetic activity and its transmutation into a material form exacerbates the presence of the depicted object. Humanity is able to get closer to the hyperobject through photography than with other physiological instruments. This proximity has extrahuman implications. For instance, the physical object and its photographic representation engage in a pseudo-parallel spatiotemporal existence. Both will remain in the world for a certain amount of time and both will age. However, humans can only speculate what that exchange might be like.

The way human-made objects exist in the world exceeds human reason. Many of them will outlive us. Being born has become as uncertain as dying. We have made existence unpredictable at every step of the line. Humanity is now threatened by materialistic uncertainty.<sup>2</sup> Our creations betray us. Objects stand against human time. Communication dematerializes as culture rematerializes. Time accelerates. The world warms up. We make objects. Objects exist. They are as we are born. We will not stop extracting, refining, producing. We need. We want. Objects remain as we keep being born. We consume. We use. We throw away. We live. The oceans die. The air is toxic. The world is ours.

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<sup>2</sup> Polystyrene is a threat for us because it endangers our planet, not as a celestial body but as the only place we have ever known as a life-sustainable home. The danger resides in the time that the hyperobject emits in the space that it takes. Timothy Morton will refer to these dimensions as *deep time* and *deep space*.

## Bibliography

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