

INTERVENTION

In Terms of Meaning

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‘In Terms of Meaning’ is written during the isolation phase of the Covid-19 and reflects on the phenomena of the disappearance of things. It is a personal response to a shortage of toilet paper and of the author’s underwear. Referring to Timothy Morton’s (hyper)objects and Kant’s concept of the things’ independence, the text playfully probes into connotations and notions such as the human-anthropocentric transition in relation to the invisible and visible object, the emotional dependence on things and the deep fracture between us, things and the world.

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End of March 2020. While I settled into the isolation phase, I noticed that the quantity of my underwear – my slips – had shrunk alarmingly during a fortnight. I dismissed the conundrum, for the phenomenon of things and objects disappearing is familiar to everyone, which is the very reason I procrastinated and postponed action. What I mean is that everything, myself and others included, can disappear at any given moment; something I try not to think about unless confronted with it. Given that nothing has been taken outside the home – it is at home that the disappearance happens – the rule goes that ‘it’ll reappear, wait a few days, it’ll be found eventually’. Years of struggle have taught me to be patient and take these phenomena light-heartedly.



Things like one’s slips are different however. I need not search every corner of my living quarters. My slips are easily traceable either in the drawer where they belong, on the bedroom floor, in the laundry basket, in the washing machine or drying on the radiator. I braced myself to face the fact that almost half of them had disappeared. They are special things manufactured in Switzerland. That’s where my friend with her family lives. Her surname is the same as the company’s brand, she is an expert on philosophical subjects, we share a deep conversation every now and then, and she wears those slips too. Made from the finest mercerised organic cotton with tiny bits of lace at the

sides, featherlight, hugging the skin. I enjoy wearing them. I don’t mistake them for rubbish or whatever else. I don’t change underwear once I’m out and about and I don’t lose them while wearing.

Neither do I want to elaborate on the pandemic’s progress and cut straight to the one matter that stuck with me from the very beginning of that invisible, phenomenal ‘Covid-thing’ that caused the panic shopping. The hoarding of food, cleaning and personal care goods focused on toilet paper right from the start. A mainstream media topic on and off online, I didn’t understand the urgency of stacking up on toilet paper. Most of it is imported from China I was told, incomprehensible to me and proved to be ill-informed anyway. First sign of the public’s panic about a shortage, or the possibility of disappearing paper-pulp was a Damocles sword looming over pre-Brexit negotiations. UK’s manufacturers are now working full-power to fill the emptiness of shelves.

I did not buy into it, not the hoarding nor the panic shopping. Certainly not the toilet paper. But I made sure I got a haircut before entering self-isolation. Looking in the bathroom’s mirror, stroking my hair that I thought suffered over a wrong and far too short cut, I was certain that I still had a few rolls of the spotlighted thing to outlast the panic.

My slips and the public’s privy paper, both shrunk in numbers, disappeared.
One a thing, and the other, an object?

‘Am I Anthropocene?’ I asked. Absolutely! – though perhaps a little less than others – than other humans? Perhaps.

Inseparable all the same, I call it the bonding that announced a change: the dawn of the metamorphosis to my anthropocentric counterpart.

Paradoxically, capitalism has unleashed myriad objects upon us, in manifold horror and sparkling splendour. Two hundred years of idealism, two hundred years of seeing humans at the centre of existence, and now the objects take revenge terrifyingly huge, ancient, long-lived, threateningly minute, invading every cell in our body. When we flush the toilet, we imagine that the U-bend takes the waste away into some ontologically alien realm. Ecology is now beginning to tell us about something very different: a flattened world without ontological U-bends. A world in which there is no 'away' (Morton 2013b: 115).

Hey, I thought when I read the paragraph, this rips the gauze from the drama of my teenage years, the birth of a future transition described in my novel:

One morning in July she felt the urge
went to the bathroom,
sat waiting,
listening to the trickle of her urine,
for the urine emptied her body. Stood up, turned
around and saw red.
Waves of adrenaline rippled through her,
through her blood,
her blood looking at her inside the polished white
of the closet,
screaming 'I am bleeding. I am red-blooded
River Styx.

A knife-cutting consciousness, the realisation of the rift between me, the toilet, the slip, the gap between me and the physical, internal fluid that is red and mine, and has left me, is outside me but a rift between the past, innocent me and the water that traced the red outside of me inside the toilet thing that had begun to morph towards a different breath.

That breath now writes at the desk, a fully-grown anthropocentric thing, isolated, endorsed with full consumer power. Mystified is the breathing over the disappearance of my slips and the extremely annoying issue of toilet paper that headlines the papers internationally, which might be the reason I recalled *hyperobjects* – a term for things that are too massive to be perceived with a naked eye, and I think of climate change as a thing as much as an object and how, 'at the very inception of the Anthropocene, things never coincide with their phenomena.' (Morton, 2013a: 18)

I trust men have a limited understanding concerning women's monthlies, not to mention the ensuing connotations such as birth and so on; just try to imagine you're bleeding, every morning you wake, look at the blood before you flush it down the lavatory – never before had I considered the excess use of toilet paper and stained underwear ...

I know it doesn't shed any light on, or persuade my slips to re-emerge in my drawer. Uncanny almost, how the word fits their disappearance. Did they slip off, on, under, into the rift? The shortage of the paper reels and my missing things will force a return to the consuming habit while the pandemic

adds effort and patience to the otherwise automated habit of shopping. Implemented rules to the queues in front of pharmacies and supermarkets are obeyed meeting their ends – the essential products to nourish our wellbeing. Isolated organisms they became, exhibiting the rift between things and human spatially – the recommended two metres distance between each person seems to shorten London's streets. Looking at the queue from my window up in the second floor, it's staged like a rehearsal, set for 'non-action ready to strike at things or objects'.

Next to my desk are plants. They are lively and not infectious, like nonhumans. Objects are infectious when touched by humans. Or does the invisible thing rest on them when it pleases, its intent to infect the vulnerables in the line? Having said that, a myriad of objects, if not all of them, become dangerous tools when touched by humans.

Is this a reason to disappear?
Sure.

A reminder of the rift, the void, of my blood that had processed the metamorphosis – why else would my slips prefer to join the invisible categories of object-things? Why else would I feel each thing changing my skin like *Mystique* in the *X-Men*, am I *Days of Future Past*? (*X-Men: Days of Future Past* 2014).

I am at peace, now that they decided to move on, inside-out my flat, perhaps joining the many other objects that have disappeared since the change took place. I can see it and sure *We* see it more clearly in isolation. All things are in the void.

The dark night of the soul is disturbing because melancholia, the default mode of being an ego, is holding on for dear life to nothing. Because the soul essence is this very quiescence of the inorganic world, it must remember through this darkness that everything else is an illusion, a delusion that the soul matters, that reality it, about it, for it – even the nothingness of melancholy self-reference is a delusion. How to let go? [...]

Depression is the rush of death-in-life decelerated by some psychic object that holds the mind in its jaws until we learn to hear its truth. Depression is frozen wisdom. Inside the ice is molten water. What replaces the delusion of melancholy is what is already the case – the simple coexistence of entities, 'objects' [...] So spiritual depression doesn't exactly swing 'back' to two-dimensional happiness, which has become an impossible escape route. Depression simply dissipates, like Arctic frost in the bright cold air. It enfolds itself back into the mute coexistence of things. Melancholy is supposed to be the pathological twin of mourning. But the small print of mourning is that to pass through it we must dwell with melancholia. Melancholy is a lump in our throats, a rock in our stomach, a knot in our subtle body channels, an object-like entity that seems to stick in our being. It reminds us of

the object world we strive to leave behind in our quest to compute the impossible. As such, the sorrow of being goes 'deep down things' (Morton 2013c:73–94; 86).

I want some thing else, knowing full well I don't know what that would be.

The knowing out of the window, I rely on my senses, feeling a sense of consolation by the many things I have and have found before the rules of isolation applied. Above the many, I must highlight the beauty of such a lively thing like the 'Queen of the Night', who evidently and instantly raised her leaves gently, gratefully stretched her stems when touching upon her final destination in the lounge – *Epiphyllum oxypetalum*, an orchid cactus who doesn't look like a cactus. Her future blossoms are large, white and fragrant, flowering between dusk and dawn; every night one flower opens her petals and lasts for that night only. I can't wait to witness the magic. My Queen found her way from the treetops of the Mexican tropical jungle to London. She grows on trees, her leaves are modified stems, adapted to cling to the host as well as they photosynthesise. I would wish to serve her as a host, but she needs some thing that won't be as vulnerable to the invisible categories of stuff as I am.

Both of us enjoy living in symbiosis. She makes sure I'm breathing.

Plants and algae perform photosynthesis, which converts atmospheric carbon dioxide and water to sugar using the energy from the sun. This process produces oxygen as a by-product and this by-product of green life is thought to have given rise to the current atmospheric oxygen levels of around 20%. Simplified, we breathe in oxygen and carbon dioxide out, and plants do the opposite (Morris & Woolfenden 2017).

We breathe through the mouth – *stomata*, Greek for mouths – the green parts of land plants are covered with tiny units of them.

Stomata are framed by two cells, called guard cells, each a mirror image of the other, which together form a ring shape like a doughnut (those with a hole). Unlike doughnuts, stomata are exquisitely regulated and dynamic. Light causes stomata to open and close. Typically, stomata are open during the day and closed at night, like some people's mouths. Many other signals cause stomata to open and close. Open stomata allow carbon dioxide to enter the plant, however, water vapour can escape, so regulation of stomata is crucial for maintaining plant water status. We wanted to understand how this opening and closing works (Morris & Woolfenden 2017).

We understand how things work on this and other planets.

I understand the unmistakable sign of spring arriving as I watch a few ants invading my home from the terrace and I know that soon, there will be a busy trafficking,

pressing me to build a poisonous barrier. I know of my guilty anthropocentric feelings when I brush the corpses into one of the new things I bought before the isolation. A green dustpan.

I will kill the trespassers and try to avoid current pandemic statistics of corpses, the isolation and everything connected, but my mind returns to the intimacy of the bathroom, that privy thing that might have dissolved my slips, the thing that in itself must consist of either virgin or recycled tree pulp, the organic alternative to the otherwise cheap chemical mush.

When I look at my Queen, I think of the months I spent on a Brazilian island editing my novel. A lovely Canadian women writer became my ally. Religion was the subject of the book she wanted to write and it triggered a lengthy discussion during one of the very humid, sizzling hot afternoons. The kind when even a single intention to move is too much to cope for the body, but the mind remains restless. I cannot cite her precise questions and I don't remember how we tiptoed the seriousness I imagined circular, and that I succeeded in lifting occasionally. She seemed fixed on hunting down no less than the Truth, there and then.

I listened to diverse arguments, watched arrows flying. Taoism, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam ... I let them pass the silence we encountered, exhausted by her pushing for meaning, betrayed by the void.

I had changed the 'why are we here on earth?' to 'what is our function?', which made her laugh.

Anthropocene as I am,

I am not a seeker of meaning, but I know my place and I am certain of the truth.

Rolled it out from the bathroom to the ocean, floating the waters.

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Cover image taken by author, Exhibition at Gallery Hauser & Wirth, New York 2019, 'To Exalt the Ephemeral: Alina Szapocznikow, 1962–1972', by kind permission Hauser and Wirth.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Roswitha began her career as a costume and stage designer in theatre, opera and dance nationally and internationally. Since the millennium she developed her own ideas and interests as an artist and writer. Her work incorporates spoken word, movement, opera and digital images, and has involved working with composers, groups of actors, dancers, acrobats and musicians in established opera houses, theatres and academic institutions. Roswitha's research studies of the 'chorus' led her to rediscover her poetry, resulting in a self-published collection of poems. She embarked on writing poetry as part of a novel while directing choral performances that focused on the bee swarms' democratic decision-making which received the 'People's Award'. Her career focus had shifted to becoming a writer, and it was this work that

acted as a catalyst for her studies of the chorus which formed the foundation for her first novel *The Future Was Bright*. Roswitha was offered a two-month artist/writer residency on a Brazilian island; recent travels produced a collection of short stories and poetry. As a writer she collaborated with choreographer Yolande Snaith and composer Kris Apple in California and the UK; she has written the concept and dialogue to kickstart a new interdisciplinary project, 'The Manna Threshold' this year. www.roswithagerlitz.co.uk.

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