A FOLLY FOR THE ANTHROPOCENE

by Chris Perry

Not for 'us' alone.

Published July 4, 2015

Rendering / photomontage of proposed folly situated at the edge of OMI's sculpture park, an inherently ambiguous space belonging neither to "nature" nor "culture". As such, this edge condition necessarily serves as a zone of exchange between human and nonhuman forms of inhabitation, for which the folly provides a space of intensification as simultaneously a "cultural object" located within the sculpture park's space of exhibition and a "natural object" both visually and ecologically linked to the tree line. Image courtesy of pneumastudio.

> The end of the world, then, is also the end of the human dream that reality is significant for us alone. We now have the prospect of forging new alliances between humans and nonhumans alike, now that we have stepped out of the cocoon of "world."
> —Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*[1]

The rapid technological advancements of the Industrial Revolution, beginning with the invention of the steam engine in 1784 and extending into the postwar years of the 1950s, brought with it a modern age characterized by optimistic themes of progress and futurism. Within the discipline of architecture during the first and second waves of modernism, Le Corbusier's carefully cultivated industrial "machine aesthetic" and Alison and Peter Smithson's prototype for a mass-produced plastic "House of the Future" personified such themes.[2]

It wasn't until the late 60s that concerns regarding the collateral effects of industrialization on both human and environmental health first arose. In 1970, the same year that Richard Nixon signed the National Environmental Policy Act, which resulted in the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency, Robert Smithson completed Spiral

Jetty. This rugged landform installation composed of mud, rock and salt was sited within a "natural" setting in fact shaped by decades of industrial activity in the Great Salt Lake of Utah. Arguably the most important and influential work to emerge from the burgeoning Land Art movement, this large-scale "earthwork" personified skepticism among a new generation of artists for the rhetoric of progress associated with industrialization. Moreover, a series of major publications in 1969 and 1970 signaled a similar philosophical shift within the related fields of sociology, architecture and landscape, including John McHale's *The Ecological Context,* Ian McHarg's *Design with Nature* and Reyner Banham's *Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* and *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies.*

We might understand our current moment as parallel to the late 60s and early 70s.[3] After four decades of relative indifference to environmental questions, contemporary artists, architects and landscape architects find themselves faced with an increasingly alarming ecological crisis. Forty-three years after Nixon signed NEPA with the declaration that the 70s "absolutely must pay its debt to the past by reclaiming the purity of its air, its waters, and our living environment," Barack Obama called for new and urgent legislation on environmental regulation. At a speech at Georgetown University, Obama stated simply, "We need to act."[4] If anything, the growing signs of environmental degradation that became apparent to the public in the late 60s, which were seen principally at local scales and as a national problem, have escalated into a global crisis. What is now referred to as the "Anthropocene," a new geological age characterized by man's anthropic effects on the planet, lends a tangible identity to this new period in which we live—a period of increasing existential threat.

Timothy Morton's recent book, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World,* goes so far as to suggest that this looming ecological catastrophe may have, in fact, already happened. He likens the threat to "a slow-motion nuclear bomb" ignited at the dawn of the Industrial Age, the irreversible and catastrophic effects of which have only recently become evident.[5] And it is largely the emergence of what Morton calls "hyperobjects" that has rendered the previously imperceptible effects of this slow-motion nuclear bomb visible to the human eye. Hyperobjects are "'hyper' in their inescapable relation to some other entity," whether "directly manufactured by humans or not."[6] Global warming, for instance, can be understood as a hyperobject, in that it is "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans." The principal result of global warming, commonly referred to as *climate change*, may be impossible to represent in its totality. However, it has unmistakable effects and manifestations across vast scales and localities, whether in the form of regional droughts or the global phenomenon of glacier retreat, each of which index the *hyperobject* as a material, albeit elusive, entity in the world.

It is the presence of these hyperobjects that has fundamentally displaced human orientation in the world, forcing us to recognize that we now inhabit a dramatically different one. The previously dominant concept of world, premised on the constructed fantasy that humans exist outside of "nature" (itself a human construct) is no longer tenable. Unlike its anthropocentric predecessor, this new world does not tolerate separation between human and nonhuman, but rather imposes an "asymmetrical confrontation" between the two.[7] Whether we like it or not, in this "Asymmetric Phase," "nonhumans have finally infiltrated human social, psychic and philosophical space."[8] Morton argues, "hyperobjects seem to force something on us, something that affects some core ideas of what it means to exist, what Earth is, what society is."[9] As such, humans must inevitably come to terms with a dramatic philosophical realignment as it regards previously held notions of "environment" or "nature," specifically in terms of the constructed fiction that *the environment* is a space that exists outside of and is thus distinct from the space of humans, and by extension human civilization.

Similarly, the recent development of "speculative realism" or "new materialism" in continental philosophy orients itself around a fundamental questioning of anthropocentrism that tracks back to philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. As Steven Shaviro argues in his recent book *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*, this critique of anthropocentrism, coupled with the increasing threat of ecological catastrophe, recognizes "that the fate of humanity is deeply intertwined with the fates of all sorts of other entities," and that, given "how closely related we are to all the other living things on this planet, we cannot continue to consider ourselves unique."[10] This

mode of thought displaces the centrality of the human subject with an understanding of a world of objects—the human becomes merely another object among objects. Whether rocks, plants, weather systems, or fellow mammals, each entity maintains its own forms of interaction with one another. This interactive, or "interobjective" (as Morton calls it) conception of the world describes a system of nonhierarchical, interrelated "processes" (as Whitehead preferred to see them), in which no object is privileged over another. Thus the human can no longer be viewed as central or unique to, and thus *apart from,* its fellow nonhuman processes and resultant objects, but rather, always and already *a part of* them. As such, this philosophical line of thinking serves as a fundamental critique of the traditional subject–object distinction, which asserts that the world is comprised of subjects and objects (this dates back at least to Descartes' mind/body distinction). In contrast, "speculative realism" or "new materialism" argues that there are no subjects in the world, but rather, only objects, human as well as nonhuman, each of which form varying nonhierarchical relations with one another. So this critique of anthropocentrism, through an argument of "new materialism" or "speculative realism," may also be considered an inherently "environmental" argument, similar to Morton's writing, in that it critiques the anthropocentric view of the world that humans have traditionally held, in which "nature," as nonhuman object, is subjected to the "manifest destiny" of human civilization, as subject.

If human as well as nonhuman "inhabit some etheric shared space between objects," how does one define this radically reconfigured human experience and by extension its various forms of representation?[11] In other words, in an age where the human has been realigned alongside a vast world of objects, how can we rethink cultural fields of invention and production, like architecture? Should architecture realign itself in order to establish new affiliations beyond the human? If so, what does it mean for architecture to define itself as something no longer significant for "us" alone?[12] The realignment of architecture away from a human field of inquiry and production can help to engender greater awareness among our fellow humans about our place in the world, or the degree to which our concept of "place" has been fundamentally *dis*placed. And in this sense, aesthetics might be seen as performative, in terms of its capacity to promote new modes of thought and awareness about the world and our place in it, through direct experience of the architectural object itself.

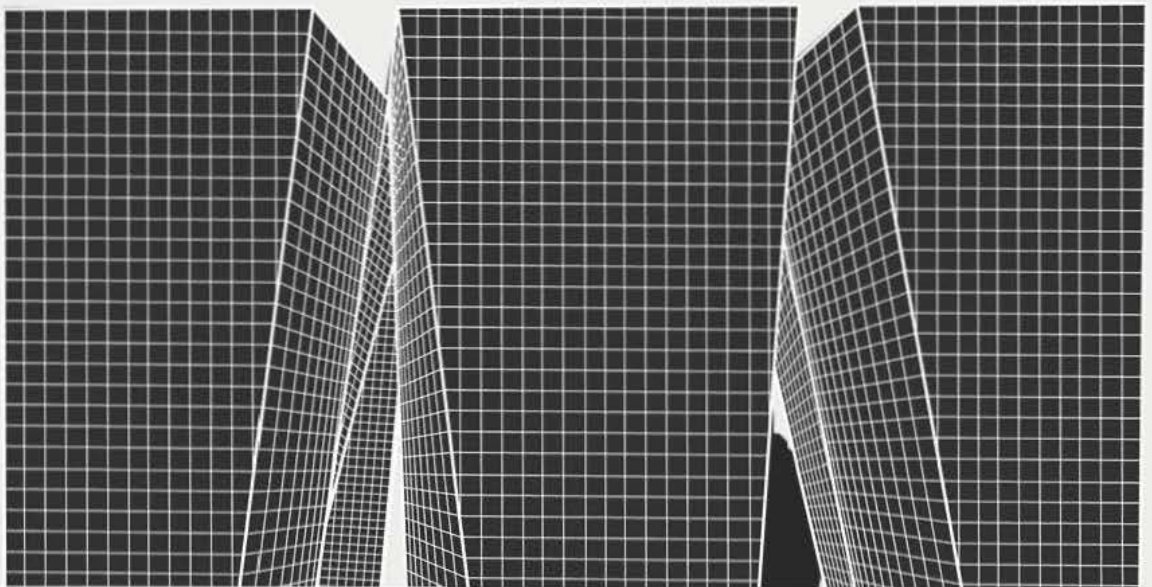
Left, axonometric rendering of A Folly for the Anthropocene, which depicts the project's principal formal gesture: a large section of earth, along with its various nonhuman inhabitants, displaced from the ground. In turn, this formal and material displacement serves to displace the conventions of human-nonhuman relations. Right, ecology diagram illustrating human as well as nonhuman forms of inhabitation that the folly supports, the latter of which includes vegetation, insects, and wildlife. The Paw Paw tree (Asimina triloba) is a fruit tree native to North America, related to the tropical papaya. It is not widely distributed due to a recent (10,000 years) Quaternary

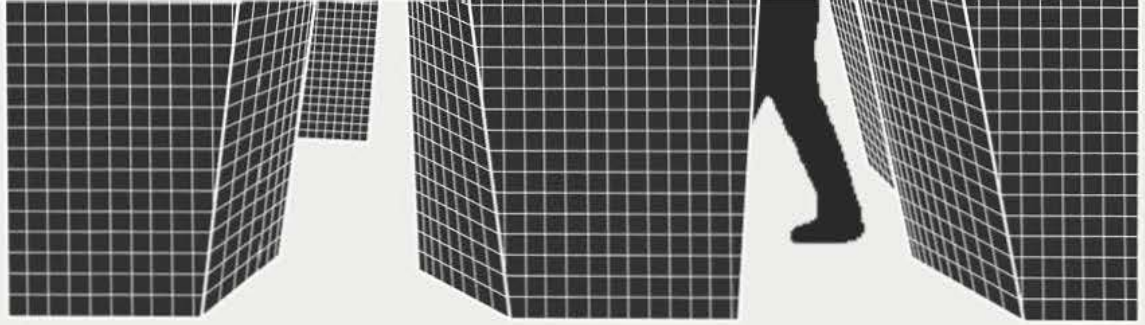
extinction event. Ecologists have been re-propagating the Paw Paw because its clonally growing root systems buttress stream bed edges and its fruit was an exotic bounty favored by Thomas Jefferson. Images courtesy of pneumastudio.

AN ARCHITECTURAL FOLLY FOR THE ANTHROPOCENE

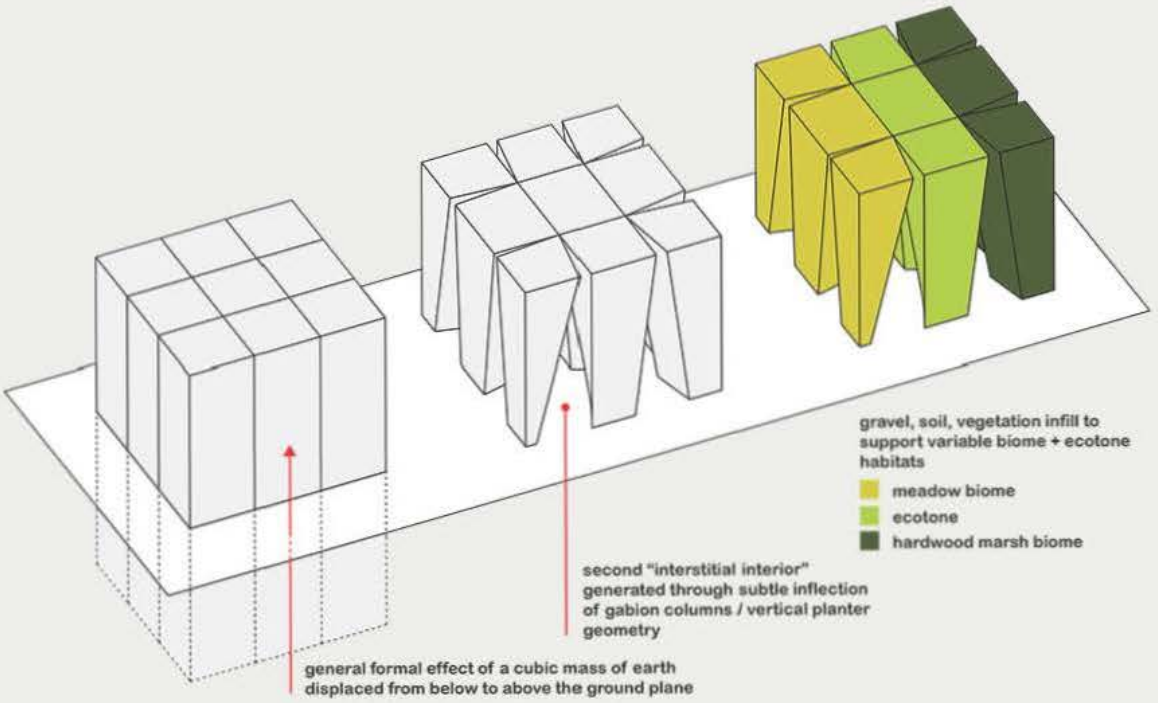
Anthony Vidler writes that "as a vehicle for all sorts of fashionable literary notions, from the sublime to the picturesque, the folly exhibited them in a kind of museum of meditative objects."[13] Whether deployed at the Garden at Ermenonville in the late eighteen century or at Parc de la Villette two hundred years later, the folly is a unique cultural typology in that it can be found within the discipline of architecture as well as landscape architecture. Furthermore, the folly also provides a unique space for design experimentation and theoretical inquiry unfettered by the prosaic utility, or practical constraints, of "building." As such, it might also be seen as a cultural typology conversant with fine art, and especially with sculpture and its various subcategories such as land art and installation art—while not considered a "work of architecture" *per se*, the folly has been absolved of any and all normative architectural functionality. Indeed, Bernard Tschumi's interest in the folly, which dates back to the initiation of *20th Century Follies* in the late 70s, is premised on the concept of a "useless architecture"—an ambiguous architecture that, despite its useless and to some extent, non-architectural status, should not necessarily be confused with sculpture, land art or installation art.[14] In this way, the folly would seem to be a strangely extra-disciplinary typology that migrates between architecture, landscape architecture and the fine arts. One can find a similarly ambiguous definition of the architectural folly in the introduction to the catalog *Osaka Follies*, for an exhibition staged at the Architectural Association in 1991, in which Arata Isozaki writes: the folly "isn't quite architecture...isn't quite sculpture. Rather, the folly is a thing that structures new meaning through public contact."[15] These two definitions of the architectural folly suggest that, despite its uselessness as a conventional "building," aesthetics activated by it might be seen as having their own form of usefulness or performativity, albeit an intellectual or conceptual one. Sensory experience carries with it the potential to promote discourse and, in turn, new forms of cognition, awareness and, eventually, action. The design proposal shown here seeks to reactivate the aesthetics of the architectural folly at the dawn of the twenty-first century as a means of exploring new forms of cognition and awareness in an age of environmental crisis and existential threat.

Commissioned by and situated within the sprawling sculpture park of the OMI International Arts Center in Ghent, New York, this proposal seeks to evoke displacement of anthropocentrism in material, formal and spatial terms. As an ambiguous object located somewhere between human and nonhuman space, the folly privileges neither. Instead it seeks to engender the paradoxical condition of simultaneous proximity and separation between the two. In this way, the human individual's experience of the folly mirrors that of society's in an era of global warming and climate change—it is an experience characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty and the uncanny associated with new forms of intimacy between human and nonhuman objects and processes.





Perspectival elevation of A Folly for the Anthropocene. This drawing, which documents the folly's formal tectonics, a gabion structure packed with local stone, soil, and native plantings, produces intentionally uncomfortable and claustrophobic conditions for the human body, thereby displacing it from any point of assumed privilege. Image courtesy of pneumastudio.



Axonometric diagrams that depict the following:
1. The project's principal formal gesture: a large section of earth displaced from below to above the ground plane.
2. The folly's nine-square columnar structure: made out of gabion, the folly's formal system provides two types of enclosure, one for nonhumans (the interior volume of each column), and one for humans (a second "interstitial interior" located in between the columns, which is produced by inflecting the column geometry)
3. Ecotones and biomes: An ecotone is a transition zone between two biomes. It is where two communities meet and integrate, a transitional area that typically sponsors greater species diversity and population than its adjacent biomes. One of our proposed sites at OMI is the margin of the upland meadow and the hardwood marsh in the Architecture OMI fields. Another proposed site is the upland hardwood condition, with particular interest in cultivating two compatible ecologies in the vertical direction, native trees and mushrooms on top; mosses, mushrooms, and ferns below. Image courtesy of pneumastudio.

The folly is comprised of self-supporting gabions, filled with a matrix of local stone, and prodigiously planted with natives designed to foster biodiversity among an extended ecology of insects, birds and small animals. Humans are able to enter the folly but in a way that is intentionally uncomfortable, claustrophobic and displaced from any point of assumed privilege. In this way, the gabion structure operates as a double enclosure for human as well as nonhuman inhabitation, producing variable forms of interiority and with it an intentionally ambiguous threshold between human and nonhuman space, degrees of "insideness," and by extension, architecture and landscape. Configured as nine hollow "columns" or vertical planters, the interiors of which are filled with gravel, soil, and vegetation, modest interstitial spacing between each of these columns generates a second interstitial interior for human occupation. Taking the form of a series of

crevice-like spaces, this second interior forces the human body to bend, duck and slither, suggesting to human occupants that these spaces, while physically accessible, were not necessarily designed for them. Furthermore, the materiality and atmosphere of the folly's second interior confronts the occupant with a quality of "nature" that is typically kept at a more comfortable distance, a quality akin to David Gissen's concept of "subnature."[16] As such, the folly's second interior simulates material and atmospheric qualities characterized by dampness and lack of daylight; a dark, musty "underground" environment conducive to the proliferation of moss, slugs, and spiderwebs. In this way, the gabion structure is merely a loose container for gravel, soil and roots, in effect displaced from the earth itself, and hosts various subterranean nonhuman objects and processes that are typically concealed in the depths of the ground. All the while, the more familiar forms of "nature"—the plants, butterflies, and birds, which inhabit the top of the folly—are intentionally lifted away from the human and thus remain physically, and to some extent, visually, inaccessible. As a result, the human's conventional orientation to "nature" can be understood as displaced in multiple ways: No longer safely above ground, the human inhabits the ground itself, thus occupying a simultaneous interior/exterior condition, philosophically as well as experientially, whereby human–nonhuman distinctions are rendered ambiguous.

In the context of speculative realism and the displacement of anthropocentrism "after the end of the world," this architectural folly, while to some extent expressive of the grand human folly that is the Anthropocene itself, resists privileging either the human or the nonhuman. In this sense, humans and nonhumans alike, whether in the form of bird migrations, climate or the seasonal fluctuation of plant and insect life, exist in a perpetual state of interaction and co-modulation—an "interobjective" architectural landform no longer designed or designated for "us" alone. And to this extent, the folly might also be understood as a node situated within a series of hyperobjects that influences and is influenced by temporal and distributed processes.

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1. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 108. ^
2. For more on Le Corbusier's "machine aesthetic," characteristic of his work prior to World War II, see Reyner Banham, "The Machine Aesthetic," *Architectural Review* (April 1955). For more on the aesthetic of mass consumption and expendability characteristic of the postwar period, see Nigel Whitely, "Toward a Throw-Away Culture: Consumerism, Style Obsolescence, and Cultural Theory in the 1950s and 1960s," *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2, The '60s (1987), 3–27. ^
3. In his essay "Whatever Happened to Ecology?" published in the 2010 *Architectural Design* issue *Eco-Redux: Design Remedies for an Ailing Planet*, Anthony Vidler suggests that questions related to "ecology" and "environment" initiated by McHale and Banham have only recently resurfaced in architecture discourse. ^
4. For more on Richard Nixon's formation of the EPA, specifically as it relates to architectural discourse in the early 1970s, see Reinhold Martin, "Environment, c.1973," in *Grey Room*, no. 14, Winter 2004 (MIT Press), 78–101. ^
5. Timothy Morton, *Literature and the Environment*, University of California at Davis, Fall 2008 (iTunes U). ^
6. Ibid. ^
7. Timothy Morton, "Art in the Age of Asymmetry: Hegel, Objects, Aesthetics," *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 1 (2012), 130. ^
8. Ibid, 133. ^
9. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 15. ^
10. Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (University of Minnesota, 2014), 1. ^
11. Morton, *Hyperobjects*. ^
12. Timothy Morton, "Architecture Without Nature," *Tarp Architecture Manual: Not Nature* (Spring: 2012), 3. ^
13. Anthony Vidler, "History of the Folly" in *Follies: Architecture for the Late-Twentieth-Century Landscape*, B.J. Archer, ed. (Rizzoli, 1983), 10. ^
14. For more on a discussion of follies in relation to Bernard Tschumi's work, see the interview "Architecture Beyond Architecture: Cathryn Dwyre and Chris Perry in Conversation with Bernard Tschumi", in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, No. 109, a special issue on *Performance and Architecture* guest-edited by Cathryn Dwyre and Chris Perry (MIT Press, 2015), 8-15. ^
15. Arata Isozaki, "Osaka's Green Crossroads" in Osaka Follies (Architectural Association, 1991), 5. ^
16. For more on the concept of "subnature," see David Gissen, *Subnature: Architecture's Other Environments* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2009). ^

pneumastudio
Principals and Project Designers:
Cathryn Dwyre, Landscape Architect; Chris Perry, Architect

Formed in 2011, *pneumastudio* is an experimental design practice that brings together the related fields of architecture and landscape architecture as a means of reconsidering the "built environment" in a time of environmental crisis and existential threat. *pneumastudio* has exhibited its work at the Design Museum in Barcelona and New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study. Dwyre and Perry are fellows of The MacDowell Colony (2013) and co-editors of a special issue of *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* (MIT Press). Recent publications featuring the group's work include *Global Design*

(Prestel) and *Bracket 2: Goes Soft* (Actar). Dwyre is Visiting Associate Professor at Pratt Institute's School of Architecture where she teaches undergraduate thesis and elective history/theory seminars. Perry is Assistant Professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's School of Architecture where he is Head of Graduate Studies and director of the Geofutures post-professional program.

A Folly for the Anthropocene is a full-scale "permanent installation" commissioned by Peter Franck, director of architecture at OMI International Arts Center, Ghent, New York. The project is pending construction and in the meantime will be exhibited as part of a solo exhibition by *pneumastudio* at OMI and as part of a group exhibition at the Clermont State Historic Site in Clermont, New York, organized and curated by the contemporary arts project space, CR10. Both exhibitions will take place in the fall of 2015.