

This conversation comes as a result of a few unfolding collaborations: between myself and Rit Premnath, between me and Matt Keegan, and between Gresham's Ghost and *Shifter*. After participating in my project *No More Presence*, Matt invited me to contribute to this publication as a way of continuing the chain of reciprocity that remains as one of the engines behind *No More Presence*. Similarly, when Rit and I started talking about doing something for his magazine, *Shifter*, I thought that it might be fortuitous to combine all the ventures into one sprawling project, which would take on a series of manifestations. First, the interview here. Second, the interview in *Shifter*. Third, a collaborative exhibition with *Shifter* and Gresham's Ghost that will revolve around the idea of intentionality. Fourth and final, Matt Keegan will organize an exhibition that gives his publication a different kind of life. As the theme of the next issue of *Shifter* is intentionality, the idea loosely girds our conversation below. But as you'll see, it leaks and spreads into many other areas of discussion.

It seems appropriate, considering the way Rit and I both choose to work, that we introduce each other and the multifaceted intentions behind our collaborative projects, and how they continue to shape our thoughts on not only intentionality but artmaking and the world in general. *Shifter*, as Rit informed me, is a word that calls attention to the speaker of the word: *I or you*, for example. The word remains the same, but whom it designates depends completely upon the speaker. Likewise, *Shifter* has taken the role of remaining a slippery, collaborative effort; it's known for changing its mode of address as it sees fit, allowing the pragmatic elements of this change to determine the other characteristics of each "issue." Thus, though *Shifter* most often functions as a magazine, it has also become an exhibition, an occasion to celebrate a fictitious philosopher, and a curatorial entity. To define it as the intentions of Rit Premnath is only a piece of the story.

## CONVERSATION BETWEEN SRESHTA RIT PREMNATH OF SHIFTER AND AJAY KURIAN OF GRESHAM'S GHOST

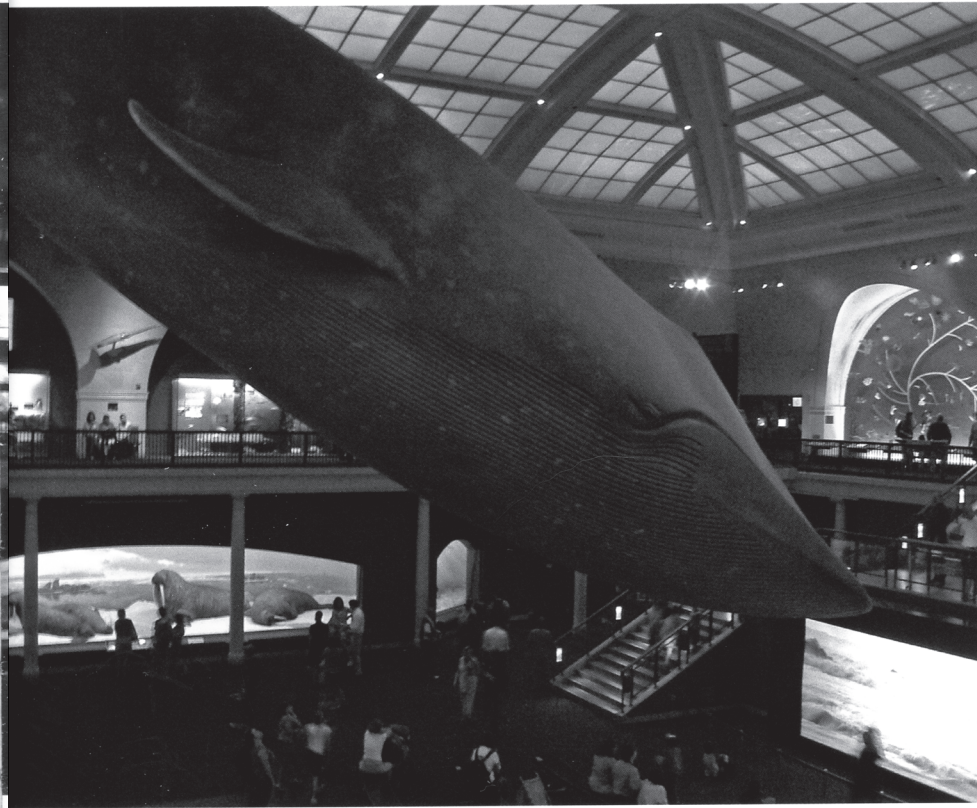
The spectral quality of Ajay's roving curatorial project, Gresham's Ghost—shape-shifting as it inhabits new locations—brought back to the surface a question I have asked myself about *Shifter*. How do we, as curators and editors, as initiators of collaboration, think about the issue of *intention*. The difficulty in talking *about* intention is that it opens up an infinite regress that can potentially unhinge a conversation. Intention is a topic that immediately points out our very urge to create topics, to determine the direction of a conversation before it has begun.

In Ajay's project the spectral quality of intention that directs our decisions is evoked by the ghost of Sir Thomas Gresham, a sixteenth-century financier. His economic law predicted the dangerous consequences of overvaluing currency. It's a prescient law in light of our ongoing economic crises that highlights the flimsy, even imaginary financial substructure that supports and often directs the art world. In relation to the way major collectors influence shows, such as at the New Museum in New York, how do the small, fleeting gestures of artists and their collective discourse have any effect on the superstructure of the art market? These fleeting gestures of exchange are drawn into focus through Ajay's ongoing project *No More Presence*, in which he invites friends to exchange gifts and marks that moment of exchange as a subject for public consideration. Any economy is subject to the ebb and flow of various intentions. *No More Presence* is no exception, and it does so with a different system of valuation to that of capital. By proposing a gift economy in which value is determined ad hoc by two friends, the universal equivalent of money is bypassed and all that remains are the traces of the singular event of exchange.

*In order to resist having a designated topic of conversation we decided to each choose an object and use this unnamed object as a fulcrum around which to structure our conversation. On Ajay's request we met outside the American Museum of Natural History's Hayden Planetarium, then proceeded to wander through Central Park.*

## MODELS

Ajay Kurian (A): I had in mind two places that I wanted to go. I was thinking of taking you to a cemetery, where the «object» in question would be death because it seemed like the one thing that simply escapes all objectification. The other thing that I thought of was a planet or a star, since they're both objects, regardless of the models we have of them, which pale in comparison to the things themselves. So I thought of going to a place where models of these things exist. There's a sincerity with which all these models are built for the purposes of explication as well as for our experience, but at the same time the museum is simply a little box next to Central Park.

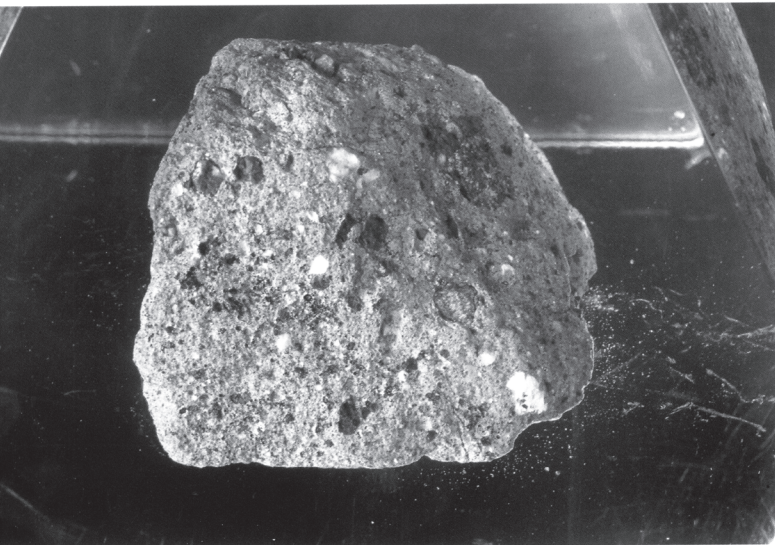


Sreshta Rit Premnath (R): When you said you wanted to go to the Natural History Museum, I wrote back, "I hope your object is the whale!" The reason I said it was because I had done a piece called *Phantom Moon* a few years ago, which used a little part of Bela Tarr's film *Werckmeister Harmonies* in which the protagonist circles around a stuffed whale that's been brought to town as part of a traveling circus. As he's walking around the stuffed whale he thinks aloud, saying something like "I'm standing right in front of you. I can reach out and touch you, and yet I have no understanding whatsoever of the world you inhabited." Then, as he circles around it, he stops right in front of the enormous eye of the whale and says, "and there's no way I could ever understand how *you* looked at the world that you inhabited." So there's something interesting about that impossibility of objectifying, even of the thing that is right in front of you. So for the piece I placed the whale in relation to the moon, which makes total sense here because it is another object that is always mythologized and romanticized—so much that it's more of a symbol than an object. Even in the natural history museum when you see a moon rock—a remnant of the moon—it's still impossible to place that knowledge on top of the knowledge of the moon as a whole as we experience it.

A: I feel like when we see a moon rock, it seems too similar to something that we already know, so we categorize it differently. We might say, "Oh, that's the moon rock—of Earth," instead of connecting it directly to the moon. It's a completely different category when you're talking about the moon, which I think falls more into the space of symbol, because it sloughs off all materiality. So anything that you start to attribute to it slips off like oil on water. It just falls away.



## INTERSPECIES TRANSLATION



A: It's interesting you bring up that film, how the protagonist says that he can't see what the world would look like to the whale, because I've been thinking a lot about the given nature of interspecies translation. It seems very similar to the way we are communicating right now. It's a given that there's not going to be a full «presentability» in any of our interactions—that I'm not going to be able to get directly into your head, and you're not going to be able to get into mine. All we have is this shared language that works . . . well. The only difference with a whale or any other species is that we generally lack the tools to translate the whale's communication or to interpret its understanding of the world. But to me the relevant task of the artist should be to speak as many languages as possible. In that sense, I feel like it's more pertinent and important at this particular time to start reaching out to other disciplines so that we can start seeing how we've always been speaking to animals, to fungi, and so on.

We know their habitats, we know how they act, and how they respond. I think we can predict their responses in very similar ways to how we'd predict a friend's response. This is most obvious with dogs. We treat them as best friends, companions. Many people grow up with them so they really do hold a special place in our lives, and we understand them.

R: Yes, I feel that way with my cat. For instance, if she cries at night, it's annoying, but the only way that I can somehow control it is to try to understand why she's crying—conventionally impossible because I can't pose that question to her. So the only way I can attempt to translate her meows is through trial and error. I try to give her what she wants to stop her cries, or I punish her in some way to make her stop. Either way, the end is clear: I want her *not* to cry at night! But there is a necessity to understand the animal that you live with, and I think this kind of communication has to expand further. For instance, dogs smell one another's asses, or lick each other's poop, and that's another form of communication through which they understand the inside of another animal. As I scoop my cat's poop, I notice the health of the animal and then respond with the right kind of food. So there's a very primal communication that's always taking place.

A: But I think it's even more sophisticated than that. I just watched a documentary on dogs that showed in many ways how they're more sophisticated than primates. They do things that primates haven't been able to do, such as responding to a human pointing. If you point to an object, the dog immediately knows what you're talking about.

R: Cats don't understand that. They look at your finger; they don't realize you're trying to point to something.

A: Really? That kind of indicative gesture is lost on primates as well. You can put something underneath one of two cups, and if you point to the cup that it's under—you're telling them where it is—they still choose randomly. There's no rhyme or reason to it. But as soon as you do that with a dog, they run to it, turn it over, and there's a treat. They demonstrate behavior to show they're reading us much more precisely than any other animal, I think, because we've bred them to co-develop with us. There are really interesting possibilities to start expanding how we treat animals and how we might finally agree that there is more space for interspecies translation. That is, if we'd like them to be a part of our community. Though I'm not saying anything like "we need to take the animal out of the animal."

R: Or to think about communication not only in relation to how we communicate with each other; clearly there are ways in which we also respond to communication between animals.



## TRANSCENDENTAL INTENTION AND LEAPS OF FAITH



A: In relation to models—this is something we talked about before—there are tiers of intentionality, tiers of objects. An interesting question might be: how do we even classify a planetary intention?

R: What do you mean?

A: Well, say we're talking about Earth. There's been a series of massive extinctions—moments when Earth radically changed. I don't know if I'm ready to say that these have been the intentions of the planet itself or that those moments are defined by a series of much smaller events that coalesce into something larger.

R: Sure. I think that's why people often invent the concept of God so that intentionality is then placed outside of all events, and all events can then be traced back to some unseeable central figure. It's tautological, as the normal positing goes. Something happened = fact. This happened because of God. God exists because this happened. It's a self-perpetuating prophecy, which is exactly the opposite of the scientific method. So it's interesting to look at the issue of the model as a way of testing out a possibility.

A model is attractive because it's always contingent and always revisable. So the problem with looking at a moon rock is that the only way we can understand it is through our experience of a rock from Earth. It seems that for any understanding or communication there has to be some set of givens, things that we already understand, and through a kind of metaphorical or metonymic jump we can then say, "Taking *these* things that I understand, I can build up a logic for *that* thing." For instance if you were to imagine a Martian landscape, you probably would picture an arid desert instead of focusing on the fact that it's an oxygen-free environment in which you could not live.

A: But even that is understandable because we *can* think of an atmosphere that we couldn't inhabit or that would kill us. I think the greater jump, the more impossible one, is imagining a landscape that you couldn't imagine . . . How do you do that?

R: Right. I suppose that's impossible.

A: Which is funny because that was your prompt for this conversation. To find an object that is not objectifiable. As soon as you find the object, you've defeated your purpose!

R: Ha. Absolutely. But here's the thing that interests me: There are moments in life when something happens that is completely new to you, not a summation of other things that you've seen or known. Since there are these moments of possibility—when there are no referential means of describing the event, and the event in fact become the means for describing other events—the moment itself becomes an indefinable fundamental object.

A: Right. There are moments like that. One way of describing it is like Kierkegaard's leap of faith. You make a leap of faith once you believe or once you reach a certain level of *knowing* God, but you only know the moment of the leap retrospectively, not when it actually occurs. Another way of looking at it is how an electron jumps from one energy level to another. It doesn't take in energy, nor does it gradually move from one level to another—it's a discrete quanta of energy with nothing in between. It just jumps. We have no ladders to connect those in-between spaces, and they're not incremental in any way.



## DEATH

R: On the subject of death—again, we're straying all over the place, but that's just what we're going to do—I had a moment that may not seem grave to other people, but it was for me. We had little kittens at home, and they were just learning to walk. They would hang out on the windowsill, and then one time two of them fell into the garden outside, where there were dogs. By the time I ran out, one kitten had already been attacked so I picked it up. I had it in my hands—it was still breathing. A moment later, it was dead. It was just a little thing that had been completely alive. In fact, it had just been born about a month before. I had seen it open its eyes for the first time and start to breathe, and then it just . . . died. This small being just becomes a thing, an object without consciousness.

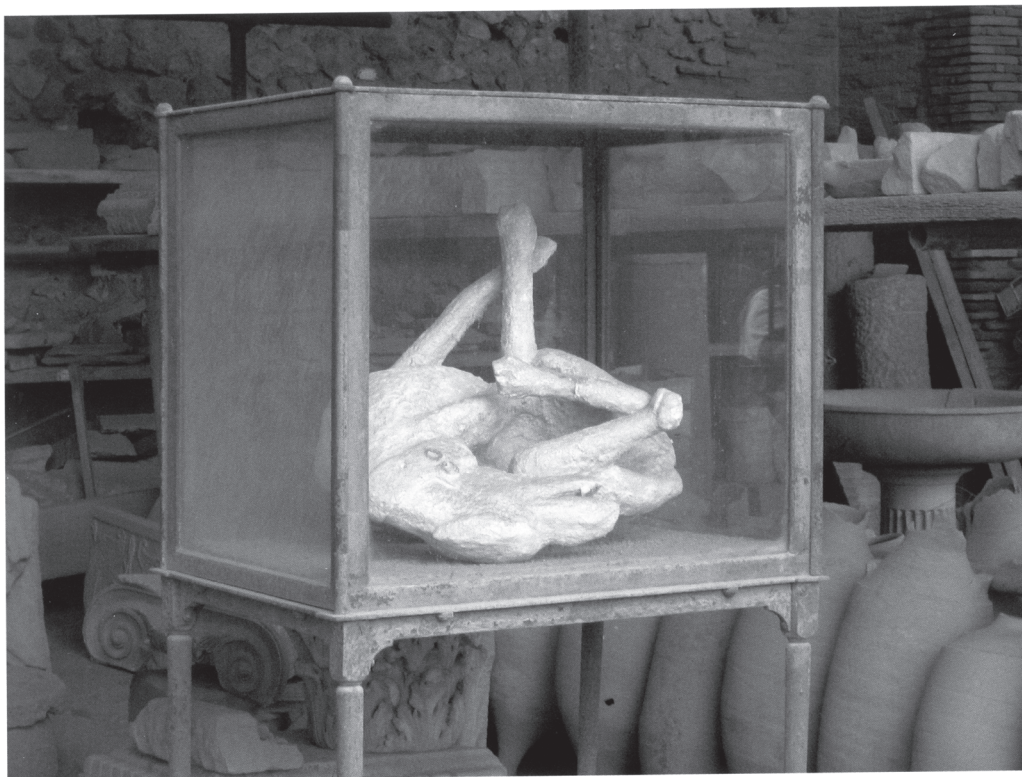
It's not to say that I understood death any better, but there was something about observing the movement from life to death. It made death even more definite, strange, and incomprehensible when it became objectified in that event.

A: Yes, we constantly objectify death, but I think it's one of those things that everyone will experience in similar ways—friends die, your parents die—so you have those shared experiences. It really unleashes the world all over again, every time it happens. We get so caught up in habits and rituals that the occasion of death sometimes allows for all those things to reveal their flimsiness, while other things of the world are offered up with newly explicit force.

Just recently I lost a very close friend . . . I still can't believe it. It made me think about a theory of how we might view space and time. The general model is that space and time are interconnected, but Graham Harman's theory is that *objects* produce space and time. I started thinking about it after my friend passed because it became so clear that space and time did contract because of his absence. Everything is re-situated because of a loss. It redefines people's spaces, how they think about time, what their psychological time is, and what their experience of coded architectures are—it changes everything. Experiences like that reproduce the world differently, radically changing intentionality and how we might be in the world.

R: Going back to the concept of God or some sort of transcendental intention, part of the reason such an idea exists is because of the incomprehensibility of death. So if it doesn't follow our logic, it must follow the logic of a transcendent being.

## INFINITE REGRESS AND POTENTIALITY



A: Infinite regress is just really scary for people. When you say there was no beginning, it's easier to attribute this fact to a transcendent being such as God, as believers recognize that his existence has no beginning or end—that he was not born, nor will he die. Even our conception of the Big Bang as the origin event for the universe is getting re-worked into the “Big Bounce,” which posits that the universe developed from an explosion after a series of millions of previous contractions and expansions. So the idea of intentionality gets really messed up.

R: It's a problem to say there was “a point in time” because before the explosion there was no space or time. There was nothing! It's completely mystical. This pure potentiality exploded, and that explosion has produced and continues to produce space and time. However, the mass of that explosion of energy should remain constant to all the mass in the universe today, since energy remains constant. So everything was contained in that potentiality, which was basically almost nothing.

A: Maybe a way to steer this back toward intentionality is to think about objects and their intentions through their ability to resist entropy—similar to how the world came together. And in their resistance there becomes a series of identifiable factors or means in which they resist entropy or falling apart, which becomes their intentions in a way.

R: That's pretty absolute. So intention is in reaction to the constant threat of death or erasure. It's a resistance against *not* being.

A: Well, maybe it's better to say a resistance to disorder? It's not to say that another system won't be organized out of that “not-being.” Something will come about afterward; it's just that a particular system may have to disintegrate for something else to happen. I guess it's still a reductive way to think about potentiality, to say that it's just a fending off of non-being, since I don't think that's what we do day-to-day. Maybe it is. I don't know.



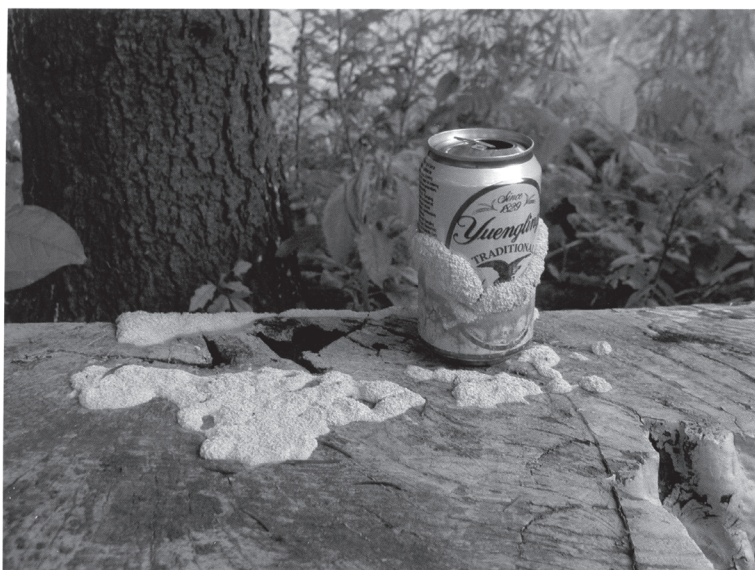
## PARADIGM SHIFTS

R: Intentionality is such a broad issue, but I want to go back to the planet models and the history of astronomy; Galileo and his struggle with the Church. According to the Church, Earth was the center of the universe and the planets and sun revolved around it, but Galileo constructed an alternate model based on his observations, which reversed their claim and challenged the anthropocentric perspective of the Church. Not only that, it would change the structure of intentionality—in which man is modeled after God, therefore man holds central importance with all other things surrounding him existing only for his use. Then suddenly the whole thing falls down like a house of cards. So Galileo's model restructured the Christian model of intentionality.

The weird thing is that this new idea then gets absorbed and becomes part of common sense, through education and dissemination. So now if you ask most kids about the movement of the planets, they wouldn't attribute it to God but to gravitational force instead. But we still don't know what gravitational force is, so it remains a model, or a filler, for something we're still trying to figure out. We know that gravity is based on mass, probably, but then we don't really know how mass is produced. So it's this constant struggle in which I feel like we're working with a system of black boxes, where you can see certain effects of what's going on, but you don't know exactly why it's happening or how you're affecting it.

Global warming is a prime example here. It wasn't the intended consequence of technology to warm the world, but then once you know that it's happening, it becomes a known consequence, and you can't factor out intentionality anymore. If you were to say to a developing country that we know now if you do a certain "X," it will fuck up the environment, the country's immediate answer would be, "But *you* guys did that. For like, fifty years! And that's why you're a superpower. How can you tell us not to do that?" But now it would not be an unintentional consequence anymore.

## INTENTION



R: Right! Maybe now is a good time to try to talk about what we mean when we say intentionality, if we are in fact talking about that.

A: Yes. There's intentionality as it appears in Edmund Husserl's philosophy of phenomenology, which is different from its common usage. In Husserl's case, intentionality simply means that consciousness is always the consciousness of *something*. So basically every moment in which we participate in the world is an intentional act, inasmuch as we're objectifying the world every moment in which we exist. But I tried thinking of moments when that's not true, and it seems like the definition breaks down when you consider the moment when someone is born or when someone is given a new sense, like when a blind person undergoes a surgery and can see again, or when a deaf person gets a hearing aid. All of a sudden the forms of intentional existence change radically. I don't really know if these renewed sensing agents are able to objectify the world just yet. I think it is just sense data. Husserl and others might respond that even though it isn't an objectified act, one's existence is still an attempt to objectify the data we receive, to make sense of things, or to make models of things.

R: I think there's also plenty of research regarding the ways in which we construct narratives or stitch the world together into a consistent picture of reality. For instance, there's a whole lawn in front of us now, basically a repeating pattern of grass, and the brain just fills in information because it doesn't want to have to see every fucking blade of grass. That's a lot of information to process. So unless you're paying direct attention to something, the brain is just filling in general information. Similarly, when we construct narratives of what we are doing in the world or what other people's relationships to us are, we're constantly filling in those narratives to accommodate a grander narrative of our self or subjectivity. In that case it's interesting to think about what you said about Earth. Do you think about it just as "the Earth," or as an object made of many consolidated things that has gone through many radical transformations over time? But then we could say the same thing of ourselves.

A: It's funny, you don't even need a head to have intentions. For instance, experiments have been done with slime molds. There's obviously no brain in a slime mold, but scientists gave it a kind of incentive, and it navigated through a maze. The slime perceives the world and relays information to different parts of itself. I feel like we are looking for consciousness in the wrong places and thinking about intentionality in very narrow ways.

R: In a larger scope, we are completely dependent on various synthetic and organic inputs; they're extensions of our bodies. But again, perhaps there are different tiers of intention. For instance, the route of our walk is being determined by the paths in this park. But then there are other factors that determine our movement as well—perhaps some areas are more attractive than others . . .

A: Also, people think it's cheating to ascribe intention retrospectively, and I don't know if that's necessarily true. I think it's false to assume that the world is fully accessible except that our bodies prevent us from having full access to the world. We have a model in which any mediation is considered a curse. But I don't think that's the case. It's better to think that everything is always in translation. We do it as much as dogs do it, as much as trees do it, as much as minerals do it . . .



# REALITY AND TRANSLATION



R: I feel like when we talk about notions of *reality* and *translation*, we can't get around their separation because of the very language we are using. It's written into our language. So perhaps our understanding *is* reality and there's no other reality, but our language makes it difficult to articulate that.

A: Yes, it really does seem like a false problem. When we realize that other animals are capable of seeing the world in a different way—that birds can see a whole range of colors that we don't, say—it means that facets of reality exist that are as real as ours. And in knowing how other beings experience the world, we are able to understand not only the contingency of our own experiences but also the truth of all those particular experiences.

R: And the importance of acknowledging our inability to have every experience or perceive everything at once.

A: Why is that the Holy Grail? To experience everything all at once?

R: There's a great Borges story called "The Aleph," in which a guy finds a point in space in his basement and realizes that if he looks through it, he sees everything in the universe at once. It's just overwhelming. The thing that was difficult for me to understand was how he knew that he was seeing *everything*. How could you ever know that you are seeing everything, because when you see things that you have never seen before you don't necessarily perceive them as things at all. They might just be perceived as noise.

A: That's another linguistic deficiency, I think. We are able to point to everything, but that doesn't mean we understand.

R: We can say "the world," for instance, and understand it as a concept, although we only experience one point in the world at any moment, one climate, one person's being . . .

A: In a way it's about being OK with the infinite regress of all objects all the time, even the fractal existence of the grass that we were talking about. There's so much information layered in one blade of grass: there's the cellular level, the molecular, the atomic, the subatomic. You keep going down, and we don't precisely know when it ends.

R: Žižek has this ridiculous taciturn idea: In a video game, when you get too close to an object or a part of the architecture that has not been fully rendered, you encounter a weird pixilation or fragmentation. In the same way that video game reality wasn't constructed fully, he proposes that our reality is only constructed to a certain resolution. So when we get too close, a new reality has to be produced in order to satisfy our looking. If you get too close, an atom is produced; if you get closer, an electron and a proton are produced . . .

A: It's an awesome idea, but it seems so fucking self-centered . . .

R: It's a throwback in a way, the idea that the production of reality depends on *our* intentions.

A: It's funny that he's involved in any kind of ethical philosophy because that idea seems so radically unethical.



## ETHICS AND BUREAUCRACY

R: OK, in terms of infinite regress, ethics is an important issue. On the one hand, it's true that we experience the world in different levels and in a fractured way, so it's already impossible to fully understand the world, our existence, and the existence of other things. At the same time there are other beings in the world, and we must have relationships with them. The question of ethics is complicated because even the most basic ethical statement cannot be grounded easily in logic.

A: In the university setting you have layers and layers of bureaucracy. Often what ends up happening is that the program of bureaucracy is so stringent and poorly devised that the people who run it do not realize the simplicity of their program. If they did they would be able to make it more complex and take on more information. They simply end up following protocol like, "here are these forms; fill them out." And sure, there must be some protocol, but you're not a fucking machine. What they are doing, ultimately, does not make any sense, but because of strange bureaucratic accountability, the program stays in place.

In the same way, if we were to produce any form of ethics on a larger social scale, you need a bureaucracy and you need it to be readily revisable.

R: Well, there's the law . . .

A: Yes, I guess the activity of pushing up against the law and speaking for those who can't speak for themselves are all ways in which we change the program. For me, I can't see any other way besides revising a program that will always be too simple.

R: By the time anything becomes law, it is stretched out to fit all kinds of agendas. There are Stalinist fascist ethics: "This is what I think is right and if you disagree, I will kill you." And there are democratic ethics, which do not always work as we wish but seem to be the best thing we've come up with. Then there are microethics, as you were saying. There's the stringent law of the institution—the school or the land or whatever—but if you need help and you meet a particular individual in one of these institutions, someone who knows you, you might ask, "Listen, can you just do this? You know me. I know you. Let's just get this done." On a microethical scale, there are a number of possibilities. If nothing budges, I think it's because of laziness.

A: It's also hard to implement those kinds of insignificant changes in a systematic way, right? How do you consistently and persistently account for these minor actions when there are major things to deal with that are actually more important than your transcript records? It's hard to reconcile because we would need to function at a higher level to do all these things, and then do them even better. Maybe we will. At least that's what Ray Kurzweil says.

R: Who's that?

A: He's the one who's been talking about the event of singularity; when humans will merge with the technologies that they have been creating. He believes that at some point nanotechnologies will be what keeps us alive almost indefinitely. That there will be nano-bots coursing through our veins that will repair us and also radically change our intelligence and memory and all of those things. The processing power of a computer has grown about a billion times. He thinks our own human processing power will increase a billion times. And then what?

R: Then we'll be flipping through channels a billion times faster. We'll be doing dumb things even more efficiently! *[laughs]*

A: *Jackass* for the accelerated mind.

R: Pornography for the accelerated mind.

A: We'll have to think of new visual structures, too. Dogs can see more frames per second than we can. Before TV went digital, dogs didn't have any interest in television because they could see that it wasn't reality. They only saw blank spaces in frames so they were like, "Screw this!" But they'll watch digital TV. Oh no.

[Bird droppings land on Ajay's knee.

We get distracted trying to find paper napkins, and the conversation ends.]