

# Five

## Facing Necrophilia, or “Botox Ethics”

Philosophies are means to ends. New ideas beg the question not of whether they are right or wrong but of whether they make for being rightly or wrongly. For this reason, ideas deserve deployment.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter asks after the deployment of recent object-oriented thought, and whether, when deployed, it lives up to its promises. Do speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, and new materialism truly banish philosophy’s thinking humanist subject? Can they manage, finally, to put philosophers into contact, and philosophy into action, with and within the world? In other words, do these ideas “work” in an artistic sense? Can philosophy hold its own as performance art?<sup>2</sup>

Conceiving of the world as objects or matter sounds like a savvy strategy for avoiding the hubris and distortion of anthropocentrism. (And certainly we are agreed that anthropocentrism has proved again and again to be an enormous liability in deployment: from the ecological to the epistemological to the ethical.) But when put into practice, object-oriented thinking remains hindered by two obstacles. The first is a trend toward privileging connectivity that results in a fetishization of liveliness.<sup>3</sup> This tendency may be most evident in new materialist thought, and given that some object-oriented ontologies propose that objects are ultimately independent and apart from relation, this claim may seem counterintuitive. Still, I fear liveliness lurks not only in new materialist animism and agential realism but also in object-oriented theories of relation and causation. Like a Trojan

horse, liveliness is poised to smuggle anthropocentrism back into the game. Even more concerning, the second obstacle is a failure to truly implicate the self as an object. By not exploiting the self as a specimen, object-oriented thinkers can miss what may be their only opportunity to discuss and engage with objects' perspectives and experiences. Without the modesty of self-implication, anthropocentrism's arrogant exceptionalism returns.

These two sticking points place our object-oriented endeavors in an untenable ethical position. Either we disrespect objects in the name of commonality by projecting our own liveliness onto them, or we set ourselves apart as nonobjects by saying that we know nothing of objects' perspectives, implicitly denying that an object's perspective is ours, too. We seem to have backed ourselves into an ethical corner.

Happily, we can regain our modesty with the help of an object usually associated with vanity: Botox. This misunderstood object's assistance offers a practical way out of our ethical dead end. In the following pages, I set forth ample evidence that Botox will remedy our woes, easing our brows and righting our philosophy. Yet we must first attend to these points of contention.

### *Loving Life: Liveliness as Anthropocentric Relapse*

Like new materialism, object-oriented ontology stresses connectivity between objects.<sup>4</sup> For example, in *Prince of Networks*, his beautiful book on Bruno Latour's metaphysics, Graham Harman indicates that for Latour, the very "reality" of objects hinges on their connectivity. Harman puts Latour forward as an anticipatory figure for object-oriented metaphysics. In Latour's view, objects (or in his terminology, "actors") are "real" only insofar as they are connected and, through their connections, have measureable effects on other objects. In Harman's words, an "actor that makes no difference is not a real actor."<sup>5</sup> For Latour, a real object is networked with others.

Harman's view is closer to my own. He sees objects as disconnected and sealed off from each other. Still, Harman is not content to let autonomous objects lie. To accommodate interaction, he formulates a theory of "vicarious causation," a complex system of allure and all-enveloping, third-party intentions, which allows him to explain how sealed objects may enter into relations after all.<sup>6</sup> Even while

deviating from Latour's networked connectivity, Harman asserts that some form of influence must remain possible. With vicarious causation, he accounts for interaction between objects without the direct causation of overt connection; indeed, for Harman, the latter's impossibility is precisely what makes the former necessary. The alternative—radical disconnect—is untenable, so vicarious causation is Harman's solution for preserving autonomy without sacrificing connection or influence.

In effect, this concession to connection betrays a preference for lively objects, an inclination not only of Harman's but one that, as Harman establishes, appears in Latour and runs throughout much of object-oriented thought. Liveliness also features especially strongly in the Whiteheadian brand of object-oriented ontology favored by Steven Shaviro.<sup>7</sup> In various configurations, the preference is for objects that get up and *do* things, that twist and turn and nudge one another, influencing and making differences by, as Harman writes of Latour, “modifying, transforming, perturbing or creating” their allied friends.<sup>8</sup>

Simply put, for Latour, a disconnected object doesn't count. Latour's theory of alliances is a means to validate the “reality” of objects on the basis of their network effects. A real object *does* make a difference. In this view objects are informatic; they are a “difference which makes a difference,”<sup>9</sup> so they can be sustained only as a circulating network effect. For his part, Harman accepts that real objects can have “no relation at all” without compromising their status as real,<sup>10</sup> but he too explains his theory of vicarious causation in informatic terms as a “problem of *communication* between substances” wherein relation amounts to “signaling” (emphasis added).<sup>11</sup> This informatic formulation is critical. As information, objects must continually generate change (in Latour's language, by modifying, transforming, perturbing, or creating), and this imperative to change—this dynamism—is nothing if not lively.

In her excellent book *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett, an author who has been associated both with object-orientation in speculative realism and with new materialism, refers to this same networked dynamism as “distributive agency.”<sup>12</sup> Taking an embedded view of the liveliness of objects, Bennett writes of the vital “Thing-Power” of objects, which she explains is “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”<sup>13</sup>

Yet reveling in objects by recognizing their inner material life, and appreciating how their actorly connectivity produces lifelike, emergent complexity, is symptomatic of what I call *vivophilia*: loving objects for their liveliness. And herein lies my first point of contention. In privileging alliances, object-oriented ontologies risk reinstating anthropocentrism, where what is “anthro” is no longer the subject but instead the networked individual. Such object-oriented ontologies are in danger of merely rewriting the terms for anthropocentrism. In effect, object-oriented ontology’s philosophical intervention promotes a new view of the human self, in which to be a self, it is more critical to be connected than to be a thinking subject. Objects represent this change from a subject that thinks, and therefore *is*, to an informatic self that *is* in connection. The trouble is that this reformulation takes its cues from something residually “anthro,” and not from objects in and of themselves.<sup>14</sup>

Aside from undoing the hard work undertaken thus far in whittling away anthropocentrism’s death grip on philosophical thought, this move should be rejected for the simple reason that it is bad for all parties: it is bad for philosophy because it mistakes a meta-phenomenon (connectivity or alliances) for a structure (the self-contained nature of the object’s black box). It is bad for human objects because the imperative to connect is detrimental to individuals who suffer from the overconnection compulsions of neoliberal subjectivity. And it is bad for nonhuman objects that get theoretically mangled when they must bear the (human) “indignity of speaking for others.”<sup>15</sup>

And on that note, object-oriented ontology’s second obstacle concerns this question: What of speaking for oneself?

### *The Missing Me: The Self as Omitted Object*

Object-oriented ontology correctly states that humans are a kind of object. However, when pressed to account for their ontology from an object’s perspective, object-oriented thinkers seem to draw a blank.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the problem lies in thinking of “humans” as objects to begin with. By “human,” one always seems to mean those other self-conscious bipeds, never *me*. Yet this remove is immediately problematic. Ontologizing objects must come from a first-person (if you will forgive the

term) perspective. The particular self, not a human generality, is needed as an exemplary object precisely to orient this ontology.

Object-oriented philosophy is a joy to read because it is peppered with witty lists—Latour Litanies of screamingly incongruous specimens.<sup>17</sup> But object-oriented thinkers should be their own first specimens because anyone's ability to articulate the being of "phlogiston, unicorns, [and] bald kings of France" is at best severely curtailed by the very black boxes those objects describe.<sup>18</sup> Really implicating ourselves as objects is the only chance we have to say anything at all about objects' being.

Donna Haraway argues that "feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*."<sup>19</sup> Object-oriented ontology's claim to speak of or for or as "humans" is a "god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere."<sup>20</sup> Instead, object-oriented ontologies should be limited to—or delimited by—the personal viewpoint I have when the object I am is "quite simply situated" in being only me. We must name ourselves. Until we do so, our discussion remains abstract conjecture because talking about objects from the perspective of anything other than an object cannot help but foreclose the object's real, independently formulated perspective.

And yet, merely taking ourselves as specimens is not enough. To *ethically* interrogate ourselves as objects requires something more: that we take ourselves not as living specimens but as dead ones. Otherwise, we risk reverting to vivophilia, on the one hand (by anthropomorphically ascribing lifelike experience to objects), or phenomenology, or some such, on the other (by anthropocentrically focusing on our lived subjective experience).

We have now identified the two key issues this chapter seeks to overcome. Our goals are to eradicate vivophilic bias toward objects and to instate the self-object's "first person" perspective, which we can best accomplish by coming face-to-face with the alternative: necrophilia.

### *Facing Necrophilia*

In lieu of vivophilia (loving objects for their liveliness), and against the omission of the self-object from its own ontology, I advocate for

an opposite approach: *a necrophiliac orientation to objects*. Vivophilia's imperative to connect insists that we look outward, but necrophilia allows us to turn our gaze within. Rather than see something living in the abounding world of objects, facing necrophilia entails that we find—and love—something dead within ourselves. A necrophiliac philosophy is a philosophy that takes dead objects as love objects.

It is a question of perspective. Vivophilia says that most things in the world are, in some significant way, as alive as I am. Necrophilia says that I am, in some significant way, as dead as are most things in the world.

The former statement sounds surreal, but more significantly, it carries an epistemological liability: it does not generate new insight into the nature of objects because, living or dead, objects other than myself remain black-boxed and unknowable. The latter argument is only marginally more commonsensical, yet it allows for an inroad toward credible knowledge or further understanding about the being of objects.

Necrophilia thus seems the better bet. Finding liveliness in everything is a Sisyphean task, requiring not just connectivity but omniscience. But implicating myself as an object, and finding the deadness I have in common with my inanimate neighbors, is far easier to implement. Necrophilia suggests that it may not be necessary, to borrow Bennett's phrase, to "[distinguish] me from my corpse."<sup>21</sup>

Necrophilia has better promise for yielding a concrete, ethical, object-oriented practice. In fact, we can already observe necrophilia at play in self-implicating object-oriented feminist practices. Beyond the enormous body of work by feminists on women's objectification in culture, we encounter examples of overtly necrophiliac object-orientation in the philosopher Catherine Malabou's account of brain plasticity and in the work of feminist body artists like Orlan.

## *Plasticity*

*What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, Malabou's stunning book, explores brain plasticity and its implications for consciousness and identity. Plasticity, for Malabou, is not only generative and lively but also deadly.

As Malabou defines it, plasticity is the threefold capacity for giving form, receiving form, and destroying form.<sup>22</sup> Plasticity is a near-perfect description of the material quality of being an object. Latour has warned us not to think of objects as substances but as performances;<sup>23</sup> my own experiences of deploying myself as an object in my work as a performance artist accord with this view. Experience shows that while objects are not substance, their performance does have material consistency. Objects' performed material quality is plasticity. Objects consist of plasticity; they perform plasticity's qualities. In this case and to stress the ontological point, if to be an object is to be plastic, what is plastic being?

Malabou associates receiving form with materials like "clay [that are] called 'plastic,'" and giving form with "the plastic arts or . . . plastic surgery," and she relates plasticity's annihilation of form to "*plastique*," or plastic explosives.<sup>24</sup> Plasticity thus encompasses what Malabou calls "two extremes." One plasticity sculpts. This is the plasticity of sculpture, plastic objects, and plastic surgery. It is a plasticity that models. A second plasticity disobeys. This is the plasticity of explosives. It is a plasticity that refuses the model.<sup>25</sup>

Plasticity suggests that the self as an object is both moldable and resistive. Malabou explains that being only moldable, only ready to connect to the model, is not plasticity in the full, potentially liberating, sense of the word. Alone, the side that persists in models, that exists by opening alliances, is not plasticity but mere flexibility, which she calls "plasticity minus its genius."<sup>26</sup>

Flexibility is the harmful, neoliberal sensibility that I have identified as being perpetuated by vivophilia's imperative to form creative, generative alliances; to network the self; to increase the object's power;<sup>27</sup> to participate in the model.<sup>28</sup> Its necessary counterpart is destruction. There is no polite way to refuse the compulsory form of the network; Latour is right in saying that the disconnected object that makes no difference is not real, but with the following caveat: *so far as the network is concerned*. The "I'd prefer not to" of Herman Melville's *Bartleby* gets us close to disconnected objecthood, but is not strong enough here. In Latour's terms, the passivity of "I'd prefer not to" just makes for a weak object.<sup>29</sup> It is a biopolitical moment par excellence. The only way to disconnect, to get off the grid, is to



self-destruct. Plasticity reminds us that our repertoire of self-practices includes this capacity for deadliness, too: a necropolitical aesthetics.

As objects consisting in plasticity—which is to say, as plastic objects—we engage both creative and destructive processes in the work of “self-fashioning” ourselves. Malabou writes, “Self-fashioning implies at once the elaboration of a form, a face, a figure, and the effacement of another form, another face, another figure.”<sup>30</sup> Far from an abstraction, plastic self-fashioning—this activity at once lively and deadly—is a concrete practice that we have opportunities to examine: it has already been realized in many forms, among them, feminist body art.

### *Feminist Body Art: Object-Orientation and Plasticity*

Considerable work in the practice of being plastic objects has been carried out since the 1960s by feminist body artists who, while not using this terminology, have rigorously investigated these very concepts: object-orientation, plasticity, and necrophilia. In body art, artists use their own bodies as material in their artwork, quite literally elaborating and effacing their own faces, figures, and forms. The bodily self of body art is an eminently plastic, not to mention evidently necrophiliac, object.

To take but a few art historical examples of body art’s object-orientation, Hannah Wilke has undermined and exploited her eroticization and objectification as a posing female nude.<sup>31</sup> Yayoi Kusama has diffused herself into obsessive surfaces of polka dots and phal-luses, and in a further gesture of disregarding her difference from other objects, has subsumed herself into the art market as an art object commodity.<sup>32</sup> Eleanor Antin has “carved” her body in the manner of “classical sculpture” through dieting.<sup>33</sup> And Adrian Piper, a performance artist and philosopher whose work also thoroughly investigates objectification through gender and race, has re-formed herself in a Kantian, yogic fast.<sup>34</sup> Yet the most quintessential example of body art’s object-orientation within a plastic attitude appears in the work of Orlan, where the sculptural plasticity of body art intersects with and is reinforced by the surgical plasticity of plastic surgery.

Orlan has been working with her body as sculptural material since the 1960s. She is best known for *Reincarnation*, a series completed



Figure 5.1. Orlan *Omnipresence-Surgery*, 1993. Close-up of laughter during the Seventh Performance n°1, New York. Cibachrome in Diasc mount, 65 × 43 inches. Copyright 2015 Orlan/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy of the artist.

from 1990 to 1993, in which she designed and staged nine multimedia plastic surgery performances. Turning herself into her own “ultimate masterpiece,” Orlan has aesthetically transformed her body and face by appropriating and literally incorporating (i.e., into her body) elements from art historical sources including notoriously distinctive forehead implants.

Following a computer-generated compilation of her own making, Orlan has surgically collaged her face to merge, in the words of the cosmetic surgery scholar Meredith Jones, “the chin of Botticelli’s *Venus*, the forehead of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, the lips of Boucher’s *Europa*, the nose of the School of Fontainebleau sculpture of Diana, and the eyes of Gerard’s *Psyche*.”<sup>35</sup> In her operation performances, Orlan collaborates with plastic surgeons who share and enable her artistic vision. As performances, the surgeries include elaborate sets and props, philosophical monologues by the artist (who remains anaesthetized but fully conscious throughout the operations), and lavish designer surgical gowns for the artist and the medical staff. Orlan’s work literally involves “at once the elaboration of a form, a face, a figure, and the effacement of another form, another face, another figure.”<sup>36</sup> In her words, “I’ve chosen to put some face on my face: I develop a work on figuration and re-figuration.”<sup>37</sup>

Body art’s object-orientation is patent enough, but Orlan’s work shows its double significance for our discussion: in body art, object-orientation expresses both plasticity and necrophilia. With regard to plasticity, body art sets into practice all three of plasticity’s capacities. In the first sense, body art is an example of lively self-fashioning. From the authorial perspective of the artist who sculpts, the body-self-object is an experiential and intentional object that self-fabricates. In this respect, body art is a practice of giving form. In the second sense, body art is an example of a self-implicating feminist object-oriented practice. From the interpretive perspective of feminist critique, the body-self-object is a readymade cultural object. By placing the body-self-object in the artwork as a “preloaded” culturally determined signifier, body artists show their capacity for receiving form. In the third sense, body art is an example of feminist object-oriented necrophilia. It is a practice that promotes a necrophiliac relation to self in which any notion of the self’s liveliness is beside the point. From the physical perspective of the artwork, the body-self-object is

a convenient art material, comparable to any other material object. In its ruthless re-rendering of the body-self-object, body art shows an unparalleled capacity for destroying form.

*Feminist Body Art:  
Necrophilia and “Specific Objects”*

In this destructive light, and with regard to necrophilia, feminist body art exploits the body-self-object as an artistic medium for its formal properties and material specificity. Body art’s matter-of-fact, inglorious approach to the body-self-object as material shows its connection to a contemporaneous art movement, minimalism.<sup>38</sup> Minimalist artists use nonprecious industrial materials and fabrication processes, cheapening the status of sculpture by “phoning in” its manufacture, and rendering the authentic art object simultaneously singular and absolute, and serial and replaceable. Body art takes this cavalier, deadpan, necrophiliac attitude toward its primary material, the body-self-object, which it both takes as inviolable and is willing to destroy and replace.

Because of this connection to minimalism, feminist body art should be understood in contrast with essentialist and gynocentric feminist art, which deploys the body for its anthropomorphic symbolism and insists that the body is in the representational register more than it is in the material register.<sup>39</sup> Instead, in feminist body art, the body-self-object is a singular, “specific object,” a term that the minimalist artist Donald Judd coined to describe works that evince their own singleness and absolute presence. Through absolute presence, the specific objects of minimalism undermine the anthropomorphism inherent in the “part-by-part” narrativist structure of European traditions in sculpture. Describing the specific objects of “the new work” (now called minimalism), which was gaining prominence in the same conjuncture as feminist body art, Judd wrote,

Materials vary greatly and are simply materials—formica, aluminum, cold-rolled steel, plexiglas, red and common brass, and so forth. They are specific. If they are used directly, they are more specific. Also, they are usually aggressive. There is an objectivity to the obdurate identity of a material.<sup>40</sup>

Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky, quoted by Bennett, declares, “We are walking, talking minerals.”<sup>41</sup> It is in this sense of being no more or less than minerals that the body-self-object appears in body art as “aggressive . . . obdurate identity.” As plastic material, body artists have both the sculptural obduracy to create their form and the aggressiveness to explode it. For Malabou, “the threat of the explosion of form structurally inhabits every form.”<sup>42</sup> In this way, body artists who assume what the body art historian Amelia Jones calls “the rhetoric of the pose” are always ready to dispose of themselves.<sup>43</sup> Body artists expose themselves as plastic (disposable) objects.

At once blasé and brutal, body artists like Orlan treat their own bodies as fully plastic objects and, as such, regard themselves with necrophilia. Body art uses plasticity to catapult us over the stumbling blocks of vivophilia and self-omission. Denouncing the fetishization of lively integrity in body objects, body art foregrounds the self not only as a deadly object to be killed off but also as the scene of the crime.

Body art is a concrete practice for facing necrophilia. But its necrophilia is extreme and aesthetic. What quotidian version of necrophilia can a greater population of objects enjoy? How can object-oriented thought incorporate necrophilia, bringing this deadness into the corpus of philosophy and into the corpus of the self? To integrate necrophilia into our philosophy and our bodies, the obvious drug of choice is Botox.

### *Botox Plasticity*

Botox is the brand-name for a suite of pharmaceutical products manufactured by Allergan, all of which consist of injections of onabotulinumtoxinA (the same toxin found in botulism). The product line includes prescription treatments with medical applications for relieving facial spasms, strabismus, limb spasticity, and cervical dystonia, as well as severe underarm sweating, but by far the most widely popular and widely known treatment is a product called Botox<sup>®</sup> Cosmetic, which is used to temporarily “improve the look of moderate to severe frown lines between the eyebrows ([known as] glabellar lines).”<sup>44</sup>

The toxin in Botox injections inhibits the connections between nerves and muscles, engendering local, short-term paralysis around

the site of injection; the effect takes about fourteen days to set in and lasts, on average, for three to six months. With Botox® Cosmetic, paralysis lessens frown lines by disabling the brow muscles' capacity to furrow. The cosmetic advantage of this paralysis is amplified in that Botox not only suppresses existing frown lines but simultaneously prevents the muscular engagements that create the formation of new ones. In effect, the paralyzing toxins create a temporary "dead zone" in the body. As a self-practice, Botox directs its necrophilia squarely at the body-self-object, forbidding the omission of "me." Moreover, the resulting internal dead zone exercises a certain necrophiliac attraction. The widespread adoption of Botox indicates that individuals (perhaps even philosophers) may be poised to accept its uniquely necrophiliac form of plasticity.<sup>45</sup> In addition to its merits as a self-directed practice, Botox has the right blend of plastic capacities to cure our thinking of residual vivophilia.

Botox expresses its plasticity in three different ways in medical, military, and cosmetic contexts. When applied for medical purposes, Botox is an example of the plastic capacity of receiving form. Used as a cure, Botox restores deviant bodies to normativity. Bodies that receive Botox receive the form of health.

Applied in military contexts, botulinum toxin demonstrates plasticity's destructive capacity. Used as a biological weapon, botulinum toxin eradicates form. In "Effacing the Face," Grayson Cooke defines Botox as a *pharmakon* that always simultaneously occupies "a double role of creator/destroyer and poison/cure."<sup>46</sup> As *pharmakon*, Botox is itself a plastic object, encompassing the two extremes Malabou identifies in plasticity. Cooke reminds us that apart from its use in "highly diluted form" in the plastic treatment of faces, botulinum toxin is "one of the deadliest and most powerful neurotoxins known."<sup>47</sup> As a biological weapon, botulinum toxin—arguably the *ur-form* of Botox—is applied much like *plastique* explosives. Through active annihilation, it erases forms of life, creating a clean slate for humanity,<sup>48</sup> or, perhaps, for a world without humans or humanity at all—what Alan Weisman and Eugene Thacker call "the world without us."<sup>49</sup>

Finally, in cosmetic applications, Botox gives new form. Botox inhibits the old forms of faciality, interrupting muscle memory and habits of facial expression. By inhibiting the modes of expression we have come to expect, Botox creates a new form of inner-directedness.



Cooke's interpretation of the face and its relation to Botox centers on communication. The face records and communicates its archive of experience, which Botox erases and censors. The face expresses; Botox represses. Cooke defines expressing as "a sending out, an outerring,"<sup>50</sup> which returns us to the vivophilic imperative to connect. In Cooke's interpretation, Botox "is pure repression, the repression of expressions" (punctuation modified).<sup>51</sup> In its role as an inhibitor, Botox represses the outerring, the other-directedness of the informatic self that is in connection. It inhibits the vivophilic, neoliberal self that is real only when it expresses itself in the communicative act of making a difference, of sending and receiving information.

In weapon form, Botulinum toxin is a matter of force; Botox medical treatments, considered medically necessary, are a matter of necessity. Yet Botox® Cosmetic injections are deemed optional. They are a matter of choice and, thus, of ethics. Botox represents a new, necrophilic direction for ethics in an object-oriented feminist practice.

### *Conclusion: Botox Ethics*

The choice is this: Do we use the face, as Emmanuel Levinas would have it, as a vivophilic site for living ethical encounter? Or do we put on dead faces, suppress errant expressivity and lively countenances, and remind ourselves, with a thwack on the forehead, that object-oriented ethics occurs between mutually dead objects?

For Levinas, the moment of ethical encounter is when, meeting face-to-face, the living visage of the Other apprehends the ethical subject with the silent entreaty "Don't kill me!" The numbed face of Botox, however, renders this version of ethics meaningless. Not only is a partly paralyzed face incapable of expressing such signals, but these become pointless requests when coming from a face that is, in significant portion, already dead. The alternative to Levinasian ethics is Botox ethics, the encounter between objects that silently acknowledge the independent mutuality of their deadness.

Joanna Zylińska has written, also in the context of cosmetic surgical body practices, about what she terms "prosthetic ethics."<sup>52</sup> Describing the work of Orlan and another body artist, Stelarc, whose best-known project is his robotic third arm, Zylińska advocates for an "ethics of welcome" that accommodates difference and engenders



Figure 5.2. Katherine Behar, *Levinas / Botox Faciality Grid*, 2010. Screenshot collage. Courtesy of the artist.



hybridity between living and nonliving forms—in this case, the body and technology. Meredith Jones describes Zylinska's "prosthetic ethics of welcome" as a "perform[ance of] hospitality, openness, and invitation."<sup>53</sup> In Zylinska's insightful formulation, prosthesis is "an articulation of connections"<sup>54</sup> that creates, in Jones's words, "unbounded, networked, and changeable subjects."<sup>55</sup>

Botox ethics represents the exact inversion of prosthetic ethics. Botox ethics seeks not to articulate connections but to inhibit them; to create not unbounded subjects but enclosed objects; it recommends not outward-directed networking and changeability but inward-directed unexpressivity and singularity.

Prosthetic ethics is an extension of Levinas's ethics of facialized living encounter. Both place a vivophilic demand for living responsiveness from every single thing we greet "face-to-face," or "welcome" aboard. Levinasian ethics is sustained by communication through the face and its expression and response. Prosthetic ethics, too, is sustained by communication, in ongoing exchanges and transfers of information. Where in Levinasian ethics, communication occurs on the surface of the face, in prosthetic ethics, communicating subjects are networked at their core. In the expansive gesture of prosthetic welcoming, network alliances are invited in.

Welcoming is the sort of inclusive practice that feminism has traditionally promoted. But here, object-oriented thinking offers an alternative direction for practicing feminists. In this, an object-oriented feminism might diverge from historical feminisms that embrace the body beautiful in unaltered form or that promote Other-directed camaraderie and practices of community. Instead, Botox ethics warrants some newfound inhospitality. The subjectivity that gets formed through unbounding and networking is indeed precisely that of a "changeable subject." This too dynamic, too lively subject is caught up in the network's imperative for continual "modification, transformation, perturbation and creation." By including everything, an "ethics of welcome" resumes "outring" expressivity as pure communication. By numbing ourselves with Botox ethics, we can resist the Other-directed compulsion to connect, and the neoliberal internalization of the requirement to make alliances.

As an alternative, Botox closes the communicative port of the face as site of Other-directed expression. Levinas and prosthetics welcome.

Botox slams the door shut. It wants to be left alone. What we are left with when we stop communicating is ourselves, the missing “me” that, as object, provides our only ontological orientation.

As objects ourselves, we engage Botox ethics as a self-practice. Botox is only a cosmetic insofar as it is, more accurately, an inhibitor. Self-fashioning with Botox is not the cosmetic effect of appearing dead to the Other through a facial communiqué. This would be no more than “playing possum,” hiding under the mask of deadness to escape the threat of death. Botox ethics does not avoid death—it aspires to it. Its self-fashioning is the corporeal practice of inhibiting life within oneself. It is a praxis of practicing death. We do not mock the appearance of death; we practice being dead by giving it—or ourselves—a shot.

Botox turns us into objects, shoots us up with our own plasticity, and lets us—as objects—exist mutually, independently, and graciously in the dead object world. When another smooth forehead returns our expressionless stare, we can be sure that we are facing necrophilia. As a self-practice, a little shot of death provides all the object-orientation we need. In place of the vivophilic ethics of “Don’t kill me!” Botox ethics says “I’ll kill myself!” Shooting up to shut up, Botox ethics recommends battening down the hatches on our own black boxes and becoming killer objects who will shoot ourselves first.

## Notes

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1. Many artists, myself included, approach art practice as applied philosophy. My initial interest in object-oriented ontology stems from my intuition that these ideas serve artists’ interests well. Its main tenets coincide nicely with many of the aesthetic pretensions and practical intentions of contemporary studio practices.

2. Object-oriented ontology's principal claims, that the world is composed of a nonhierarchical collection of objects, and that objects themselves are like slick black boxes sealed unto themselves, bode well for fruitful deployment. In art, similar ideas have already proved seaworthy. These formulations dovetail with contemporary postminimalism and a larger history of Greenbergian modernism, respectively. For more on this subject, see Katherine Behar and Emmy Mikelson, eds., *And Another Thing: Nonanthropocentrism and Art* (Earth, Milky Way: punctum books, 2016).

3. Liveliness appears in many formulations, including the "agency" in Karen Barad's agential realism, the "actors" in Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, what the editors Diana Coole and Samantha Frost call "the force of materiality" in the new materialisms, and the "magic" in Timothy Morton's realist magic. See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007); Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Coole and Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010); and Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Open Humanities Press, 2013).

4. See Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*.

5. Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 106.

6. Graham Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," in *Collapse Vol. II: Speculative Realism*, edited by R. Mackay (Oxford: Urbanomic, March 2007).

7. See Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

8. Bruno Latour in *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 122, quoted in Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 81.

9. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 381.

10. Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 200.

11. Ibid., 187.

12. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 21. While explicitly dedicated to liveliness, Bennett's is the object-oriented text that falls closest to my own thinking. A profound meditation on the ethical and indeed moral implications of object-orientation (see, in particular, pages 12 and 75), her book is in many ways a mirror image of my same concerns.

13. Ibid., 6.

14. Bennett contends that this type of anthropomorphism is necessary in the interest of arriving at nonanthropocentrism (ibid., xvi). See also Erin Manning on applying anthropomorphism to autistic perception in "Another Regard," in *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, edited by Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 54–70.

15. Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, "Intellectuals and Power," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, edited by Donald Bouchard, translated by Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 209.

16. The problem of objects' withdrawal and endless recuperation into an author function was expressed by discussant Eugene Thacker at the Object-Oriented Ontology Symposium on April 23, 2009. Thacker recounted his student's joking reluctance to "start reading object-orientation unless there's a book written by a block of wood." See audio recording, accessed October 4, 2010, <http://www.mediafire.com/file/yfyemmvytii/000-Symposium-Harman.mp3>.

17. Ian Bogost coined this term in "Alien Phenomenology: A Pragmatic Speculative Realism," keynote address, annual meeting for the Society of Literature, Science, and the Arts, Atlanta, Georgia, November 6, 2009.

18. Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 161, quoted in Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 74.

19. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 188.

20. Ibid., 189.

21. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 73.

22. Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, translated by Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 5.

23. Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 44.

24. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 5.

25. Ibid., 6.

26. Ibid., 12.

27. Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 47–51.

28. In violating the usual separations that keep ontologies and politics distinct, I am returning to my intention to test philosophical deployment.

29. See Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street," in *Bartleby and Benito Cereno* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Thrift Editions, 1990).

30. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 71.

31. See Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

32. See J. F. Rodenbeck, "Yayoi Kusama: Surface, Stitch, Skin," in *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art, in, of, and from the Feminine*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

33. See Howard N. Fox, *Eleanor Antin* (Los Angeles: LACMA, 1999).

34. See Adrian Piper, "Food for the Spirit," in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968–1992* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).

35. Meredith Jones, "Makeover Artists: Orlan and Michael Jackson," in *Skintight: An Anatomy of Cosmetic Surgery* (New York: Berg, 2008), 153.

36. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 71.

37. "ORLAN Official Website: F.A.Q.," accessed October 4, 2010, <http://www.orlan.net/f-a-q/>.

38. In addition to being contemporaneous movements, body art and minimalism were in dialogue through key practitioners who practiced both kinds of work. Robert Morris's career provides a noteworthy example for its fluent crossovers, including collaborations with feminist artists like the body artist Carolee Schneemann and the sculptor Lynda Benglis. In addition, many feminist body artists turned to their bodies as a personal material to challenge the masculine authority and seeming neutrality of minimalist industrial materials.

39. See Iris Marion Young, "Humanism, Gynocentrism, and Feminist Politics," in *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

40. Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," in *Complete Writings, 1959–1975* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 187.

41. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 11.

42. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 71.

43. Amelia Jones, "The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art," in *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. See also Henry M. Sayre's essay "The Rhetoric of the Pose: Photography and the Portrait as Performance," in *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

44. "Medication Guide: BOTOX® and BOTOX® Cosmetic (Boe-tox) (onabotulinumtoxinA) for Injection," accessed October 4, 2010, [http://www.allergan.com/assets/pdf/botox\\_med\\_guide.pdf](http://www.allergan.com/assets/pdf/botox_med_guide.pdf).

45. The International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery reported that, in 2009, Botox and Dysport (another brand of botulinum toxin injections) were the top nonsurgical cosmetic procedures, accounting for 32.7 percent of nonsurgical procedures worldwide (<http://www.californiasurgicalinstitute.com/blog/plastic-surgery-statistics---worldwide.html>, accessed October 4, 2010).

46. Grayson Cooke, "Effacing the Face: Botox and the Anarchivic Archive," in *Body & Society* 14, no. 2 (2008): 26.

47. Ibid., 25.

48. Ibid., 27.

49. Alan Weisman, *The World without Us* (New York: Picador, 2007).

See also Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*, Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1 (Alresford, U.K.: Zero Books, 2011), 5.

50. Cooke, "Effacing the Face," 29.

51. Ibid., 33.

52. Joanna Zylińska, "Prosthetics as Ethics," in *The Cyborg Experiments: The Extensions of the Body in the Media Age*, edited by Joanna Zylińska (New York: Continuum, 2002).

53. Jones, "Makeover Artists," 151.

54. Zylińska, quoted in *ibid.*

55. Ibid., 151.