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On Decay in Art

Abstract
With Aristotelian teleological convictions, humans in the 21st century remain bent on believing that human happiness is the ultimate end of all human activities – especially aesthetic ones. All such activities generate waste: leftover paint, wrong notes, old drafts. Indeed, the very act of living inevitably terminates in the decomposition and decay of all organic and artificial structures. Yet, while aesthetic practices and theories emphasize various kinds of productive potential (e.g. for meaning, growth, beauty) as innately human, they tend to denigrate or ignore decay as something intrinsically non-human. The notion of decay is frightening because it signals the messiness and inessentiality of human life. Our paper considers visual, literary, and musical artists that confront decay, often by inducing decomposition within the artwork itself. Alongside Bernd and Hilla Becher’s photographs of industrial architecture, we discuss the decomposition of abandoned objects in the video work described in Michel Houellebecq’s The Map and the Territory. We evaluate W.G. Sebald’s notion of writing as “natural history,” which emphasizes the reclamation of ruined landscapes by vegetation. And we analyze William Basinski’s use of the deterioration of magnetic tape as a musical process. We speculate on the consequences and questions, both aesthetic and ethical, that result from aestheticizing decay - from artistically affirming reality at its most terrifying.

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We normally associate decay with palpable, nauseating disgust, with a skin-crawling sense of the pathetic, a melancholy premonition of emptiness. Such reactions are precise opposites of what’s thought to be the point of aesthetic experience: pleasure or, at least, leisurely contemplation and questioning. Instead, typical reactions to decay resemble responses induced by mortal fear. Decay is terrifying because it pitilessly indicates the frailness, messiness, and transience of life. Unlike aesthetic practices, which foreground productive potential of diverse, often human varieties, decay is first and foremost negation, which as it turns our bodies into compost, signals that our existence as thinking, building, domineering human beings isn’t as necessary as our physical demise.
So what of artworks that employ decay as their aesthetic processes, the processes by which the works are made and the means by which they affect their audiences? As these works deploy life’s self-destructive process, are we to see in them affirmations of all life has to offer, even at its most frightening; or vain attempts to resist living, by denying life’s vital decline? In other words: according to decay-artists, what does it mean to understand life?

Take for instance Jed Martin’s last, untitled artwork. This installation involves time-lapse videos and digital photo-slideshows of objects, many of which were meaningful to Martin at one point in his life, that he has left (or forced) to decompose, either in his studio or his jungle-like backyard. Meanwhile, Martin himself wastes away from old age and untreated cancer. Jed Martin is the fictional protagonist of Michel Houellebecq’s 2010 novel, The Map and the Territory, which chronicles Martin’s artistic career. So decay isn’t just Martin’s aesthetic process; it is also Houellebecq’s. Let’s take a look at this fraught artwork, which at once affirms and denies the transformation that is decay.

To make this artwork, Martin videos and photographs: vegetation, his untamed backyard-jungle; manufactured objects and electronics, notably motherboards, in which he induces decomposition by dipping them in weed-killer; pre-extant, printed photos of estranged friends; and human-shaped Playmobil figurines, which he deliberately abandons in his jungle for years at a time.1 “As for the meaning of this work which had occupied [Martin] during all the last part of his life, he refuses all comment. ‘I want to give an account of the world...I want simply to give an account of the world,’ he repeats...”2 To give an account of something – to

2 MT, 286.
count up what belongs to it, demonstrate that it counts – is to affirm that it exists. To tell about it, write about it, document it, photograph it, is also to resist its passing-away. But in Martin’s decomposition-artwork, the only thing consistently accounted for, and brought to account, is passing-away, the fact that to live is to decay. We could say that with his final work, Martin achieves a sincere, accurate affirmation of life at its most productive and naturally self-destructive. As he himself is dying, Martin artistically discovers decay, physical reclamation by the earth, as the truest of living truths. “The triumph of vegetation is total,” Houellebecq writes, as the jungle devours Martin’s figurines and photos.3

And yet, Houellebecq implies that to understand Martin’s decomposition-work simply as a testament to the impermanence of human activity is all too easy.4 To give an account of something is to resist its passing-away – and there are several accounts of Martin’s last work. He gives interviews about it, a journalist produces an article about it, and of course there’s Houellebecq’s novel. Martin’s aesthetic process is itself preserved as a “finished product”: a video installation that’s exhibited and archived in a museum. Because they comprise an artwork, the triumph of vegetation, the decay of Martin’s little manufactured avatars, are undone. The decaying is undone because it is redone each time the video is shown. This happens many times each day for all the visitors eager to bear witness to the legacy of Jed Martin, and for each and every reader of Houellebecq’s bestselling novel. Martin’s testament to impermanence is in several ways made permanent.

3 MT, 292.
4 “L’œuvre qui occupa les dernières années de la vie de Jed Martin peut ainsi être vue – c’est l’interprétation la plus immédiate – comme une méditation nostalgique sur la fin de l’âge industriel en Europe, et plus généralement sur le caractère périssable et transitoire de toute industrie humaine. Cette interprétation est cependant insuffisante à rendre compte... » Houellebecq, La Carte Et Le Territoire (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), 428.
Generally, as we’ll see, tensions between opposites pervade decay-based art: decomposition and preservation, documentation and aestheticization, affirmation and resistance. Each functions in the work as itself and as its opposite. But all this conceptual bleeding confounds Houellebecq’s seeming determination to cleanly align decay with truth.

Houellebecq really wants us to believe that “the triumph of vegetation is total,” that when things decompose, even in Martin’s artwork, plants – in their “peaceful and pitiless,” “carnivorous suppleness” – devour them without sharing and without help. But is the triumph theirs alone? Decay returns all bodies to the earth, which nourishes plants. But the decaying process is not an exclusively vegetative achievement. In Houellebecq’s novel, Martin shares the responsibility: the artist uses weed-killer to expedite the decay of electronic objects, to ensure that his production process and resultant video-experience are feasible within mortal timeframes. Yet Houellebecq implies that what’s best about Martin’s final work is its laisser-faire technique (simply giving an account), which reveals that power over being and non-being ultimately belongs not to humans but to plants. By using decay as his aesthetic process, Martin documents what to Houellebecq is the truth, the reality of life: the ultimate, total triumph of vegetation. But because his artwork is an artwork, something that he brings about, Martin’s approach isn’t just documentarian. To make his aesthetic process practicable, he uses chemical that asserts human dominance over plants, to do what plants can’t do quickly enough. So yes, laisser-faire, resignation, but also defiance. And the truth is more ambiguous than Houellebecq lets on: every triumph is somewhat less than total.

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5 MT, 288.
6 Ibid.
Maybe “The triumph of vegetation is total,” the final sentence in Houellebecq’s novel, is an ironic statement. Maybe, with Martin’s aestheticized documentary or documentarian aesthetics, Houellebecq means to comment subtly on the imperfection to which every documentary is doomed. It’s difficult to tell. Describing Martin’s last work, Houellebecq adopts a distant, quasi-academic tone.\(^7\) This makes for a tidy description, cluttered neither by the dying artist’s thoughts or feelings, nor those of his audience. “The triumph of vegetation is total” likewise sounds as neat, self-contained, and authoritative as an axiom.

Might Houellebecq’s aestheticization of decay be too neat? Thanks to Houellebecq’s timbral distancing, we readers aren’t affected in the same way as those fictional viewers who stand before Martin’s moving images. But Martin treats even those viewers to a diluted experience of decay. They see silent montages in pretty colors. Portraits of beautiful women dissipate before their eyes. They watch the jungle grow, the swaying of the leaves – all from the air-conditioned comfort of the museum. None of Martin’s victims are organic. So there’s no affront to our gag reflexes or moral sensibilities. Even by inventing an artwork that, by using decay as its aesthetic process, eschews or pretends to eschew perfection, tidiness, and even artistry – even as he promises us readers that it’s possible for art to say yes to everything that has to do with life, life at its most messy, smelly, and horribly finite – Houellebecq turns even this brash artwork into a neat rounding-off gesture that brings his novel to a satisfying close.

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\(^7\) “The methodology of the work that occupied Jed Martin during the last thirty years of his life would have remained completely unknown to us if he hadn’t, a few months before his death, agreed to give an interview to a young female journalist from Art Press. Although the interview takes up just over forty pages of the magazine, he speaks almost exclusively about the technical procedures used for the fabrication of those strange ideograms, now kept at the MoMA in Philadelphia, that are like nothing else in his previous work, nor, in fact, like anything known, and which, thirty years later, continue to arouse in visitors a sense of apprehension mixed with unease” (MT 264).
W.G. Sebald might call this gesture a conceited, inauthentic, and improper representation. By *proper* representation, we mean representation that does justice to decay’s singularities in all their gory details, to the heart of decay and to its end, which is destruction. We also mean ethically proper. *Right* in the moral sense and in the sense of *accurate*. For Sebald, the right way to represent decay, a mechanism of destruction, is not to aestheticize it at all. The right way to represent any kind of destruction is to accentuate its destructive qualities, not its piteousness, productive potential, or metaphysical import.

What Sebald calls a “natural history of destruction” comprises an artless, even ugly, documentary that emphasizes the “sheer nausea” of decomposition and the reclamation of ruined bodies by the earth.\(^8\) Unlike Martin’s portrayal of his life’s disintegration in tranquil images, Sebald’s “natural history” is deliberately “disgusting.”\(^9\) He implies that a natural history of destruction *properly* begins not only by describing distressed human responses, but also by noting the proliferation of “parasitical creatures”: rats, flies, maggots.\(^10\) Photographs, he suggests, outdo written accounts at “making the process of degradation visible in every concrete form,” especially images of “plants growing among the ruins.”\(^11\)

Martin does well in the latter regard, but his work renders decay abstract and clean: there are no flies in the video, no rats in the museum, his choice of medium (video alone) shields his audience from any stench. Like Houellebecq’s novel, with its enthralling language, poignant love story, and peaceful, rounded ending, Martin’s decomposition work surrenders to the artistic temptations that in Sebald’s view destroy the work’s sincerity as a documentary of destruction.

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\(^9\) Ibid., KL387.

\(^10\) Ibid.

\(^11\) Ibid., KL439.
For Sebald, to be insincere about destruction is morally wrong. To aesthetically undermine the negative aspects of destruction is to overlook or even glamorize violence of a sort that humans routinely perpetuate, and to be complicit in the illusion that there is some human triumph to be gained by destruction, if not the sort of triumph that amounts to domination over others, then the triumph manifested in beautiful, perhaps marketable artworks.

We wonder what Sebald would think of the American composer William Basinski’s *Disintegration Loops*. This gorgeous and eloquent musical project (of ever-increasing popularity) is a series of recorded tape loops that gradually, physically degrade until their musical content disappears. The legend that Basinski propagates is that he composed *The Disintegration Loops* from synthesizer riffs he recorded in the 1980s. Attempting to digitize the tapes in 2000 and 2001, he inadvertently triggered their decomposition. On September 11, 2001, Basinski played the loops in his Brooklyn apartment as he and friends watched the Twin Towers collapse. Because this work is made from and through the disintegration of old tape, decay is indeed the work’s aesthetic process. If we interpret *The Disintegration Loops* in the context of 9/11, it’s possible to read Basinski’s use of decay as a Sebaldian “natural history of destruction” – or perhaps a vague premonition – that extrapolates from one act of destruction, greater destruction on even larger scales, “making the process of degradation visible [or in this case audible] in every concrete form.”

Granted, listening to this piece, it’s tempting to aestheticize 9/11 itself, to quietly enjoy, even wallow in the horror-become-tragedy that is still memorialized daily. For at the end of

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*The Disintegration Loops,* when every tape has become dust, we still hear sound coming from the speakers: a thin sound, like a throb, not the thick, harmonious texture that characterizes the rest of the piece. This throb does not fade out; the track simply stops, indicating that the throbbing could have continued if Basinski hadn’t turned off his digital recorder. With 9/11 as its backdrop, this empty throbbing could be heard as the sound of the future after catastrophe has struck, after the towers we build up to the heavens come crashing down. What is left is not a void, but neither is it a memorial: the end of our way of life is not the end of all life. Rather, what remains after destruction is decay – which means that decay is both the process and the result of destruction. After the Towers fell, America could hear, if we listened closely, the decay of its ideologically-grounded practices – in particular the myth of American exceptionalism – as these practices gave way to the new kind of life that must inevitably spring up from our rubble. So for Basinski, decay is an aesthetic process that can signify the truth about the aftermath of destruction: relentless decay is itself that aftermath – not revenge, certainly not a redoubled sense of entitlement on behalf of the victims.

Sebald’s concern with sincerity and accuracy, in art that attempts to give an account of destruction, is really a concern about art’s ability to access and convey truth. With Houellebecq and perhaps Basinski, Sebald identifies an artist’s use or representation of the aesthetic process of decay as a reference to existential, moral, and/or political truths. For all three artists, decay and truth go hand in hand, each pointing towards the other. But let’s consider this from a philosophical point of view: When we speak about decay, utilize or emphasize it in art, do we necessarily hit upon the truth?
Aristotle based his speculations concerning the nature of the universe in observable data that he qualified according to exhaustively delineated categories. The categories—names for ways in which being exists—are meant to account for the diversity of everything that our senses apprehend. Yet what if Aristotle’s intention in documenting the world is not to affirm its knowableness, its responsiveness to investigation? In a radical reinterpretation of Aristotle, Christopher Long arrives at a theory of truth not as monologue, wherein humans grasp and speak the truth about silent, inert objects, but rather as dialogue between humans and things, wherein the things actively express themselves and their relations to other things. So while humans may certainly attempt to understand our world through study and through language, there will always be “remainders,” expressed by things, that exceed language and therefore our ability to know.13

Like recent theories of new materialism and object-oriented ontology, Long’s new Aristotelianism poses tantalizing but terrifying possibilities—especially for contemporary art that claims to represent the truth by giving an account of the world. Such accounts are also preoccupied with remainders: that which cannot be accounted for because it exceeds representation. Artworks that attempt “accountings” of the world via typologies (i.e. witnessing the truth by cataloging it, making sense of the truth by breaking it down into its constituent parts) seem to exist in dialectical relationships with Aristotelian remainders.14 In other words, the more exhaustive the catalog, the more certain is the presence of that which cannot fit within the catalog. In cataloging artworks, decay is often that which cannot be

14 Again, we learn this strategy from Aristotle, whose typologies of animals, dreams, and arguments are predicated on the existence of categories.
explicitly accounted for. Thus in these artworks, far from being a representative of the truth, as Houellebecq, Basinski, and Sebald implied, decay often falls outside of knowable truth, taking the form of a remainder.

The cataloguing impulse has been particularly vigorous in photography. Among photographers, Bernd and Hilla Becher stand as cataloguing’s most assiduous proponents. With their typological and serial images of industrial structures, the Bechers hoped (especially in their later work) to inspire the preservation of industrial buildings as historical sites with acknowledged roles in cultural memory. A “melancholic insight” trails the Bechers’ work because it attempts to capture and preserve that which is unpreservable – Europe’s industrial past, and by extension, human industry of any kind.15

The truth in the Bechers’ work indeed consists in the comprehensive representation of an important aspect of the world by an exhaustive catalog of industrial architecture. But we must situate the fact of this architecture’s imminent decay also within the truth, even though it is not in the catalog specifically. The decaying of these structures is only evident to the sympathetic reflections of a human viewer, which reflections constitute remainders relative to the catalog itself. The fact that we instigate and survive the decay of these structures is invisible to catalogs of the structures.

In conclusion: as an aesthetic process in contemporary art, decay signifies apparent truth and/or the remainder that lies beyond knowable truth but is true nonetheless. The truth is frightening, what lies beyond its purview even more so. The most horrible truth of all, from humanity’s perspective, may have less to do with our inevitable losses, and more to do with the new life into which disintegrating life develops. Decay is nothing other than change, growth, and their inevitable consequence: hope, if you like. The thing is, humans don’t particularly care to see other matter benefitting from our demise.