

## 12 Sarah Sze's *The Last Garden* and the Temporality of Wonder

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The gentle simplicity of the installation slowed me to a tiptoeing pace—moving with a sense of wonder, I revelled at each new discovery I made, and there was such an epic beauty in that.<sup>1</sup>

. . . we walked into this garden and stumbled across these pieces that take you so much by surprise.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter sets out to examine some of the unique temporalities coming out from the ongoing dialogue between contemporary art, new materialism, speculative realism, object-oriented philosophy, and affective studies. New materialist and speculative investigations of change—especially studies that propose to explain how change occurs by examining the materiality and relationality of objects, things and events—have been rather rich in that regard. Investigations adopting a feminist new materialist perspective include: Rosi Braidotti's study of metamorphosis as a reformulation of becoming and Elizabeth Grosz's examination of the productive forces of duration, becoming and untimeliness; Jane Bennett's analysis of the vibrancy of matter; Rebecca Coleman's notion of time "as non-linear, as intensive and immanent . . . where time doesn't [only] move from the present to the future, but where the future is experienced in and as the present, as that which must be acted on now"; and Rachel Lowen Walker's "living" present (a present always stretching as opposed to a static "now").<sup>3</sup> Adopting a more speculative—realist—investigation of change, they also include: Manuel DeLanda's re-reading of Gilles Deleuze's Chronos (immaterial linear time; time as destiny and certainty) versus Aion (material time; time as possibility and uncertainty) to explain how virtuality emerges from the actual world; Jussi Parikka's talk of processual materiality; and Steven Shaviro's accelerationism as a way "to get beyond the current social and economic order and reach a post-capitalist future."<sup>4</sup>

Artistic and curatorial practices of the 2010s have been negotiating with these philosophical theories and concepts, both explicitly and obliquely. This is especially manifest in practices engaged in the aesthetic investigation of the object, the agency of things, realism, and materialism, as well as the aesthetic contemplation of reality beyond the confines of human finitude. These forms of artistic engagement probe the relationality between humans and non-humans to think time in terms of transformation, change, generation, and emergence—an impulse toward the living.<sup>5</sup> They often do so by overtly or implicitly mixing the new materialist promotion of relations over autonomous objects and the object-oriented ontological (OOO) defense of objects as realities that exceed their relation to humans. Hence, although new materialism has been noticeably rich in its conceptualization of temporality and although OOO has

not been particularly innovative in that area (except for its insistence on the present as a temporality that unfolds in the sensual realm of objects), artistic practices have nevertheless explored some of OOO's valued operations—withdrawal, objecthood, and vicariousness—as temporal.<sup>6</sup> This mixture counters the increased philosophical polarization between new materialism and OOO. As it combines them, art necessarily re-defines the concepts of both camps. These translations and distortions (concepts that OOO supports to explain the modus operandi of knowledge-making) are salutary, for it is in such operations that insightful re-formulations of temporality are in fact appearing.

Installations by American artist Sarah Sze are pivotal to this dialogue. Fully engaged in an object-driven investigation of time, they set into play a loose mobilization of new materialist and object-oriented philosophical insights to elaborate what I would like to call a *temporality of wonder*. In the following, I focus on Sze's *The Last Garden (Landscape of Events Suspended Indefinitely)*, a garden made for the 2015 56th Venice Biennale International Art Exhibition, as part of the biennale curator Okwui Enwezor's *All the World's Futures* exhibition. My main objective is to tease out the inventive temporalities elaborated in that work by following its connections with new materialism and OOO. I am not arguing here that the garden is a direct response to or engagement with new materialism and OOO. Rather, I am contending that the active dialogue between contemporary art, new materialism, and object-oriented philosophy offers a point of entry into *The Last Garden's* temporal investigations. This chapter asks: if, as new materialists have contended, certain temporalities indeed act as productive forces (forces that generate new objects or are the dimension by which things change, evolve, differ, or transform themselves), how can materiality and historicity be conveyed to these temporalities? In other words, what type of temporalities matter in this historical moment and how does Sze's practice participate in that mattering? My main claim is that the temporal significance of Sze's mid-2010s work, of which *The Last Garden* is a critical instantiation, lies in its development of wonder—an affective form of temporality that comes about when we encounter objects “*as if* for the first time,” surprising us and moving us in that surprise—as a condition of possibility of the future.<sup>7</sup> The work of two thinkers, object-oriented philosopher Graham Harman and new materialist philosopher Catherine Malabou, will be put into dialogue with Sze's work to help specify the materiality (and, more specifically, the affectivity) and historicity of that temporality.

### **From *Triple Point* to *The Last Garden***

In 2013, Sze represented the United States at the 55th Venice Biennale with a sequence of installations presented in the American Pavilion, under the title of *Triple Point*. The installations were in continuity with Sze's previous work and its preoccupation with objects—more specifically, the accumulation but also the assemblage of everyday, generic, mass-produced objects, including: office supplies, electric lights, desk lamps, string, fans, water systems, houseplants, birthday candles, napkins, batteries, packing material, colored yarn, empty plastic water bottles, and tins of paint. Sze has often spoken of her interest in the lives of objects, in the ways in which objects change value and meaning through labor, treatment, or context, and the means by which they can acquire an aesthetic value. The mutability of objects in *Triple Point*—“[t]his idea that objects, like experiences, are ultimately fleeting, ephemeral, and located in a very

specific moment”—was made manifest in the pavilion's multiple displays of objects, which gave them different meanings and functions.<sup>8</sup>

But mutability was not the sole temporality sustaining *Triple Point's* installations. The ordering of the objects and connecting devices, as well as the labor-intensiveness by which they were assembled showed objects to be one of the vital means by which human actors locate themselves in time and space, not only socially and physically but also psychologically and emotionally. Sze described them as orientation devices—as “tools to calculate time, measure space, understand behavior.”<sup>9</sup> Troubling that function of orientation, *Triple Point* conveyed the sense that these tools were not endlessly effective: some objects were so interdependently connected that the break or displacement of one of these would likely cause the collapse of the structures. As one critic phrased it about similar work made in the 2000s, each installation “holds things together . . . taking no pains to hide a careful choreography of metal rods and wire that renders the work's elements neither a collection of autonomous bits nor a fully seamless unit. Each of the various components appears to depend on one another, like organs in a body performing equally necessary functions. They are assembled in a precarious, mutable chain of causes and effects.”<sup>10</sup> In his own review of the show, art historian Benjamin Buchloh saw the assemblages both as a manifestation of and a remedy to precariousness. He more specifically maintained that the accumulation of the objects disclosed today's “ceaseless proliferations” of objects and the “sense of a definitive loss not only of the utilitarian dimensions of objects but even of their groundedness in matter, structure, and process” that have come to characterize the “monumental legitimation of the commodity regime.”<sup>11</sup> He convincingly argued that Sze's *Triple Point* was a critical response to this intensified regime of commodification and the traumatism by which we experience objects under that regime. As a provisional response to that regime, the installations set into play the perceptual and cognitive activities of classification and typology as “operative counterforces” to the traumatism of its experience.<sup>12</sup>

Two years later, in the context of the 2015 56th Venice Biennale and as part of the exhibition *All the World's Futures*, Sze was invited to create a new installation. The work maintained Sze's understanding of objects as orientation devices, but the entangled assemblage effect of the *Triple Point* installations was sensibly diminished. Entitled *The Last Garden (Landscape of Events Suspended Indefinitely)* (2015), it consisted more of an environment than an installation—an open-air expanse and not a sheltered grouping of objects tightly connected together (Figure 12.1). In contrast to *Triple Point*, withdrawal became one of the environment's main operations. If objects continued to work as counterforces to trauma, as I believe they were, that effectiveness had more to do with withdrawal than with the human capacity to order the proliferation of objects.

To begin to understand that shift and the temporality it generated, let us have a close look at the five main levels of withdrawal sustained by the garden. First, *The Last Garden* was geographically withdrawn, located behind the Arsenale's Corderie and the Gaggiandre buildings, in the remote Giardino delle Vergini of a former monastery at the utter limits of the Biennale's spread, partly delimited by decaying brick walls. A minimalist intervention within a hidden and abandoned garden, it was barely announced by the few yellow strips surrounding the row of trees at the entrance; these ambiguous strips could easily be interpreted as markers installed by a gardener. Second, the few artifacts installed in the garden—hammock structures, stringed rocks,



Figure 12.1 Sarah Sze, *The Last Garden (Landscape of Events Suspended Indefinitely)*, 2015, mixed media installation. Courtesy of the artist

metallic grids, photographs, paint strips, mirrors, a Foucault pendulum (a device that makes manifest the earth's rotation through the oscillation of its pendulum), empty plastic water bottles, a sink—were dispersed here and there, sometimes next to each other, but their assemblage did not follow the logic of accumulation. The assemblages were looser and scarcer. Third, interactions between objects mostly occurred between the artifacts and natural elements—plants, wind, water, earth, the sun. These interactions provided an entropic evolution to the garden, leading to the slow irreversible transformation, de-differentiation, decay, and sometimes destruction of some of the artifacts, and to nature outgrowing (increasingly camouflaging) artifacts. Fourth, the hidden enclosure was itself composed of hidden worlds that were physically out of reach, although obliquely visible (and easily missed), as was the case with the micro-garden within the well only made visible by a mirror (Figure 12.2). Finally, some of the artifacts withdrew from the centrality of human visitors, as their human destination was suspended to reinforce their usefulness for non-human elements.

That last point is key because it showed withdrawal to be a non-anthropocentric operation. This disruption of anthropocentrism can be further elucidated if we consider one of the main components of the garden—the nylon hammock-like structure strung between two trees with a piece of rock, suspended on a string, dangling just above it—and contrast it with Gabriel Orozco's *Hammock Hanging between Two Skyscrapers* (1993), a sculpture that *The Last Garden* re-enacts but also problematizes a great deal. Orozco's white cotton hammock was installed in the Museum of Modern Art's sculpture garden in the context of the *Projects 41* exhibition. Hung between two trees in front of the north wall, the hammock was hardly noticeable. Its droopy



Figure 12.2 Sarah Sze, *The Last Garden (Landscape of Events Suspended Indefinitely)*, 2015, mixed media installation. Courtesy of the artist

contour and parabolic shape, however, entered into a dialectical interchange with the standing viewers, to convey the possibility of a horizontal positioning of the viewer's body as he or she imagined using it, the possibility of sleep and the possibility of experiencing views of the sky when lying in the hammock. In *The Last Garden*, that

phenomenology significantly disappeared. The relationship between the hammock structure and the suspended rock confirmed the hammock's reluctance to receive a human body: there was simply not enough room between these two elements to allow for that reception; and that reception would have entailed disrupting the hovering dialogue between the suspended rock and the suspended hammock. Moreover, petal-like fragments were sometimes found occupying that space: *they* were the beings lying on the hammock. Human visitors were thus exposed to the temporality of non-human others. This ecological approach, but also the liminal and minimal quality of Sze's intervention discussed above, is key to the historical significance of wonder, to which I will return later.

### The Withdrawal of Objects

Graham Harman's object-oriented philosophy helps to qualify and identify the productivity of withdrawal—a productivity that Sze's garden activated but also problematized a great deal by temporalizing it. Again, it is not that the garden was a direct response to or engagement with OOO, but that Sze's investment in objects and in “the social life of things,”<sup>13</sup> as well as her privileging of relations over autonomous objects while still advocating for withdrawal, obliquely engages with new materialism and OOO. In a 2016 interview with Enwezor, she explains that her sculptural practice is “as much about the dispersal of objects as the agglomeration of objects.”<sup>14</sup> As an object-oriented aesthetics privileging the relationality of objects, her work both solicits and complicates OOO's notion of withdrawal.

OOO's central principle is that all objects (a category that includes humans and non-humans) withdraw from access and that it is only the sensual qualities of objects that are accessible.<sup>15</sup> They withdraw in the sense that they never touch, except sensually. This principle goes hand in hand with the assumption “that all objects are equally objects, though not all are equally real”: real objects are autonomous, whereas sensual objects depend on the entities they encounter.<sup>16</sup> Objects have a surplus reality—they “are sleeping giants holding their forces in reserve, and do not unleash all their energies at once”—that exceeds their sensuality and especially the human consciousness of objects.<sup>17</sup> That surplus is what accounts for the realness of the objects: forms of knowledge (any discipline that seeks to know objects) and our practical use of objects can never exhaust the being of objects, which exist not only beyond human finitude but also beyond any relation whatsoever. This is what Harman means when he says that the surplus of rocks, for example, “is not the result of some sad limitation of human or animal consciousness. Instead, rocks themselves are not fully deployed or exhausted by *any* of their actions or relations. When a rock smashes a window, these two entities come into contact in only the most minimal fashion, never sounding one another's depths. Direct contact is actually quite impossible. Not only must knowledge be indirect but causal relations can only be indirect as well.”<sup>18</sup>

Harman's main rationale for postulating withdrawal is the need to account for emergence and change in a world where stability, rather than contingency, is the norm.<sup>19</sup> OOO contests the undermining perspective supported by physics and, sometimes, new materialism, according to which objects depend on their components—a perspective that cannot account for emergence and the relative autonomy of objects from their constituent parts. It also contests the typically new materialist insistence on objects as relations or actions to the detriment of the objects—a perspective that fails

to account for change, the surplus of reality of objects beyond what they transform. Although its view of new materialism is reductive and questionable (new materialism does in fact explain change, but does it by approaching the world as predominantly contingent), I believe that OOO's insistence on withdrawal is productive in the following sense: withdrawal means that objects are not easily changeable. Objects hold a hidden surplus in reserve, beyond their sensual phenomenal presentation. Therefore, they are not fully perceivable, explainable, mastered, controlled, exhausted, or reducible. This surplus is indicative of the object's capacity to "surprise" us, or any non-human observer, as it emerges or changes against all expectations. That specific understanding of withdrawal helps to specify its role in Sze's *The Last Garden*: the surplus any object in the garden holds in reserve is what potentially enables it to surprise us humans—to make us wonder—when it changes or emerges. That surplus cannot be directly perceived, but some objects can work as mediators, intermediaries, or vicars to make it indirectly perceivable.

However, as we observe the interactions at play in Sze's environment, the OOO principle of withdrawal starts to wobble. It gains in neo-materialism. It does so at least for two reasons. First, object-oriented philosophy has a narrow definition of temporality because it postulates that time only concerns the sensual world. Objects do not easily change; they are quasi-eternal essences or forms.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, though *The Last Garden* insists on the withdrawal of things, it turns it into a sensual and temporalizing operation since it is the operation by which wonder—what Harman calls surprise and what new materialist philosopher Catherine Malabou defines as "the capacity to be amazed"—is potentially experienced by the beholder.<sup>21</sup>

Second, *The Last Garden* integrates withdrawal as a fundamental organization principle not despite, below, or above, but amidst relationality. Relationality (let us follow new materialist philosopher Rebekah Sheldon on this point) "begins from the assumption that ideas and things do not occupy separate ontological orders but instead are co-constituents in the production of the real . . . Matter draws together what appears separate and makes the totality subject to mutation and emergence."<sup>22</sup> *The Last Garden* never abandons that assumption of co-constituency; it supports nature's transformation of the artifacts and the artifacts' underlining of natural elements. However, it also re-defines the experience of relations by moving away from the new materialist assumption that everything is related to everything within ecosystems that are always immanent. As will be explained further below, it makes withdrawal and relations benefit from each other to create wonder, making full use of what Harman calls "vicarious causation"—the capacity of objects to relate through a third mediating object that functions as a vicar. In *The Last Garden*, most of the artifacts work as mediators between objects; their main function is to allow invisible objects to become partly visible and to amaze us in that very process.

In short, *The Last Garden* activates these two concerns tightly together: the artifacts—when they are seen, a reality which is never guaranteed—orient viewers toward the withdrawn and the withdrawn is the reality by which art defines itself as a practice of discovery. The bright colors of the objects (red, yellow, blue) and the re-iteration of blue throughout the garden catch the approaching human visitor's vision: they have a performative stance because they help visitors orient themselves in time and space. In so doing, the artifacts signal the presence of other not-so-easily-perceived, unperceived, or unperceivable cultural or natural objects. At the same time, the withdrawn can be partly discovered even if never resolved: it creates the sensory

threshold conditions by which art re-invents itself as a wondering activity. So, why is this mutual operation about temporality? The answer, which will be developed in the remaining of this chapter, is a twofold one: I want to argue that mediation, relationality, and withdrawal act together to create wonder—an affect that continental philosophy and contemporary neurobiology recurrently consider the most fundamental of all affects; and I also want to argue that wonder is itself a temporality, a productive force of transformation and, as such, a condition of possibility of the future, what Malabou designates as “the introduction of time within identity.”<sup>23</sup>

### **All the World’s Futures**

As stipulated above, Sze’s environment was made in the context of *All the World’s Futures*. Enwezor stated that the biennale exhibition was conceived as an answer to the precariousness of the world affected by the 2008 financial crisis:

I came to this title because I was imagining what role a Biennale could play in a moment of such uncertainty. I cannot remember a time more precarious, more foreboding, than the current moment . . . We have reached a point where we cannot have one homogenized narrative, one view of the future, a singular idea of what constitutes the good life . . .<sup>24</sup>

Enwezor’s was a curatorial attempt to establish a dialogue between art, politics, and the economy in temporal terms—as a deliberation oriented toward the enabling of future(s)—an echo to Buchloh’s previous comment about how Sze’s *Triple Point* worked as operative counterforces to the traumatic conditions of the present.

Arguably, Sze’s environment responded to Enwezor’s concerns not by providing a content or narrative as to what the future is or what it could or should be. As systems theory sociologist Niklas Luhmann has convincingly argued elsewhere, “The future never becomes present; it never begins but always moves away when we seem to approach it”: in light of that fleetingness and instead of endlessly waiting for the future to materialize, the “more pressing need might well be to describe the present condition, but then we might have to acknowledge that there are many possible descriptions, so that we will have to move from first-order to second-order descriptions.”<sup>25</sup> In response to Enwezor’s concern for futurity, Sze’s environment did not imagine a future, but, following a Luhmannesque perspective, attended to the present condition to potentialize the future. It did so, and this is my main claim, by materializing one particular means of futurity: the subject’s capacity to wonder—the capacity to be affected and not to retreat into indifference. That capacity is itself a form of temporality.

### **Objects as Mediators**

To begin our discussion on wonder as the primary affect of temporality, let us first look at how wonder worked in the garden. As will be shown, wonder was the affect by which the human visitor was oriented throughout the garden as some objects highlighted or revealed—without resolving—the withdrawn and as the withdrawn oriented art toward a wondering practice.

If we adopt media historian and philosopher John Durham Peters’ definition of media as amphibious—as infrastructures living or able to live both on land and in



water, or connecting land and water, combining qualities of nature and culture—*The Last Garden* can be said to be an environment of objects that worked as media and whose main function was now (compared to *Triple Point*) more about disclosure than orientation, or about orientation as a mode of disclosure: they revealed objects which would have been otherwise unperceived, unobserved, unnoticed.<sup>26</sup> Natural and cultural objects disclosed one another, becoming land and water affordances to each other. The blue hammock-like structure revealed the plants invading it, but also the wind moving it. It underlined the rock above it (both of them moved although differently with the wind) and showed the rock to be a miniature landscape within the larger landscape. The bright blue that punctuated the whole garden helped visitors perceive the deceptively unremarkable parts of the garden: the sink, the metal grids, the trees, the plants, the nest, the walls, earth, and various sounds of water. The back wall mirror disclosed an otherwise invisible and inaccessible well, reflecting the hammock hidden inside. The other mirror disclosed any human or non-human visitor approaching the sink. As human visitors got closer to the revived sink, they could hear the water; the bottles on and in the sink were media that made the water containable and transportable, but they were empty and, because of that emptiness, emphasized the running water they did not contain, and from that view and sound one's imagining of the canal beyond the enclosure. Photographs of water and of the sky were folded and inserted into the cracks of the back wall. Notice how they were inside the wall and not simply on a wall reduced to a background; as such, they invited the viewer to observe the materiality of the bricks sheltering them and to follow a weaving vertical line leading to the sky. Sze called this "turning the volume up": "This place," she continues, "is so layered. Feel the layers of history. I wanted to sort of trace that history, to highlight it . . . to actually turn the volume up on your sense of every part of the space, even your sense of sound, sense of light, sense of nature."<sup>27</sup>

This continual process of discovery of the withdrawn enabled by the mediating function of the objects was intensified by the entropic quality of the garden. *The Last Garden* was abandoned to the tendency for all matter and energy in the universe to evolve toward a state of inert uniformity; the inescapable steady deterioration of a system following the second law of thermodynamics, which states that in any irreversible process, entropy always increases. Some of the artifacts were invaded by natural elements and others fell apart (notably, the black material in the sink, slowly eroded by the dripping water). As Peters has also observed about media: "Despite the interconvertibility of storage and transmission, time and space, and the time-confounding powers of recording, nothing in the end can stop the universe from degrading, and it degrades in a linear path towards chaos rather than order. Time is likely the effect of cosmic entropy, the tendency of everything to run down steadily in one direction."<sup>28</sup> And yet surprisingly, although some objects were decaying, some of them resisted even if inevitably slightly changed (the main hammock and the bottles, for instance), despite the six months of their exposure to the natural elements of water, wind, and sun. Some objects were shown not to be fully reducible to the laws that govern them: as a surplus, they transformed themselves and did not simply die in that timespan.

### The Temporality of Wonder

Sze has often stated that the consideration of the viewer is crucial to the structuring of her work: "There's a consideration of how the viewer will see it at every point—even

what one sees peripherally when looking at other things . . . I always want to find out how you enter, what you will see first, what leads you to your experience of the work, and then what you will see last. The viewer's perspective [and how information is revealed to viewers as they move through time and space] are for me actually what the experience of the work is always about."<sup>29</sup> About *The Last Garden*, she wanted "discovery" and "amazement" to be the way in which the viewer entered, circulated, and experienced the environment:

This idea of discovery in my work is something I like to put the volume up on . . . this location [works] in a very different way than the American Pavilion where you go right there; you often stand in line; it's told to you that it's important. This is exactly the opposite. This is a place where you come to the door and you don't even know if it's art or not. And you find the art. So your first impression of the art is that you've discovered it. It wasn't presented to you . . . This is a great opportunity to be in a place, which is a hidden entropic place within which you find these smaller entropic places . . . At each place there is that amazement of finding more . . .<sup>30</sup>

This amazement state of affairs—a discovery process made possible by the objects' mutual role of mediation and withdrawal—was fully assumed. The artist was aware that withdrawal meant that *The Last Garden* would largely be missed (Sze: "Maybe only 2% of the people who come to the Biennale will see it. But I think that for these two people it will be a very unique memory . . . and I think also the story of it . . . the telling of the story of what happened, what it was, is actually in many ways as important as the numbers.")<sup>31</sup> The environment orchestrated discovery at the limit of its possibility. The affective occurrence of discovery is best designated by the concept of wonder (surprise, astonishment, amazement, and awe). In the words of feminist phenomenologist Sara Ahmed, wonder is the affect that unfolds when the object that appears is encountered "*as if* for the first time"; it has a transformative impact on our perception of the world:

Wonder is an encounter with an object that one does not recognize, or wonder works to transform the ordinary, which is already recognized, into the extraordinary. As such, wonder expands our field of vision and touch. Wonder is the pre-condition of the exposure of the subject to the world: we wonder when we are moved by that which we face . . . I would suggest that wonder allows us to see the surfaces of the world as *made*, and as such wonder opens up rather than suspends historicity.<sup>32</sup>

Sze's garden mobilized wonder specifically in these terms: its intersection of withdrawal and relations between withdrawn objects turned "the volume up" on our sense of the site, including the layers of history of that site; it prepared but never guaranteed the viewer's experience of wonder, by which the viewer notices the complexity of a *Umwelt* (milieu), is touched by it, and is transformed in that encounter. What we have just described as occurring when the human viewers circulate in the garden—objects acting as amphibious revelatory media to indirectly yet never fully disclose the withdrawn and the surplus they hold in reserve—can thus be complicated as we develop our dialogue between new materialism, speculative realism, affective studies,

and contemporary art. How is wondering temporal, i.e. how does it generate temporality? Why is that temporality historically important? And how can it be understood as a pivotal condition of possibility of the future?

New materialism, at least in the work of Jane Bennett and Catherine Malabou, associates the affect of wonder with vitality and the subject's capacity to be touched. Particularly relevant to the aesthetics of wonder is the dialogue that Malabou establishes between neuroscience and the continental philosophical tradition of emotions and passions. Hers is an attempt to materialize that tradition by confronting it with the biological findings of neuroscience. Malabou is particularly interested in how Derrida's reading of Descartes and Deleuze's reading of Spinoza discredit the Kantian notion of affect as an autoaffectation (autoaffectation being a concept coined by Heidegger in his own reading of Kant). Autoaffectation is the process by which the subject is in touch with itself and modified in that touch "by the impact of an encounter (with another subject or object)."<sup>33</sup> In Kantian metaphysics, subjectivity is self-affecting. Heidegger's, Derrida's, and Deleuze's critical reading of that definition is crucial for our understanding of wonder. I will identify three reasons why this is so.

First, the critique of affect as a mere autoaffectation shows that affects are temporalities. This is Heidegger's conclusion as he reads Kant's study of affects: an affect is the auto-affecting process by which the subject is not only in touch with itself but also modified in that touch following its encounter with another subject or object. Affect introduces a "temporal difference between the self and itself."<sup>34</sup> Malabou insists on that point: for continental philosophy after Heidegger, autoaffectation—affects in general and wonder in particular—is the very "introduction of time within identity."<sup>35</sup> Time is the productive force by which transformation occurs. Second, post-Kantian philosophy (but also neurobiology) seeks to complicate the definition of affect as autoaffectation. Derrida's deconstructive reading of Descartes's *Passions of the Soul* shows that there is no pure autoaffectation. More precisely, there is no autoaffectation without a hetero-affectation—which is to say that the other is always involved in the deployment of affects; autoaffectation takes place in "my being affected by the other in me" as well as the other outside me.<sup>36</sup> And Deleuze's reading of Spinoza's study of passions shows that subjectivity is constituted by affects that pre-exist it. These two philosophical readings are decisive for the evolution of the concept: they claim that subjects and affects do not coincide. For Malabou, contemporary neurobiology is even more radical in its challenge of autoaffectation. Why? Because the wounded patients of neurobiology are, from the start, deserted subjects—subjects whose capacity to feel is lost. And while that loss is still reversible for Spinoza, contemporary neuroscience postulates that it is in some cases—as it is for patients suffering from Alzheimer's—irretrievable. Third, in the continental philosophical tradition but also in contemporary neuroscience, the affect of wonder has a special place in relation to other affects: it is a primary affect. This is certainly true of Descartes's *The Passions of the Soul*, which designates wonder as the primary emotion of the six primitive passions of the soul. Spinoza also supports the primacy of wonder, although in his *Ethics* he finally affirms that joy, sorrow, and desire are the primary affects. What does that primary role entail? Basically, for Malabou, it entails that: "Without the capacity to be surprised by objects, the subject wouldn't be able to have a feeling of itself."<sup>37</sup> As such, "wonder is what attunes the subject both to the world and to itself."<sup>38</sup> Malabou emphasizes the ambivalence of that fundamental role: "What are the soul, or the mind struck by: the surprising object or its own capacity to be surprised? What does

the soul or the mind wonder at: the other or themselves?”<sup>39</sup> This ambivalence is what makes wonder especially interesting as an affect; its occurrence lies between autoaffectation and hetero-affectation.

What makes Malabou’s take on affect especially relevant to artistic practices invested in the affect of wonder (as I claim it to be to Sarah Sze’s work) is its consideration of the neurobiological study of brain plasticity—not only the brain’s capacity to change “continuously throughout life, in response to everything we do and everything we have,” but also how traumatic imprints can orient that plasticity destructively.<sup>40</sup> Malabou relies here on the work of neurobiologist António Damásio, which shows that subjects with an impaired prefrontal cortex (the zone of the brain responsible for the interpretation of emotional stimuli) are disconnected from emotional experience. Damásio’s research suggests that this impairment can be expanded to include homeless people, the depressed, victims of abuse, and persons suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. For Malabou, Damásio’s conclusion is decisive: “*the loss of wonder is the emotional and libidinal disease of our time.*”<sup>41</sup> She names this loss a “hetero-heteroaffection,” a state in which the loss of the subject’s capacity to wonder is significant enough to erase the subject, leaving in its place an utterly dissimilar subject. Considering the intimate relationship between wonder and temporality, the loss of the subject’s capacity to feel is also a loss of temporality; it entails a subject “whose present does not stem from any past, whose future has no future.”<sup>42</sup> Primary and endangered by what Malabou calls a spreading politics of indifference, it is an affect that needs taking care of, insofar as the loss of wonder produces an indifferent—disaffected—subject; a subject unable to attune itself to the world and to itself.

Why is the new materialist postulation of wonder as a temporality crucial to our understanding of Sze’s work? The answer to that question is twofold. By activating wonder (what Sze calls amazement and discovery), *The Last Garden* can be seen as an environment that activates a special form of temporality—temporality as a force of alteration generated when a subject is in touch with itself and touched by others through affects. In so doing, it should be seen as attending to and taking care of a threatened affective temporality whose existence or re-invention must be secured to enable open, touchable, caring, and concerned forms of subjectivity. Our discussion of the work has shown that at least two operations come together to facilitate the human experience of wonder: withdrawal and the exploration of objects as amphibious media whose main function is to disclose the withdrawn without resolving it—that is, to turn the volume up on the unperceived, the barely perceivable, the under-perceived. To this function must be added two others: entropy and the partial suspension of anthropocentrism—operations that are themselves temporal (entropy as the irreversible degradation of matter and, in this work, the growing entanglement of nature and artifacts, and the problematization of anthropomorphism as a means by which the phenomenology of time can be alluded not only as a human but also a non-human animal or plant experience). Combined in this garden, all of these aesthetic operations work together to surprise the human visitor.

Of course, *The Last Garden* facilitates but certainly never guarantees wonder and it is hard to imagine how wonder could ever be guaranteed insofar as it takes its supply from withdrawal and from the withdrawn that a vicarious object might or might not partly reveal. Wonder, *The Last Garden* declared, is a way of approaching objects as sensory thresholds and as relatively autonomous (indifferent to us but “wanting”

us through that partial indifference). It takes its affective temporal dimension—the beholder's capacity to change when in touch with the other inside or outside of the self—from that approach. It also takes its historical significance from that approach. For, indeed, what is the historical significance of wonder? *The Last Garden* gives a perceptual, ecological, and affective response to that inquiry. By favoring wonder as an affect that might not occur, it certainly disrupts the over-programming of perception increasingly regulated by the participatory ethos of the contemporary museum. It can also be seen as unsettling the increased human domestication of nature in the age of the Anthropocene as a geological period where human activities are acknowledged as being the primary cause of global climate change and the large-scale destabilization of natural ecosystems—its intervention in the garden is minimal and its deployment is not altogether human-centric. Finally, and this is what this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, it took seriously the loss of wonder as the emotional and libidinal disease of our time—not necessarily repairing it, but sustaining the subject's capacity to be touched and not to be indifferent.

## Notes

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29. Melissa Chiu, "The Line between Drawing and Sculpture," 13.
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33. Malabou, "Go Wonder," 5.
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