



Specials > OBJECTHOOD

The *Specials* podcasts focus on projects by artists and curators who have some kind of connection to the Museum's programming and the MACBA Collection. **OBJECTHOOD** is a series of podcasts about new perspectives on the role of the object in contemporary art and philosophy.

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Curation, production, interviews and documentation: Roc Jiménez de Cisneros.

Music by Stephan Mathieu

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OBJECTHOOD #6

This is a podcast about objects, in particular about theories that have recently brought us new perspectives on objects from contemporary art and theory. In this episode, we talk to **McKenzie Wark**, **Liam Young** and **Mette Edvardsen** about space. Space, and the spaces we inhabit as mediating objects. Space as object of desire, as the ultimate "outer". Space as a medium for extremely strange objects, from heavenly bodies to UFOs and many other myths. A three-way look at the idea of space, from political theory to performance art.

01. Introduction

The track you hear in the background is a short composition by Stephan Mathieu, in which the melody from Max Mathews' famous 'Daisy Bell' – the first computer-generated vocal performance in history – has been resynthesized in a drastically slowed-down rendition of the song. The original tune, programmed by Mathews on an IBM 7094 mainframe, was in itself the cover of a popular hit written by Harry Dacre, so the layers stack up quickly here. Mathieu's track is a stretched-out version of a pioneering computer cover of a love song written in 1892. Not just *any* love song, mind you. One that ended up making film history, landing a stellar role in a key scene in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, when the evil supercomputer in control of the ship, HAL 9000, tries to sing the tune as he is being disconnected.

This little introductory criss-cross of historical references is relevant because our sixth episode in the series is all about SPACE. Space as a medium, space as an object, space as more than a container of things, space as a boundary. And to get started on our own space odyssey, we're going to jump from HAL 9000 to a much friendlier computer – the original Nintendo Entertainment System –, and talk about something that may at first glance seem to be about time. But trust me, it's also about space.

Pretty much anyone can complete Shigeru Miyamoto's 1985 Super Mario Bros., but it's not so easy to do it in under 5 minutes. Then again, not a lot of people aspire to *speedrunner* status. This niche subscene, arguably one of the weirdest corners of videogame culture, is a world apart from the usual dictates of the industry, and is driven only by the goal to clear either single levels or whole games as fast as humanly possible. Such an objective requires lots of practice, years of trial and error, and, above all, a unique approach to gaming. Speedrunners strategically analyse the inner structure of the game, looking for singularities, hidden patterns and infinitesimal pockets of weirdness in the code that they may be able to exploit to their advantage. Speedrunners are kind of like the particle physicists of gaming. In the case of Super Mario Bros., one of the most popular speedrunning arenas, this means knowing absolutely *everything* there is to know about time management, acceleration and collision – including all the strange behaviours that even the original team of programmers was probably not aware of. Let me give you an example. One of the hardest shortcuts discovered by speedrunners thus far is the so-called 'wall-entry trick', which allows Mario to jump into a solid wall and walk through it, thus avoiding enemies and clearing the level faster. This ranks among the hardest of the advanced techniques because it requires brutally precise positioning – beyond single-pixel accuracy. So in order for this to work, players need to account for *subpixels*. Wait – you may not know what a subpixel is. That's normal. Remember, speedrunners are the particle physicists of gaming. As you may have guessed, subpixels are the stuff that pixels are made of. In Super Mario Bros., a pixel is made up of 16 subpixels. The catch is that this position component is not rendered onscreen, so it is a total shot in the dark even for the most proficient speedrunners. On 25 May 2018, *somewes* beat the world record for the Super Mario Bros. speedrun, with a whopping 4 minutes, 56 seconds and 245 milliseconds. The former record, established in February 2018 by *Kosmicd12*, was 4:56.462. Yes, that's a 217 millisecond difference, and it took three months to beat. (Not that it matters, because by the time you hear this, these records may be old news).



[Mette Edvardsen *Black*]

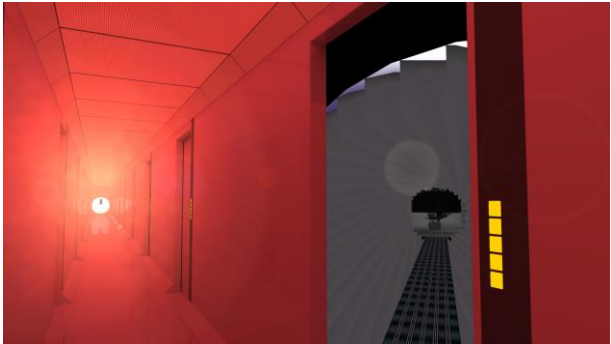
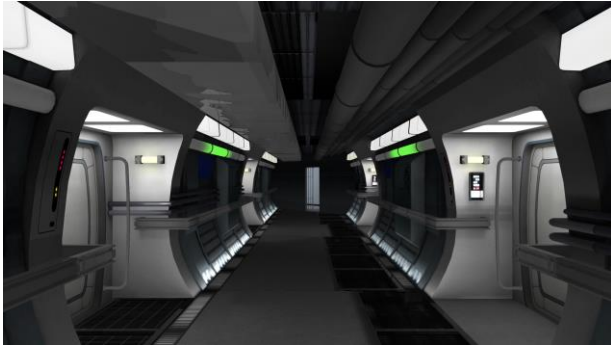
Speedrunners are experts at understanding and predicting how obstacles work. How things bounce, how enemies die, how sprites respawn and despawn, how every single object in a particular environment behaves. And that goes for the environment itself as well. Space becomes another object in the run. Speedrunning requires a meticulous understanding of distances, positions and space. It's not just about dodging piranha plants and flying hammers – that's easy. It's the assimilation of space within the game, down to the subpixel, that a player must achieve in order to smash the latest record. In this scenario, space is not merely a container, a stage, a place. Space is an entity with real agency – a true enemy.

In Stanislav Lem's 1961 novel *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*, the main character is trapped in a maze of insane bureaucracy, a mission without a mission statement, a degrading and pointless quest for instructions, a vast network of disinformation so perversely effective that no one, regardless of rank, seems to be in control. The only character that appears to call the shots throughout the book is, in fact, the Building. Building, with a capital B. Its corridors, rooms, hallways, doors and bathrooms are more than just a backdrop. They almost seem to hint at some sort of sentience. In a quote that could easily be applied to Super Mario, the protagonist says: 'the Building had familiarized me, to some degree at least, with its methods – confusing at times, but not without certain salient features. (...) Nothing was overlooked, even the plumbing played a vital part. But underneath that surface of clockwork precision lay a hive of intrigue, skulduggery, deception. What exactly was that wild confusion? A game? Or perhaps a camouflage to prevent the uninitiated from seeing some deeper plan, some higher order.'

In Lem's book, written in the heat of the Cold War, the seemingly inescapable traps and intricacies of the Building are analogous to the intricacies of the System, for which, in the words of the late Mark Fisher, it is 'impossible to imagine a coherent alternative'. Indeed, there does not seem to be an *outside*. It's not even clear if the protagonist ever arrived in the Building from without, as the reader only encounters him lost in its hellish network of identical rooms and corridors. Just like in Super Mario speedruns, the stage is a lot more than just a stage, the spaces in the Building are a character, an object in its own right.

Maze Walkthrough, an experimental videogame developed by Serafín Álvarez in 2014, takes the role of space to a whole other level by presenting the user with what he simply calls 'an empty game'. A 3D environment made from reproductions of iconic corridors from science fiction films such as *Alien*, *Metropolis*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. There is no plot, no challenge, no enemies, no goal, no score, no time limit, no narrative and no purpose, other than pure contemplative exploration. The piece, which is part of a larger research project on the trope of the corridor in science fiction films, goes well beyond the usual constraints of the game format to suggest an experience akin to the situationist notion of psychogeography, which Guy Debord described in 1955 as 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals'. The corridors in *Maze Walkthrough* are not only nostalgic film buff throwbacks – they intentionally point towards their agency in the original movies, where they frequently play a role as more than just architectural elements. They are examples of what McKenzie Wark, one of our guests on this episode, calls the 'inhuman', an intermediate category between the human and non-human worlds, which we often fail to acknowledge.

Mette Edvardsen's solo performance *Black* also involves invisible things and bridging worlds, but in a very different way. The piece takes place in a completely empty space, where everyday objects symbolically appear through the words and movements of the performer. The stage remains empty at all times, but the combination of actions, language and collective memory manages to conjure up tables, chairs, cups and so on, in an attempt to reconcile the gap between thought and experience. Or, as she puts it, to explore 'the possibilities and limits of language and how it extends into real space'. As Edvardsen explains in our interview, her take on space has to do with a certain degree of attention that radically differs from her everyday interaction with her surroundings. A way of feeling, acknowledging and accepting feedback from structures and details in spaces around her own body. A kind of psychogeographical approach to the black box of the performing arts.



[Serafín Álvarez, *Maze Walkthrough*, 2014]

The title of Edvardsen's piece, *Black*, references the invisible just as the 'blue' in the expression 'out of the blue' references the sky. Why do we unconsciously place unexpected objects and events up in the sky? Probably because the firmament, and ultimately outer space, act as constant reminders of the great unknown out there. A hard limit on our knowledge. We like to think we are more or less in control of what's around us, but our awareness is inversely proportional to vertical distance, despite the pervasiveness of the vertical perspective paradigm that Hito Steyerl brought up in our last episode. Objects hovering a few meters above us may indeed be hard to notice. Not to mention things happening in the ionosphere. Or near Jupiter. All the way to the farthest edges of the observable universe. Outer space is the big question mark onto which we project dreams and nightmares. And that's why, in this sixth episode, we look at space as more than just a place. Space, and the environments we inhabit, as mediating objects. Space as an object of desire, as the ultimate outside. Space as the medium for extremely weird objects, from celestial bodies to UFOs and as the setting for a host of myths. And we also turn our attention to commonplace objects, which **Liam Young** describes as 'radical shapers of space'. We talk to him, to Mette Edvardsen, and to **McKenzie Wark** about architecture, pixels, technology, urbanism, invisible walls, supply chains and spatial coordinates.

02. Biographies

Liam Young is an architect, although his approach to the discipline bears little resemblance to the construction of buildings. Much closer to art and theory, his work consists of myriad overlapping research, critical, speculative, and educational projects intended to closely study the challenges that contemporary urbanism and design must face in the Anthropocene.

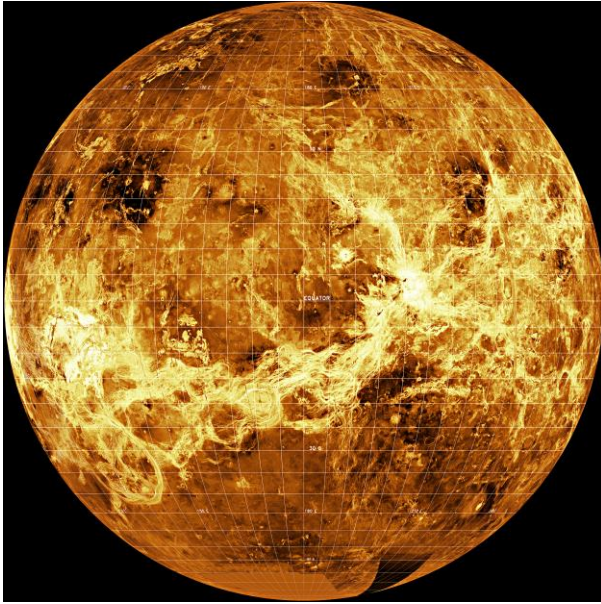
McKenzie Wark lectures and writes about seemingly disparate themes that come together under his particular critical approach. From digital entertainment to the economy by way of literature and the Situationist derive, Wark's books and essays weave a dense web of ideas that shape his personal analysis of contemporary culture.

Norwegian choreographer and performer **Mette Edvardsen** creates works that recontextualise the forms and methods of the performing arts through language, memory, and space. Although some of her works explore other media and formats – such as videos, books, and texts – her interest always lies in their relationship with performing arts as practice and situation.

Elegant, raw, and characterised by an almost meditative simplicity, **Stephan Mathieu's** musical compositions have been compared to the compositions of visual artists such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Ellsworth Kelly. His works often address the subject of translation and the analogue/digital process, and use obsolete sources such as early musical instruments and outdated playback media.

03. Timeline

- 00:00 Introduction
- 14:21 McKenzie Wark on psychogeography
- 19:25 Dad, what is architecture?
- 25:54 Science-fiction and world-building
- 28:59 Mars
- 32:11 Exodus, escape
- 38:25 Liam Young: radical shapers of space
- 41:54 Re-thinking architecture
- 44:35 A city the size of the Earth
- 48:47 Scales
- 50:51 The power of narrative
- 54:15 UFOs
- 56:29 The death of the object
- 01:00:32 Mette Edvardsen on space in her performances
- 01:01:59 Feedback



[Venus]

01:07:33 The moment doesn't exist

01:08:12 An interesting gap

01:12:39 Outroduction

04. Notes about the commissioned music

Sketch for Daisy Bell is the title of a composition created by Mathieu in 2008, but presented for the first time in this podcast. As its title suggests, the piece is a homage to Max Mathews' famous version of the song "Daisy Bell" for the first-ever computer-synthesised human voice performance, which is legendary in both the computer music field and the film world, after featuring in one of the most iconic scenes of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In his reinterpretation, Mathieu took some of words from the original lyrics (Daisy, crazy, love, for you), translated them into binary code, and played them on a quartet of Stroh fiddles: violin, viola, cello, and Japanese fiddle, assigning different tones to ones and zeroes. In the second part, "Solo", the entire lyrics of "Daisy Bell" were read out by various voices from the Simple Speech synthesiser and then mixed using Soundhack, an audio processing program developed by Tom Erbe that Stephan Mathieu often uses in his recordings.

05. Related links

www.metteedwardsen.be

vimeo.com/lyoung

www.speedrun.com/smb1

mazewalkthrough.serafinalvarez.net

schwebung.bandcamp.com

www.boundary2.org/2017/04/alexander-r-galloway-an-interview-with-mckenzie-wark

06. Credits

Curated and produced by Roc Jiménez de Cisneros. Voice over: Barbara Held. Music by Stephan Mathieu.

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07. Acknowledgments

Thanks to all the artists, Annette Wolfsberger, Gideon Kiers and Lucas van der Velden.

08. License

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