

## 'For the Snark was a Boojum, you see'

Inês Rebelo and the subject of cosmology

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An astronomical expedition lies at the heart of Rebelo's practice. Much of her work's experiential status necessitates the relationship between the inside world of earth and outside world of space, between the earthly 'now' and the cosmological 'then', provoking an intrinsic advancement towards her artistic access to the realm of cosmos. Rebelo's works speculate the spatially and temporally dislocated universe, and her conglomerated thoughts attempt to formulate an equation that could satisfy her artistic and cosmological enquiries. Inside Rebelo's solo exhibition, *Do It Yourself (night sky experience)* a black vehicle stands quietly on the vermillion floor, with holes as big as one centimetre dispersed all over its glossy surface. When the sun strikes through the framed window panels, it hits the sable back-drop of the Peugeot 306 16v, whilst the floating dust becomes ever more perceptible (*I Attempt to Find the Snark* #4, 2010). The bullet size holes are softened with light, the engine-less car aged by settling micro-particles, preserved and treasured like a ship in bottle, but instead placed inside a room with a white door. The hollow circles present flattened constellations of the Northern Hemisphere that is then projected and replicated onto a three-dimensional object, the vehicle. The constituted exhibition space is a place that tries to examine the finitude and contingency of another unknown space (the cosmic space and entities), which in fact excludes all human sensorium, empiricism, and the knowledge of *being*. The polarity existing in the argument of subject versus the object is considered subsidiary within this context, and ultimately aims for an embryonic formation of the 'philosophies of access', to borrow Graham Harman's term, and her practice ignites series of critical discussions that conjures exactly this. The given philosophical access present within *Do It Yourself (night sky experience)* runs parallel with Quentin Meillassoux's oppositional ideologies between science and philosophy. This dichotomy is well represented in his most recent publication *After finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, where Meillassoux begins his theoretical undertaking of *speculative materialism* by first introducing the term *arche-fossil* (or *ancestral matter*), followed by the concurrent thought of *correlationism*. The purpose of this paper is to predicate the artist's practice in relation to Meillassouxian ideology, to disclose a rendering of Rebelo's practice, and to consolidate the understanding of Meillassoux's anti-absolutisation<sup>1</sup> and/or dogmatic approach through visual and artistic means. Much more, by bringing in the contemporary philosopher's metaphysical guide into the realm of arts, the proposed paper adds to the discussion by reinstating Meillassouxian struggle, between necessity (science) and belief (philosophy).

In *After Finitude* Meillassoux begins the first chapter with an in-depth consideration of the arche-fossil from a correlational posit and that of the Cartesian comprehension. The ancestral matter, whether it be a bone from the Jurassic period or the accretion of earth, is benefitted and supported by empirically validated observations that disregard secondary qualities of the event, such as 'it was bright when the earth was formed' or, saying that 'fossilisation of an ammonite was slow and boring.' Therefore, in the Cartesian sense, the primary quality, such as the duration, space, geometric volume, and other measurable elements, responds as the objective quantification of entities

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<sup>1</sup> The difference between the anti-absolute forms (correlation) and anti-absolutisation (speculative materialism) is that the former denies an absolutist realm, therefore correlationists are able to retract certain states but accept other accounts. The latter disclaims any form of making anything absolute, protesting solidification of absolute forms.

and events. However, the correlationists would confront these scientific configurations by stating that these pre-historic events and objects can only be accounted as referents (symbolisation that merely denotes the happening) through numerical figures, all of which are contemporaneous with us and our scientific mode that acts as a retroactive process. One can estimate a correlationists' answer to the question "what is it that happened 4.56 billion years ago? Did the accretion of the earth happen, yes or no?" as both, and as Meillassoux applies, 'the *ancestral statement* is a *true statement* in that it is objective, but *one whose referent cannot possibly have actually existed in the way this truth describes it*. It is a true statement, but what it describes as real is an impossible event; it is an 'objective' statement, but it has no conceivable object. (2008b)." In such manner, a correlational propensity would predict that the microstructure of Galapagos' tortoise carapace which determines the hardness, could not have had existed as we would describe it now. Yet a correlational procedure demonstrates a type of double-standard as on the one hand she would accept the mathematical result or scientific exposition, yet still identify them as formally and theoretically inept to further existential or ontological quests on the basis that they are subjective developments. In so stating, the author perceives the danger of all correlationists who hypostasize the inability of separating object from subject. The danger here lies in the absolutist policy of the correlationists, who advocates that there cannot be any disconnection from the Dasein ideology (human cognizance) and inscribing a strong anti-absolute state. A correlationist, therefore, may enter Rebelo's exhibition to consider the *Apophis Found* (2010) or *DIY (night sky experience)* (2007) irrelevant or naïve for its scientific and mathematical calculations, which are merely a referential method. The notion/predication of time and speed reflected in the text of *Apophis Found*, or the astrological recordings and constellations (Cygnus or Virgo), would only be concluded as scientifically (therefore, partially) true but ultimately subjective and cannot be held as a substantial truth. Meillassoux, on the opposition, will exonerate the mathematical proposition combined within the artwork itself by declaring that the only way out of the absolute circle is to breakaway from the correlational or retrospective ideology. Certainly the figurative element will only bare its full potential according to human consciousness, however, what stands true for speculative materialists, is that one can positively speculate a space and a time, the condition of the past through these mathematical pronouncement. In other words, it is in relation to us but these theoretical and empirical underpinnings can be and are a method of *corresponding to the reality* where numbers and figures are not mere symbolisms, but give a *sense* of the hidden realities, through these findings. Truth, therefore, is held as the condition of the meaning of theories, as Meillassoux states, and scientific facts should give way in order to release one from the correlational tendencies, to charge the empirical (ancestral) studies with power. The exhibition could then be seen as embarking on liberation, and not a naïve retrospection or introspection, shifting away from the super-intersubjective habit of the philosophical constituencies.

A correlationist may also then rebut and challenge that the ancestral matter is much like an event occurring many galaxies away, and thus conflating the spatio (geographic distance) and the temporal (pre-life) under the conception of 'un-witnessed', and thus seemingly deflating the Meillassouxian argument. Yet one must be carefully submitted to the notion that the two cannot be conjoined or taken as synonymous, simply because distal occasions still happen in the contemporary time, not in the pre-cognisant. The spatial difference only imagines an un-witnessed account, whereas the temporal dislocation strongly assumes a non-witness site. For example, Rebelo's un-exhibited work *One day in Saturn* (2009) invites many layers of discussion that also discloses the scientific evidence

that there are only ten (earth) hours on Saturn. This specific work may establish the accountability for the un-witnessed as we are speculating the reality of Saturn in the contemporary moment, whilst works like *Life on Earth* (2009) engenders pre-historic instants where there was no-one to *perceive* the combusting life on earth. The world of science and math can display to us that which is anterior to time and cognisance, to life, itself. It can discuss scientifically, a life that is devoid of human perception and this Mathematisation of ontology is what Meillassoux holds to be supreme, and that which can be embellished or provoked through Rebelo's cosmological practice. The differentiation between the geographical and duration, between the un-witnessed and the non, has been explored by Meillassoux but a further interest arose when discussing the subject of *light years* with Rebelo. The visible light emitted from the stars could have originated before human development or even prior to the accretion of earth, and this blurs the demarcation easily held between the non-witness and the un-witnessed conditions. For the illumination of a star many galaxies apart, can only reach earth with given time and therefore, what in fact is seen as the luminosity of a star is neither entirely or wholly present, or permanent in its existence.

Politicality ruptures when oppositional belief systems convene under one label, as seen within *After Finitude* and Rebelo's works/exhibitions. Rebelo's *Do It Yourself* (*night sky experience*) located within a former police station where it is befitted with cells, offices, and a gym. Positioned within this politically enlivened space, the existing tension is underscored with works such as *Legal Advice* (2010) and *Polaris* (2010). The formal notification from South Westminster originates from a legal battle ensued by the artist herself for a stolen possession, more specifically, her drawings which were lost during a previous exhibition; whilst the blue police light from *Polaris* irradiates the exhibition space. In particular, what should be elucidated is the paralleling Meillassouxian polemic evident in the show. Whilst the environmental foundation (police station) of the show allows a legislative reading of the place that is based on the constituted law, therefore where belief, ethical concerns and morality become the building blocks, cosmological disposition (artist's subject) reflect the experimental and observational (scientific) disposition.

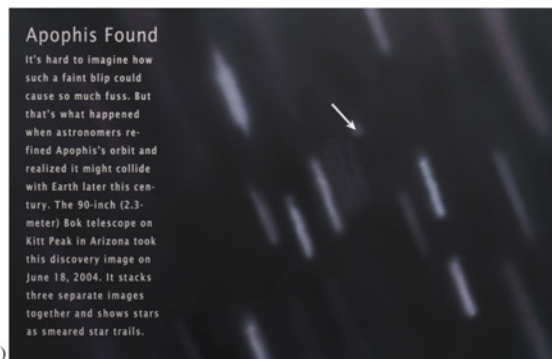
In the midst of the word he was trying to say  
 In the midst of his laughter and glee  
 He had softly and suddenly vanished away  
 For the Snark *was* a Boojum, you see.

-Lewis Carroll *The Hunting of the Snark*

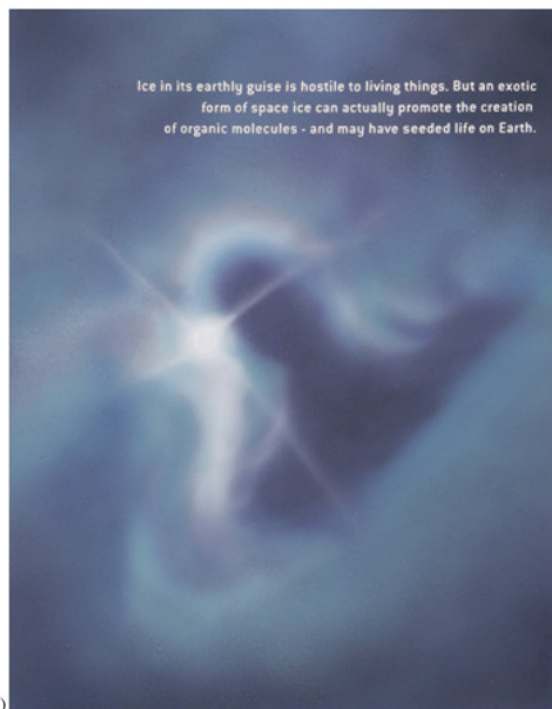
The purpose of this paper was to draw out the Meillassouxian fideistic friction through artist Inês Rebelo's artworks. In doing so, complex ontological forms of correlation was introduced, which then also yielded a new challenge in grappling with the artistic production. Perhaps what the speculative materialists are in search for when entering a gallery is not dissimilar to what the crewmembers in Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*, were in search for. It may not be a mythical animal or a monster, yet one can still gather from the fictional account a similarity, where the Snark is mirrored as the philosophical access. A search for something incoherent, unbelievable, illogical, unimaginable, and this isn't too far fetched from the quest of searching for contingencies, although it may be a Boojum, too.



(1)



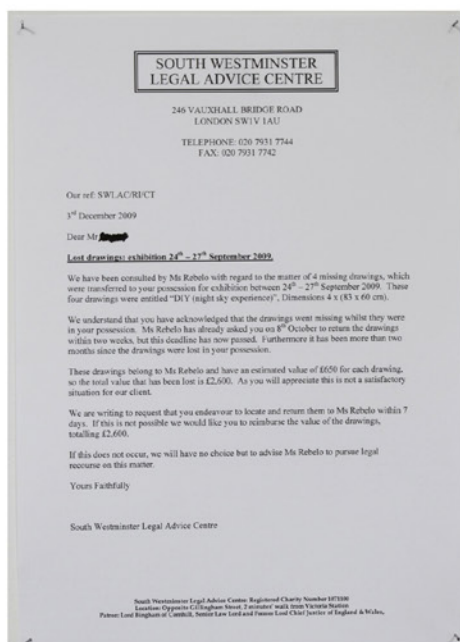
(4)



(5)



(2)



(3) (7)



(6)



(1) *DIY (night sky experience)*, 2007, edding pen on posters from "The Guardian", 83x60cm; (2) *Polaris*, 2010, Metropolitan Police emergency blue beacon and AC/DC power converter, 18x8x8cm; (3) *Legal Advice*, 2010, edding pen and inkjet print on paper, 29.7x21cm; (4) *Apophis Found*, 2009, enamel on aluminium, 55x86cm; (5) *Life on Earth*, 2009, enamel on aluminium, 55x43cm; (6) *I Attempt to Find the Snark #4*, 2010, perforated car model Peugeot 306, 138x399x168cm; (7) *One day in Saturn*, 2009, inkjet print and wall clock, 26cm (diameter). Photography by Cláudia Mateus (1, 7), Shoko Maeda (2, 3, 6) and Filipe Romão (4, 5); all images courtesy of the artist.