

# “Negative Seeing”: Robert Smithson, Earth Art, and the Eco-Phenomenology of “Mirror Displacements”

Ming-Qian Ma

**Abstract** Mounted randomly in various geo-ecological loci in Yucatan, Mexico, Robert Smithson’s earth art of the “Mirror Displacements” stages an eco-phenomenology characterized by “a wilderness of unassimilated seeing.” His leitmotif of an “anti-vision” or “negative seeing,” which paradoxically enables the world to appear counter-intuitively through the mirror displacements, presents itself as an artistic rendition of Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenon of givenness. Theorized as the third phenomenological reduction contra that of Husserl and Heidegger, Marion’s phenomenology of givenness postulates a phenomenon saturated with intuition, which appears absolutely and unconditionally, beyond the limits set by the horizon and the transcendental I. In both Smithson’s eco-phenomenology of the “Mirror Displacements” and Marion’s phenomenology of givenness, the appearance of this saturated phenomenon is, as Marion epitomizes it, “invisible according to quantity, unbearable according to quality, absolute according to relation, irrefragable according to modality.”

**Keywords** Jean-Luc Marion · Immanuel Kant · Edmund Husserl · Robert Smithson · Phenomenology · Phenomenological reduction · Saturated phenomenon · Givenness · Eco-phenomenology · Earth art

## Introduction

Regarded as an “iconoclastic” artist who “has now come to symbolize the expansive, antiformalist movements that emerged in the mid-1960s and early 1970s” in America, Robert Smithson (1938–1973) occupies a radically unique position in the contemporary art arena (Flam 1996, xiii). Anti-anthropomorphic in sentiment and post-humanist in approach, his art projects, also referred to respectively as

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“‘earthworks’ and ‘earth art,’” challenge the received theoretical paradigms and conceptual categories of phenomenology by foregrounding the phenomenality of the world itself, so much so that, as Jack Flam puts it, “the question of mind and ‘nature’ appears to be obliterated” (Flam 1996, xvii, xxiv). Smithson himself is eloquently explicit about an earth-oriented and eco-centered phenomenology that undergirds and permeates his art. In an essay titled, rather tellingly, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects (1968),” he thus describes the earth and mind comparatively:

The earth’s surface and the fragments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art. Various agents, both fictional and real, somehow trade places with each other—one cannot avoid muddy thinking when it comes to earth projects, or what I will call “abstract geology.” One’s mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason. Vast moving faculties occur in this geological miasma, and they move in the most physical way. This movement seems motionless, yet it crushes the landscape of logic under glacial reveries. This slow flowage makes one conscious of the turbidity of thinking. Slump, debris slides, avalanches all take place within the cracking limits of the brain. (Smithson 1996, 100)

Smithson’s language therein makes a revealing statement; it delineates, by way of a hybridity of generic vocabularies and a plethora of mixed metaphors, a terrene image of two parallel worlds in the process of merging into one: a vast geo-ecological landscape on the one hand and a human mind on the other, with the latter sinking into and engulfed by the former. In this sense, Smithson presents his earth art, at once literally and metaphorically, as a phenomenological critique of the human mind in terms of perception, highlighting, in particular, the very polemics of limit or boundary that construct vision as the constitutive mechanism of phenomenological reduction and containment. It articulates, through a privileging of the enormity of the phenomenal world and its indifferently all-encompassing movements, a different phenomenology, a phenomenology that is “beyond the bounds of beholding” (Flam 1996 xxiv). Neither transcendental nor existential, Smithson’s phenomenology is, as is so embodied by his earth art, material or ecological, the phenomenality of which lies in what the artist calls “undifferentiation” (Smithson 1996, 102). Of this, he writes:

At the low levels of consciousness the artist experiences undifferentiated or unbounded methods of procedure that break with the focused limits of rational technique. Here tools are undifferentiated from the material they operate on, or they seem to sink back into their primordial condition. ... This entropy of technique leaves one with an empty limit, or no limit at all. ... The rational critic of art cannot risk this abandonment into “oceanic” undifferentiation, he can only deal with the limits that come after this plunge into such a world of non-containment. (Smithson 1996, 102)

Limits or boundaries are, in other words, schemata of constituting consciousness and dividing techniques of sufficient reason, and they are deployed to reduce the phenomenal world to rationally containable categories. By contrast, Smithson’s earth art exhibits, as the artist himself states therein, an eco-phenomenology of the undifferentiated, which shows itself through “dedifferentiation,” or de-demarcation,

of phenomena: of mind from matter, of medium from the mediated, and of the rational from the irrational, among others (Smithson 1996, 103). With consciousness descending into, rather than transcending, the world in its primordial state, differentiation ushers in "the oceanic," an uncontained and uncontainable "limitlessness" in which "all boundaries and distinctions [lose] their meaning" and "all notions of gestalt unity" collapse, therefore resulting in "one's inability to see" (Smithson 1996, 103, 110, 130).<sup>1</sup> Situated beyond the bounds of beholding, Smithson's earth art thus stages an eco-phenomenology which, as is demonstrated provocatively in his project of "Mirror Displacements," phenomenolizes an "anti-vision" (Smithson 1996, 119-133, 130).

anti-vision

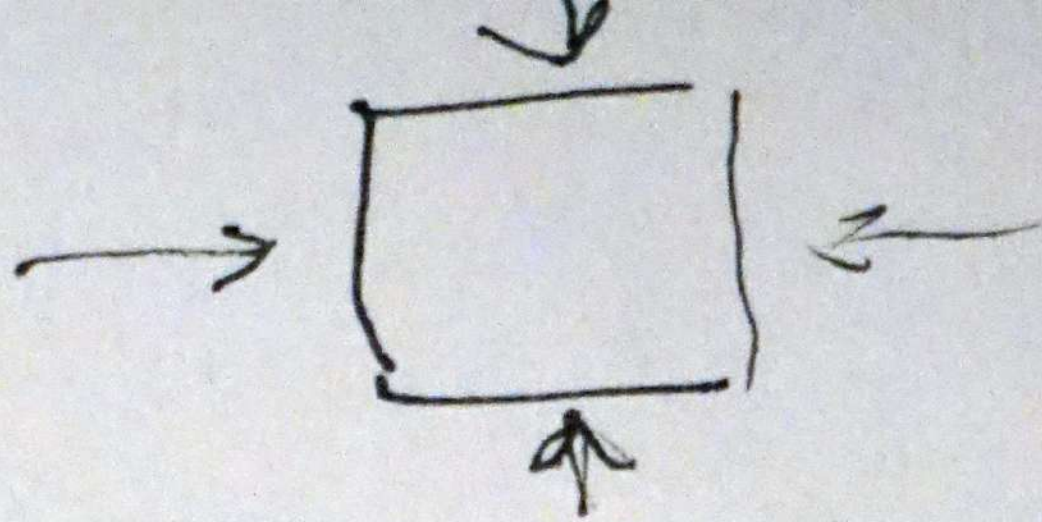
### A Setting for Negative Seeing

Documented in "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan (1969),"<sup>2</sup> Smithson's earth project of "Mirror Displacements" consists of nine groups of mirrors, with 12 mirrors in each group (Smithson 1996, 119-133).<sup>3</sup> These groups of mirrors are distributed in various geo-ecological loci in Yucatan, Mexico: a field of ashes on a charred site of red soil between Uman and Muna (Smithson 1996, "The First Displacement," 120), red clay mixed with white limestone in a suburb of Uxmal (Smithson 1996, "The Second Displacement," 121), the side of a heap of crushed limestone covered with large clusters of butterflies near Bolonchen de Rejon (Smithson 1996, "The Third Displacement," 122), dry seaweed and eroded rocks on the beach of the Gulf of Mexico, south of Campeche (Smithson 1996, "The Fourth Displacement," 123), the lush jungle at Palenque (Smithson 1996, "The Fifth Displacement," 124), a high sandbank of the river Rio Usumacinta ("The Sixth Displacement," 127), a tentacled tree near Yaxchilan (Smithson 1996, "The Seventh Displacement," 128), the slope of the eroding Island of Blue Waters (Smithson 1996, "The Eighth Displacement," 129), and mangrove branches and roots near Sabancuy (Smithson 1996, "The Ninth Displacement," 131).

Smithson's description of "The First Mirror Displacement," which is the shortest of all, could be read as sketching out the fundamental features that characterize, most generally, all the "Mirror Displacements," outlining some of the basic properties of this earth project in terms of an eco-phenomenology of "anti-vision:"

Somewhere between Uman and Muna is a charred site ... On this field of ashes ... twelve mirrors were cantilevered into low mounds of red soil. Each mirror was twelve inches square, and supported from above and below by the scorched earth alone. The distribution of the squares followed the irregular contours on the ground, and they were placed in a random parallel direction. Bits of earth spilled onto the surface, thus sabotaging the perfect reflections of the sky. Dirt hung in the sultry sky. Bits of blazing cloud mixed with the ashy mass. The displacement was in the ground, not on it. Burnt tree stumps spread around the mirrors and vanished into the arid jungles. (Smithson 1996, 120-121)<sup>4</sup>

Thus deployed, Smithson's "Mirror Displacement" operates on two levels simultaneously, as is signaled by the two words themselves in the name of the project.



*Metaphorically* (almost to the point of being a cliché), on the one hand, a mirror represents perception, a human construct intended for an ego-centered verisimilitude ("perfect reflections"). It is an anthropomorphic device in which one sees, by design, nothing but one's own exact duplicate. Moreover, the perfect reflection of one's intended image in the mirror occurs within and is rendered possible by the perimeter of the mirror ("twelve inches square"), which, as the mirror's delimiting framework, constitutes an all-enclosing horizon. A determining condition, according to which "phenomena obtain their meaning," this horizon is, as its "first determination" decrees, "what allows phenomena to manifest themselves to us," that is, to subjectivity (Geniusas 2012, 1). In other words, the mirror metaphorizes its own boundary as "a structure of determination that pre-delineates the purview within which each and every phenomenon appears," as "what consciousness co-intends in such a way that what is co-intended determines the sense of appearing objectivities" (Geniusas 2012, 7).

Literally, on the other hand, the mirror is indeed displaced in more ways than one. For one thing, it is physically removed, position-wise, from its established seat above the ground ("on it") to a spot in it ("into low mounds of red soil," "in the ground"), as Smithson makes emphatically clear, hence dethroning it from its transcendent vantage point. For another thing, the mirror, instead of being identified with subjectivity and sustained by consciousness, now finds itself, status-wise, entirely and unequivocally earthy, having become part of an amorphous expansiveness of crudity ("supported from above and below by the scorched earth alone," "followed the irregular contours on the ground," "placed in random parallel direction," "burnt tree stumps spread around the mirrors"). Moreover, with its reflecting surface covered by "bits of earth, thus sabotaging the perfect reflections of the sky," the mirror loses, function-wise, its capacity as a system of representation authorized by subjectivity, as a structure of determination authenticated in the name of self-reflecting consciousness.

Emerging out of such a "Mirror Displacement" is, then, a strange eco-environment, an alien phenomenal world of "Dirt hung in the sultry sky. Bits of blazing cloud mixed with the ashy mass." It unfolds, indeed, "an enchanted region," as Smithson himself so describes it, "where down is up," and where phenomena appear in manners against common sense and beyond apprehension (Smithson 1996, 119). Unintended and counter-intuitive, the appearances of phenomena in Smithson's "Mirror Displacement" thus articulate an eco-phenomenology of what Smithson also calls "negative seeing", one that defies the logic of vision, resists conceptual mapping, and flouts any attempt at constitution (Smithson 1996, 130).

## A Shared Vision

It can be said that Smithson's eco-phenomenology of "Mirror Displacements," as such, is provisioned with philosophical underpinning by Jean-Luc Marion's "Phenomenology of Givenness"<sup>5</sup> as unfolded in his works Réduction et donation

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(1989), *Étant donné* (1997), and *Du surcroît* (2001); herein, all quotations from these works will be from their English translations: *Reduction and Givenness* (1998), cited as RG; *Being and Givenness* (2002), cited as BG; and *In Excess* (2002), cited as IE.

Contra Husserl's transcendental reduction and Heidegger's existential reduction, Marion presents his "phenomenology of givenness" as the third phenomenological reduction, one that postulates the "originarily unconditional" givenness of phenomena (Marion 1998, *RG* 205).<sup>6</sup> Proclaimed as "first philosophy" according to phenomenology," it posits that phenomena appear unconditionally, giving themselves, showing themselves, and starting from themselves alone (Marion 2002a, *IE* 23, 25; 2002b *BG* 70).

Both unconditional in origin and "unconditioned" owing to "its certitude and its automatic universality" (Marion 2002a, *IE* 23), givenness is, as Marion asserts, what constitutes "The phenomenality proper to the phenomenon" (Marion 2002a, *IE* 23, b, *BG* 19). It is a givenness whose ontological features Marion details thusly:

Now, this datum gives itself to me, because it imposes itself on me, calls me, and determines me—in short, because I am not the author of it. The datum merits its name by its being a fait accompli, such that it happens to me, and in which it is distinguished from all foreseen, synthesized, and constituted objects, since it happens to me as an event. This unforeseen happening marks it as given and attests in it to givenness. Givenness does not indicate so much here the origin of the given as its phenomenological status. Better, most often, givenness characterizes the given as without cause, origin, and identifiable antecedent, far from assigning them to it. And it is sufficient that the given—the given phenomenon—gives itself starting from itself alone (and not from a foreseeing and constituting subject) in order that the fold of givenness is witnessed. The objection turns in this way to the confirmation of my thesis: givenness does not submit the given to a transcendent condition, but rather freed it from that condition. (Marion 2002a, *IE* 24–25)

It follows, then, that "the phenomenon gives itself," but only in its own "process of arising into appearing" (Marion 2002b, *BG* 68). In a rhetoric that resonates with Smithson's de-metaphorization of the mirror, Marion expounds further the unmediated appearance of the phenomenon:

The phenomenon can appear as such, and not as the appearance of something else more essential to it than itself, in short it can appear without the lack implied by an in-itself or the withdrawal implied by a noumenon—and this is indeed the primary goal of phenomenology—only if it pierces through the mirror of representation. Appearing must thus remove itself from (if not always contradict) the imperial rule of the prior conditions of knowledge by requiring that what appears force its entry onto the scene of the world, advancing in person without a stuntman, double, or any other representative standing in for it. (Marion 2002b, *BG* 69)

The unconditional givenness of the phenomenon as described here entails that, "In the strict phenomenological sense, the phenomenon is no longer... visible" (Marion 2002b, *BG* 69).<sup>7</sup> Marion asserts this, and such a phenomenality of invisibility proper to the phenomenon has to be understood against the "three of its characteristics" of Husserl's "principle of all principles," a principle which states that "every originarily giving intuition [*Anschauung*] is a source of right for knowledge, that everything that offers itself originarily to us in 'intuition' [*Intuition*] is to be taken

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simply as it gives itself, but also only within the boundaries in which it gives itself there" (Marion 2002b, BG 184; Husserl 1998, 25).<sup>8</sup>

Whence arises, first and foremost, the issue of perception or intuition. Having freed itself from the rules of the *a priori* conditions of knowledge, which "is to say [from] intuition and the concept [that] determine in advance the possibility of appearing for every phenomenon," the phenomenon gives itself and shows itself forcefully as a *fait accompli* in the face of a subject (Marion 2002b, BG 181). In this way, the phenomenon becomes invisible because it would no longer "tie its fate to intuition," as Marion's "inverse hypothesis" states, and consequently appears as unintended (Marion 2002b, BG 197, 187). It "breaks through the frame, is abandoned to the world of which it now makes a part," Marion writes, and, as such, is unperceivable even to the "sufficient intuition" postulated by Husserl (Marion 2002b, BG 69, 184). For it is the "first characteristic" of Husserl's "principle of all principles," according to Marion that intuition is never neutral and—emphasizing that this intuition occurs "only within the boundaries in which it [every originally giving intuition] gives itself there,"—that it is still a conditional intuition, however originally sufficient Husserl claimed it to be (Marion 2002b, BG 184). More specifically, Marion contends, it "remains framed, inasmuch as it is intuition, by two conditions of possibility... [assigned to every phenomenon];" and these two formal conditions of possibility, or the two other characteristics of Husserl's "principle of all principles," are "the horizon and the I" (Marion 2002b, BG 185, 179).

Secondly, it follows that, with its severance from intuition and its confines, the unconditional appearance of the phenomenon is invisible also in that it does not "admit limitation, de facto and de jure, by a horizon," hence freeing itself from "the priori limit of a horizon of phenomenality" (Marion 2002b, BG 187). For the horizon, being the "second characteristic" of the principle of all principles, functions to render phenomena manifest, granting them visibility. A structure of co-intending with consciousness, it frames intuition by providing the latter with a scaffold required by the "logic of penury" that "intuition obeys," Marion points out, a scaffold within the limits of which intuition "must first be inscribed de jure" in order that it give itself "within certain de facto 'boundaries'" (Marion 2002b, BG 185). Using "seeing an object, transcendent by definition" and the concomitant incomplete apprehension of that object as an illustration, Marion claims that the horizon is thus "the organization of all the successive lived experience around one single object," an organization in which "the known (the immanent lived experience already recorded) remain not only in memory, but be co-deposited within the same horizon as what still remains unknown (the lived experience yet to come), for the sake of a single intended transcendent object," and in which the known and the unknown "could simply be united... in one and the same objective intention" (Marion 2002b, BG 185, 186). Such being the case, Marion argues that "within the horizon, the unknown refers in advance to the known because it welcomes it and fixes it" (Marion 2002b, BG 186). Hence, a tautology under the mask of a paradox: inasmuch as the horizon is concerned, the logic of intuitive penury guarantees an intentional fullness, characterized by a "determinable indeterminateness" (Husserl 1998, 94).<sup>9</sup> Marion continues,

\* TAUTOLOGY UNDER

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PARADOX \*

The horizon in advance takes possession of the unknown, the un-experienced, and the not gazed upon, by supposing them to be always already compatible, compressible, and homogeneous with the already experienced, already gazed upon, and already interiorized by intuition. The intention always anticipates what it has not yet seen, (the result being that the unseen has, from the start, the rank of a pre-seen, a merely belated visible, without fundamentally irreducible novelty, in short a pre-visible.) The horizon therefore does not so much surround the visible with an aura of the nonvisible as it assigns in advance this nonvisible to this or that focal point (object) inscribed in the already seen. (Marion 2002b, BG 186)

Functioning as the "[designation] of the object of all givenness" and the "assimilation of givenness to intuition" for "its intentional aim at an object," the horizon is thus a determining structure of a proactive vision of positivity (Marion 2002b, BG 187). In this sense, the "horizon of appearing always already seen, or at least visible" circumscribes a closure, or more accurately put, a foreclosure (Marion 2002b, BG 187). By leaving nothing unseen or invisible, Marion argues emphatically that the horizon constitutes a seeming "openness [that] would be equivalent to a visual prison, a panopticon broadened to the dimensions of the world, a panorama without exterior, forbidding all genuinely new arising" (Marion 2002b, BG 187).

Thirdly, the unconditional appearance of the phenomenon is invisible because it "precedes every other instance (including and, above all, the I)," an "I" who, as "the third characteristic of the 'principle of all principles,'" is ultimately one with horizon. Marion makes it clear, the I is presupposed to be "as transcendental and as horizon" (Marion 2002b, BG 188, 187, 188). In other words, the phenomenon appears unconditionally, still "to us," granted, but "on its own basis to an I" without being constituted into an alienated phenomenon "by and on the basis of the I" (Marion 2002b, BG 187). Thus, Marion continues, the unconditional givenness of the phenomenon "obligatorily confiscates the function and the role of the *self*, and therefore can only concede to the ego a *me* of second rank, by derivation," thereby demoting the "I" to a "passive receptivity" (Marion 2002a, IE 45, 48): "In other words, the *ego*, deprived of transcendentalizing dignity, must be admitted as it is received, as an *adonné*: the one who is itself received from what it receives, the one to whom what gives itself from a first *self*—any phenomenon—gives a second *me*, the one of reception and of response" (Marion 2002a, IE 45). Moreover, Marion states, "without reserve or limits, the I must renounce every claim to the synthesis of objects or the judgment of phenomenality. In the realm of givenness, it no longer decides the phenomenon, but receives it; or else, from "master and possessor" of the phenomenon, it becomes its receiver" (Marion 2002b, BG 188).

Vis-à-vis these three characteristics of Husserl's "principle of all principles," Marion's phenomenology of givenness assumes, in turn, a different "hypothesis" (Marion 2002b, BG 189). An "inverse" one, as Marion has described it earlier, it is a hypothesis that Marion claims "would permit us to go to the limit in determining phenomenality and experiencing afresh what possibility means or can give" and would enable imagining "certain phenomena [that] could appear only by playing at the limits of phenomenality" (Marion 2002b, BG 189). It posits, imaginatively as well as rhetorically, an unconditional givenness of the phenomenon "without the limit (the principle of a horizon) or condition (the transcendental I)," a givenness

previsible  
invisible

“that is finally absolutely unconditioned (without the limits of a horizon) and absolutely irreducible (to a constituting I),” and whence the phenomena, which “would invert limit (by exceeding the horizon, instead of being inscribed within it) and condition (by reconducting the I to itself, instead of being reduced to it)” (Marion 2002b, *BG* 189).

Marion’s “inverse hypothesis,” stated as such, leads to a further one. Since it is the “logic of penury” inscribed in intuition that determines the limited possibility of the phenomenon, and since it is “the two finitudes of the horizon and the I [coming] together in the finitude of intuition itself” that delimit the appearances of the phenomenon, the very limit or finitude of intuition has, then, to be inverted (Marion 2002b, *BG* 197). For the “unconditioned and irreducible phenomena (if there are any) would become thinkable and possible,” Marion argues, “only if a finally nonfinite intuition could secure their givenness” (Marion 2002b, *BG* 197). To this end, Marion posits an intuition that, contrary to the “poverty” that characterizes intuition, which is to say the penury that marks the “ideal adequation of intuition to intention,” would “give *more, indeed immeasurably more*, than the intention would ever have aimed at or foreseen” (Marion 2002b, *BG* 199, 197). The result is an inversion from “the phenomenon supposedly poor in intuition” to “a phenomenon saturated with intuition,” to what Marion calls “a saturated phenomenon” (Marion 2002b, *BG* 197).

Furthermore, crediting Kant with “a foretaste of ... saturated phenomenon,” which “Kant formulates ... in a rare term: the aesthetic idea,” Marion points out that, as with Kant’s doctrine of “representation of an object according to a principle,” the saturated phenomenon “too can never become knowledge, but for a contrary reason” (Marion 2002b, *BG* 197, 198). For, as Kant puts it unambiguously, the surplus of intuition is one “for which a concept can never be found adequate.”<sup>10</sup> Marion, thus, explains:

It is no longer a question of the nonadequation of (lacking) intuition leaving a (given) concept empty. *It is inversely a question of a deficiency of the (lacking) concept, which leaves the (superabundantly given) intuition blind.* As a result, it is the concept that is deficient, no longer intuition... *The excess of intuition over every concept... prevents the aesthetic idea from making an object visible.* It is important to insist on this: the failure to produce the object does not result from a shortage of givenness (as for the idea of reason), but well and truly from an excess of intuition, therefore from an excess of givenness. (Marion 2002b, *BG* 198)<sup>11</sup>

Elaborating further on Kant’s position, Marion argues that the “excessive givenness” (Marion 2002b, *BG* 198) or the “aesthetic idea,” that defines an “inexponible representation,”<sup>12</sup> “can be understood as follows”:

Because it give “much,” the aesthetic idea gives intuitively more than any concept can expose. To expose here equates disposing of (or organizing) the intuitive given according to rules. The impossibility of the concept arranging this disposition comes from the fact that the intuitive superabundance no longer succeeds in exposing itself in a priori rules, whatever they may be, but rather subsumes them. Intuition is no longer exposed in the concept; *it saturates it and renders it overexposed—invisible, unreadable not by lack, but indeed by an excess of light... a surplus of intuition, therefore of givenness, over and above intention, the concept, and the intended... a saturated phenomenon will no doubt no longer constitute*



an object (at least in the Kantian sense), for it is not self-evident that objectivity has enough authority to impose its norm on the phenomenon. (Marion 2002b, *BG* 198, 199)<sup>13</sup>

That said, Marion, by way of an inverse reading of Kant that would exceed the Kantian categories, sketches out the properties of the saturated phenomenon as "*invisible* according to quantity, unbearable according to quality, absolutely according to relation, irregardable according to modality. The three first characteristics put into question the ordinary sense of horizon...; the last, the transcendental sense of the I..." (Marion 2002b, *BG* 199).

### Smithson's "The Mirror Displacements" as a "Saturated Phenomenon"

Foregrounding its eco-phenomenology of "negative seeing," Smithson's earth art of "Mirror Displacements" begins, not surprisingly, with a meditation and speculation on a horizon. "Driving away from Merida down Highway 261," Smithson writes, "one becomes aware of the indifferent horizon ... devouring everything that looks like something," a "closedness," that is, which imposes "restrictions on all forward movement," and in which everything is "imprisoned" (Smithson 1996, 119). The phenomenological question he then raises is "How could one advance *on* the horizon, if it was already present *under* the wheels?" (Smithson 1996, 119).<sup>14</sup> So formulated hypothetically, Smithson's question is Marionian in that the two prepositions of "on" and "under" therein have already presupposed a spatial and positional displacement: they signal, both denotatively and connotatively, the removal of the horizon as the "*unsurpassable* limit" from afar, always remaining "*relative in regard to [one's] current situatedness*," to the immediacy of the unconditional appearance of the phenomenon, by erasing the elusive distance that constitutes the transcendental-ity of a horizon, to a spot of "tumult of 'de-differentiation'" where, as Smithson himself puts it in his documentation of "The Seventh Mirror Displacement," the horizon is "submerged and suffocated in an asphyxiation of vanishing points" (Geniusas 2012, 2; Smithson 1996, 110, 128). This spatial and positional displacement of horizon, which inverts the limit by exceeding the horizon, then turns the horizon into "something else other than a horizon," as Smithson claims; it unfolds, in other words, an oceanic "openness" of and to phenomenality (Smithson 1996, 119).

With the horizon thus displaced, Smithson's "Mirror Displacements" engage an "anti-vision" or "negative seeing" at the limit of phenomenality, where saturated phenomena appear unconditionally. In this regard, "The Eighth Mirror Displacement" presents itself as an illuminating case in point. Mounted precariously on the sandy slope of the "Island of Blue Waters," a slope that is "dropping, draining, eroding, trickling, spilling away" (Smithson 1996, 129), this "Mirror Displacement" is documented extensively as follows:

Small bits of sediment dropped away from the sand flats into the river. Small bits of perception dropped away from the edges of eyesight ... Sight turned away from its own looking. Particles of matter slowly crumbled down the slope that held the mirrors. Tinges, stains, tints, and tones crumbled into the eyes. The eyes became two wastebaskets filled with diverse colors, variegations, ashy hues, blotches and sunburned chromatics. To reconstruct what the eyes see in words, in an "ideal language" is a vain exploit. ... Sight consisted of knotted reflections bouncing off and on the mirrors and the eyes. Every clear view slipped into its own abstract slump. All viewpoints choked and died on the tepidity of the tropical air. The eyes, being infected by all kinds of nameless tropisms, couldn't see straight. Vision sagged, caved in, and broke apart. Trying to look at the mirrors took the shape of a game of pool under water. All the clear ideas of what had been done melted into perceptual puddles, causing the brain to gurgle thoughts. Walking conditioned sight, and sight conditioned walking, till it seemed only the feet could see. Squinting helped somewhat, yet that didn't keep views from tumbling over each other. The oblique angles of the mirrors disclosed an altitude so remote that bits of "place" were cast into a white sky. How could that section of visibility be put together again? Perhaps the eyes should have been screwed up into a sharper focus. But no, the focus was at times cock-eyed, at times myopic, overexposed, or cracked. ... The eyes crawled over grains, chips, and other jungle obstructions. From the blind side reflections studded the shore—into an anti-vision. (Smithson 1996, 129-130)

Smithson's documentation of "The Eighth Mirror Displacement" here details what the artist refers to as "a wilderness of unassimilated seeing" (Smithson 1996, 129). Here, as elsewhere in Smithson's "Mirror Displacements," the inability of the "seeing" to be assimilated into an ideal adequation to intention, hence an intuitive "wilderness" exceeding the limit of the concept, results from the fact that the unconditional appearance of the saturated phenomenon is, as Marion has stated earlier, "invisible according to quantity." Defined as that which "*cannot be aimed at [ne peut viser]*," "meant, or intended" this invisibility of the saturated phenomenon, or this "impossibility" of the saturated phenomenon to be aimed at or intended, Marion explains, "stems from its essentially unforeseeable character [*son caractère essentiellement imprévisible*]" (Marion 2002b, 199, 363).<sup>15</sup> Take, for instance, the phenomenon of how "tinges, stains, tints, and tones crumbled into the eyes." Designating a specific relation between the phenomenon and the eye, the verbal phrase "crumbled into" delineates here the appearance of the saturated phenomenon from two perspectives. First, with its denotative meaning of "to break down into small crumbs" or "to fall asunder in small crumbs or particles,"<sup>16</sup> which "de-structuralized' any literal logic" of the eye, it gestures toward a "wilderness," or what Smithson also calls the "indecisive zones" and "riddling zones," of the phenomenal world by connoting an overwhelming increase in "all kinds of nameless tropisms," an irresistible addition to the already limitless quantity of the phenomenon that is unassimilated and unassimilable by intention and representation (Smithson 1996, 128-9).<sup>17</sup> It thus inverts the limit or the logic of penury of intuition, whose foreseeability is predicated upon the principles of homogeneity and finitude that mobilize the "successive synthesis" (Marion 2002b, BG 200).<sup>18</sup> Marion writes,

According to Kant, quantity (extensive magnitude) is declined by composition of the whole in terms of its parts. This "successive synthesis" allows for the representation of the whole to be constituted according to the representation of the sum of its parts. In effect, the mag-

nitude of a *quantum* implies nothing more than the summation of the *quanta* that make it up. From this homogeneity another property follows: a quantified phenomenon is “(fore-) seen in advance [*schon... angeschaut*] as an aggregate (sum of the parts given in advance) [*vorher gegebener*].”<sup>19</sup> This sort of phenomenon would always be foreseeable, literally seen before being seen in person or seen by procuration, on the basis of another besides itself—more precisely, on the basis of the supposedly finite number of its parts and supposedly finite magnitude of each among them. (Marion 2002b, *BG* 200)

Secondly, with “Tinges, stains, tints, and tones” that “crumbled into the eye,” thereby inverting its logic of poverty, intuition ceases to be limited by its concept, whatever that may be, and becomes both saturated and saturating. It thus finds its own freedom to “give more,” as Marion has argued earlier, “indeed immeasurably more, than the intention would ever have aimed at or foreseen,” rendering itself “overexposed,” as Smithson himself puts it in his exposition, as if qua Marion, and hence invisible. In this way, “its excess can neither be divided nor adequately put together again by virtue of a finite magnitude homogeneous with finite parts,” Marion argues, “since the saturating intuition surpasses limitlessly the sum of the parts by continually adding to them” (Marion 2002b, *BG* 200). Smithson concurs; and when referring to the excessive “views ... tumbling over each other,” for instance, he asks rhetorically in the same vein, “How could that section of visibility be put together again?” As such, the saturated phenomenon of “Tinges, stains, tints, and tones crumbled into the eyes” no longer constitutes any object, and lends itself instead only to “an instantaneous synthesis,” as Marion will make clear, one “whose representation precedes and surpasses that of the eventual components, instead of resulting from it according to foresight” (Marion 2002b, *BG* 200). Resonating with Smithson’s phenomenological notion of objects as “the excrement of thought and language,” as “phantoms of the mind, as false as angels” (Smithson 1996, 122), Marion then continues to detail this “instantaneous synthesis” and its concomitant invisibility in contrast to the “successive synthesis” and its self-evident visibility of the object:

The [instantaneous] synthesis takes place without complete knowledge of the object, therefore without *our* synthesis. It is thus freed from the objectness that we would impose on it so that it might impose on us its own synthesis, accomplished before we could reconstitute it (a passive synthesis, therefore). Its coming forward precedes our apprehension, rather than resulting from it... it comes before our gaze at it, it comes early, before us. We do not foresee it; it foresees us. (Marion 2002b, *BG* 201)

Smithson’s anti-vision, eco-phenomenalized as it is in “a wilderness of unassimilated seeing” in “The Eighth Mirror Displacement,” likewise intimates that the unconditional appearance of the saturated phenomenon is “unbearable according to quality.” Understood as “intensive magnitude,” quality is what “allows intuition to fix a degree of reality for the object by limiting it,” Marion points out (Marion 2002b, *BG* 202). However, contrary to the foresight built in the “successive synthesis of the homogeneous,” anticipation of intensive magnitude operates “in a perception of the heterogeneous, in which each degree is demarcated by a dissolution of continuity with the preceding,” Marion notes, “therefore by an absolutely singular novelty” (Marion 2002b, *BG* 203). Otherwise put, quality is none other than the

more refined measure inscribed in and deployed by the logic of penury of intuition in ideal adequation to intentional aim at an object. But, Kant refines the measure further. Owing to his privilege of the "poor phenomenon," Marion observes, Kant nevertheless "approaches intensity only by strangely privileging phenomena of the weakest intensity, precisely where intensity is lacking, to the paradoxical point of basing it on the very absence of intensity, negation" (Marion 2002b, *BG* 203). Defining intensity "starting from its degree zero," such a Kantian paradigm, one of "a poor phenomenon, indeed one empty of intuition, definitely blocks, in metaphysics at least, every advance toward the liberated phenomenality of givenness" (Marion 2002b, *BG* 203). By contrast, the saturated phenomenon is unbearable; Marion explains:

For the intuition saturating a phenomenon attains an intensive magnitude without measure, or common measure, such that starting with a certain degree, the intensity of the real intuition passes beyond all the conceptual anticipations of perception. Before this excess, not only can perception no longer anticipate what it will receive from intuition; it also can no longer bear its most elevated degrees. For intuition, supposedly "blind" in the realm of poor or common phenomena, turns out, in a radical phenomenology, to be blinding. The gaze cannot any longer sustain a light that bedazzles and burns. The intensive magnitude of intuition, when it goes so far as to give a saturated phenomenon, cannot be borne by the gaze, just as this gaze could not foresee its extensive magnitude. ... For not bearing is not simply equivalent to not seeing.... It concerns a visible that our gaze cannot sustain. (Marion 2002b, *BG* 203)

Foregrounding its anti-vision, Smithson's "The Eighth Mirror Displacement" dramatizes, perhaps most explicitly, such an intensive magnitude of the saturated phenomenon by unfolding "a wilderness of unassimilated seeing" in which, as the artist himself puts it, all "measure is dropped and incomputable" (Smithson 1996, 124). Facing the onslaught of the intensive magnitude from "ashy hues, blotches and sunburned chromatics" as well as "grains, chips, and other jungle obstructions," among many others, "the eyes" can no longer "see straight," Smithson acknowledges, as "sight consisted of knotted reflections bouncing off and on the mirrors and the eyes." The intensity of the saturated phenomenon thus passes, as Marion observed earlier, beyond all the conceptual anticipations of perception to such an elevated degree that "All the clear ideas of what had been done melted into perceptual puddles." The result is that "vision sagged, caved in, and broke apart." To his own tentatively-proposed solution that "perhaps the eyes should have been screwed up into a sharper focus," the artist responds with an immediate and resounding, "but no." For, however the eyes may have attempted to focus, they turn out to be either "cocked-eyed," "myopic," "overexposed," or "cracked;" the eyes are, in other words, blinded by the blinding intensity of the saturated phenomenon that they cannot see, much less sustain. Described figuratively by Smithson as "two wastebaskets," the eyes in the "Mirror Displacement" receive a similar but less expressive account from Marion when he says,

Thus, the eye experiences only its powerlessness to see anything, except the bursting that submerges it—almost metallic and vibrating—which blinds it. Thus appears the excess of intensive magnitude in the pure and simple impossibility of even maintaining it within the horizon of the visible. (Marion 2002b, *BG* 205)

That the unconditional appearance of the saturated phenomena is invisible according to quantity and unbearable according to quality leads, inevitably, to the third property of the phenomenon as such: it is "*absolute* according to relation," as Marion states, "which means it evades any analogy of experience" (Marion 2002b, *BG* 206). Smithson's earth art of "The Mirror Displacements" strikes one as radically unique precisely because, and in light of Marion's phenomenology of givenness, the unconditional appearance of this saturated eco-phenomenon is, simply, unprecedented. What is that, for instance, which "the eyes see" but can not be reconstructed "in words, in an ideal language"? If, following the general outline of Kant's definition of the principle of such analogies, experience is understood as "possible only through the representation of a necessary connection of perceptions," a connection that "will have to produce itself ... through concepts" that would connect "a priori" the "existence of objects" and "their relation in time,"<sup>20</sup> and if, as Marion has epitomized it, it is this connection as such that "permits three relations: inherence of accident in substance, causality between cause and effect, commonality among several substances," Smithson's "Mirror Displacement" is one that foregrounds the opposite: disconnectedness; "the distances between the twelve mirrors are shadowed disconnections," Smithson writes, "The mirror surfaces being disconnected from each other" (Marion 2002b, *BG* 206, 123–124, 128). It follows that the saturated phenomenon that appears in "The Mirror Displacement" is, then, disconnected from or un-analogous to any experience whatsoever, having exceeded the limit of concepts that would otherwise perform such connection.

Moreover, the saturated eco-phenomenon in Smithson's "The Eighth Mirror Displacement" defies the "three presuppositions" that Kant employs to establish the above-mentioned three relations permitted by connection (Marion 2002b, *BG* 206–207). First, mounted randomly on the irregular contours of the eroding sandy slope of an "unknowable zero island," the "Mirror Displacement" stages an "anti-vision" or "negative seeing" precisely because the saturated phenomenon does not appear "by respecting the unity of experience," as Marion explains, "that is to say, by taking place in a network as tightly bound as possible by lines of inherence, causality, and commonality that assigned to it, in the hollow as it were, a site" (Smithson 1996, 129; Marion 2002b, *BG* 207). The artist's question of "Where is the island?" implies an uncharted locale for the "Mirror Displacement" that is a far cry from "a site predetermined by a system of coordinates, itself governed by the principle of the unity of experience" (Smithson 1996, 129; Marion 2002b, *BG* 207). In this sense, Smithson's "anti-vision" declares, as does Marion's rhetorical question, "the possibility that a phenomenon might impose itself on perception without assigning it either a substance in which it resides like an accident or a cause from which it results as an effect, or even less an interactive *commercium* where it is relativized" (Marion 2002b, *BG* 207). Secondly, in Smithson's "The Mirror Displacement," "the mirror itself is not subject to duration," as the artist understands it, and hence is "timeless" (Smithson 1996, 122). With such "Timelessness," "The Mirror Displacement" breaks free from Kant's privilege of analogy and his presupposition that "all empirical time-determinations must [*müssen*] stand under rules of universal time-determination. The analogies of experience ... must [*müssen*] be rules of this

description" (Smithson 1996, 121; Kant 1965, 210).<sup>21</sup> An analogy, which is instrumental in the construction of unity, and "by recourse to" which "this unity should be always be accomplished," as Marion analyzes it, functions, on the one hand, as the constitutive "procedure that allows [one] to secure temporal and conceptual necessity, therefore the unity of experience" and, on the other hand, as the sole executor of "the regulation of experience by necessity, therefore to assure its unity" (Marion 2002b, *BG* 207, 208). Since the mirrors are themselves timeless, the saturated phenomenon thus mirrored, such as "bits of 'place' ... cast into a white sky," severs itself from any analogy of experience by stripping itself of the temporal horizon as the condition for an analogical, intra-temporal connectivity. Thirdly, Smithson's use of plurals in "The Eighth Mirror Displacement," such as "knotted reflections," "All viewpoints choked and died," or "views ... tumbling over each other," corresponds to a similar usage in "horizons were submerged and suffocated in an asphyxiation of vanishing points." Situated within the "wilderness of unassimilated seeing," Smithson's usage of the plural here invokes Marion's question of how "phenomena exceed their horizon" and his proposed answer in a "hermeneutic of an infinite plurality of horizons," against which the "essentially and absolutely saturated phenomenon" appears absolutely (Marion 2002b, *BG* 209, 211). Marion writes:

If the hermeneutic of an infinite plurality of horizons is by chance not enough to decline an essentially and absolutely saturated phenomenon, it could be that each perspective, already saturated in a single horizon (bedazzlement), is blurred once again by spilling over the others—in short, that the hermeneutic adds the bedazzlements in each horizon, instead of combining them. Then, not only no single horizon, but no combination of horizons, could successfully tolerate the absoluteness of the phenomenon, precisely because it gives itself as absolute, that is to say, free from all analogy with common-law phenomena and from all predetermination by a network of relations, with neither precedent nor antecedent in the already seen or foreseeable. In short, there would appear a phenomenon saturated to the point that the world (in all senses of the word) could not accept it. Having come among his own, his own do not recognize it; having come into phenomenality, the absolutely saturated phenomenon could find no space there for its display. (Marion 2002b, *BG* 211)<sup>22</sup>

That being the case, it could be argued, though, that the absolutely saturated phenomenon does find its display space in Smithson's "wilderness of unassimilated seeing" which exists indeed only on the outer-fringe of a radical imagination and, in which, "by giving itself absolutely," the saturated eco-phenomenon "also gives itself as absolute," as Marion contends, "free from any analogy with already seen, objectified, comprehended experience. It is free because it does not depend on any horizon. In every case, it does not depend on this condition of possibility par excellence—a horizon, whatever it might be" (Marion 2002b, *BG* 211–212).

Situated within "a wilderness of unassimilated seeing," Smithson's "anti-vision" or "negative seeing" also articulates, perhaps most literarily, that the absolute and unconditional appearance of the saturated eco-phenomenon is *irregardable* [beyond any seeing] according to modality. On this issue, Smithson's punning on "eye/I" kills two birds with one stone. For one thing, the literal absence of the first person singular "I" in the "Mirror Displacement," whose existence can thus be evoked only through punning, invalidates, by default, the "categories of modality" as the "operators of the fundamental epistemological relation to the I" who is the "power of

knowing” and with whom objects must agree “absolutely if they are to be known” (Marion 2002b, *BG* 212). More specifically, insofar as phenomena are concerned, Marion explains:

This agreement determines their possibility (therefore also their actuality and their necessity) to be and to be known as phenomena solely by the measure of their suitability to the I, for whom and by whom the experience takes place. ... The phenomenon is possible strictly to the extent that it agrees with the formal conditions of experience, therefore with the power of knowing that fixes them, therefore finally with the transcendental I itself. ... Far from showing itself, it is staged only in a scene set by and for an other besides it, actor without action, submitted to a spectator and transcendental director. (Marion 2002b, *BG* 212–213)

In this sense, the absence of the “I,” or the erasure of an “objectifying intentionality,” which otherwise constitutes the phenomenon into an object through the categories of modality, suggests, then, a “disagreement between an at least potential phenomenon and the subjective condition for its experience” (Marion 2002b, *BG* 213). This disagreement results from “the type of phenomenon that is exceptional by excess,” so much so that this saturated phenomenon, being both “nonobjective” and “nonobjectifiable,” “annuls all effort at constitution” by the “I,” and, hence, the displacement of the “I” and its categories of modality (Marion 2002b, *BG* 213).

For another, the “eye,” which features exclusively in “The Eighth Mirror Displacement,” and which puns on the “I,” is depicted as being purely passive. Either the saturated phenomenon “crumbled *into* the eyes,” for instance, or “The eyes became two wastebaskets *filled with* diverse colors, variegations”; either “all viewpoints [were] *choked*,” or “the eyes, *being infected by* all kinds of nameless tropisms.”<sup>23</sup> From this perspective, the “eye” in Smithson’s “Mirror Displacement” is also displaced, having been removed from the position of the “author” or “master and possessor” of the phenomenon, much as Marion lays out, to become the “receiver” or the “witness” (Marion 2002a, *IE* 113). Blinded by the overwhelmingly intense lights of the saturated phenomenon, this receiver is no longer able to gaze at the saturated phenomenon; “gazing, *regarder*,” which means to “keep the visible thus seen under the control of the seer, exerting this control by guarding the visible in visibility,” is the same as “transforming it [the phenomenon] into an object visible according to an always poor or common phenomenality—visible within the limits of a concept,” thereby keeping the object “in an objected state for the I” (Marion 2002b, *BG* 214).

Thus deployed, Smithson’s “Mirror Displacement” displays, artistically, the saturated phenomenon. It articulates, from within its “wilderness of unassimilated seeing,” an imaginative hypothesis most succinctly verbalized by Marion when he says, “determining the saturated phenomenon as irregardable amounts to imagining the possibility that it imposes itself on sight with such an excess of intuition that it can no longer be reduced to the conditions of experience (objecthood), therefore to the I that sets them” (Marion 2002b, *BG* 215).

## Conclusion

"Only appearances are fertile," Smithson writes in his concluding remarks on his "Mirror Displacements" earth art; "they are gateways to the primordial" (Smithson 1996, 132). With its denotative meaning of "pertaining to, or existing at (from) the beginning, first in time, earliest, original... fundamental, radical, elementary,"<sup>24</sup> the term "primordial" designates a state of phenomenality prior to the imposition of reduction, be it transcendental or existential, a state of undifferentiated phenomenality of which the only reduction, if there be any, would be the reduction of the phenomenon to its own absolute and unconditional givenness. In this light, "only appearances are fertile" precisely because they are the appearances of the saturated phenomenon, rich in intuition, giving itself, showing itself, and starting from itself alone, absolutely and unconditionally; hence, appearances are the portals to a world where, as Marion observes, "givenness would organize phenomenality universally without exception," where, that is, "all horizons are shattered" (Marion 2002b, *BG* 179; Horner and Berrand 2002, ix). In Smithson's eco-phenomenology thus demonstrated in his earth art of the "Mirror Displacements," his leitmotif of an "anti-vision" or "negative seeing" presents a post-humanist position that resonates intimately with Marion's phenomenology of givenness. For Smithson, "Art works out the inexplicable"; so does the phenomenology of givenness for Marion, for "it sustains itself" paradoxically, "not on differentiation, but dedifferentiation, not on creation but de-creation, not on nature but de-naturalization" (Smithson 1996, 132).

## Notes

1. In Smithson's text, the term "limitlessness" is put in quotation marks, and it occurs in a passing reference to Anton Ehrenzweig in Smithson's brief discussion of Tony Smith's artwork.
2. As Smithson makes clear, "the mirror displacements were dismantled right after they were photographed" (Smithson 1996, 132–133). Therefore, this study of Smithson's earth art of the "Mirror Displacements" is based on the narrative documentation of this particular earth project.
3. Smithson states clearly that each "Mirror Displacement," such as the First, the Second, the Third, the Fourth, the Fifth, and the Seventh, has 12 mirrors in it, but he does not specify how many mirrors there are in the Sixth, the Eighth, and the Ninth. While it is safe to assume, given the consistency in the number of mirrors used in the majority of the displacements, that there are 12 mirrors in each of the nine displacements, the actual number of mirrors involved is irrelevant as far as concerns the phenomenological issue covered in this paper.
4. Original emphasis. Unless otherwise noted, all italicization for emphasis in this paper is original.



5. The phrase "Phenomenology of Givenness" is taken from the subtitle of Jean-Luc Marion's book *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, which will henceforth be cited in the text as *BG*. Marion's phenomenological trilogy also include *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology*, henceforth cited in the text as *RG*, and *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, henceforth cited in the text as *IE*.
6. For Marion's outlining of the differences between the three phenomenological reductions, see "Conclusion: The Figures of Givenness" in (Marion 1998, *RG* 203–205), especially pp. 204–205.
7. My emphasis.
8. Quoted in (Marion 2002b, *BG* 184).
9. Quoted in (Marion 2002b, *BG* 186).
10. Kant. *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Kant 2000, 218). Quoted by Marion (Marion 2002b, *BG* 198).
11. My emphasis.
12. Kant. *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, (Kant 2000, 218, 219). Quoted by Marion (Marion 2002b, *BG* 198).
13. My emphasis.
14. My emphasis.
15. For the etymological definition of "invisible," derived from the word *viser* by the translator, see Note 41 on page 363 in *BG*.
16. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989. Vol. IV, 81, 81.
17. Quoted by Smithson (Smithson 1996, 128).
18. Quoted by Marion (Marion 2002b, *BG* 200).
19. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1965, 199); quoted by Marion (Marion 2002b, *BG* 200).
20. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1965, 208); quoted by Marion (Marion 2002b, *BG* 206).
21. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1965, 210); quoted by Marion (Marion 2002b, *BG* 207–208).
22. Marion's "hermeneutic of infinite plurality of horizons" is what he considers to be the "third case" of phenomenological situations as regards how the phenomenon exceeds its horizon; and this "third case," in Marion's account, "redoubles the first two cases by lumping them together" (Marion 2002b, *BG* 211). For the details of the first two cases, see (Marion 2002b, *BG* 209–211).
23. My emphasis.
24. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989. Vol. XXII, 489.

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