

Joel Kuennen

Object of Interest 700 e

03.02 – 26.02.2023

Title of the Project: **Spheroids, 2022–23**

Title of the work: **Object of Interest 700 e, 2023**

Technical specifications: Stoneware, Autochthonous clay from Le Grammont (La Suche-Les Revers), metallic oxide glazes (copper, cobalt, zinc, aluminum, nickel, olivine (magnesium, iron, silica, boron, strontium, tin), silicon carbide, porcelain, biofilm (Acetobacter and A. oryzae), strontium aluminate europium dysprosium, neodymium magnets, levitation array, olivine+calcium carbonate composite, aluminum, olivine single crystals, insulating resin, enamel, poster appropriated from NASA/Caltech Exoplanet Travel Bureau.

[ENTER THE HYPER-SCIENTIFIC](#)

EPFL-CDH Artist in Residence Program 2022

Commissioned and produced in the framework of EPFL CDH Artist in Residence Program 2022, Enter the Hyper-Scientific, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL).

Made in collaboration with the Crystal Growth Facility (EPFL) and the Laboratory of Statistical Biophysics (EPFL).

Studio and production support provided by [La Becque](#) | Résidence d'artistes.

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Bio:

[Joel Kuennen](#) (b. 1984) is an art critic, curator, editor, and artist. They received an MA in visual and critical studies from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2010). Their art practice investigates human relationships to the earth as a means of understanding social constructs that can interrupt the extractive and exploitative ways in which we engage with this planet. Their site-specific land art interventions, use autochthonous clay to create anthromes to help visitors consider their place in deep time – the complex matrix of past, present, and future. Working with the earth, with clay, means working with and through time. Considering deep time has allowed Kuennen to expand out and up to include celestial frames into their work with a special interest in habitable exoplanets. They have completed permanent installations in the US, Germany, and Switzerland.

Kuennen has been publishing criticism on emerging artists for nearly ten years. Their written work focuses on the intersection of technology, identity, and society. Kuennen participated in the Arts Writers Grant, AICA/USA Arts Writing Workshop in 2011, mentored by Artnet editor Walter Robinson. They were a contributing editor for *Theorizing Visual Studies* (Routledge, 2012) and served as city editor, senior editor, and chief operating officer at ArtSlant (2012–18). Their work has been published in *Art in America*, *ArtSlant*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Elephant*, *Frieze*, *Mutual Art*, *THE SEEN*, and others. Kuennen was inaugural critic-in-residence at Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in April 2019. They are a curatorial research assistant for Del Vaz Projects, Los Angeles, and an adjunct professor at Valparaiso University.

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Object of Interest 700 e

Object of Interest 700 e gives us an opportunity to interrogate the role exoplanets play in the cultural imaginary. Although the first confirmed detection of a planet existing outside our solar system came only in 1992, they have quickly emerged as neocolonialist objects of interest – as suggested by the poster lying beside the sculpture: produced by NASA in the style of the US Works Progress Administration of the late 1930s, it seeks to frame exoplanets as exotic touristic locations.

Since 2018, Kuennen has been working on a series of landscape interventions using autochthonous clay that explores deep time as a place and object. At [La Becque](#) in La Tour-de-Peilz in 2021, Kuennen made a permanent installation, North Stars, representing the Earth's 26,000-year axial precession cycle. By using materials that could potentially last the duration of the cycle, they became interested in technical ceramics – high density, high thermal shock resistant ceramics made of silicon amalgams, generally silicon carbide and silicon nitride – which are used in semiconductors, rocket nozzles, weapons and defense manufacturing, and other industries stemming from our relationship to outer space. In parallel they started experimenting with biofilms, a result of their interest in fermentation and microbial collaboration in culinary practices.

[Spheroids](#), the research project at the origin of Object of Interest 700 e, takes the thread of Kuennen's distinctive practice of land interventions, bringing together the artist's material interests while expanding into the conceptual field of extraterrestrial "hyperobjects," to use the term coined by philosopher Timothy Morton.

Hybrid materialism and material intelligence emerge in Object of Interest 700 e. Consolidating as an architectonic sculpture, it consists of a porcelain sphere enveloped in a biofilm made from the symbiotic bacteria and fungi found in our digestive system, a magnetic levitation array, and silicon carbide ceramic stilts on a base of stoneware glazed with rare earth elements and olivine. The bowl that holds the levitating sphere at the top of the structure is made from the clay that caused the Tauredunum Event, a landslide that triggered a tsunami to devastate parts of Geneva in 563 CE.

Olivine, the object of Kuennen's material research at EPFL, is an exceedingly common mineral in the Earth's crust. The magnesium ferro silicate is essential to the geological sequestration of atmospheric carbon and contributes to the stability of the Earth's tectonic cycles. Through unorthodox lab experiments conducted at [EPFL Crystal Growth Facility](#), Kuennen experimented with growing single crystals from natural olivine to test a non-pure form, a process that defies the protocols of scientific laboratories. An olivine single crystal has been set in insulating resin and housed in clay from the Tauredunum disaster. Its ultrasonic resonating frequency is inaudible to us but signals the rudiments of life nonetheless.

An art critic and writer as well as a visual artist, Kuennen condenses here the theoretical and artistic concerns leading their practice—namely the conditions for life to form, abiogenesis, the markers, gestures, and materials involved in the search for unknown life forms, and what those materials can look like in configurations approaching ontogenesis.

As evoked by the artist, Morton's notion of the "hyperobject" appears here condensed in the work. As Morton has put it:

I coined the term hyperobjects to refer to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans. A hyperobject could be a black hole. A hyperobject could be the Lago Agrio oil field in Ecuador, or the Florida Everglades. A hyperobject could be the biosphere, or the Solar System. A hyperobject could be the sum total of all the nuclear materials on Earth; or just the plutonium, or the uranium. A hyperobject could be the very long-lasting product of direct human manufacture, such as Styrofoam or plastic bags, or the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism. Hyperobjects, then, are 'hyper' in relation to some other entity, whether they are directly manufactured by humans or not. [...] They are viscous, which means that they 'stick' to beings that are involved with them. They are nonlocal; in other words, any 'local manifestation' of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject. They involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to.¹

Object of Interest 700 e, both viscous and non-local, does indeed seem to be the local manifestation of an elsewhere, and involve profoundly different temporalities. Reflecting Kuennen's interest in multispecies and material kinships ranging from bacteria to Gaia—as the Earth's finely tuned ecosystem—all the way to space, Object of Interest 700 e condenses a range of scales in materializing the system of cooperative relationships that renowned scientist Lynn Margulis showed to be the origin of evolutionary novelty.²

In its technologically augmented materiality and its symbology that is both sacred and profane, the work manifests and makes tangible an ancient yet futuristic theoretical imprint, adding a further layer of techno-scientific, material, and theoretical implications to Kuennen's practice.

¹ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Posthumanities, 2013), p. 1.

² Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (Basic Books, 1999).