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A Questionnaire on Materialisms

Art history in the wake of post-structuralism has relied heavily on theories of subjectivity. Recent philosophical tendencies, characterized as “Actor-Network Theory,” “Thing Theory,” “Object-Oriented Ontology,” “Speculative Realism,” and “Vibrant Materialism,” have profoundly challenged the centrality of subjectivity in the humanities and, arguably, the perspectives that theories of the subject from the psychoanalytic to the Foucauldian have afforded (on the operations of power, the production of difference, and the constitution of the social, for instance). At least four moves characterize these discourses:

- Attempting to think the reality of objects beyond human meanings and uses. This other reality is often rooted in “thingness” or an animate materiality.
- Asserting that humans and objects form networks or assemblages across which agency and even consciousness are distributed.
- Shifting from epistemology, in all of its relation to critique, to ontology, where the being of things is valued alongside that of persons.
- Situating modernity in geological time with the concept of the “Anthropocene,” an era defined by the destructive ecological effects of human industry.

Many artists and curators, particularly in the UK, Germany, and the United States, appear deeply influenced by this shift. Is it possible, or desirable, to decenter the human in discourse on art in particular? What is gained in the attempt, and what—or who—disappears from view? Is human difference—gender, race, power of all kinds—elided? What are the risks in assigning agency to objects; does it absolve us of responsibility, or offer a new platform for politics?

We wonder if it is possible to reconcile the different positions we’ve outlined, many of which seem to contradict one another, in order to theorize a new materialism or objectivity. If it isn’t, what is at stake in those irreconcilable differences? Which, if any, are the productive materialisms for making and thinking about art today? Please comment from the perspective of your own work on the significance and effects of these developments.

—David Joselit, Carrie Lambert-Beatty, and Hal Foster

EMILY APTER

An untranslatable English term for an existentialist Heideggerianism referring to *Dasein*, “the existent” is not an essence, but a state toward which the subject tends or in which matter and being are localized in time. It can be qualified as an ontic immanence that discloses the “being-there” of the in-existent, and it is a process of emergence where genres come to individuate, to differ, and to achieve variation. The existent is really a transmedial translation problem concerned with orders of relationality among natural languages, as opposed to an artificial language or a translation. It references the ontological modalities of object-oriented aesthetic practices, improvising links between what Patrice Maniglier formally designates “the New Existentialism” and what is often designated in Anglophone theory as “Object-Oriented Ontology.” It is in this context that we can situate the “modes of existence” by Stengers and Latour in their ventures in interactive metaphysics: collaborative online platforms and ateliers that have culminated in such projects as *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (AIME 2012–) and the GAIA *Specbook* (2014).

In their co-authored presentation of Étienne Souriau’s 1943 book *Les différents modes d’existence* (Different modes of existence) and in Latour’s contribution to *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, Souriau is rescued from relative obscurity.¹ A French academic aesthetician still active in the heyday of Sartrean existentialism, Souriau’s emphasis (in contrast to Sartre’s focus on humanocentric ways of being in the world) was on how “each mode is, solely in and of itself, an art of existing (*Chaque mode est à soi seul un art d’exister*).”² Latour and Stengers herald Souriau’s notion of a mode as something both singular and repeatable somewhere else or in another mode. Gilles Deleuze, of course, had drawn heavily on this very idea in *Difference and Repetition*, but Latour and Stengers mine its potential for an existential plurimodality informed by William James’s concept of multirealism (DME, p. 23). For Latour it is the set-up, the “what to do next,” the *instauration* (a marked term of Souriau’s carrying combined meanings of imprinting, inauguration, emergence), that are of paramount importance; all associated with the “*doing of making*” (*le faire faire*), “the *making exist!*” (R, p. 310). This existentialization of manufacture emphasizes not only “different ways of saying something about a given being” (a project embedded in Aristotelian category theory), but also ways of positing the multiplicity of existence such that it eludes assumptions embedded in ontological predication. In

1. Bruno Latour, “Reflections on Etienne Souriau’s *Les différents modes d’existence*,” trans. Stephen Muecke, in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Greg Harman (Melbourne: re-press, 2011). Further references to this essay will appear in the text abbreviated as R.

2. Etienne Souriau, *Les différents modes d’existence* with an introduction (“Le sphinx de l’oeuvre”) by Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009), p. 111. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated as DME. Translations my own. Souriau was best known for his *Vocabulaire d’esthétique* (Vocabulary of aesthetics), the only work of his still in print.

place of an essentialist “being *qua* being” Souriau introduces ways of “being *qua* another” that lead on to key questions: “How many different ways are there to differ? How many distinct ways are there for a given being to alter itself?” (R, pp. 312, 313). Such interrogatives forge procedures of trying out the other, mode to mode as it were. Souriau is identified as the thinker of the phenomenon that is not a phenomenon of anything else. The disciplinary practice of phenomenology traditionally depends on the reflexive habit of reducing something to something else through logics of derivation, imputation, and presupposition. Souriau frees the mode from delimiting logics, abolishing the division between predicates and substances, and proposing in logic’s stead a structure of differential ontic intensities. For Latour, Souriau’s determinations of “where the fact of a genre of being resides” entail a “shepherding” of being, such that each is “instaured” according to its own procedure (R, p. 332). Shepherding underscores the situation of precarity and provisionality in Souriau’s conception of a work in the making. The contingency of the work’s creation—its “to be or not to be” factor—indicates its perilous life on the *chantier* between success and failure. Herein lies the hypothetical or counterfactual mode of incompleting statues on which Michelangelo’s chisel would cease and desist. Herein are stored the jazz improvisations and choreographies of unrealized performances.³

Souriau, filtered by Stengers and Latour, revisits metaphysics in the guise of compossible material and immaterial existences. What comes to the fore is a way of imagining differential modal ontologies that cut across formal category distinctions among divinities, persons, things, forms, grammatical entities, matter, visual productions, and material practices. This way of thinking foreshadows some of the “expanded field” constructs that one encounters today—“the database as an archive,” “the art world as sensory industry, “speculative editing”—each expression drawn from Hito Steyerl in a recent *Artforum* interview.⁴ Souriau’s plurimodality, one could say, anticipates the “new materialisms” of art forms and practices as they confront an informational milieu in which agency is distributed across a plane of existence undifferentiated by living and inanimate properties. It prompts renewed thinking about the existential status of the aesthetic object and the grounds for its critique.

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3. Etienne Souriau, “Du mode d’existence de l’oeuvre à faire,” in *Les différents modes d’existence*, pp. 203–05.

4. “Techniques of the Observer: Hito Steyerl and Laura Poitras in Conversation,” *Artforum* (May 2015), p. 312.

ED ATKINS

I think it's often a matter of trying to *retrieve* bodies from figuration—from some infinite, ever-cresting horizon of image and metaphor. I say “figuration” because, I think, at the heart of the matter—at the heart of so much power—is an insidious and deeply effective dissimulation regarding what can be understood as literal or figurative. This begins and holds through language—a language that finds its most powerful subject in the image. Which is the matter, literally, in figurative language: the ways in which bodies that are very much alive are held in abeyance and apart, in purgatories of language circumscribed by images. Figuration delimits the literal. It's why I want finitude to be such a fundamental concept and expressive strategy within my work: as a means to reiterate terminality precisely in order to underscore life, wholly incorporated and mortal. The videos I make speak to this, even and especially as finitude is so definitively absent from them, with the recurring zero of the digital video's somatic lack—along with their loopy rehearsals of existential horror—conjuring precisely the form's obverse: a body, similarly gratuitous, if terribly mistaken for simply more imagery.

Making work that bares its form by yelping that form's inadequacy in realizing its content returns the content to the viewer, hysterical, amplified—burlesqued sufficiently to perform a kind of satire or allegory, albeit one whose meaning is visited on the viewer affectively. That is to say that emphatically my attention is on people and ethics in the face of a re-steeled ideological, figurative *gift* that feels new, if only because of contemporary technology's accelerated development of both occlusion, as regards its own narratives, and dispersion, as regards both its ubiquity and its cybernetic insinuation.

Computer technologies seem so fiercely figured, and so wholly welcomed and afforded, the combination of which is surely most conspicuously capable of eroding the capacity to tell the difference between what is and what is not—or more opaquely, what is and what is also, with that “also” a fine print of terms and conditions to unspool in great, abject reports from far away and next door; to be scrolled blithely through in order to reach the “I agree” checkbox. A confusion of literality and figuration means that “the cloud” remains a cloud, literally, while also operating as an image of a cloud—the one obliterates the conditions of the other, sending clouds, along with whatever acceded personal details, to some weird no-place of fug and ignorance and clouds, literally.

Paradoxes like this seem to reproduce. They're ideologically rigged, like mirrors facing one another—images extending to infinity, immortal. In such a grip of excess, it's hard *not* to desire interruption, and my heaving, mortal body is the most potent thing I have to thrust between the mirrors and sever the images, even if that means my desire, my need, my pleas. So the protagonists in my videos, insofar as they're any more than ciphers, rehearse this interruptive blurt over and over, within the form and their horrid banter. They burble logorrheic jargon, loss,

pitiable hypochondriac worries, and overwrought emo-whatevers. This deluge of affective language is certainly a means of insisting on the pronominal, on a kind of counter-loop to the reproductive infinite of contemporary tech and ideological progress with a kind of onanism that's masochistic and probably self-consuming. Agency lurks here, I feel. So I write, right here, and I fart and I belch and tear up or go for a piss: my body insists on my re-engagement with it, with its story that might extend to all bodies and against all this apparent immateriality.

So if literality and figuration were to have their confused champions, one would be the so-called material, corporeal—the other the so-called immaterial, incorporeal, with apparent affiliations easily confused and undone simply by appearance and some horrible unverifiable presence or lack thereof. Certain points of those once-nascent speculative philosophies appealed a few years ago, precisely because of their weird answers to these kinds of problems: the leveling, the sense of equity, seemed to offer a way of elevating the body, returning us to some essential thingness equivalent to the animate materiality of everything else. It retrieved materiality for us, of us—to affirm a literality that might be wielded in the face of ever more convincing sleights of hand. The animate, material body returned (or generated), however—especially on a par with paramecia, rocks, celestial somethings, yeast—performed some sort of *shrug* to those dubious speculated consequences—the annulling of ethics, agency, love.

The privilege of a thought that seeks to toy with becoming-thing—with a desire for thingness—feels conspicuous: as was pointed out to me at the time, women have been “thing'd” for eons—have been ontologically flattened through or with almost every prior philosophy. The potential political absolution proffered by an ontological plateau is desirable to those identities that will not suffer from any leveling—it's desirable, as both a fantasy and as a reprieve, a reset, a historic amnesty sought by those whose identity constitutes the very level ground itself: men.

“Rendering” feels like the operative word here. It speaks to the processes of my making computer generated videos, the figuring of bodies, the disappearing of bodies—the evisceration of bodies in deep collusion with figuration. And while I might desire literality to return to resolve the problems of image, the risk is that it will simply reassert a kind of de facto essentialism in the form of a dead body spasming with the appearance of life.

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ARMEN AVANESSIAN

I want to pursue the question of the new interest in materialism by way of an (apparent) detour, namely: with a view to determining from what direction, for what reasons, and via what signs this new interest is expressed. Because of the increasing lack of interest on the part of official academic institutions and their pitiful failure at hosting or producing new philosophy, it is now an expanded art field that gives impetus to various movements and transformations in theory. This expanded field includes not only artists and curators but also galleries, art institutions, art academies, art journals, and the theoreticians and critics whom they publish. At times, it is this expanded field that enables individual theoreticians to continue working at all. On the other hand, in view of the fundamental crisis of a contemporary art scene that appears increasingly directionless, and that can be termed materialistic primarily in an economic sense, the new speculative realism (or in Quentin Meillassoux's case, speculative materialism) has been stripped for buzzwords. This process is well known, and has been undertaken in order to disguise extreme emptiness and disorientation in the art field (zombie-conceptual? pre-internet? post-digital?) with new concepts—this time from the subject areas of materialism, speculation, and ontology. In particular, one variant of speculative realism has achieved rapid success in the art world, namely Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology. There are a couple of obvious reasons why artists and curators have embraced this ontology so joyfully: Harman developed a pan-psyche theory largely by re-reading positions that were already established—and hence comprehensible for the art business—such as Husserl's phenomenology, Latour's network theory, etc. And he endorses aesthetics (as *prima philosophia*, first philosophy), which is fundamentally and inherently "correlationist," depending as it does upon a perceptual dialectic of subject or object. Finally, there is the ontological enhancement or upgrading of the status of objects, an aspect of his thought that has certainly not slowed the economic materialism of the art world.

The fog is slowly lifting after several years of hype, and we now see positions and demarcations more clearly. This relates first of all to the several kinds of new speculative materialism or realism. This occurs not least through the recent prominence of accelerationism, a political theory in which the influence of Deleuze and Guattari meets that of a new Promethean rationalism. With the latter, the significance of analytical-philosophical and linguistic-philosophical thought clearly enters the foreground. A positive side effect of this is the overcoming of a rather naive initial emphasis—it could also be termed somewhat simplistic public relations—namely, the assumption that a *speculative turn* would simply overcome the *linguistic turn*; or that an uncritical, purely speculative and baseless ontology would or could now operate in place of critical epistemology or language philosophy. Such simple models maintain a common dichotomy of *either* language *or* matter (a misunderstanding that is no less widespread in poststruc-

turalism itself). The second of these terms—matter—is at times excluded in these models as impossible and at times is longingly invoked through aesthetics. In place of such unhelpful juxtapositions, there will hopefully be a greater materialistic reliance upon thought or language, not as opposite terms of a simple dichotomy but as recursive aspects of world *and* matter together: of language best understood from its material dynamics. This is also a linguistic-ontological presupposition for every (future) attempt at an understanding of art that is no longer aesthetic but rather poetic or perhaps *poietic* (meaning productive, in the sense of creating something genuinely new).

The other shift in the understanding of speculative materialism can be observed in the field of art (theory). Following the Speculative Realism Conference, organized by Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier and held in London in 2007, the initial reception in the art world was at times enthusiastic. This is attested to by numerous anecdotes regarding object-oriented art students who are either arguing about or supposedly producing *archifossiles* (materials indicating traces of phenomena anterior to the emergence of life); or trendy gallery owners trying to associate their artists with the appropriate theoreticians, the latter themselves all too often readily acting as catalogue text writers for the art business at the same time that they banally lambast it as corrupt (instead of systematically pondering the material software and hardware of the art business); or the prominence of various positions of the *new materialism* at the last Documenta. In short, there have been a great many efforts that have led at the very least to successfully establishing a new, young, fresh generation of artists in a global market between Basel and Miami who benefit from their association with speculative philosophies.

Old wine in a new bottle? Same old sculptures—this time 3-D printed? Yet more decorative paintings with some new industrial colors or maybe on synthetic materials? This is pretty much the impression one gathers when following some quite fruitless debates about post-internet art. Regardless of these discussions the horizon or the potential of the digital revolution has until now hardly had a positive impact upon ultimately decisive questions such as the economic terms of the distribution forms of contemporary art (as long as one doesn't count the flipping phenomenon or the importance of Instagram to gallery sales as a progressive development). By and large, everything appears to have remained pretty much as it was. Critics still invoke the critical potential of art objects and the impression they make upon bourgeois subjects when those works hang upon their walls, and art historians still mystify white cubes as aesthetic experience in a profitable way (to say nothing of the ever-increasing volume of money that is laundered by means of contemporary art). That these practices continue to take place in relation to speculative and materialistic ideas, to concepts that are opposed to every form of correlationalism, is a pity, and certainly helpful neither for art nor for philosophy.

In the longer term, I would hope that the real philosophical and art theoretical potential of speculative realism or materialism might emerge more clearly, even if this were to have a threatening impact upon the *business as usual* aspect of

contemporary art.¹ Meanwhile, so-called critical art and its aesthetics does not combat the new *spirit of capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello), but by its nature continues to propagate that spirit. An art truly informed by speculative materialism would on the contrary strive not only for a transformation on the discursive level but also for an acceleration of the existing platforms of the art system: the material-economic forms of production of art and the paths for its distribution. This also applies to the material power of images to transform our reality, a power that has fortunately been dealt with recently in a more concise way by artists and theoreticians. Such images can also shape reality and can be integrated recursively in actuality, instead of merely reflecting it over and over again. Rather than an aesthetic-critical art that bears such an affinity with our modern capitalism, a materialistic art, in a sense that is poietic and speculative, would aim at a new art, no longer our contemporary art.

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—Translated from the German by Alan Paddle

1. See, initially, Suhail Malik, "Reason to Destroy Contemporary Art," *Spike Art Quarterly* 35 (2013), pp. 128–34. On the question of other platforms for politics and new economics, see my project for this year's Vienna gallery festival, *Tomorrow Today* (www.curatedby.at). Here I experiment with different economic models for a postcapitalist and postcontemporary art.

BILL BROWN

Things interacting in certain ways are experience.

—John Dewey

1) Richard Tuttle's *3rd Rope Piece* (1974) consists of a three-inch length of white cotton rope affixed to the wall—horizontally—with three tiny nails. Only the central, centered nail is clearly visible.¹ The *Piece* can't help but draw attention to its own minutiae: the density of the woven fiber, the slightly frayed edges where it's been cut, the slender shadow it casts. A bit of quotidian stuff, displaced from quotidian routine, provokes a kind of intimate inspection as form and as matter, as a mystery of matter re-formed, restaged. And yet the cuts, granting the rope its isolation from the everyday object-world, conjure up that world nonetheless: the rest of the rope—a clothesline stretched, perhaps—perhaps clothesline unused (as clothesline) in the era of the dryer. The concrete abstraction can't be fully abstracted. The piece of rope, having become a *rope piece*, attains a kind of autonomy and wholeness (while remaining a part, the title situating the work as the third within a series).

2) The work accomplishes—literally and modestly—what Emmanuel Levinas understood as art's task of extracting “things” from the perspective of the world “where their alterity is hardly noticeable” (*où leur altérité ressort à peine*).² Just as for Robert Smithson, who demonized the market's fixation on the “art object,” insisting that artists produce not objects but “*things* in a state of arrested disruption,” so too for Levinas the thing is not the object (of knowledge, use, exchange, etc.).³ However dependent on an object form, the thingness of the object is irreducible to it; it is another thing.

3) How might you characterize this thing? In the twentieth century Heidegger devoted more energy than anyone to the “the question of the thing,” explicitly posed in the effort to get beyond the Kantian impasse of the (merely) apperceived object. But the question was implicitly posed, as well, in relation to Marx, as mediated by Georg Lukács, who argued that reification conceals the “character of things as things.”⁴ Heidegger's august quest to fathom unreified Being and to

1. As Richard Shiff has narrated so well, different appearances of the piece draw attention to different aspects of it, prompting different conclusions about what it shows. Shiff, “It Shows,” in *The Art of Richard Tuttle*, ed. Madeleine Grynstejn (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2005), pp. 267–70.

2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (1947; Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1978), p. 46. For the French, *De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1990), p. 81. Further references provided parenthetically.

3. Robert Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,” in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 112, 106.

4. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), p. 92.

apprehend the character of the Thing (the thingness of things) should not foreclose a cruder, more immediately compelling suspicion: that the doubleness of the commodity (divided into use value and exchange value) conceals a more rudimentary distinction between the object and itself, or the object and the thing. Value derives from the appropriation of a preexisting surplus, the material object's own excessiveness, which, like value, resides in and as a relation.

4) Indeed, however freed it might be from the prototypical subject-object structure of perception, the *thing* (the thingness of the object) emerges in and as a relation. The thing about the toy truck, for the magnet, is the iron. The thing about it for the girl (just now) is the sound the wheels make when they spin really fast. The thing about it, for her mother, is the fact that her own father once played with it, found it, repaired and repainted it (yellow). The thing about it, for the cat, is that at any moment it may dash like a rodent. Some latent thing about the object must be catalyzed by an encounter, and yet: that very thing catalyzes the encounter.

5) When Bruno Latour provides a “pragmatogony”—a time line on which he charts how the once-comfortable distinction between subjects and objects, humans and nonhumans, has given way, and will continue to give way, to “an ever greater level of intimacy and on an ever greater scale”—this can be read as a (inadvertent) historical explanation for the advent of Actor-Network Theory.⁵ And indeed, the more rambunctious, current interest in object agency, animate matter, panpsychism, and the mystery of objects—these can be read as symptoms of significant changes in the material culture of our present: new robotic technologies, drones, an expanding field of nonconscious cognition, the Internet of Things, etc.⁶ It's not so much that we've never been modern (as Latour once put it) but that we're inhabiting some newly unmodern (or differently modern) world.

6) Whether or not you share Adorno's skepticism about (an earlier) “cult of things” that he associated above all with Rilke, it's hard not to share his conviction that “the genuine power of reification” cannot be “painted over with a lyric aura,” nor with ontological assertion.⁷ His much invoked claim that “we are not to philosophize about concrete things [as Heidegger did]; we are to philosophize, rather, out of those things [as did Walter Benjamin],” should be read two ways: as an insis-

5. Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 200–01. As for the modern world of the recent past: André Breton published “The Crisis of the Object” in 1936, the year when Heidegger completed his Freiburg lectures that began with “Various Ways of Questioning About the Thing.” What logic of substitution and displacement explains the relation of that crisis and that question to the material crises of an economically ravaged Europe? André Breton, “The Crisis of the Object,” in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2002), pp. 275–80. The standard English translation of Heidegger's lectures appears as Martin Heidegger, *What Is a Thing?*, trans. W. B. Barton Jr. and Vera Deutsch (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1967). The German publication appeared as *Die Frage nach dem Ding* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1962).

6. See N. Katherine Hayles, “Cognition Everywhere: The Rise of the Cognitive Nonconscious and the Costs of Consciousness,” *New Literary History* 45, no. 2 (Spring 2014), pp. 199–220.

7. Theodor W. Adorno, “Lyric Poetry and Society,” trans. Bruce Mayo, in *Critical Theory and Society*, ed. Stephen Bronner and Douglas Kellner (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 158.

tence on engaging the concrete world and as a warning against simply curating concreteness into a scene of historical or cultural coherence.⁸

7) For Levinas, art—insofar as it breaks up the surface of objects and lets “things break away”—provides a “paroxysm of materiality” (p. 51). At times, works of art assert themselves as meta-objects, reflecting on the problematics of materiality and materials, on the dynamics of the object world.⁹ Richard Tuttle’s *Object* (2015), which lies flat, consists of a very short piece of white cotton rope (4 ½ inches), considerably frayed at the ends, unevenly curved, and all but invisibly stitched onto (somewhat into) a piece of pale, somewhat wrinkled burlap (10 ¼ x 10 ¾ inches), slightly unwoven along two edges, with three strands significantly adrift. The piece of rope could be read as a pale, raised scar. More important, the sutured objects constitute a new object while each itself is constituted by the relation among threads. In relation to Tuttle’s other recent work—*I Don’t Know: The Weave of Textile Language* (2014–15), installed in Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall—*Object* would also seem to stage a new drama of text(ile) and object, a drama about how a text(ile) might hold the object, about how the object might gently draw the text to itself, about how a text might enjoy a kind of startling intimacy with an(other) object. These objects interacting in certain ways—there you sense the experience of the thing.

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8. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1997), p. 33. “Nicht über Konkretes ist philosophieren, vielmehr aus ihm heraus” (Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966], p. 41).

9. See, for instance, Christine Mehring, “Cloth Pictures, 1966–1972: Modernism by the Yard,” in Mehring, *Blinky Palermo: Abstraction of an Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 45–86.

GIULIANA BRUNO

*There exist what we call images of things,
Which as it were peeled off from the surfaces
Of objects, fly this way and that through
the air. . . .
I say therefore that likenesses or thin shapes
Are sent out from the surfaces of things
Which we must call as it were their films
or bark.*

—Lucretius, *De rerum natura*¹

Lucretius, who knew two or three things about the nature of things, proposed long ago that the image is itself a material substance. In this conception, it is configured like a piece of cloth, released as matter that flies into the air from the surface of objects. It is as if it could be peeled off, like a skin or layer of substance, forming a “bark” or leaving a sediment, a veneer, a “film.” The material fabrication of visual things, as proposed by the Epicurean philosopher, has sparked some of my interest in materiality.²

In our time, with its rapidly changing materials and media, what role can materiality have? How does it operate in the arts and in visual technology, as well as in cultural theory and philosophy? It is not a coincidence that these questions arise at a time when many artists are probing the material conditions of their mediums and striving for a reinvention of materiality, in residual and textural forms, as they explore the actual fabrics of the artwork, in the visual, plastic, and moving image arts and in architecture. I am engaged with material history and practice in the visual arts because these are tangible forms of thought and, correlatively, because patterns of thinking are themselves a material practice. Most important, I contend that materiality is not a question of materials themselves or a matter of “thingness” per se but rather concerns the substance of material relations. I am interested in the space of those relations, and in exploring how they are configured on the surface of different media.

At a very basic level, a turn toward the material in the study of visual space enhances the exploration of the phenomenal and the sensible worlds, including attention to haptic matters such as textuality—the visual fabric and the “feel” of spatial phenomena—which configure the art object and mold its life in historicity. To engage with material formations and the reality of objects is important because these practices structure forms of representation and communication and embody modes of imaging as well as substantial models of thinking. Such a way of approaching material practice does not exclude subjects and subjectivities but rather engages them. After all, material things such as screens—architectural, cin-

1. Titus Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of the Universe: A New Verse Translation by Sir Ronald Melville* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 102–03.

2. See Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2014), in which a theory of materiality and the surface tension of media is articulated in analyses of specific artworks.

ematic, digital—have been activating connections between persons and objects throughout modern culture.

Materiality does not exist in singular, isolated fashion but manifests itself in many forms of networked relations, mediations, and even projections (both psychological and cinematic). The material surface of things is an architecture: this is a partition that can be shared, and it is a primary form of habitation for the material world. Surface materiality, including screen surface, is a permeable skin that holds the very configuration of the relationship between subjects as well as that of subjects with objects. In this sense, the material membrane does not create irreconcilable differences between the sphere of subjectivity and the world of objects. Concern with materiality, then, does not put an end to the agency of human subjectivity, for this is fundamentally a relational matter. Materiality is an active zone of encounter and admixture, a site of mediation and projection, memory and transformation.

By thinking in a transitive way about materiality, one furthermore can articulate the complex material relations that develop between different art forms and disciplines, or that take place even in between these categories. After all, we should consider that art, architecture, fashion, design, film, and the body all share a deep engagement with the world of objects and their superficial matters, including such things as the materials of the canvas, the wall, and the screen. If materiality defines an art practice it can also act as a connective thread between separate art forms, creating a productive exchange. We cannot disregard the ways in which contemporary artists are engaged in this connective mode of investigating material practice, incorporating different material formations in a productive dialogue, on the surface tension of media.

Last—but indeed not least—I think that the material encounters that structure our communicative existence and our approach to the arts produce all kinds of movement. Matter is a vital thing in material practice, for the surface condition has body and depth. On the surface of things, time becomes material space. In the form of a coating, a “film,” or a stain, there exist layers and tissues of social space. Imprints, strata, sediments, and deposits are substantially dynamic narratives. Not to mention the materiality of affects, and the motion of emotion that matter affects. With regard to this vibrancy of matter, I agree with Jane Bennett when she says, “Mine is not a vitalism in the traditional sense; I equate affects with materiality.”³ The life of objects haptically conveys energies that are also layers of experience and residual existence. Things retain on their surface, and transmit, the movement of circulation, the fabrication of difference, the texture of negotiation, the conditions of mediation, and many other forms of passage. Materiality, in this sense, is an archive of relations and transformation. And this, for me, matters.

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3. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), p. xiii.

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON

Because my opinions about new materialism are conflicted, and constantly changing, I find myself unable to produce a singular, unified statement in response to this questionnaire. So, rather than paper over my unresolved thoughts with a false sense of confidence by making an argument along the lines of a simple *for* or *against*, I have decided to keep alive my disjunctive perspectives by writing down, briefly, some recurring—if fragmented—thoughts and questions. I often take recourse to the form of the list when I am faced with a complex decision, or when I am trying to contain my anxiety by atomizing it into more manageable bits. Here the list functions to make visible the coexistence of my trepidations about new materialism and what I understand to be its promises:

- The prompt for this issue mentions several schools of thought in which the question of matter has become central; these schools should not be collapsed into each other as they are often significantly at odds.
- I have always considered art and social movements in relation to process, production, and “old materialist” Marxist questions about the (uneven) inscription of labor. As a result I am more sympathetic to a capacious understanding of “vibrant matter” (loosely inspired by the likes of Jane Bennett) as an intentionally naive way to creatively envision a more ethical relationship to the world around us than I am to post-Kantian object-oriented ontologies, which I have little interest in.
- The upsurge in interest in new materialism has provided a different vocabulary for thinking about *matter*, broadly articulated as more amorphous than discrete objects (or as constitutive of everything, foundational to the human and the non-human), and it has led to enlivening conversations with a wider set of academic interlocutors. If we take seriously the idea that we are comprised of the stuff around us (and the substances inside us), might this open up important conversations about justice, accountability, and care? These urgent issues are being considered across the humanities, and new materialism has provided one useful platform for those dialogues.
- New materialism, in part, holds out the promise that our objects might adequately articulate their origins, counteracting capitalism’s pervasive veilings and mystifications.
- But art history, too, has long considered objects to be animated bearers of history. We teach our students that, in some perhaps not totally metaphorical sense, the things of material culture can, with proper attention, come alive. Some of the moves made by new materialism thus feel familiar, but these affiliations with or even indebtedness to art history—as a discipline trained to think carefully about matter—have been largely disavowed or elided.
- An even greater occlusion: many non-Western and Native epistemological frameworks propose a fluid subject/object divide, yet such worldviews have been scarcely considered in the mainstream object-oriented ontology literature (which is dom-

inated by white men).

- Hannah Arendt writes, “Dear matter, natural and artificial, changing and unchanging, depends in its being, that is, in its appearingness, on the presence of living creatures. Nothing and nobody exists in a world whose very being does not presuppose a *spectator*.” Arendt grasps the radical reciprocity of being and appearing, and considers the categories of subject and object to be ever-mobile. She continues, “The worldliness of living things means that there is no subject that is not also an object and appears as such to somebody else.”¹

- I am concerned that art institutions have latched on to a renewed investment in the object because it provides perfect justification for the impulse to collect, reify, and institutionalize every scrap, every residue, every trace. This is especially troubling when it comes to accessioning the remains of fleeting performances, as props, costumes, and the like are turned into quasi-relics.

- Why the rise of matter and the entrenchment of objects now, in the early 2000s? What are the political stakes for this focus on materiality in our present moment? Is the growing theoretical attention to stuff an outgrowth of our widespread hoarding culture? Is it an attempt to return to the tangible in an age marked by digital remove and drone warfare? Or is it just commodity fetishism with a fresh justification, old wine in trendy new bottles, all shined up for hyper-acquisitive times?

- The emergence of thing theory coincides with court cases in which some nonhuman animals, like laboratory chimpanzees (previously considered property), are being re-categorized as “legal persons” with rights. Will the legal status of “thing” versus human become increasingly blurred, and what are the policy implications of reshuffling priorities away from the primacy of the human?

- Some of the theoretical enchantments with objects feel reactionary, blithely unconcerned with issues of power and privilege on multiple axes. As an antidote to those, I am indebted to my daily conversations with Mel Y. Chen, whose work offers a profound understanding of how hierarchies of race, ability, gender, and sexuality constitute and undo the contingent categories of thingness.² Chen thinks deeply about what it means to be marked as human, and less than human, as we are shaped by structures of racism and ableism. Critical race, queer, and crip theory is a vital counterpoint to the overwhelming whiteness of so much academic discourse on new materialism.

- A year ago I wrote an essay on a recent series of beaded canvases by a white woman artist who had moved from the US to South Africa. They are meticulous pieces, the culmination of many hours of beading by the black South African women that the artist gainfully employed as studio assistants. But the art’s beauty and the painstaking efforts that generated it were incommensurate, and I found it difficult to reconcile my uneasiness about the racial politics of this practice with the canvas’s glowing surfaces. I focused on the beads themselves, hoping their materiality would lead to the crucial, volatile interplay of work and value

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 19.

2. Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012).

and race. But in the end, the beads told me very little. Sometimes objects remain recalcitrant, silent, stubbornly obscure. This experience left me with questions that aren't fully answered by new materialist assertions about the primacy of end products, rather than the racialized economic processes that subtend their creation and distribution.

- While objects are being elevated, certain people are still treated as expendable things. Or even despised, as what Stuart Hall calls, after Mary Douglas, “matter out of place.”³ Black men and black women and black trans folks continue to be killed by police and others in a moment saturated by racist state violence. The material fact of these many deaths reveals the stakes of who gets to adjudicate life and non-life.
- Given the brutality that accumulates with every passing day in the US and elsewhere, I am increasingly weary of arguments that matter matters. Rather, I will reiterate, as so many continue to do in the face of raging indifference and systemic cruelty, that
- **BLACK LIVES MATTER.**
- The founders of #BlackLivesMatter, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, cogently theorize about the duplicity of matter when they write: “Black queer and trans folks bear a unique burden from a hetero-patriarchal society that disposes of us like garbage and simultaneously fetishizes us and profits off of us.”⁴
- In 2015, as an extension of his series with African American quilting traditions and the possible use of quilts as a communication tool along the Underground Railroad, Sanford Biggers produced a work assembled out of antique quilts, tar, glitter, oil stick, spray paint, and fringe. Breaking free of the rectangular frame, the piece zigzags ten feet along the wall. Legible from among its many patterns is the word MATTER. Using the tactility of textiles to comment on black histories of making and legacies of objectification under slavery, Biggers’ piece reads like a retort to white new materialisms that ignore racial difference, instead asserting the unevenness, vulnerability, and specificity of black mattering.

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3. Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Hall (London: Open University, 1997), p. 236.

4. Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, “This Is not a Moment, but a Movement,” <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>.

D. GRAHAM BURNETT

I am basically sympathetic to the trends of thought identified in this questionnaire. So what follows is a kind of *apologia* for these sympathies. This will require that I say something about what I take these “new materialisms” to be, but also that I try to articulate something of what I take to be the point of a thinking/making life—the point of a life in which one seeks the time, space, and ability to engage in reflection on topics like the one before us, and then, further, to produce things (lectures, performances, academic essays, paintings, films) in the course of such reflection. It is difficult to be clear about fundamental commitments, but I will try.

Before embarking on any of that, it is proper to underscore briskly the internal diversity of the domain in question. As the questionnaire makes clear, we are here attempting to engage (critically) with what should actually be understood as a rangy and ultimately nonconverging array of theories, tendencies, and/or heuristics. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is more than thirty years old. It developed within the specific context of sociologically oriented science and technology studies, and was designed to “solve” well-defined problems in SSK (Sociology of Scientific Knowledge). Orthodox ANT has at this point been substantially abandoned by its own creators. “Thing Theory” is a much more recent proposition, built out of a baggy coalition of art historians, devotees of material culture, anthropologists, and scholars of literature. It is a fundamentally interdisciplinary enterprise, and one cannot really understand its intellectual traction without attending to the fortunes of interdisciplinarity itself as a strategy/virtue/refuge within the modern research university. “Vibrant materialism” is Jane Bennett’s effort to push affect theory in contemporary political science toward the “nature challenges” that loom large on our collective horizon (environmental degradation above all). For all the breakout enthusiasm that has greeted Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology in the fields of art and architecture, the progenitors and champions of these self-consciously iconoclastic philosophical movements ultimately wish to hold sway in the technical arena of academic philosophy; they seek victory there, in the conflicts that characterize that special *nous-agon*. In my view, it is hard for outsiders to tell what is happening inside the cages where those fights are staged. And the Anthropocene? Something else again.

All that said, from a suitable distance these various enterprises can indeed be seen to share a common drift: they all demonstrate a marked tendency to displace focus from the human and to disavow the apparent “privilege” of the human perspective—hence the different efforts to elide agency, to vitalize “mere” matter, and to re-center analysis on distributed and/or hybrid entities.

On the one hand, it is tempting to diagnose this as nothing other than the latest instantiation of what Nietzsche decried as the “ascetic ideal”—that tragicomic philosophical dereliction by which we humans compulsively aspire to “think without ourselves.” Dissatisfied, apparently, by the two earlier major manifestations of this tic (religion, where we bowed to the gods in matters of the real and the true; and then science, where we groveled with equal pusillanimity before “nature”), a scattered rump of early-twenty-first-century thinkers would seem to be

intent on washing their hands yet again of the normative-superlative-transcendent character of the human mind. How now? Oh, by thinking the world from the perspective of a *stone*, or indulging in various neo-spiritual exercises whereby the human being is imaginatively immersed and unrecoverably dissolved in oceanic tides of time or whirling world-systems of terrestrial microorganisms. One can hear the laughter echoing through the valley of Sils Maria: even the ancient Israelites had a more sophisticated program of narcissistic self-loathing!

On the other hand, it is difficult not to feel the shiver of a very different concern upon review of the “new materialisms”: after all, do they not have about them the odor of a simple capitulation to the fetish-forms of capitalism? Avant-garde thought just might here be tipping its (fetching) bell-boy cap and scrambling to do justice to all the shopping left on the curb by its paymasters. “Things” *are* kind of magical, aren’t they? Yes indeed! And who doesn’t love “material culture”? Why it’s almost like Etsy! Like Etsy kissed by *philosophy*. What could be better? The more dematerialized and etherealized our consumerism becomes, the more sweetly nostalgic an emphasis on actual medium-sized dry goods. They are, after all, something like the Real Presence of late capitalism.

Given all this, whence the sympathy?

My early training was in the history and philosophy of science. I immersed myself in this field out of a desire to understand the process by which theological explanations for phenomena—and theological discourse more generally—came to be substantially displaced over the last several hundred years across the wealthiest and most powerful parts of the globe. This is a complicated and interesting story, with winners and losers. Probably more winners, in the end, though reasonable people can disagree on this, in my view. “Art,” as such, was certainly a winner, along with “literature” and “the humanities.” These enterprises mostly represent—for all their diversity—barely secularized forms of spiritual striving. Had God-talk remained dominant, these important expressive projects could not have come into being in the forms we recognize. And we would not be having this discussion.

But that said, I remain a theological thinker. Which is to say, I believe we have an obligation to train continuously to think impossible thoughts. For God is an impossible thought, toward which we must work to think. We will not “think” God, of course, just as we will not fly. But the arabesques of a leaping dancer are a beautiful form of failed flight, and they have in them much of what flying would be. I take thinking to be like this.

And so I like much of the mad and trembling and urgent and counterintuitive mood of the “new materialist” writing, which not infrequently springs and jerks and dances as if possessed by nameless and unspeakable strivings. As is proper to the best thought.

Irrationalism? Of course. Sometimes. But not all irrationalism is merely irrational. Some of it is properly called mysterious. And some of that is very important.

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MEL Y. CHEN

A student I encountered a few years ago, in a thought experiment, noted that “sustainability in academia would be like reusing old ideas as much as possible.” This statement ironizes the newness that sustainability performs, as a frequently corporatized discourse whose structural condescensions—dominant forms with powerful effects despite or perhaps due to their poor importation from other domains—opportunistically displace and discredit the resourceful strategies of oppressed or impoverished societies. I’d like this ironic thought to peck at scholarship’s own recycling, or self-referential, strategies as well as to ask about competing approaches to matter. The implicit temporality of sustainability further suggests to reflect on the meaning of “old” and “new” in terms like the new materialisms. Here I meditate on “going cosmic”—a mode I identify in some social or scholarly gestures. By “going cosmic” I refer obliquely to experimental drug cultures of the sixties, in which drugs often enabled experiments of metaphysics. In an expanded reading, “going cosmic” suggests a (futuristically or relatively) “new materialism”—a cosmology whose material participants or collectivities are not as they seemed, and whose interrelations or relational potentials are experienced as novel. There is something necessarily experimental in scholarship that seeks to understand the life of matter from perspectives beyond those crystallized as conservatively “human”; I am deeply sympathetic to this experimentality.

My own consideration of materialism has been primarily in my exploration of animacy, a hierarchy of sentience, mobility, and personhood that effectively runs down and across orders of descent roughly from humans to animals to plants to minerals; as well as what it has further become in institutionalized and colonial-conditioned settings: an obdurately racialized and sexualized and ableized set of coercive rules for favorable interactions between matter of different kinds. Strict coercivity can’t help but leave gaps, enabling animacies that perform a kind of affective fibrillation. Decolonial and queer scholars, for instance, have recognized and theorized this kind of restive animacy under different terms, even if humanness may have remained an unnecessarily agentive core. The accountability I’m looking for refuses to accept that speciesism or human-centricity has ever worked the way that it seems to have. Difference-hierarchalizing systems of species and race, ability, sex, sexuality have been long working with and borrowing from one another, explicitly and latently mutually enabled by the non-coincidental overlap of colonialisms, imperialisms, Great Chains of Being, and capitalism. It is a form of whiteness, I think, that enables a thinker like Ian Bogost to claim that computers are “plastic and metal corpses with voodoo powers,” without critically considering—or simply deeming irrelevant—the disabled racialized inhumanism of historical *and* contemporary zombies (not to mention his use of “voodoo”), or to claim that “environmental philosophy has argued that humankind is to ecology as man is to feminism or anglo saxonism is to race.”

Gil Scott-Heron’s famous song “Whitey on the Moon” (“Taxes takin’ my

whole damn check / The junkies make me a nervous wreck / The price of food is goin up / And if all that crap wasn't enough / A rat done bit my sister Nell / With Whitey on the moon / Her face and arms begin to swell / And Whitey's on the moon"), rather than simply rehearsing the Great Technological Divide, seems to suggest that at least one drive to go cosmic—the reach for the moon while his sister Nell can't afford to see the doctor—is identifiable as a feature of capitalism and empire. By the whiteness of going cosmic I refer to the set of patterns by which outer space becomes an empire of colonies, and by which even the “new” hippy dippy wonderment of things, some sustainability efforts included, risks calling on an exotified spiritual cosmopolitanism to embellish its own tainted garden.

To what extent then are new materialisms serving as structural condescensions, *themselves* new technologies engaged in acts of forgetting, in which lived differences such as race, class, sex and ability no longer serve as necessary considerations because fictions of scale mark them as irrelevant? Deracination is a profoundly political move from which novel materialisms cannot be taken as immune. Simultaneously, I commit to taking “old” materialisms as seriously as those heralded to be “new” ones, while resisting the easy categorization of either. In my ongoing dialogues with Julia Bryan-Wilson, we often discuss how art history, with its deep-seated considerations of materiality, seems to sit at an odd, partially forgotten location within the inevitably multidisciplinary exchange about matter. In multiple and overlapping genealogies of scholarship, questions abound as to the historical ownership of theories of matter, and they do not seem easily resolvable.

I continue to return to Noenoe Silva and Jonathan Goldberg's work on sharks and pigs' integral relevance for Native Hawaiian (Kanaka Maoli) sovereignty. At a talk on their work Silva commented, “For us the stone is alive; we don't have to *derive* it!” This counts as provocation only from the point of view of settler colonialist approaches to matter. To accept that a stone is simply living, not only under certain perspectival conditions, is to contest the habitual particularization and old-making of race or indigeneity. The authors rethink the political present using Kanaka Maoli transspecies and transanimate genealogies. This sets up an important exchange in which the statement “yes, one is related to a mountain,” can be read as a direct rejoinder to colonially circulated reasoning about matter's identity, species, dynamism, and sexuality. To the extent that new materialisms seem to proffer cosmologies that function as somehow more potent than the old ones, and yet work to deracinate matter unequivocally, I would suggest that the new materialisms have the potential to enact structural condescensions of their own in spite of an aesthetics of equality; to function as a place of new racial or settler treachery, as sustainability discourses easily do.

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ANDREW COLE

Materialism is as old as the hills. Naturally, there are many kinds of this philosophical position—some a mouthful to pronounce, like eliminative materialism, mechanistic materialism, or atomistic materialism. There is historical and dialectical materialism. And there’s vital materialism, as ancient as logos theology and the philosophy of Kapila. But a subcategory of vital materialism has recently emerged called “vibrant materialism” after Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*. This book has become relatively popular in the academy, less so in philosophy departments than in art and literature programs. Vibrant materialism is what most critics have in mind when they speak of the “new materialisms” or the recent “turn to matter,” so we’d do well to survey and query some of its basic features. (I exclude Deleuzian materialism, which, I will argue elsewhere, usefully converges with historical materialism.)

Vibrant materialism draws our attention to nonhuman forces in the world and explores the life of elements (periodic and Empedoclesian), the political agency of objects, and the ecology of polities. Vibrant materialism argues for the animacy and agency of nonhuman entities and for the vitality of matter. Above all, it reminds us that everything is interconnected, and that sometimes there are ghosts in the machine. Reminders that everything is immanently and spookily One, that there are bugs in our networks, and that the world is just one big symbiome are important to have. But who ever doubted that nonhuman forces were at work in our world, that agents aren’t *always* people, that things are made of other things, that nonhuman entities can help us digest dinner or turn ants into zombies, that the weather sways elections, and so forth? These points seem rather obvious to me and are the stuff of dailies, popular science mags, and basic cable. Yet time and again these are the lessons of the case studies presented in Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*. Vibrant materialism must have something else to teach us apart from this.

To my mind vibrant materialism is an object lesson in method—its purposes and consequences. When you do vibrant materialism, you don’t simply announce that matter is alive or that things have a power of their own. Again, that’s old news in the history of theology, philosophy, physics, and mathematics. Rather, as Bennett tells us, you endeavor to “uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances—sounds and sights that echo and bounce far more than would be possible were the universe to have a hierarchical structure.” You busy yourself with “revealing similarities across categorical divides and lighting up structural parallels between material forms in ‘nature’ and those in ‘culture.’”¹

This basic method—to look for sameness across differences—also happens to precede Bennett by millennia. Elsewhere I have discussed the long history of this mode of thought from Plotinus on, focusing in particular on its place within

1. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 99.

dialectical critique from Hegel and Marx to the present.² Vibrant materialism, however, adopts the method of seeking “affinities across . . . differences,” but by choice and as a point of pride it excludes the most powerful form of thinking the interrelationality of disparate entities: dialectics.³ This is not a good choice, however, because without dialectics, you don’t take that extra step to ask whether your own theory could be a function of your historical moment; you don’t step outside your own mode to see where it sits in time and place. Lacking the dialectical point of view, vibrant materialism is a method for method’s sake—indeed, a method not unlike a crude conception of allegory, in which the point is to collect disparate examples, display their affinities, and dust off your hands for a job well done. Only here, in vibrant materialism, it’s collections that are collected. Facts about nature and culture are exhibited as “whodathunk?” surprises about our crazy and interconnected world, though the truth is someone else has already discovered these connections and the surprises are inevitably the author’s own. In this sense, the vibrant materialist is like Walter Benjamin’s “collector,” who “brings together what belongs together.”⁴ The task of the vibrant materialist, in other words, is to curate and spectate—to make a museum, a World of Wonder. By contrast, Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism* is a breathtaking scholarly work limning how the cultural logic of “difference relates” is now a function of late multinational capitalism—with the crucial point here being that Jameson takes the extra step of recognizing that theory itself is a function of the present.⁵ Again, you won’t find this acknowledgment in vibrant materialism, though Bennett’s aside wondering whether “energy traders shared my vibrant materialism” throws light on the matter before the shades are quickly drawn.⁶ Which is to say you could update Jameson’s *Postmodernism* by adding to it “vibrant materialism” as another logic of late capitalism, an ontology of the present whose practitioners just can’t bear to break through the smooth plane of immanence, raise the periscope, and gain a perspective on totality, lest one make waves.

Vibrant materialism has some fans in the humanities. And true to form, questions about capitalism or class are reduced to flat ontologies positing the equality of everything, while the experience of workers under capitalism is eschewed. Again, as well it should be: the whole point of vibrant materialism is to decenter the human (though it’s ok to dabble in anthropomorphism, which strikes me as solipsistic, especially when manifest as a preciously sincere style of

2. See Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

3. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 104.

4. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 211.

5. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).

6. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 37.

academic writing). Yet when you decenter the human, you destroy politics, bad and good. It is true that many vital materialists find their politics in the environmental humanities, but it doesn't seem advisable to approach the problem of, say, climate change through a point of view that decenters the human, for the very reason that we live in the geological epoch some call "the Anthropocene," a phrase that necessarily *re-centers* the human—first as the agent of global ecological catastrophe and second as the name of the only party who can try to mitigate the damage it wrought. Now's not the time to demote human responsibility and agency, or hide in your own museum.

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CHRISTOPH COX AND SUHAIL MALIK

Malik: If the basic claim of Speculative Realism (SR) across its several fronts is that what lies beyond human cognition can be apprehended in its alien status—that thought can think beyond itself, as Quentin Meillassoux has put it¹—this is correctly understood as a vigorous challenge to the poststructuralist and post-Marxist orthodoxies of contemporary art and its prevalent theoretical armature. In their divergent ways, these orthodoxies propose that the real is necessarily shaped by discourse, social structure, economy, desire, subjecthood, the material or psychic structures of thought, and so on. Here, the real is not alien to discourse and anthropological praxes but rather, so to speak, inalienable from them.

Given the evident incongruity and even incompatibility between SR and poststructuralism, what has been perplexing is how and why some strands of SR, primarily object-oriented ontology, have been assimilated to developments of poststructuralism from the mid-2000s, particularly materialist feminism, affect theory, some queer theory, and performativity theory. These theories certainly share with SR an interest in breaking up the centrality of the human actor and extending the world of relationality beyond its historically privileged agents (from all kinds of subjects to objects); but their other basic commitments are wholly incompatible with SR. It's this confused hybrid of theoretical stances that the word "neo-materialism" now predominantly signifies in contemporary art, defanging and, worse yet, expropriating SR's most challenging demands on the orthodoxies of both contemporary art and theoretical-academic hegemons.

Cox: Exactly. A rigorous materialism would, as Nietzsche put it, "translate humanity back into nature."² But much of what is called neo-materialism today does just the opposite: it *humanizes nature*. The formerly inert and lifeless is treated as animate, as an "actant" with an "agency" no less "vibrant" than our own. Even deep time—in which human existence is but a fleeting microsecond—is examined in the humanities and arts today primarily under the banner of "the Anthropocene"!

Materialism should reject these new avatars of correlationism in which the world is seen only in our image. This means refusing the divisions between nature/culture and matter/mind by which we persuaded ourselves that we were higher and better than the rest of matter; and it means naturalizing reason, mind, culture, and language, treating them not as anomalous or miraculous endowments but as variants of processes discernible in the rest of the natural world.

Malik: On this, we disagree, in part. We agree in rejecting the exteriority of human

1. See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 36.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), §230, p. 123.

sapience to natural processes—a Ptomelaic hangover that has to be renounced. But we shouldn't attribute apprehension of the real to natural processes themselves, espousing a sort of Deleuzian vitalism that's close to the hegemonic variants of neo-materialism (HNM) identified above that confound SR's interest in identifying what is irreducibly alien to thought or discourse (or some proxy of these) with the poststructuralist vitiation of this possibility (even via the limit case of the altering encounter with the Other)...

Cox: I don't think there's anything vitalist about the radical materialism I'm espousing. It naturalizes the human rather than humanizing nature. Reason is not other than nature; and to treat it as such—as, I think, neo-rationalist critics of materialism do³—is theological insofar as it posits a transcendent world of reason and culture that's irreducible to the rest of nature.

Malik: This is our point of contention. Yes, the theological hangover has to be discarded in *all* its varieties: reason is not a proto-miracle nor is it ordained by grace. But, theoretically, the issue is whether what happens on the two sides of the phase shift that is the anthropotechnical nexus are *only* contiguous. A demarcation is definitionally inaugurated with that phase shift, meaning that the effects cannot be described in the terms available *before* it. Furthermore, as technoscience demonstrates, the *before* of nature is itself recursively modified by the *after* of anthropotechnical intervention, which involves the use of reason. That is, nature is now itself anthropogenetically or quasi-rationally constituted—or can be—by technosciences that are fundamentally constructive. This is not only what matter *can* be, but how it *must* now be understood. What is materialism then?

Cox: Doesn't this revert back to the humanism and correlationism I thought we both repudiated, treating nature and the facts uncovered by science as inextricably bound to the human and to human history? I think you also overestimate the place of our species in the natural world and in cosmic history. From Copernicus and Galileo to Hutton, Darwin, and current neuroscience, all the scientific breakthroughs of modernity have pushed in the opposite direction, undermining human narcissism and megalomania.

Malik: Recognizing anthropogenetic interventions and constructions of nature and matter does not mean that we are exporting our image of ourselves into them. As we regularly learn, interventions on nature do *not* necessarily lead to vain images of ourselves. An embryo with the DNA of three "parents" does not reproduce an image of human or animal life but is an invention—in and of nature as well as our self-image. Rational-material invention thinks outside

3. See, for example, "Reason Is Inconsolable and Non-Conciliatory: Ray Brassier in Conversation with Suhail Malik," in *Realism Materialism Art*, ed. Christoph Cox, Jenny Jaskey, and Suhail Malik (Berlin: Sternberg, 2015), pp. 219–20; and Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 2–3, 22–35.

thought itself because it recognizes what matter might be in terms that had not yet been thought. Art of course has the capacity to take its role in this, and is maybe even a privileged historical name for this ambition. But neomaterialism in thrall to contemporary art—HNM—cannot.

The claim that this rational determination of materialism is a “theological” or correlational determination of matter is itself a theoretically stipulated subordination of reason to natural processes. As with HNM, but distinct to it, it promulgates a negatively governed materialism. Both proscribe commencing from matter’s rationalizable construction. Granted, *that* postulate is probably not just a materialism—but, given that we agree to dispense with HNM, how is the demand here to be met by the naturalized materialism you endorse?

Cox: Again, it’s deeply narcissistic of us to think that human invention and intervention marks some fundamental “phase shift” in the history of the universe. Natural history is full of such material transformations prior to, and surely following, the existence of human beings: the emergence of life itself, mass extinctions triggered by asteroids, biological mutation, etc. Human reason and anthropotechnics is absolutely continuous with this natural history, which, in the not too distant future, will bury all trace of the human in its eternal course.

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T. J. DEMOS

In early 2015, I co-curated *Rights of Nature: Art and Ecology in the Americas* at Nottingham Contemporary, an exhibition assembling the work of twenty artists and collectives.¹ The show traced how diverse practitioners have responded to a recent paradigm-shift in legality, which reconceptualizes relations between human and nonhuman life in ways radically different from property-based forms of past jurisprudence. While this legal transformation is global in scope, there has been an intensity of cultural developments in the Americas linking Indigenous movements, environmentalists, legal theorists, and activist-artists, which have defined newly egalitarian ways of being-in-the-world, founded on post-anthropocentric commitments that see humans and nature as inextricably intertwined. The outcome is nothing less than a juridico-political revolution that is redefining our relation to the world. From Bolivia's and Ecuador's enshrining of the rights of Mother Earth in their legal systems to the international Indigenous movement Idle No More that has joined First Nations peoples across the continent in environmental and native rights struggles, this bi-continental shift mirrors recent Western formations of new materialism, speculative realism, and object-oriented ontology in rethinking relations to nonhuman life—yet not without substantial conflicts.

One exemplary inclusion in *Rights of Nature* was Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares's *Forest Law* (2014), a double-channel video essay and mixed-media installation that explores the legal activism of Indigenous peoples in Ecuador's Amazon, a biodiverse, mineral-rich region polluted by decades of oil extraction. The video presents testimonies and factual evidence, defining an experimental forum of truth-telling that details a forensic, legal, economic, and cosmopolitical conflict. One trial, brought by members of the Siona, Secoya, Cofán, Waroani, and Kichwa peoples against Texaco/Chevron, in Lago Agrio, won a multi-billion-dollar settlement for compensation, remediation, and reparation in 2011, contesting what José Galingua, leader of the Serayaku, describes as a "silent and gradual genocide"—even though, owing to the corporation's financial resources and legal appeals, the judgment is yet to be fulfilled.² These legal battles index a Latin America redefined by Indigenous environmentalism dedicated to "Nature or Pachamama"—the earth goddess worshiped by many Amerindians—"where life is reproduced and exists, has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structure, functions and its processes in evolution," as according to Ecuador's constitution.³

1. The exhibition was organized in collaboration with Director Alex Farquharson and Assistant Curator Irene Aristizábal. A digital, freely downloadable catalogue, including my essay "Rights of Nature: The Art and Politics of Earth Jurisprudence," is forthcoming.

2. See the accompanying catalogue, Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares, *Forest Law—Selva Jurídica* (East Lansing: Broad Art Museum, 2014), pp. 55–59.

3. See <http://therightsofnature.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/Rights-for-Nature-Articles-in-Ecuadors-Constitution.pdf>.

Such ecocentric jurisprudence reconfigures human-nonhuman relations, extending legal standing to animal and environmental realms.⁴ Motivating its formation is not only the threatened ecologies of equatorial forests, but also catastrophic climate change tied to neoliberalism's growth-obsessed developmentalism. Some call it the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch driven by "human activities," though I opt for the alternate, Capitalocene, as discussed by Jason Moore and Donna Haraway, offering greater political traction in identifying the culprit—capitalism—and thereby resisting the false universalization of responsibility in implying that "humans" have altered our planet's systems.⁵ That said, the political alliances resulting from this move are far from straightforward, with some Western theorists objecting to Indigenous religious reverence of nature: Slavoj Žižek imperiously declares "there is no Mother Earth watching over us," and Alain Badiou proclaims that "rights of Nature is a contemporary form of the opium of the people."⁶ Yet these critiques reinforce a disconnect between academics and social movements, pointing to an additional value of Biemann and Tavares's research, which reveals the Indigenous activist origins of rights-of-nature legislation, stretching back to the formation of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) in 1986. Militating for ecocentric revisions to the Bolivian and Ecuadoran constitutions, native activism has gathered enormous momentum in contesting industrial extractivism in Latin America and the corporate causality of climate change globally.⁷

My research for *Rights of Nature* thus raised alarms regarding object-oriented philosophy, especially where it theorizes post-anthropocentric, vitalist materialisms

4. For introductory literature on Earth jurisprudence, see Cormac Cullinan, *Wild Law: A Manifesto for Earth Justice* (Claremont, South Africa: Green Books, 2002); Peter Burdon, ed., *Exploring Wild Law: The Philosophy of Earth Jurisprudence* (Kent Town, South Australia: Wakefield Press, 2011); and Maude Barlow et al., *The Rights of Nature: The Case for a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth* (San Francisco: the Council of Canadians, Fundación Pachamama, and Global Exchange, 2011).

5. See Jason W. Moore, "The Capitalocene," 2014, www.jasonwmoore.com/.../The_Capitalocene_Part_I_June_2014.pdf; and "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulhocene: Donna Haraway in Conversation with Martha Kenney," in Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, ed., *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), pp. 255–70. For more of my own take on this subject, see my series of essays on the visual culture of the Anthropocene, written for the Fotomuseum Winterthur during May–June 2015 at <http://blog.fotomuseum.ch/author/tj-demos/>.

6. Slavoj Žižek, "O Earth, Pale Mother!," *In These Times*, June 17, 2010, http://inthesetimes.com/article/6079/o_earth_pale_mother; and Oliver Feltham, *Alain Badiou: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 139. Badiou's critique resurrects certain—misguided, in my view—Leftist rejections of ecology as a vector of political struggle. See Jean Baudrillard in 1970: "In the mystique of environment this blackmail toward apocalypse and toward a mythic enemy who is in us and all around tends to create a false interdependence among individuals. Nothing better than a touch of ecology and catastrophe to unite the social classes." Cited in Felicity Scott, *Architecture or Techno-Utopia: Politics after Modernism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p. 235.

7. See, for instance, Benjamin Dangl, "Neoliberalism, the Left, and the Politics of Pachamama," *Common Dreams*, April 25, 2014, <http://www.commondreams.org/views/2014/04/25/neoliberalism-left-and-politics-pachamama>; and Salvador Martí Puig, "The Emergence of Indigenous Movements in Latin America and Their Impact on the Latin American Political Scene: Interpretive Tools at the Local and Global Levels," *Latin American Perspectives* 37, no. 6 (November 2010), pp. 74–92.

that resemble key elements of Amerindian cosmologies, yet commonly fails to register such connections or credit native philosophies and legal cultures.⁸ As such, Indigenous thinkers—such as anthropologists Kim TallBear and Zoe Todd—have identified the neo-colonial tendencies of the “ontological turn,” which at best risks negligence by overlooking non-Western knowledge systems, and at worst, unthinkingly perpetuates long histories of appropriation and disavowal.⁹ Might this disturbing aspect of speculative realism follow from its practitioners’ common marginalization of the politics of human subjectivity in their emphasis on nonhuman ontologies and distributed networks of agency? Locating these debates more directly in current politico-environmental conflicts—as do select artistic models—provides a much-needed corrective, one that stands to democratize epistemologies in opening up a new “ecology of knowledges” (of local and global cosmologies alike) that supports social justice rather than reinforces Western colonial orders.¹⁰

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8. One exemplary exception is Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

9. See Kim TallBear, “Beyond Life/Not Life: A Feminist-Indigenous Reading of Cryopreservation, Interspecies Thinking and the New Materialisms,” lecture at UCLA, November 5, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkUeHCUrQ6E>; and Zoe Todd, “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take on the Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word for Colonialism,” *Urbane Adventurer: Amiskwacî*, October 24, 2014, <https://zoeandthecity.wordpress.com/2014/10/24/an-indigenous-feminists-take-on-the-ontological-turn-ontology-is-just-another-word-for-colonialism/>.

10. For more on “an ecology of knowledges” that “is the epistemological stance from which it is possible to start thinking about the decolonization of science and, thus, the creation of new types of relationships between scientific knowledge and other knowledges,” see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, João Arriscado Nunes, and Maria Paula Meneses, “Introduction: Opening Up the Canon of Knowledge and Recognition of Difference,” in *Another Knowledge Is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies*, ed. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (London: Verso, 2007), esp. p. xlix.

JEFF DOLVEN

It's cold outside: you had better use your coat. A thoughtful recommendation, but you could be forgiven for assuming that English is not the speaker's first language. You might use your coat to smother a fire, or as a pillow on a long flight, but ordinarily you *wear* it. *Use* does not seem to cover the complexity of the relation, which is something more than instrumental—at least if it's your coat, the one you usually wear. One name for the difference is style.

I point to the difference because thing theory is characteristically concerned with use, while art history is more concerned with style. What follows is a footnote to the project of thinking things, meant to identify a seam. *Use* is the bogey of thing theory, or at least *mere use*. Its costs are practical (global warming: using up resources), existential (alienation from the thing-world), and intellectual (mistaking how the world works). There are two basic lines of reproach, the first via the ontologies of Heidegger and Harman. Heidegger accords things a hiddenness that withdraws from instrumentality. Harman radicalizes Heidegger by hiding everything from everything. The second comes from the network theories of Latour and fellow travelers. The camps of subject and object are replaced by a rhizomatic kingdom of quasi-objects, within which there are no privileged users, and nothing is merely used.

So you had better not use your coat. But didn't we already know that? One way of talking about the dissonance of the phrase, the reason it sounds obdurately odd, is to say style is a matter less of *use* than of *identification*. When you wear a coat, you imitate it; your way of being is cut to its specifications. The coat also imitates you, not just by taking the shape of your body, but by being the sort of thing someone like you would wear. There are ways, then, in which the agenda of thing theory is already accomplished by style. The distinction between subject and object is blurred. You are the coat, the coat is you; that common sense of style transfers among your other articles of clothing and the people you spend time with and their clothing and books and so on. Likewise, style describes social and historical space, illuminating and constituting networks that bind people and things together. Who else wears that coat, when and where was it in fashion? Any style is a map.

Then again: thing theory has, in its expanded sense of *demos*, a democratic impulse. All objects are equally hidden; all the nodes of the network are potentially equivalent. Style, by contrast, is not democratic and cannot be made to be. Connoisseurship is only the most sophisticated of its discriminations. No community, faction, movement without a style. Nor any artist. I pose the question how far thing theory can *see* style; how well it recognizes the dynamics of identification that organize our solidarities and prejudices. The number of objects we use may be small compared to the number we wear.

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DAVID T. DORIS

Felonies and gourds have one very important commonality: they're both extremely fucking real.

—Colin Nissan

This is what a handful of earth taught me.

It had been scooped from the ground in Ilé-Ifè, Nigeria, by a man I'd never met, who set it upon a pile of lumber as an *ààlè*, a warning to would-be thieves. Typically, *ààlè* are assemblages of worn-out, broken, or discarded objects; in them, once-useful things become useless, are usefully displayed as signs of uselessness. They are transposed into *images*, in Yoruba *àwòrán*, “what we look at and remember.” Such warnings are meant to trigger a viewer's conscience (*erí òkan*) via visual analogy (*afíwé*). The expectation is that all passersby will easily decode the meaning of ordinary objects—putting themselves into the picture as the projected subject of the utterance—and comport themselves righteously.

In 1863, English explorer and adventurer Richard Burton reported seeing such an *ààlè*: “A traveller piling a handful of sand upon his luggage leaves it under the protection of a medicine, or magic.” He dismissed its power, as he was wont to do. Let's not make the same mistake.

Chances are you're familiar with the “clod of earth” on Heidegger's short list of the thingliest of thingly things, “lifeless in nature and in human usage.” The handful of earth I experienced was not that at all, but an object, useful, alive, and powerful. It was, however, tough to decipher, so I asked the man who had placed it: What would happen to someone who steals this lumber? Would he be buried in the earth, or have no children to bury him there? I'd heard such things before.

The man laughed. “Nothing has to *happen* to him,” he said. “Fear has its own torments.”

Like other *ààlè*—and *àwòrán*—the handful of earth (*ilè*) was a placement in time. It drew into itself the skein of lawful powers at work in the world (*ayé*), triggering recognition of one's imbrication within the network of social forces that prescribe, compel, exalt, and sometimes punish our behaviors. But no analogy was at work here; the handful of earth was raw and uncoded, depicting neither its creator nor recipient. There was nothing to be read, only *felt* as a deeper, more pervasive fear.

“Whatever you might believe may happen to us after we die,” said a *babaláwo* (ritual specialist) with whom I've worked, “maybe we go to Christian heaven or Muslim heaven, we don't know that for sure. That is faith. What we do know is that we all go to the earth.”

No way around it: We are *on* the earth, and we wind up *in* the earth. Such knowledge trumps faith, as the *babaláwo* suggests. It also keeps in check our more worldly ideological efforts, revealing them as provisional, arbitrary, built by fallible human consensus. In the handful of earth, that relationship is abstracted; power itself is disarticulated from human experience, reckoned as incomprehensively

vast, ancient, and inexorable. In that reckoning, the Earth is acknowledged as a sentient actor.

In Yoruba ontology, Earth is *òbìnkítì níkàlè*, “the ageless, bottomless, and endless one.” It existed before us, and will endure long after we disappear. Immeasurably wide, its surface supports us. Unfathomably deep, it generates our sustenance. The Earth is the unblinking witness of every human and non-human deed, recording all history and containing it as if within a gourd. Finally, in its materiality, the Earth is the repository of the collective dead’s remains, and thus their spirits, the *irínmolè* or *alujonnu*. We can converse with those spirits, but not with the Earth—we don’t know its language. But it sure knows ours. The Earth knows because it is always already *there* beneath our feet. There’s no hiding from it.

The Earth, however, hides, displaced by objects more readily scaled to our perception; it is the literal *ground* upon which articulated *figures* come to presence: yams, cars, religions, ontologists, woodcarvings. Practically speaking, the Earth is at once ubiquitous and absent, supremely visible yet unseen. Paradoxically, its absence, its retreat from the gaze, becomes its most obvious feature. Yet the Earth is indeed a figure, infinitely polymorphous; its sheer scale transcends the possibility of figuration.

Yoruba ontology, like the social worlds that extend from it, is subject-oriented and subject empowering at every level but one. The Earth holds sway over all of us. Some Yoruba scholars argue that Earth is a god or, more fervently, a goddess. It’s just not so. Yoruba people don’t worship the Earth as such, and there’s no evidence they ever did. The Earth, instead, is the palpable but inevitably abstract image of the only Being in Yoruba cosmology that cannot be personified, or even imagined in human terms: *àse pààpàà*, Power-As-Such, the Power that precedes and exceeds all others, surpassing all possibilities of its representation, overwhelming the actions of humans and divinities alike. Call it God, if you want, or Olodumare, or Allah or whatever, but that’s missing the point. *Àse pààpàà* transcends the names we give it; it operates beyond the ideological divisions those names enact. Earth does likewise.

For a thief, here is fear beyond the vengeance of human law: to steal, to be perfidious, is *òdàlè*, to betray the Earth.

To invoke the Earth is to point to the origins of Power itself: shrouded in secrecy, unknowable, beyond question. Thus, even the simplest social gesture of *ìkúnlè*—kneeling upon the earth to an elder, an ancestor, a chief or a god—is an unconscious, embodied affirmation of a truth that surpasses all others, and justifies them all. “*Ilè òdu mògbò*,” said the *babaláwo*, “the Earth combines us together.”

One small gesture of displacement reminds us of this truth, sets into perspective the provisionality of human acts, institutions, ideologies. Such is a magical transposition, in which ground is brought forth as figure, revealing incomprehensible Power. The handful of earth is no less than the Earth itself, disclosed to vision in metonymic miniature. It renders Earth’s infinitude as an *àwòrán*, an attunement, an image “we look at and remember.”

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HELMUT DRAXLER

With good reasons so-called New Materialists have questioned the dominance of subject-oriented theories in constructivist and/or poststructuralist thinking. Indeed, the subject cannot be understood as the only reliable factor in subject-object relations. Objects always imply their own logics in terms of constitution, availability, consistency, and interaction. However, to shift the focus exclusively to the object-oriented side of things again misses the point, at least as long as this move is understood as an attempt to install new ontologies beyond the scope of any subjectivity. Just insisting on the terms “object,” “matter,” or “reality” keeps these terms dependent on the structural relationality of subjects and objects, mind and matter, ideality and reality. Thus, only shifting the focus from one end of these dichotomies toward the other in no way indicates an overcoming of relationalities altogether; in fact the relationalities will be confirmed and reestablished in their mutuality precisely within such a shift.

Even the speculative ontological move towards the absolute remains dependent on certain subjectivities, at the very least the ontologically speculating subject itself. And this subject again remains conditioned by its formation in terms of scientific, philosophical, economic, and cultural coding. So, for example, speculating about the “ancestral” times before the presence of any human subject presupposes scientific hypotheses about ancestral times, and in its hypothetical character science will always contain elements of subjectivity and thus stay within the reach of the symbolic. It is precisely this fundamental symbolic form of science itself that gives the ontological speculation its matter.¹

Ontological speculation is certainly a philosophical necessity; however, there is no strict opposition between ontology and correlation, that is, an ontology to be found beyond relations. The entire point is to identify ontology neither with being nor with becoming, but with relationality as such, or rather to identify and dis-identify ontology and relationality at the same time, because in a strict Heideggerian sense any specific definition of ontology would make it already ontic.² So what is at stake is an ontology of ontic relations or, more precisely, the ontological dimension of relationality within the concrete ontic: logical, historical, political, and finally aesthetic forms. Since ontology has to remain different from the ontic but at the same time cannot be separated completely from it, it can only be grasped in its own form of relationality. Difference is a condition of such a relationality, but difference implies elements of identity or similarity in order to be differentiated.

1. My aim here is not to accurately represent the positions of Speculative Realism thinkers; I'm just using their examples for my own speculative needs.

2. In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger distinguishes the phenomenological level of being as its ontic dimension from the ontological horizon of understanding, within which the ontic can only appear. The ontological therefore defines the truly philosophical quest. The relationship between the ontic and the ontological is framed by another difference, that between identity and difference.

The operative principle of that ontology of relations cannot be determinism, neither a determinism of the material, the object, or the real nor a determinism of the ideal, the subject, or the fictional; it also cannot be pure contingency, because even contingency remains within the hypothetical horizon of the scientific symbolic, which means that contingency can only exist as an ontic claim.³ Hence the operative principle of an ontology of relations can be defined as a form of conditionality, specifically as the mutual conditionality of mind and matter, subject and object, materiality and ideality, substance and relation, the absolute and the specific. It is within these conditionalities that Western modernity has established itself, mainly in creating divisions and categorical oppositions between center and periphery, inside and outside, active and passive, the self and the other, the rational and the irrational. And in doing so it has produced its specific social, economic, and cultural relations according to those divisions.

Only that mutual conditionality articulates sameness with difference at the same time. As such it opens the ontic toward the ontological and anchors the ontological to the ontic. There is, indeed, no pure relationality before any ontological claim (e.g., by saying that there is no society but only social relations, or that there is no art but only artistic works or practices); but there is also no pure ontology beyond any relation. The ontological structures the ontic symbolically, whereas the ontic conditions the ontological in the same way as the subject is conditioned and not determined by its objects. “Conditioned” here means the categorically restricted availability of certain objects or materials for the subject according to specific social relations, cultural representations, and spatial and temporal givens in general. And that holds vice versa for objects as well. Therefore, the ontological can only choose within the ontic. It can symbolically highlight certain ontic dimensions, and it always does. There is no philosophical, scientific, artistic, or political claim without any ontological dimension. And the objects do not found an ontology in themselves; they can only operate as object relations, as psychoanalysis names it, which then might condition ontologies of different kinds.⁴

Thus, to identify modernity with an overcoming of substances and the ontological dimension altogether in the name of pure relations or functions as incarnations of the logos is thoroughly misleading. Substances are always reestablished even within the attempts to overcome them. They come into being first as terms, then as ideas, and finally as discourses, practices, and institutionalized norms claiming to represent these ideas. Modernity has inaugurated a series of such substantialized and singularized terms or ideas: Nature, Culture, Science, Art, Technology, History, Society, Politics, Capital, Law. Raymond Williams has called

3. Within the scientific symbolic we can never know if there is not another determinism behind any hypotheses of seemingly contingent events. And even a purely philosophical speculation on contingency cannot transcend its relativity, because speculation itself is just another (symbolic) form of correlation.

4. This argument does not imply that object relations finally become subject relations in the Kantian sense; it implies a more thorough understanding of object or objectified agencies within psychoanalytical theory. I call these agencies the “inter-objective” dimension of the psyche; see Helmut Draxler, “Psycho-Politics, or: The Materialism in Correlations,” in Kerstin Stakemeier and Tim Voss, eds., *Psycho-Materialism* (forthcoming).

them “keywords.” First of all, they define the realms of the ontic in structuring the given symbolic order. However, they do not only define areas of knowledge and practice; they also offer themselves as foundational principles as well as value horizons for those areas. As such they represent the ontological, which in turn shows itself to be dependent on representations. As representations, however, these terms can only be ontic, historically contingent, and therefore groundless,⁵ and they are strictly relational within themselves. Any attempt to define their own autonomy can only be achieved by a strict rejection of some of the other terms, and thus they show themselves as structurally dependent on each other. Therefore there is neither strict autonomy nor crucial antagonism between any two of these terms—Politics and Economics/Capital, Nature and Culture, Art and Science/Technology, and so on—but a multilayered symbolic network operating through constant displacements between these terms as well as between the symbolic value horizons represented in these terms/ideas and the practices trying to claim and to embody them.

To talk about conditionality instead of a deterministic (or contingent) materialism, realism, or object-oriented ontology means to focus on the processes of materialization, objectivation, and realization alongside the processes of idealization, subjectivation, and fictionalization. That is why the move in the name of one of these sides against the other only articulates the specific conditions of modernity but does not overcome them. Materialism in this view is not considered to be the foundational principle of a truly dialectical and historical understanding of the world, but an intrinsic part of the dialectics within which modernity symbolizes itself through divisions and splitting. Being first of all a term, an idea about rejecting the hegemony of ideas in the name of Nature, Real History, or Practice, materialism could be understood as a specifically strong idea, working as a guideline for epistemic and political investigation, but not as a foundational ontological principle. Taking this strong idea seriously entails investing in a materialism of the ongoing dialectics of ontic/ontological relations—not into a Historical Materialism but into a materialism of History, Society, Art, Politics, Culture, Nature, Economics, and the like as the structuring and mediating representatives between the different spheres of the modern symbolic as well as between the ontic and the ontological divide. Practices are challenged neither simply to represent nor to reject these terms completely, but to address and to work through what I have called the “substance as medium,”⁶ which thus could be considered the crucial goal and the common denominator of relevant post-avant-garde artistic, cultural, and political practices.

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5. Hence a substance is a representation of the ontological within an ontic domain.

6. See Helmut Draxler, *Gefährliche Substanzen: Zum Verhältnis von Kritik und Kunst* (Berlin: b-books, 2007).

PATRICIA FALGUIÈRES

Allegiance to realism has been our philosophical horizon since Wittgenstein, since phenomenology. With Speculative Realism, as it is called, or Object-Oriented Ontology, or Thing Theory, what presents itself as new is that this horizon, shared today by numerous philosophical programs, is driven here by a desire to return to ontology.

1. What is behind the success of SR, particularly in the art world? The promise of the “great outdoors, the absolute outside of pre-critical thinkers” (the expression is from Quentin Meillassoux): the domain of the cosmos, of cosmic time as opposed to anthropological time (Meillassoux), of things-themselves, rid of all human presence and seemingly forming their very own society, of the things among themselves (Graham Harman), or of inorganic material (Ray Brassier). The claim of a “new naïveté”: the possibility of a “direct access to being taken in isolation, independently of our thinking,” and cleared of all “correlationist” mediations, laboriously piled up by philosophical tradition. How seductive! How evocative in a period when reading the daily news introduces a vision in our minds of a planet that will eventually be deserted of all humanity, of all life. The radical naturalism of a Brassier (the undeniable truth of extinction) gains credibility. This is undoubtedly one of the keys to the immediate popularity of such a recently formed movement (the other undoubtedly being its deployment through the Internet: there is real strategic intelligence among these Object-Oriented philosophers). It remains to be seen if the people it fascinates will be able to go beyond the “poetics of ruins” revived by science fiction to which they associate it.

2. Upon closer inspection, the corpus of Speculative Realism reveals quite a few aporias. What is “the thing” that Harman asks us to seize without mediation? A quark? A dog? A multinational? A concept? A goat-stag? What are the “things between them”? How is one to understand this return to a realism of substances that present themselves as “unified and autonomous” singularities? Why are their relationships, starting with the relationships of contiguity in space, more important to think about (and to think about exclusively) than the relationships that we might maintain with them? There is something familiar here: one “sees,” in reading *The Quadruple Object*, those “still lifes,” those dispersions of objects, those “constellations” that a good portion of the most contemporary art has proposed to us. But the work of philosophical elaboration is minimal when compared to, for example, the morphogeneses of technical objects that Gilbert Simondon proposed in *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (1969), not to mention the lavish analyses deployed by Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964) or *Eye and Mind* (1960).

3. It is, then, behind the group’s slogans that an entire series of evasions can be found. Speculative Realism presents itself as a rupture with modern philosophy since the Kant “catastrophe.” Everything that was thought between Kant and

Speculative Realism is considered Kantian because it stems from *correlationism* (Meillassoux) or the “problematic of access” (Harman), two versions of the privilege granted to the *perspective of the subject* to the detriment of *things and the world*. It’s a sleight of hand of incredible dimensions. It means placing in parentheses almost the entire philosophy of the nineteenth and twentieth century forged in debate with, against, and well beyond Kant, and especially all thought from the 1960s and ’70s—“forgetting” that the “decentering of the subject” is the core of the philosophical building blocks made possible by structuralism and/or psychoanalysis and their multiple re-elaborations, and that the “inhuman,” or as it was then called “theoretical anti-humanism,” was the first condition of this philosophical inventiveness. It also means forgetting that precisely contrary to “philosophies of the subject,” and “philosophies of the conscience,” the “philosophies of the concept,” from Jean Cavallès and Georges Canguihem to Michel Foucault and beyond, radically investigated the epistemological tradition. From this point of view, *Speculative Realism* constitutes a spectacular regression: a non-investigated submission to “science” here re-mythologized (is philosophy soluble in physics? In the neurosciences? Do mathematics again gain the exclusive privilege of ontological understanding?). One would much better get away from the aporias of the subject/object opposition by reading Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s very fine *Objectivity* published in 2007, the year that the group of Speculative Realists emerged; or by reading the wonderful analyses that Isabelle Stengers offers regarding processuality in A. N. Whitehead: a differently new and radical manner of extending the critical power of thought from the ’70s and of informing a political project, starting from a critique of science.¹

4. Why this craze for SR in art schools, in art centers, on critical panels, in reviews and museums? I attribute it to a reminiscence and a remorse: to the memory, no matter how vague, that phenomenology constituted the last great philosophical corpus available to the elaboration of theories of great style art theory (take, for example, in their differences, Hubert Damisch, who was in fact the student of Merleau-Ponty, Rosalind Krauss, or Georges Didi-Huberman). And that on the contrary (certainly this is the domain of remorse), the cry for categories and methods of analytical philosophy contributed to the impoverishment of critical debate, to having it focus on an ever more limited corpus of works, such as the Duchampian readymade, and Warhol’s Brillo boxes.

In the end, the over-emphasis on image must be left behind, both in terms of the practice of artists and in critical activity. Approaching art from the point of view of the image is insufficient, and always has been. After all, the first modern’s access to art was largely nourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by archaeology, in other words, by a “materialist” approach to objects, texture, materials, grounds, a “geology of art” and an apprehension of time, the effects of which are found in Gottfried Semper’s treatise *Der Stil* (1860) or in Alois

1. Isabelle Stengers, *Penser avec Whitehead* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

Riegl's *Late Roman Art Industry* (1901). But ultimately art, as a form of making, has always been an experience of decentering the subject. Take Dubuffet's *Texturologies*: grounds of paint where the power of negation carried by the material obliterates all perspective. Breaking the mechanism of perspective and the subjective thought established there precisely constituted the ambition of modern artists—this the program of art in the twentieth century par excellence—by which artists intended to renew ties with an “archaic” regime of art that the academic institution and its doctrinal apparatus had not been able to entirely eclipse ever since the seventeenth century: a regime where making is a mode of knowledge, a “disposition to produce equipped with logos,” just as much as the experience—imitation and accomplishment—of these movements, the totality of which is the world. This regime of art, which gave it both the boundless space of speculation and the “great outdoors” of nature (art was a regional variant of *natural philosophy*), is the Aristotelian regime of *mimesis*, as it nourished the practice of the arts in Europe until the beginning of the seventeenth century and the advent of Galilean physics.² The age of representation will have been only a parenthesis. Art, within Greek philosophy, was our *Speculative Realism*. And it is so again.

—Translated from the French by Molly Stevens

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2. For a new reading of Aristotelian mimesis with regard to its relationship to natural philosophy, I would cite “Extases de la matière: Note sur la physique des maniéristes,” in *Les Éléments et les métamorphoses de la nature. Imaginaire et symbolique des arts dans la culture européenne du XVIe au XVIIIe siècle* (1997), H. Brunon, M. Mosser, and D. Rabreau, eds., Paris, Annales du Centre Ledoux IV, Bordeaux, 2004, pp. 55–84; “Poétique de la machine,” in *L'art de la renaissance entre science et magie* (2002), Paris, Institut d'Art et d'Archéologie, Académie de France à Rome, Ph. Morel, ed., Paris, Rome, 2006, pp. 401–52.

PETER GALISON

Though perhaps not the most hilarious philosopher of all times, Immanuel Kant nailed it when he wrote that comic laughter was essentially about the sudden dissolution (*Auflösung*) of a grand expectation reduced to nothing (*Nichts*). This colossus/runt contrast was striking to a long line of comedy analysts. Jean Paul Richter, for example, found the laughable in the juxtaposition of the insignificantly minor with an exalted person (*einem Erhabenen*). For his part, the nineteenth-century biologist and theorist Herbert Spencer fastened on the “descending incongruity” that toppled “great things to small” or, more explicitly, “the degradation of some person or interest possessing dignity in circumstances, that excite no other strong emotion.”¹

All this impressed Theodor Lipps, the brilliant Munich fin-de-siècle psychoanalyst, who, drawing on and extending these philosopher-analysts, put “relative nothing” in hard opposition to the sublime. In that contrast, said Lipps, stood the comic. Lipps stressed that the small is not comic; comedy only emerged when smallness presents itself against the large. Picture, for instance, this series: a powerful church, an imposing theater, an entire neighborhood of mighty structures. Then suddenly insert a tiny, humble house. In that deflation lies the comic. Freud takes this developing theory of the comic—by Kant, Jean Paul Richter, Spencer, and Lipps—and sets it in an economic-psychoanalytic context, with the logic of the unconscious accounting for jokes and the preconscious for the comic.

Caricature, parody, and travesty aim at something sublime, exalted, and powerful and (in different ways) cut it down to size. The sudden deflation of this authority is what produces the laughter: for Freud, there is real effort, psychical *and* physical, that enters into the thought of the large/important/abstract, an effort that suddenly evaporates in the comic moment, discharging energy as laughter. This “degradation” (Alexander Bain’s term) is noted by Freud, while Freud’s own choice of nomenclature, “*Herabsetzung*,” is registered in our whole physical being, literally and accurately, a “put-down.”² Freud likens this set-aside of the greater for the lesser, physiologically, to the abrupt change the soldier feels as he is told first to stand at attention, then to back down, “at ease.” Our whole musculoskeletal being responds to the comedown.

Central to Freud is a joining of the abstract with the corporal, a bond he refers to as “ideational mimetics”—*the bodily incarnation* of abstraction of thoughts of behe-

1. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (part I, section 1, p. 54); Theodor Lipps, *Komik und Humor* (Hamburg and Leipzig, 1898), section on the large and the small (Freud cites p. 50ffp in his 1905 *Jokes and the Unconscious*, in Freud, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 8, trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1960), p. 199; Jean Paul Richter, *Vorschule der Aesthetik*, 2 vols. (Hamburg, 1804), pp. 11, 13, Part II, par 51; and Herbert Spencer, “The Physiology of Laughter,” *Macmillan’s Magazine* (March 1860), in *Essays* 2 (London, 1901), pp. 146–47.

2. Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* (London: Longmans Green and Company, 1865), cited by Freud, SE 8, 200.

moth and shrimp. “A high mountain” says the “common man” and raises his hands upward as if to capture the peak; he says “a little dwarf” and holds his hand near the ground. He follows this with his voice if he’s managed to slip the bonds of hand gestures, not to reflect his emotions, but to express the *content* of what he is describing.³ Freud writes: “I regard the matter as a really important one, and I believe that if ideational mimetics are followed up, they may be as useful in other branches of aesthetics as they are here for an understanding of the comic.”⁴

Suppose that Freud was right—that it is very often the case that our experience of the abstract is accomplished through a simultaneous presentation of the material, an embodiment in content that often results in a physical gesture. That is, suppose that when we gesture wide and high to express the abstract, we register such an abstract quality the way we register the large mountain, the high tree, or the exalted person. Freud suspected that this bodily gesturing expresses idea content, not just affect. For a moment, let us put aside the economic and even the psychoanalytic sides of Freud’s analysis. No need here for the view that the discharge of unused preparatory energy flows into and activates the laughter or to invoke the logic of the unconscious. Instead, I want to rewire this longer Kant-Lipps-Freud tradition to a more epistemological end, to take seriously Freud’s suggestive addendum that perhaps this dynamic of the comic had something more to it, something that speaks not just to the comic but to “other branches of the aesthetic.”

Appropriately, the very category of aesthetics is itself a strikingly good example of materiality interwoven with abstraction. We know that the term, so often taken to be a fully ephemeral notion of disembodied beauty, arises in the eighteenth century to designate things accessible through the senses. Even in the realm of the comic, the spread of the idea might be indicated by the Lipps-Freud interest in the whole range of techniques that realize the comic, not least unmasking, parody, and caricature. *Unmasking* shows that the highfalutin Prince suddenly reveals himself to be all-too-human through bodily function.⁵ *Parody* imitates—and shows how strikingly the putatively unique and powerful can be replicated, so

3. Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. 8, pp. 192–93.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

5. Unmasking functions broadly in our way of knowing the world. Freud’s own life’s work is a form of unmasking—dreams, parapraxes, jokes all are after something much more basic about the body and bodily urges that we fancy ourselves to have bypassed. When the Marxist argues that Adam Smith’s arguments about the grand principle of efficiency are just a cover, the coal-mining boss isn’t after some economic optimization, he is instead after direct control of the workers’ bodies and labor. Stephen A. Marglin, “What Do Bosses Do?: The Origins and Functions of Hierarchy in Capitalist Production,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 6 (July 1974), pp. 60–112. Of course there is seemingly infinite literature on the precise relation between the superstructural and the (economic-material) basis of social life, a literature launched in no small part by Marx’s own assertion that, “just as one does not judge an *individual* by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production.” Karl Marx, “Preface,” in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859; New York: International Publishers, 1970).

reducing that singular person to a replicable voice, gesture, or appearance. And *caricature* disrupts the integrity of a thing or person, exaggerating one quality, for example.⁶ Each diminishes the sanctified, the beautiful, the abstract, and (in different ways) calls out materiality. We see this in the all-too-physical emphasis of the political cartoon, in the comic strip or book, where pale abstraction comes down to earth in intimacy, violence, and power. Frame by frame, the comic is ready at each moment to conjoin the ephemeral into an almost-tangible world featuring embodiment in all its violence, sex, etc.

There are many ways in which this comic condensation ties high (abstract) things to low (material) ones. There are words that divide into concrete bits; there are slight changes in word order that sink the sublime to the ridiculous; there are slight modifications of high-flying words into ground crawlers. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Keiji Nakazawa's *I Saw It* undo the abstract statistic of mass violence by instantiating it.

Structurally, the aspect of comic materialism that interests me most is the way that double meanings superimpose the literal and the metaphorical. Freud: Think of Hamlet's remark that the purpose of drama is to hold a mirror to nature, a medical friend said to the dramatist Arthur Schnitzler that it was not surprising Schnitzler had become a great writer. "After all your father [inventor of the mirror-based laryngoscope] held a mirror up to his contemporaries."⁷ From the mirror of nature to the mirror of a sore throat—back and forth it flies. Crucially the logic of the comedic in multiple meanings is a kind of superposition, not an unmasking: in the joke, Shakespeare/Hamlet/Arthur Schnitzler are not demoted to a laryngoscope; the exalted and the material cross.

In the logic of this comic moment, we have a mirror that is both a metaphor (a change of place) and an *insistence* on staying in the same place (dare we call it an autophor?). It is this *simultaneity* of the metaphorical and literal, of ideal and material, that interests me most in the study of historical and contemporary science. Henri Poincaré, the great mathematician, philosopher, and physicist, argued that the very idea of simultaneity could be understood through the action of two longitude-determining telegraphers who sent signals back and forth, using those signals (and the time it took to transmit them) to coordinate their respective clocks. Metaphorical? Absolutely, Poincaré never would insist that telegraphers had to be present to define the meaning of time. Literal? Certainly, Poincaré himself was in charge of an army of military geographers, stationed around the world, sending signals to fix time and so map the globe. Young Einstein too engaged in this literal-metaphorical reasoning—his paper, the most famous physics paper of the twentieth century, begins with a scene of clocks coordinated along rail lines. It is material (Einstein was in charge of evaluating patents like these) and fully abstract (he was introducing a new meaning to time, making it fully relative with

6. See Lipps, *Komik und Humor*; also Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. 8, p. 201.

7. Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. 8, pp. 36–37.

respect to the frame of reference). Look at Feynman recreating his greatest lecture, “There Is Plenty of Room at the Bottom,” as he impresses in words and concepts, gestures, and voice the place of his “tiny machines.”⁸

Perhaps we can see in the autophor/metaphor a way of thinking a certain kind of materialism—comic materialism—that identifies something useful by showing us how material stuff joins abstract ideas not by changing places, but by pressing the abstract directly into the concrete, through comic ontology, that is, without changing place.

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8. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eRCygdW—c>.

ALEXANDER R. GALLOWAY

Not too long ago, being a materialist meant something rather specific, despite the capacious complexity of the term; it meant one was a Marxist. These days materialism generally means non-Marxism, or some variant thereof. What happened?

As it was formulated in France in the eighteenth century and then more broadly across Europe in the nineteenth century, materialism was concerned chiefly with what Marx called the “sensuous activity” of society and politics, an undertaking guided by strict adherence to the modern if not nihilist mantras of secularity and critique. Today’s new materialism means something different. Methodologically speaking, the new materialism is dog-whistle politics for three things: empiricism, pragmatism, and realism.

Some components of the new recipe don’t immediately jibe. For instance, philosophical realism, the view that an objective reality exists independently of thought and culture, clashes with empiricism, at least superficially, given empiricism’s dependence on sense experience. Nevertheless a shared interest in material reality has combined these otherwise distinct traditions into a new amalgam.

The catalyzing agent can be traced to Gilles Deleuze, or more precisely to the form that Deleuzianism took in the English-speaking world during the late 1990s. Deleuze’s affection for empiricism is well known, excited as he was by the strict correspondence that David Hume forged between ideas and sense impressions, or, in another context, the attention that William James gave to what he called “pure experience.” Likewise James helped reorient Deleuze toward North American pragmatism, particularly its focus on process and material action unencumbered by abstract concept or cause. And contemporary thinkers like Manuel DeLanda have done much to recast Deleuze as a realist, describing life, the universe, and everything as an ever-widening series of machinic assemblages.¹

The empiricist-pragmatist-realist cocktail has intoxicated any number of fields beyond the parochial bounds of Deleuze studies. Chief among them is sociology, where the singular figure of Bruno Latour looms large. William James is a great influence here too, as when, in a recent book, Latour implores his readers to fixate on the revelations of empirical experience.²

Similarly, media studies decamped several years ago, this time to Berlin, in greater pursuit of a material semiotics of “hard” technology. Known as Media Archeology—or sometimes simply German Media Theory—this disciplinary transformation is closely aligned with Friedrich Kittler and the discourse he helped create, from Cornelia Vismann and Wolfgang Ernst to Bernhard Siegert and beyond. Repulsed by Cultural Studies and anything that smacked of postmodernism,

1. See, in particular, Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society* (New York: Continuum 2006).

2. Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. xxv, 125, 128, 152, 175, 178, and *passim*.

Kittler fancied himself a champion of the “historical *a priori*,” to borrow Foucault’s evocative formulation, and oriented his studies toward a deeper kind of historical archive, while still leaving room for rapturous meditations on Aphrodite, Heidegger, and Pink Floyd.

What does materialism mean today? Doubtless it means what it always meant: an attention to things, processes, and physical life, over and above form, essence, or consciousness. Still, the tone has changed in subtle but profound ways. Materialism today elevates the importance of real objects, just as it highlights the connectivity between them; Tinkertoy ontologies predominate, with their struts and hubs interconnecting into larger frameworks. At the same time, a materialist today is more likely to value empirical studies over critical or conceptual ones, seeking ontological explanations where once sociopolitical explanations sufficed. (Consider climate change. Today’s materialist seeks explanations in carbon molecules and oil pipelines, not in, say, the intangibles of greed, desire, or power.) Meanwhile, materialism’s historical skepticism toward metaphysics and essentialism has evolved into a form of nihilistic anti-essentialism that even Marx or Deleuze would likely not recognize. Materialism today tends to privilege deterritorialization over all else—territorialization having become a cardinal sin—the resulting precarity then recast in a positive light as contingency, flexibility, fluidity, or something else beneficial. In fact, a materialist today is more likely to be enamored with the virtuosities of hyper-capitalism than repelled by them, dazzled by the complex beauty of derivatives and cryptocurrencies.

But not everyone is convinced. “The ontological turn,” wrote Jordana Rosenberg in a recent examination of such trends, “is a kind of theoretical primitivism that presents itself as a methodological avant-garde.”³ Alain Badiou is equally skeptical of what he calls “democratic materialism,” or the commonplace assumption that there exists nothing beyond things and the relations that connect them (remember those Tinkertoys).⁴ What’s lacking in such a model, for the author of *Being and Event*, are indeed events, those processes of wholesale transformation that depart from the stale configurations of things and their relations.

Offering a precise definition of materialism, or indeed of Marxism, has long been the subject of debate, as activists, artists, and theorists grapple with the vicissitudes of material existence. But McKenzie Wark recently suggested that Marxism in fact means something very simple. No over-arching philosophy, no articulable tenets, no oaths to be sworn—such materialism simply means *from the labor point of view*.⁵ One might quibble over the term labor, expanding it to include other kinds of activities, other modes of personhood, and indeed other kinds of nonhuman entities. But the basic idea holds firm. Materialism is the view from below.

3. Jordana Rosenberg, “The Molecularization of Sexuality: On Some Primitivisms of the Present,” *Theory and Event* 17, no. 2 (Spring 2014), n.p.

4. See Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009).

5. McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene* (London: Verso, 2015), p. xvii.

Materialism means being thrown unadorned into a world, but also remaining there, snared by its fetters. Such experience is shared by all those who are forced to gaze up at the abstractions of power, and yet remain unseduced by them. And thus materialism, while perhaps aided in certain ways by pragmatism or empiricism, must ultimately align itself with that point of view, whether one calls it labor, the people, “the 99%,” or some other name entirely.

A renaissance in such thinking, if and when it arrives, is welcome indeed. A renaissance in such fact? Surely the answer is self-evident. For these are already the basic facts of existence.

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RACHEL HAIDU

The daunting heterogeneity that emerges from your questionnaire is gracefully and perhaps fictively resolved by the mention of “the perspective of your own work.” Even as the reasonable question addressing that heterogeneity (“if it is possible to reconcile the different positions”) is laid out, the suspicion of its answer seems to lie in the next two questions, at the juncture of familiar aporia (“irreconcilable difference”) and the refuge of the critic (“productive materialisms”). In other words: *Is there room for the perspective of a critic—let alone one invested in “productive materialisms”—in the object-oriented, techno-integrated post-Anthropocene?* might be one way to read the questionnaire symptomatically, in the paranoid manner that “theories of the subject from the psychoanalytic to the Foucauldian have afforded.” Though one senses that there indeed might be something in common between these diverse discourses, the paranoid impulse that seems to generate the question suggests that possibly it is paranoia itself (“the perspective of your own work”) that senses itself under attack—and why not, if indeed we are attempting to grasp a universe in which things do not exist “for us”? Still, from what other point (than our own subject-oriented ontologies) would we go looking for a common denominator to new perspectives that threaten—it has to be said, *again*—to reconcile us to a decentering? How can we grasp this as anything but another modernist decentering, even if we were to admit that, as Latour suggests, we “have never been modern”?

Perhaps a few recent performances might help us understand the usefulness and the limits of these recent frameworks by provoking the question: what might we seek from whatever might lie beyond “decentering”? Think of how Ralph Lemon uses *both* Afrofuturist and Afro-pessimist tropes to riff on the mythopoetics of black femininity in the mass culture in last year’s *The Scaffold Room*, with its brilliant performances by April Matthis and Okwui Okpokwasili. Then consider how his ambivalence cuts straight to the question you ask about “human difference—gender, race, power of all kinds elided” in or by the “new materialisms.” Lemon takes up a Fanonian (and to my mind utterly convincing) riposte to the challenge voiced by Bill Brown, W.J.T. Mitchell, and others to “value the being of things alongside that of persons.” Soberingly, he reminds us that to actually *be* “that thing against which all other subjects take their bearing” is not a challenging new theoretical orientation but, for too many, persistent and possibly permanent historical fact, against which we all have to find political—that is, particular, historical, and material—orientation.¹

Another artist one might consider is Joan Jonas, who for decades has refined motifs and manners of using her performance environment and props so as to refer us to another position-past-“subject-positions”: that of the animal, who, in our blind spot as it were, is uniquely positioned to shift us from our accustomed center

1. Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland, “Raw Life: An Introduction,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2003), p. 53.

of perception and action. For example, by continually drawing, redrawing, and projecting the figure of the coyote (one of the recurring motifs in her body of work) in 2013's *Reanimation*, she explores how the figure/ground distinction can convey the position of a being poised on the border between reproduction and nonreproduction, between environment and self. At the same time, by manically shifting between drawing and reacting (erasing, projecting, moving around), she draws the audience into a rapt, trance-like state that both exemplifies Jakob von Uexküll's anti-mechanistic, "biosemiotic" view of animals as "subjects whose essential activity consists of perceiving and acting" and makes it our own.² That is, we are keyed by watching her antic movements (and hearing the melodic riffs of Jason Moran's improvisational piano accompaniment) to the relentlessness of such "essential activities," but more impressively, into what it might *mean* to exchange positions with the coyote. The disappearing center of our own perceptive world emerges into perception but not as a mere carnival ride. Rather, we are forced to contend with the strangeness of this exchange of positions, and—an aspect that was even more explicit in her 2004 performance and video piece *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*—its ramifications for our understanding of what aesthetic experience is.

To me, this is one of the most useful aspects of your questionnaire: it asks us to reconsider not only whether these newer frameworks for thought are accurate or powerful enough for our world, but whether the undertaking they suggest—the trade-in of our usual subject-oriented position—is itself worthy. What are we giving up, and what are we getting in return? The works I'm considering here frame possibilities that might make the trade-in worthy, at the same time that they complicate the notion of a theoretical adherence. For example, Matthis and Okpokwasili's performances, with their tics and gestures borrowed from present and historical figures, elicit a historicism and a futurism that in turn provoke awareness in the viewer that there is a kind of impassability not only to one's subject-position, but to that position's rootedness in history. That is, not only do you, as a viewer, *not* get *there*, to that place occupied by the performer in front of you, but that place forever recedes into the past and the future, depriving the viewer of any subject position beyond its own—that which seeks to understand just how other "positions" become *like objects* in the course of aesthetic experience. This is itself an exemplary model of the type of "productive materialism" your questionnaire is seeking.

The short answer, in other words, is that some of these theories, like those before them, might in fact be doing a good job of describing aspects of the world we live in, with its irreversible changes to the environment and our relations to technology, and might even help us understand the works of art that are also describing both our world and its potentialities. The changes to this world

2. Jakob von Uexküll, "A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men" (1934), in *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept*, translated and edited by Claire H. Schiller (New York: International Universities Press, 1957), p. 6.

likely matter even more to those of us who are not critics living privileged lives, and we would want—I think—to transcend the limitations on our own perspectives as we take in what we can of the world. Sometimes, art becomes more legible through the frameworks that were invented in the world alongside it—that is, through theory that is as recent as the art itself. Recognizing this gives a historicist dimension to what we do as critics, and while we might want to rein that in, for the sake of giving the work itself running room, I for one would not want to shut it down. But finally, these new frameworks do not necessarily describe either the position from which we write, or the position from which we want and aspire to write. Our only obligation is to keep searching for that position and to recognize when we haven't found it.

To answer, finally, from the “perspective of [my] own work”: for some time I have been convinced that the methods of art history can accommodate not so much the critical doxa that these new frameworks for thought present, but at least the shifts to the question of “subject position” that are so evident in works by Lemon, Jonas, and others. By imagining that we could integrate *their* ideas, their politics, and the shifts they impose on the audience into our methods—without necessarily detouring through Meillassoux, Latour, et al—I have tried to rethink what authorship itself does in these works, and others. Because no matter how “object oriented” the framework might become, the author does not go away—a vexing if reassuring truism for those of us hoping that the material output of history will always produce more and better than we can.

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GRAHAM HARMAN

In recent debates over the role of humans in art, we frequently hear terms used as synonyms that do not mean the same thing. Let's begin with a brief bit of lexicography and use the resulting momentum to zero in on the principles of object-oriented aesthetics.

1. *Realism and materialism are not the same.* Though realism has numerous possible meanings in philosophy, it is generally understood to refer to the real existence of the world outside the human mind. Materialism comes in two basic flavors, one of them realist and the other not. Flavor number one is the traditional materialism of basic particles and fields from which larger entities are built: mountains, skyscrapers, class struggles. Flavor number two rejects this scientific brand of materialism for an *anti*-realist doctrine in which there is no world outside the mind, since reality is co-constituted by the human observer. Perhaps the best examples of the second materialism can be found in the writings of Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Isabelle Stengers. Though Braidotti in particular has accused object-oriented philosophy of stealing her ideas, the object-oriented position is the exact opposite of her own: namely, we endorse realism but emphatically reject materialism.¹ Both flavors of materialism are too quick to decide what material is, and thereby truncate the surplus or surprise found only in a reality that *is not* co-constituted by humans.

2. *Actor-network theory and object-oriented philosophy are both anti-materialist, but only the latter is realist.* An author whose position is closer to mine than New Materialism is Bruno Latour, the co-founder of Actor-Network Theory. Though Latour is sometimes called a "materialist" due to his close attention to homely physical objects such as apricots and speed bumps, he rejects the label "materialism,"² which short-circuits our basic *uncertainty* about what things really are, forfeiting their reservoir of surprise. Nor could Latour be called a realist, despite a brief attempt to finesse his way into this category during the late 1990s by way of redefining "realism."³ While Latour sometimes refers to the existence of things outside the human mind, he never allows for their existence outside *relations*. Actors are indistinguishable from their actions, and are nothing without the entities they act upon. By contrast, object-oriented philosophy holds that objects exist apart from their relations. This has implications for object-oriented aesthetics, since it entails an autonomous reality for the artwork beyond any human access, and beyond any network in which it might be stationed. This leads us to a third distinction.

3. *The human as an observer of art is not the same thing as the human as an ingredient of art.* Object-oriented philosophy renews the question of what the world is like beyond human access. This raises the well-meaning question: "What would an art

1. Timotheus Vermeulen and Rosi Braidotti, "Borrowed Energy," *Frieze* 165 (September 2014), <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/borrowed-energy/>.

2. Bruno Latour, "Can We Get Our Materialism Back, Please?," *Isis* 98 (2007), pp. 138–42.

3. Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays in the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

without humans be like?,” which conflates two different roles of the human. Such conflation is also found in Michael Fried’s essay “Art and Objecthood,”⁴ whose critique of Minimalism hinges on describing it as both “literal” and “theatrical.” Literalism refers to art that renounces all depth and simply becomes a literal object obstructing our path: *ce que tu vois est ce que tu obtiens*. Opposition to literalism is found most notably in the ontologically realist position known to critics as *formalism*, which ascribes to the artwork a reality distinct from its appearance to humans or its socio-political impact. To this extent, object-oriented philosophy resonates with formalism. But Fried’s next step goes too far. Since minimalist art is devoid of aesthetic depth, Fried holds that it relies on a theatrical appeal to the viewer. This entails that in order to avoid the flaws of Minimalism, art would have to remain art even following our extinction as a species, even if Fried never says so explicitly.⁵ But in this sense “art without humans” is no more valid than “human society without humans” or “salt without chlorine.” Humans are a necessary *theatrical ingredient* of art, even though humans as *literal observers* of art always fall short of the artwork itself.

We have now seen that object-oriented philosophy turns away from human pre-eminence in art, while also preserving the human as a necessary ingredient of aesthetics. How does this compare with those who insist more vehemently on the central status of humans in art? Here we distinguish between two different kinds of anthropocentrism in art. The first humanist simply wants to preserve the various forms of participant art that have flourished since the 1960s: performance, street art, relational aesthetics. Let’s take Nicolas Bourriaud as emblematic of this position, though his actual views may be more extreme.⁶ We can reassure Bourriaud by agreeing that humans should not be excluded from art. It is conceivable that great art could be made by theatrically staging encounters between strangers in a gallery. All we add is that for such a genre to be effective, it cannot be identified with its *literal* effect on participants and observers, but remains partially impenetrable to understanding. But there is also Humanism number two, which demands that humans should *dominate* art. It is literalist in a more extreme sense than minimalism, since it wants both art and philosophy to become the vehicle of a “true political content.”⁷ Here the turn from human-centered aesthetics is most important: art must not become the handmaid of prose revolutionist booklets where it was once the handmaid of Catholic dogma.

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4. Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 148–72.

5. One important author who does say so explicitly is Tristan Garcia; see Garcia, *Form and Object: A Treatise on Things* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), chapter 8: Arts and Rules.

6. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel: 1998).

7. See Alexander Galloway, “The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism,” *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 2 (Winter 2013), pp. 347–66; Suhail Malik, *On the Necessity of Art’s Exit from Contemporary Art* (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic, 2016).

CAMILLE HENROT

*Preamble*

Grouping all of these different theories together makes them more vulnerable to critique, and it's very tempting to be quick to judge for the wrong reasons even though the perspectives being opened are exciting ones. When I was doing research on the history of the universe and the different strategies of globalization, I was mostly in contact with Teilhard de Chardin, Jean-Luc Nancy, Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, Leibniz, Sloterdijk, and Coccia for philosophy, and Latour, Lévi-Strauss, and Viveiros de Castro for anthropology. I was introduced to Meillassoux's thought later, when people talked to me about it in relation to *Grosse Fatigue* and *The Pale Fox*.

I'm excited that these theories are bringing global, all-embracing thought back into mainstream public life, where it had been dismissed by a technocratic system that rewards specialization.

Speculation and speculation

Until relatively recently in the art world, the words "speculation" and "materialist" evoked the market rather than new formulations of ontology and subjectivity. Still, one can find a connection between these two frames of reference in art's attribution of some form of subjectivity to objects via the magical thinking that sees objects not only as emanations of their creators' selves but as invested with their own power, and therefore their own will. So there is already a certain agreement between aesthetic perceptions and practices, on the one hand, and the redefined ambit of agency put forth by "Thing Theory," "Speculative Realism," "OOO," etc., on the other. The

extended agency of these theories is a more than felicitous match for the animism that is foundational to both artistic practice and art market valuations. To what do artists sacrifice their days and collectors their dollars if not this?

I am, however, wary of focusing on the object as the antithesis of human subjectivity (with the aim of synthesizing the two). This would risk retaining and reinforcing the simplifying mechanism of the dichotomous polar spectrum, which neglects the infinite constellation of intermediary and extra-spectral positions. Dualism and trouble with the intermediary runs as a common thread through Western thought, and I would be careful about this when handling these new philosophies. Art, too, can often have trouble with the intermediary: it has long been construed as a search for the absolute through the materialization of the virtual. If you imagine an artist whose ideal is to submit to norms, you quickly realize that the artist's work would be understood as a critique of these norms and as an "authentic" search for the absolute. It is, in fact, extremely difficult to communicate from an intermediary position despite the fact that ambivalent and polyvalent nondialectically synthesized intermediary positions exist and are, in fact, the position of the masses (e.g., being partially in revolt and partially resigned or accepting of norms).

Enough about human rights



*Enough about Human Rights
 What about Whale Rights?
 What about Snail Rights?
 What about Seal Rights?
 What about Eel Rights?
 Moondog, "Enough about
 Human Rights"*

If the idea of conscious matter were to be accepted, I think it would follow that the cultural objects of peoples who have always thought they may have a certain degree of conscience and autonomy be repatriated to their original holders

(i.e., for “primitive art” to be returned to indigenous peoples). The political reality of this kind of claim, though, would clearly serve only to provoke a reactionary defensiveness on the part of those who currently possess these artifacts. The language of radical projects is seductive, but the arrogance of the absolute polarizes and precludes any dialogue with that which does not conform to its logic. Philosophy is very often a narcissistic discipline because of its propensity to formulate thought through dialectical, absolute oppositions, meaning that it cannot interact with other disciplines except on its own terms and thus tends to prefer idealization over ethical action, substituting daydreams for concrete change.

There is a certain indulgence in focusing on distant or radical scenarios instead of treating what is at hand, so beginning a project to decenter the human by way of objects leaves me wondering: How can we establish a philosophy of nonhuman subjectivity without thinking about the dog’s unconscious, the mouse’s tenderness, the earthworm’s consciousness, the sponge’s thought, the will of a virus, the sensations of moss, the memory of stone? Thinking in degrees could be a way to redefine metaphysics not as a “non-metaphysics” but as a metaphysics that can interact with things other than itself. Considering philosophical issues such as what we consider life, death, thought, subjectivity, species, etc., not only in metaphorical terms but in relation to physical and biological existence would be a way towards this.

*Taxonomy and power. Inventing words
vs. inventing a language*

Neologism is often one of the symptoms of the quest for authority. Each of these theories invents its own vocabulary and the reader has to create new lexicons for herself in order to approach them without misunderstanding. The philosopher is a logothete, and it is by this that he gains esteem and authority approaching that of a god—for what is greater than the creation of a new word?

But the abstraction and specialization of philosophic language is an obstacle to the ethical, scientific, and political implications of the speculative materialist project, as it solidifies the authority of the knowledge of “non-knowledge” and cements its impermeability to other disciplines. It is not new words we need in order to decenter the human, but a new language—one that is porous and capable of embracing different fields of study.

A new materialism would need to exit the incestuous circle of the academy that reinforces traditional Western figures of authority and to begin engaging in a generous dialogue with Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Shintoism, some of which have already posed the question of conscious matter and contemplated the mathematics of infinite possibilities.

*Non-being and being, having the same source,
are distinct only in name. Call this source the obscure.*

—Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

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BROOKE HOLMES

There's a broad theoretical shift going on, driven by renewed speculative and imaginative energies querying stuff long perceived to be off-limits or just ignored under the conceptual regime of poststructuralist theory: objects, matter, bodies, plants, hurricanes, etc. I'm happy about this. The brackets on these things were in place too long. The emergence of the Anthropocene as a descriptor aimed at making visible a situation which all human beings already inhabit—with exposure to risk distributed unjustly among them—is itself sufficient to show the need to think about our entanglements in worlds we don't create but that are reshaped in unpredictably micro and macro ways by everything we do. Decentering is displacement, but displacement isn't disappearance, not yet anyways. We're still around. So while I'm committed, professionally and personally, to the maxim that we're never done with the past and the past is never done with us, I'm not interested in retrenchment. For me, the more productive question is: How can we be at once strategic and open-minded in seeing, thinking, and engaging nonhuman forces, lives, domains?

That a lot of people coming from a range of fields—continental philosophy, political theory, anthropology, and literary theory, to name a few—as well as art history and the art world are asking this question and giving different answers also strikes me as a good thing. Agonistic energies can be intensely creative. In my work I've long been fascinated by the productive forces of early Greek materialisms, the ways that attempts to think the human through the radically nonanthropomorphic nonhuman drive the formation of new ethical and aesthetic subjectivities organized around encounters with the material world that range from near-total porosity to active disengagement. Agonistic energies can also be intensely reactive (e.g., Socrates's wish to escape the prison of the body in Plato's *Phaedo*; Aristotle's not-getting-my-hands-dirty Unmoved Mover). Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology pivots on a double prohibition: thou shalt not undermine the object (reducing it to its material constituents or subsuming it into a plane of immanence), thou shalt not overmine the object (reducing it to how it appears to us). The questionnaire, bundling the new realisms with the new materialisms, distills the choice further: subjects or objects. I don't think we can throw out that opposition altogether. Nevertheless, beyond the either/or is a richer domain for thinking about the entanglements of human and nonhuman as well as the lines of continuity and discontinuity between them that co-exist, though, given their at times divergent ethical and political implications, not always peacefully.

We get further into this domain by drawing on conceptual resources from elsewhere, thinkers that decenter us from the present in order to live it out more fully. Crucial here is what Nietzsche called the untimely (*unzeitgemäß*), and the engagement with thinkers who are both friends and strangers, Whitehead and Bergson but also Euripides, the Stoics, Plotinus. We need them because they give us thought-worlds we didn't make however much we are entangled in their lega-

cies and metabolize their strangeness, worlds with their own rules, their own horizons, their own incalculable forces. The sciences yield these kinds of conceptual resources, too, and the new realists and materialists have been much more willing to engage the sciences, sometimes as a replacement for texts and history, or at least history scaled to the human. But the choice is false one. If we're going to recognize that objects and nonhuman systems and forces have prolific, productive, even creative agencies, we should be embracing epistemic pluralism—not just the history of philosophy, including ancient and medieval philosophy, and the sciences, themselves plural, but also literature, the new anthropologies of nature, science and technology studies, political theory, mathematics. (It's worth noting that epistemic pluralism is not just interdisciplinarity, nor relativism: Donna Haraway's classic 1988 article "Situated Knowledges" repays rereading, especially in light of the questionnaire's concerns, for its elaboration of a feminist ethics that brilliantly brings together epistemic mobility and embodiment, subjects and objects.)

Art has much to do here. A couple of possibilities for thinking about the shared space of materialism and aesthetics. First, the term "the Anthropocene" has been criticized for eliding, much as its ostensible opposite "wilderness" does, a messy and uncomfortable politics: the old generic "man" (*anthrôpos*) masks the intensification of global inequities in the crucible of ecological crisis. I think that criticism has teeth. But the Anthropocene also has value to the extent that with a name it embeds economic and social systems in the feedback loops of nonhuman self-organizing systems. Other terms and conceptual domains may emerge that do this better (I find the terrain mapped by William Connolly in *The Fragility of Things* under various labels—planetary politics, ontocosmology—compelling). Still, as a term it's a first step towards learning to think, imagine, and also see these entanglements in a visual culture that at present mostly just sees the violence and catastrophe they create, a step in the spirit of artworks like Roni Horn's *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* in Stykkishólmur, Iceland. The work of innovating ways of seeing the human and the nonhuman *together* is in large part aesthetic.

Second, the new materialisms and realisms are already, in some basic way, aesthetic practices if we think of aesthetics as inventive *aesthêsis*, the Greek word for sensation and perception. Their imaginative, speculative, and philosophical energies are enacted strategically to bring the nonhuman into public space as an object not of technological manipulation but of shared conceptualization. It's no accident that Deleuze, that great lone metaphysician among the language-obsessed poststructuralists, made style one of his core philosophical terms. The aesthetics of materialism—and the materialism of aesthetics (on which we are now fortunate to have Jim Porter's ground-breaking *Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece*)—are nowhere clearer than in materialism's all-time greatest hit, Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things*, the first-century BCE Roman Epicurean epic. Lucretius wants to make his reader see reality stripped to a bare-bones ontology: deep down, it's all just atoms and void. He thinks it's hard to do this not just because you can't see atoms or void but also because his readers' minds are

encrusted with all kinds of culturally generated misperceptions about the nature of the world. Lucretius's strategy is to make a different reality emerge within a common field of vision. If the poem constitutes an object lesson in how to induce nonhuman realities to erupt through and among us it's in part because it goes for plenitude (aesthetic, cognitive, stylistic) instead of trying to find the one perfect model where the objective truth of the cosmos will be clear, once and for all. Lucretius queries the cosmos for traces of its sub-phenomenal force-fields, especially those that cross our everyday lives; at the same time, he ceaselessly invents new words and images to embed these traces in his poem, and, in so doing, he doesn't just pass through objects *qua* screens of a deeper real but as objects of attention in themselves (thereby bypassing one current version of a split between realism and materialism). Lucretius *qua* artist stands at the intersection of, on the one hand, a heightened awareness of the physical world in both its minimalist logic and its maximalist realization through compound bodies and, on the other, canny inventiveness (I think here of Paul Chan's recent rereading of Odysseus's polytropy—his cunning—in Plato's *Hippias Minor* as a strategy for artists, and incidentally one that is later betrayed by Plato's later quests for purity). And Lucretius goes for broke in creating a radically new aesthetics of physics in the name of ethics, aimed at helping human beings not just survive but live well in a world not made for them. Not subjects *or* objects but subjects *and* objects and points in between, again and again. The work of populating the form of the conjunction in the present is also, it seems to me, in large part aesthetic.

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TIM INGOLD

I sometimes wonder where philosophers have been, all these years. Some of their number have recently taken to telling us—as though it were a startling new discovery—that the world does not actually revolve around human beings, that nonhuman entities of all sorts can enter into relations with one another, and even hold meanings for one another, which do not depend in the slightest on the ways they are used or perceived by humans, or even on any human presence at all. The fact that researchers in such fields as plant and animal ecology, geomorphology, and soil science have been studying such relations for generations seems to have passed them by. There is, of course, good reason to be skeptical of some of the epistemological assumptions that underpin such scientific endeavors, insofar as they are predicated on the objectification of a material world “out there,” of nature, which can be known only through its mental or symbolic representation. Modern science remains duplicitous in its claims to offer an account of the workings of nature, including the mind as part of nature, given that the authority of such claims rests upon the sovereign perspective of a mind already freed from natural constraint. Arguably, then, the scientific mind continues to lurk as an uninvited guest at the table of nonhuman conviviality, amidst denials of its presence and influence. But philosophers who call for a more balanced or “symmetrical” approach, which would allow the participation of nonhumans with humans on a level playing field, are no less two-faced. For their approach is founded on the claim—which is wholly undemonstrable yet nevertheless central to modernist mytho-praxis—that human beings are without parallel in the animal kingdom in their enrollment of objects as a stabilizing force in social relations.

This is why an actor-network theorist, for example, can declare that a sociology confined to the study of intra-species relations is fine for baboons, who have only each other to deal with, but not for humans who are in among the manifold objects with which they have surrounded themselves. At the center of the network, you can always find a human. In a world where things could truly be for what they are, there would of course be nonhumans for humans, but there would also be non-baboons for baboons and non-stones for stones. If baboons and stones are nonhumans, then why cannot human beings be non-baboons and non-stones? Perhaps this is what the purveyors of object-oriented ontology are trying to say. In their vision, however, there is no time, no movement, no growth, and no life. Theirs is a fossilized universe. It is dead. And the only way to liven it up again is to suppose that particles of magical mind-dust, alternatively known as agency or consciousness, are sprinkled among its constituents. Our fixation with the grammatical categories that are currently standard in most European languages leads us to assume that action can only be an effect, set in train by a causal agent that stands as subject to the verbal predicate. But we need not think like this. Classical Greek, along with many non-Indo-European languages, has a middle voice of the verb that, unlike the active voice, does not separate agency from

action or the doer from the deed. It is not, then, that things have agency; rather they are actively present in their doing—in their carrying on or perdurance. And as things carry on together, and answer to one another, they do not so much interact as *correspond*. Interaction is the dynamic of the assemblage, where things are joined *up*. But correspondence is a joining *with*; it is not additive but contrapuntal, not “and . . . and . . . and” but “with . . . with . . . with.”

Now it is all very well to refute the classical separation of knowing from being, or of epistemology from ontology. Surely, since we owe our very existence to the world we seek to know, our knowledge must grow from within the crucible of our involvement in this world, in its relations and processes. Yet we have things to know only because they have arisen. They have somehow come into existence with the forms they momentarily have, and these forms are held in place thanks to the continual flux of materials across their emergent surfaces. Things *become*, as does our knowledge of them. It follows that our primary focus should not be on the *ontologies* of things but on their *ontogenies*, not on philosophies but on generations of being. This shift of focus has important political ramifications. For it suggests that things are far from closed to one another, each wrapped up in its own, ultimately impenetrable world of being. On the contrary, they are fundamentally open, and all are participants in one indivisible world of becoming. Multiple ontologies signify multiple worlds, but multiple ontogenies signify one world. And since, in their growth or movement, the things of this world answer to one another, or correspond, they are also responsible. All responsibility depends on responsiveness. In this regard, human beings have much to answer for, but not all humans are equally answerable. Here, the fashionable idea of the Anthropocene, denoting a new earth-historical era in which anthropogenic and geological processes have merged in their impacts and timescales, has the potential to mislead. For one thing, humanity does not act as one, but in different places, along with different nonhumans, to different effect. And for another thing, while the massive industrial and technological interventions of the present era might draw attention to the inseparability of the history of humans from the history of the earth, this is not a novel state of affairs. There has never been a time when human history has not been part of earth history. For as much as any other creature, we belong to this earth. Despite the fantasies of some space scientists, we have nowhere else to go. Let's have an art, then, that acknowledges the oneness of the world, and our historical responsibility for what goes on in it.

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CAROLINE A. JONES

In 1738, in a section of his book on Newton devoted to “The Soul and Its Ideas,” Voltaire accused the British empiricists of asserting that “Matter thinks,” a notion currently endorsed by humans ranging from Chinese President Xi Jinping to philosophers of “speculative realism.”¹ Xi and current philosophers are undoubtedly right, in a narrow sense. Cranial grey matter, white matter, glia, and those billions of other neurons distributed throughout the body (more numerous in the gut than the brain) fully participate in this thing we call *thinking*. To alter such dynamic matter—through pedagogical training, through repeated movement, through drugs, through art, through trauma (blunt or otherwise)—is to change the path of thought.

Materialism is of course distinct from matter itself. Whether “vibrant” or “dialectical,” it offers a system of thought, a position, a polemic. Locke was himself studiously agnostic on the matter of thinking matter, leaving it “an open question whether it is *matter* that receives the materials provided by the senses, and therefore whether *matter* thinks or not.”² Clearly, between matter and materialism there are things which become activated agents, in the manner of Latourian actor-networks—although Latour cares not whether his actants “think.” But reviving the question of matter thinking interests me, since it engages fundamental questions that drive contemporary neuroscience as well as a certain kind of expanded art history. I propose, for the purposes of this brief polemic, that it is a matter of finding the right kind of “things” that produce thinking—in short, how “isms” are made out of material.

Clearly, eighteenth-century thinkers had no idea, as Locke and Voltaire were the first to admit. Twenty-first-century scientists are getting some clues, but only when they supplement the advanced phrenology of the fMRI with attention to libidinal structures that fix attention, linked to durational processing that opera-

1. The Philosophers, who, in Consequence of this, have endeavoured to prove that Matter thinks of itself, have been still more mistaken; for the Vulgar only erred without Reasoning, whereas these Philosophers went wrong upon Principles: No one of them has ever yet been able to discover anything in Matter, which could prove Understanding essential to its Nature. Mr. Locke appears to be the only one who has taken off the Contradiction between Matter and Thinking, by having recourse to the Creator of all Thought and all Matter, and by saying modestly, Cannot he who is able to do every Thing, make a material Being, an Atom, or an Element of Matter think?

Voltaire, “Of the Soul and Its Ideas,” ch. 6 of *The Metaphysics of Sir Isaac Newton: Or, a Comparison Between the Opinions of Sir Isaac Newton and Mr. Leibnitz*, trans. David Erskine Baker (London: Doddsley of Pall Mall, 1747), p. 40. The original French edition of *Éléments de la philosophie de Newton* was published in 1738. The Chinese president was recently in the news asserting that brain matter would yield the state’s choice of the next Dalai Lama; for speculative realism, see the work of Graham Harman, notably the series he edits for Edinburgh University Press.

2. Gloss provided by Friedrich Albert Lange, *History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Present Importance*, vol. 2 in *The English and Foreign Philosophical Library*, trans. Ernest Chester Thomas (London: Trübner & Co., 1880), p. 17.

tionalizes the minute differences in wavelength-triggered firing sequences to determine something like “red” as a coherent sensation (to take only one example). Far from the piano-hammer theory of action and response that constituted the romance of the neuron (evident in germ in the cogito of Descartes or the stained tissues of Golgi and Cajal, full blown in the fantasies of neuroaesthetics), there is now attention being paid to the complex processes that consciousness entails: chemicals in flux, re-uptake sequences, and electromagnetic relays that return a fair amount of mystery and wonder to matter.

This is an argument that matter and things *can* produce epistemologies, but only in combination: life-forms and “inert” substances braid together, becoming activated by energies fluctuating between them over time. Subject to chemicals and electromagnetic impulses that pulse matter into phase shifts we might call cognition in a human, photosynthesis in a plant, “quorum sensing” in a bacteria colony, and so forth, active matter seizes energy and inert material for its thinking. Object-oriented ontologies are useful analytic tools, particularly for art historians who might want to parse Olafur Eliasson’s statement that “paper wants to get back to its origins.”³ But we still need epistemology to get to the productive forces that have put paper on this earth in the first place: wood harvesting, pulping, and the human cultural priorities of rectangularity, flatness, and smoothness that gets “programmed” into the pulp. These are the kinds of forces that dialectical materialism might also want to address, examining the pressures that “make paper want” to return to its pristine, industrially produced state of flatness, or that lead it to “remember” an artist’s ingenious folds.

Matter thinks in different kinds of units that are themselves food for thought. Take the sum of artist plus critic plus work—for example, Pollock+Greenberg+Painting. As I’ve argued elsewhere, Greenberg wrote about Pollock’s early works in ways that then provoked the artist to arrange matter differently in subsequent works, the matter itself forcing changes in both painting and viewing subjects through its violent, visceral qualities. Theorized by a later critic as “energy made visible,” this dynamic, durational thing (“Jackson Pollock’s art”) could not have functioned as a cognitive object without the agency of discursive humans in the mix, making material talk in one way or another.⁴ Peter Galison’s work on Rorschach offers one key to such a hermeneutic: the category of the “projective test” is a veritable trading zone of materials made to talk and inhabit a specific Rorschachian episteme by successive human agents.⁵ Yes, these assemblages

3. Eliasson identified paper as exhibiting “an object-oriented ontology for children” in “remembering” its flat origins, recalling in particular John Cage concerts in which crumpled paper tried to uncrumple itself in front of a microphone. (Conversation with the author, January 28, 2015.)

4. Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). B. H. Friedman, *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972).

5. See the essays, respectively, by Jones and Galison, in *Things that Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, ed. Lorraine Daston (New York: Zone Books, 2004).

make it clear that agency belongs to matter itself (in the form of resistant materials, pigment, forensic indexicality, mute visuality), but equally can be brought to “talk” only by humans putting that matter into motion. Intellectually, this kind of move is not intended to counter the humanities but to thicken it.

For the art historian, of course, matter attracts thought when it condenses into very special things, *weird* things, that we designate as works of art. In his exegesis on thing and art, Martin Heidegger offered a key principle for our use: the work of art exists not to “represent” a world, but *to bring one into being*. Its agency is ontological. The working of this “art” begins in colloquy with the thing (e.g., the material constituents of canvas or wood, the “subject matter” of worker’s shoes, the stubborn sludge of pigment made viscous with oil or turpentine). But it does so only to distinguish itself from thingness and equipment—the working intentionally “opens up a *world* and keeps it abidingly in force. To be a work means to set up a world.”⁶ Art separates itself from earth’s “self-seclusion,” yet it also brings earth (material) and world (concept) together in vibratory tension: “World and earth are always intrinsically and essentially in conflict.” It is the work of art to bring world and earth together “in the unity of work-being.”⁷

Art has work to do, then, in the time of the Anthropocene. It has the job of mobilizing the useful mysteries of perception—how matter thinks—to bring the worlds of earth, *this and other potential* Earths, into being. Not as Heidegger’s dreaded, totalizing “world-picture,” but as Anthropocenic polymorphs that might, agonistically, evolve us up, helping us to become properly sensitive to the whole blooming, buzzing assemblage of intersecting worlds. This in order to avert the extinction of the comparatively rare form of consciousness that seems to be able to think about its own matter, thinking.

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6. Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Perennial/HarperCollins, 2001), p. 39.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 53–54.

ALEX KITNICK

We must constantly strive to ENRICH abstraction till it is almost plain life, or rather to get deeply enough immersed in material life to experience the shaping power amongst its vibrations, and to accentuate and perpetuate these.

Wyndham Lewis, *BLAST* 2

Today, it seems, we are in the midst of a rematerialization of the art object.¹ Everywhere around us we hear of an interest in materiality, the wonder of “vibrant matter,” a fascination before the object. But what does this rematerialization mean? Is it simply a return to craftsmanship and connoisseurship, or does it demarcate a new avenue for artistic practice?

The very idea of rematerialization is indebted to Lucy Lippard’s essay “The Dematerialization of the Art Object,” which she wrote with John Chandler in 1968.² In that text she spoke of Conceptual art’s “nonvisual emphases,” and the way it privileged ideas over objects. Things had dematerialized to such an extent, in fact, that Lippard wondered how artists would get their ideas across at all. “Thus the difficulty of abstract conceptual art,” she wrote, “lies not in the idea but in finding the means of expressing that idea so that it is immediately apparent to the spectator.”³ In truth, the supports that Conceptual artists found for their work—the file cards and gases, the instructions and the photographs—were part and parcel of their project. If this art challenged its status as both object and commodity, perhaps most importantly it sought to disperse itself into larger systems, whether environmental, financial, or social in nature.

Things change quickly in the art world, however, and just over ten years later, the editors of the Toronto-based *FILE* magazine—the artist collective General Idea—were already speaking about the rematerialization of art. In “The Re-materialization of the Art Object,” a somewhat ambivalent editorial in *FILE*’s Fall 1981 issue, General Idea discussed “New Painting and Drawing, Nuova Immagine, New Image, New Wave, and already the Trans Avant Guardia” as a kind of return of the repressed. Material, at least in the conventional forms of painting and sculpture, was back. “Just after just about everyone just about believed that art objects had—*poof*—been

1. The ideas in this text were first presented at the Anonymous conference organized by Sylvia Lavin at the Princeton University School of Architecture on November 9, 2013.

2. Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of the Art Object,” *Art International* (February 1968), reprinted in Lippard, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971). Lippard expanded on her thesis three years later in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

3. Lippard, *Changing*, p. 271.

stripped bare, cracked, dematerialized, what should start showing up in the studios, galleries, museums, magazines and collections but ‘things,’” they wrote. What did it mean? “Some see this development as retrenchment. A retreat. Ripples in the tidal wave emanating from an increasingly neo-conservative world.”⁴ But *FILE* saw things from a somewhat different angle: after a decade of exploring alternative formats (TV, newsletters, magazines), artists had begun to accept materiality and thingness as one of the conventions—if not one of the clichés—of artistic practice. Dematerialization, they reasoned, was a kind of flight from reality, even if a utopian one. Rematerialization returned one to the conventions of art, which now had to be critically explored rather than cynically celebrated.

The concept of rematerialization, then, is not new, and it has even more recent histories that continue to speak to us today. In a 2008 blog post on *Rhizome*’s website, the critic Ed Halter used the term “the Rematerialization of Art” to discuss a turn within digital and net art practices that had emerged in the 1990s.⁵ Artists, he noted, had traded in an interest in websites and code for the clunky hardware of monitors and laptops. Where earlier filmmakers such as Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice had pointed to the material substrate of film, these artists now pointed to the hardware supporting digital interfaces: the screens and projectors through which they appeared became a significant part of their work’s installation.⁶ Surely, this shift is significant, but today rematerialization has reached a fever pitch. Hardware has given way to heavy metals; raw material and crude matter have taken center stage.

Take Walead Beshty, who ships copper cubes around the world that inevitably accumulate the handprints of shippers and other middlemen. Fit to the sizes of FedEx packaging, his materials speak the language of electrical currents and financial currency alike. Or look at Sam Lewitt’s contribution to the 2012 Whitney Biennial, *Fluid Employment*, which consists of a field of ferrofluid and computer parts watched over by the warm jets of office fans. The landscape format of the work possesses a nervous twitch, a crude metaphor for increasingly precarious forms of employment (of which artistic practice is certainly one). In both these works, the hand of the artist is displaced; the work itself is presented as raw material to be opened up to other hands: those of shippers, for example, or even more abstract forces of labor. Importantly, both works share an interest in the processing of materials, an idea that is perhaps made most explicit in Lucy Raven’s 2009 film *China Town* in which we see rare earth metals pulled up from pits in Nevada, shipped across the ocean, processed in China, and put to work the world over.⁷ Again, materials and circulation are key. As opposed to the ubiquitous and often cynical interest in ceramics that the art world has witnessed in recent years, these

4. “The Re-materialization of the Art Object,” *FILE* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1981), n.p.

5. Ed Halter, “The Rematerialization of Art,” *Rhizome* (April 1, 2008), <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2008/apr/1/the-rematerialization-of-art/>.

6. Ed Halter, “The New Materialism,” *Printed Project* 15 (2012), pp. 87–91.

7. Composed entirely of still images, the video is equally aware of its own labor.

works take a critical position on the rematerialization of art. While critiquing craft, their embodiment of networks simultaneously serves to counter a remarkably prevalent interest in the immaterial—a technophile’s dream. Rematerialized works of art split the difference between these two equally regressive tendencies by insisting on the hard stuff out of which our world is built as well as the “shaping power” that gives it form. The two can no longer be separated from one another. In this sense rematerialization may not be so far from Lippard’s dematerialization after all: systems and sludge, mind and matter, are forced to gather in unruly ways. One wonders what shape things might take.

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SAM LEWITT

My work is not particularly influenced by any specific theory associated with the “new materialisms.” Nevertheless, I recognize the desire for a renewed account of the efficacy of material structures that function independently of the circuit of representations associated with linguistic or specular models of subject formation. In publicly recognizing this I’m immediately claimed by another interest, namely in the way premature bindings of varied theoretical standpoints function for an art world constantly in search of “new” theory in which to recognize itself. Currents of thought converge in the theory-commodity, congealing into the historical form shared by the subject that is in a position to consume it—no matter how trenchantly the distinction of the subject is expunged by a conceptual apparatus that wants to take steel wool to its outlines.

It may then be welcome that questioning human experience’s correspondence with worlds of material forces and agents is one of the central concerns of the “new” materialism. The problem it takes up—reality’s anteriority to human cognition—is rehearsed in different ways throughout the history of twentieth-century materialist thought. It appears as much in Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* (2008) as in Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909) and Lucio Coletti’s *Marxism and Hegel* (1974), to name a few. The precise relation (or nonrelatedness) of the rational and the real is at issue in these works. Emphasis lands in each case on an account of reality, which asserts that any historical form of theoretical consciousness about nature is preceded by a rich world of events, whose consistency does not fundamentally depend on the subject’s capacity for conceptual synthesis, but which is knowable by it. While the subject’s special status may be demoted here, it is also conceptually ramified by its capacity to find the cognitive resources to relate to a world of inhuman forces and events outside of its experience. This is a situation it must cope with using the means it has at its disposal.

Historical materialism deals with social relations as the grounds of those means. It attempts to critically dissolve the appearance of natural priority down to the historical relations that govern a society’s mode of dealing with nature, the means it mobilizes to reproduce those relations and the concepts that flow from those dealings. As a critique of the roles played by knowledge and practice in the value form, it eschews the nomination of strong ontological candidates in order to function in the capacity of a *methodological postulate* concerning the historical transformation of social being.¹ The understanding of historical material-

1. As Moishe Postone writes regarding his systematic reconstruction of late Marx: “In his mature works, Marx rigorously treats the categories of capitalist society as historically specific. In working out the non-ontological, historically specific character of the core relations grasped by Marx’s basic categories, [attention can be drawn] to their transhistorical, reified modes of appearance.” Neither value nor labor function as exclusive or historically stable concepts. The form taken by labor as a social category arises—and comes into conflict—with the historically specific system for capital’s self-valorization, making the necessary incompleteness of the relationship between value and labor under capital the central feature of experience. According to Postone, the overcoming of capitalism, which is the

ism as methodological postulate comes from Alfred Sohn-Rethel's critique of the scission between intellectual and manual labor.² This division, he claims, instantiates a norm of universal, timeless logic for science: a norm that is the direct product of historical reasoning. Sohn-Rethel is interested in a critique not of scientific rigor, but of the relation that scientific investigation has to the social forms assumed under the domination of social relations by the principle of exchange. It is a methodological critique of the philosophical epistemology of science as conditioned by an epoch that links scientificity to technocracy and epistemic neutrality.

Materialism understood as a methodological postulate therefore must remain as mutable as the social forms and practices it makes a claim upon. It is a familiar idea that historical materialism breaks the seal on social representations that appear to be given by nature. Yet it would only raise the stakes to understand method itself as an unstable historical product, one which accepts the challenge of continually *being broken in on* by processes and discoveries that force the recomposition of its theoretical standpoint. "Method" in this case pertains not to neutral, theoretical description, but to seeking out possibilities for political contradiction in a complex, shifting field of relations.

This seems all the more pressing today when the relation between historical construction and naturally occurring structure seems to actualize old-fashioned allegories of the commodity as nature. The gene and the cell have for some time supplanted the shop window as the abstracted elements of valorization processes: from Monsanto seed crops to the genetically engineered cells of livestock, the life-extending pharmaceuticals ritually ingested by Silicon Valley gurus, and the chemically desiccated organs of the people that make their products. There is nothing new about capital pressing against its own organic limits. What is new is the seeming degree of manipulability of the organism itself. The commodification of the lowest levels of matter, the construction of biogenetically and neutrally constructed materials, foregrounds the need for both a compelling account of processes intrinsic to matter and a critical methodology for organizing resistance to the abstract system of value that attempts to master it for its own ends.

This is also the case for macroscale environmental crises: there is also a need for new means of grasping the immense contradiction between the irrational global capitalist ideology of indefinite growth and the rapid destruction of material resources. What is thrown into relief, in addition to just how limited the range of atmospheric tolerance humans have to a catastrophe of their own making, is the need for cognitive tools to understand the way that catastrophes spurred by energy consumption are co-extensive with crises in valorization. As George Caffentzis argued during the "energy crisis" of the late 1970s, these cata-

overcoming of the value form, would mean the abolition of labor. See Moishe Postone, "Critique and Historical Transformation," *Historical Materialism* 12, no. 3 (2004), pp. 53–72.

2. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1978).

strophic conditions are accelerated by capital's race around the globe toward a receding bottom line, to gain the same control over the energy-commodity that it once had over work.³

From cellular and synaptic to global and geological timescales, what is less secure than ever is the possibility of directly sensible representation of these conditions. Here is one place where artworks might intervene—neither in providing representations nor in retreating to the sublime exaltation of conceptual un-presentability, but in articulating the mechanisms that enforce the exclusion of sensory experience from knowledge, taking up what these crises in representability push to the margins: to present what is materially incommensurable within the presentational powers of the concept.

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3. George Caffentzis, "The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse," in *In Letters of Blood and Fire: Work, Machines, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013), pp. 11–58.

HELEN MOLESWORTH

What do the Anthropocene and climate change mean for the museum storage vault, one of the last untouched strongholds of the Western colonialist project? This question currently plagues me, though, honestly, the daily tasks of running a curatorial program—which now entails, as we all know, a hefty amount of travel designed to keep one abreast of the new as such, as well as the multiplying narratives of both modernity and contemporaneity—mitigate against time for reflection on the museum’s core value of preservation. But as my personal carbon footprint expands daily (even as we try to move the museum to LED lighting to save on energy), I can’t help but worry about how much art is currently being made (more than ever before in human history), and wonder about how much of it is expected to end up in museum storage. It’s a not-so-open secret that the storerooms of most museums are bursting at the seams, the result of decades of generosity on the part of collectors and artists, foundations and estates, all eager to see their work cared for in perpetuity. Most curators, myself included, tend toward an inherited model of collecting, in which MoMA operates as a kind of ideal: one of everything, and more of the great ones. This model—which even MoMA can no longer achieve—is based on the idea of the encyclopedic museum, a building capable of housing the entirety of humanity’s creative output. Once the driving imperative behind this form of acquisition was a fantasy of mastery, bracketed by truth and timelessness. Now I sense the motivation is fueled more by anxiety; as the stories we tell shift and expand, growing more complicated at every turn, fear reigns: we collect a lot and we do so as a form of hedging our bets (we might not want to show it *now*, but maybe in the future it will be *really* important). This model of perpetual growth is both a symptom and a cause of the Anthropocene and is, as we know but do not admit, untenable because it is unsustainable.

Often when I present works for acquisition I talk about a “message in a bottle” to future generations. I mention that the Latin root of the word “curate” means “to care for.” I admit to feeling humbled by adding to a legacy much greater than myself. I believe all of those things. But I am increasingly aware that when I perform this act I am behaving as if the world has not changed. I am participating, in other words, in the same death drive that leads me to drive a car every day, the same death drive that allows us to build in Evacuation Zone 1 in Manhattan or to water gardens in Los Angeles. When I stroll through the halls of the world’s great museums I still have romantic thoughts of *ars longa, vita brevis*, but walking through contemporary storage provokes another temporal dimension: How long can this go on?

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ALEXANDER NEMEROV

Writing about objects, we do not neglect the human. Endowing objects with life and even ethical status, we bestow ourselves upon these hapless things. They are hapless before we arrive—another sign that all along, even before we get to them, they live by our minds alone.

The value we assign them—the utilitarian value of the handle, the headier competence of the brain—is ours alone to give. They sit there before we arrive at the hardware store or the museum, ready for us, but unable to spring from the shelves until we spring for them.

The life we give them is rarely like Dr. Frankenstein breathing lightning inspiration into his monster. If only it were that glamorous. Usually we cannot say that we are haunted by the objects that we make, that our minds have gotten out of hand with all the magic of this making, like Mickey Mouse overwhelmed by the buckets and mops in “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” episode of *Fantasia*. Then would their ethical status crowd upon us and maybe kill us. Then we would be set upon by these things dissatisfied and wild with the rage of their otherness. Then they would make us more human by overwhelming us with our insignificance in the scheme of things.

But ours is a more confident laboratory. We are always the switch-flippers, and the currents we control are usually set at tepid levels to keep us in command. The objects we make as scholars rarely are endowed with enough life to rise from the beds of their articles and books to become truly threatening or beautifully and poignantly strange. At most, these objects feebly ask for a glass of water to pass the time and satisfy their fitful thirst. Maybe they hold forth for a moment or two to say something about their rights. But all along it is a wonder that they can string together a sentence or two.

They are uncharismatic, and the twilight consciousness we consign them to is one way we do not neglect the human. Most of the time, we make damn sure to unplug the sockets and disarm the mechanisms—perhaps leaving these innards out all together—that would make objects into our genuine rivals. There is too much egotism involved to let the things take control. Even though we say we sign over our rights to them, we really are the imperial administrators to these things, marveling like proud parents at their mimicry of our ways. The docility of the satellites is what makes the NASA scientists smile.

Of course all of us now—scholars and otherwise—are overwhelmed by objects. The television remote cups in the hand like the slippery stone of a riverbed. We feel the comfort of it, but we are controlled. The trout swim in the stream and we stream in the currents without which we would drown on dry land. Take away my Internet and I gasp. The objects are mine because they made me need them.

But this is only the general channel of experience now. The specific endowment of objects with life—the transfer back the other way, where we plug them in

rather than the other way around—is a sign of the writer’s or artist’s mind at work. The stupid things are even a bit surprised to be seized by the scruff of their necks and endowed with the volatility of unpredictable thought.

The disappointment is only that they usually do not think very well, or very interestingly. On those rare occasions when objects really come after us, and seem to live without us, poised and elegant and quite on their own (think of Gogol’s Nose—how debonair and independent he is!), that is when they—and we—live most well.

ALEXANDER NEMEROV’s most recent book is *Soulmaker: The Times of Lewis Hine* (Princeton, 2016).

MICHAEL NEWMAN

I am intrigued by the confluence of Speculative Realism (henceforth SR) with the prevalence of fiction in contemporary art. It's curious that approaches to the world that seek to make some kind of contact with a materiality that is independent of the human subject can only do so by having recourse to fiction, which, so far as we know, only humans produce. In literature, speculation has typically been conducted through science fiction. The French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, who asserted in what has become practically the founding tenet of SR that we need to think the universe outside the "correlation" with the human,¹ has made a distinction between science fiction, in which the anticipated future is consistent with the world of scientific knowledge, and "extro-science fiction," which posits a world "where experimental science is impossible in principle," rendering scientific laws themselves, rather than any given results of an experiment, contingent.² He mentions Philip K. Dick's *Ubik* "in which the real ages without any apparent logic" as an example. What this implies is that while we may grasp the materiality of a given world through scientific laws and a phenomenological consciousness, at the more fundamental level of the condition of universes as such, this does not hold. In that case speculative fiction would trump science as a mode of presentation of fundamental reality or materiality.

We could divide approaches to materiality and reality into those that seek a substratum or a structure or network of relations and those that maintain the status and integrity of the object. It is easier to see how the subject may be reduced to matter or relations than to understand how an integral object may be maintained independently of a subject. The approach of the "Object-Oriented Ontology" branch of SR associated with the American philosopher Graham Harman, who cut his teeth on Heidegger, seeks not so much materiality, which involves reducing the object downward toward its constituents, as a peculiar kind of "realism" in that aspect of objects that, according to him, withdraws from the human relation and indeed from relations with other objects. Harman is fond of giving Borges-like lists of disparate objects, and at the same time he is a fan of H. P. Lovecraft, the author of "weird fiction" on whom he has written a book.³ While the list reduces structured relations to the minimum, fiction provides the possibility, on the one hand, of approaching the "weird" as that which seems not to fit human categories or that creates an inexplicable disturbance in the known world, and, on the other, of a relation that is strictly speculative, that generates worlds that while thinkable are not subject to the truth procedures of science: that is to say, such fiction is based either on a nonrelation, or on a relation that is not with anything to which the human can relate.

1. See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London; New York: Continuum, 2008).

2. Quentin Meillassoux, *Science Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2015).

3. Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2012).

The speculative turn has been much influenced by the British philosopher Nick Land, currently a journalist in China.⁴ Land, who influenced the Chapman Brothers' Goya-esque vision of the atrocities of the twentieth century, tended to speak of some underlying dark force or cosmic energy. He formulated the idea of "hyperstition," whereby, rather than fiction imitating reality, the opposite is the case—recall that "cyberspace" appeared in a story of 1982 and then the novel *Neuromancer* (1984) by William Gibson before it became a reality. Appropriately enough, SR is the first philosophical movement to emerge as a network largely through Internet blogs.

The Iranian writer Reza Negarestani used the technique of hyperstition with an occult twist in his novel *Cyclonopedia* (2008), about the role of oil in an apocalyptic geo-political conflict between Islam for which it is "tellurian flux upon which everything is mobilized in the direction of submission to a desert where no idol can be erected and all elevations must be burned down," as opposed to the "motor-grease" of "techno-capitalism."⁵ His brand of speculative and indeed prophetic theory-fiction was surely anticipated by Robert Smithson over three decades before, including in its combination of geological and occult interests and for that matter its nerdiness. Smithson was a reader of the fictions of J. G. Ballard—the modern harbinger of all the speculative science fictions. Tacita Dean has drawn attention to this role of fiction to her own work, and in particular to the relevance of W. G. Sebald's novels using photographs, where fictions and contingency destabilize each other. If Sebald investigated the traces of historical trauma by means of a form of quasi-fiction that evokes pre-Enlightenment antiquarianism, the SR writers use speculative fictions to confront a "geo-trauma" that lies at once far behind and imminently ahead, the pre- and post-human.

If geology and evolution in the nineteenth century by hugely extending the chronology of the physical world and embedding the human part in the animal and ultimately more basic life forms rendered the bible a fiction, SR reads the human impact on the earth in the Anthropocene as an anticipation of coming catastrophe and extinction, so trauma is set in the future. This new speculative form of realism is not empiricism, since it involves a view on history that is perhaps the inversion of the Christian redemptive scheme, which Hegel entwined with enlightenment, but this comes coupled with an emphasis on sheer contingency over reason, perhaps an even deeper inversion. The downplaying of the human and of subjective experience, which risks the assimilation of SR into a capitalism that seeks to squeeze and appropriate surplus value from every aspect of supposedly individual human subjectivity, may be symptomatic of the desire for relief from the burden of contemplating the present suffering of the global exploited, war victims and stateless, and an intolerable future with no prospect of collective human action to avoid it.

4. See Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012).

5. Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity With Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008).

The history of the role of fiction in art since the '60s has yet to be written, but will no doubt follow the recent interest in artists' novels,⁶ and SR might well end up as a part of that history. Today fiction provides the meeting-ground for art and philosophy where the unknown, whether it comes from outside, below or the future—or all three like “The Thing” of John Carpenter’s 1982 film—is like the void of nonrelation around a trauma circumscribed by constructions and fabrications. This also means that fiction is not so much the atrophy as the hypertrophy of the human.

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6. In the interim, see *Artist Novels: The Book Lovers Publication*, ed. David Maroto and Joanna Zielinska (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014).

SPYROS PAPAPETROS

An object and a subject: the first signaled by a square split in the middle by a “perpendicular” line, the second miniaturized into a spiral squiggle set parallel to the object’s geometric symbol. Below, the miniscule human figure appears to “carry” the symbolic object on its head as “adornment” or “costume,” and further down it is “to be carried” away by stepping on and being transferred by the thingly square as if the latter were a magic carpet. Finally, at the bottom, object and subject merge into one composite entity when the spring-like figure “imitates” and “wraps” itself inside the square by “identifying” with its central axis. Once the



“perpendicular” turns from horizontal to vertical, gravity is once more restored and transference is balanced by stasis. Movement now turns inward as it runs through the immobilized subject. The subject loses its spatial independence and organic self, yet gains in strength and energy potential by its “envelopment (*Einhüllen*)” and prosthetic enhancement by the object’s inorganic cover.

There is a vague symmetry in this illustrated formulation extracted from Aby Warburg’s “Fragments on Expression,” the art historian’s collection of over four hundred aphorisms on psychological aesthetics written between 1888 and 1905.¹ Here we witness the gradual inscription of the subject by an object in four successive iterations in which the fourth complements the first, and where the second and third are figurative inversions of each other. The formal logic of the square describes not only the ontological extension of the subject but also the epistemological pattern on which such transformation is constructed. Just as all sides of a square are equal, so too are the four stages of this formulation equivalent and potentially reversible; they are variations, relational possibilities that can partially co-exist with one another. A circle could be developing inside the square to indicate there is no linear progress.

It would initially appear that Warburg’s array of subject-object relations is based on the principles of polarity: O.[b]ject and S.[u]bject, square and squiggle, parallel and “perpendicular,” “transfer” and “being transferred.” And yet equally present is the work of analogy, balancing, and “compensation (*Ausgleich*)” that drive these polar

1. The original text of the aphorism reads: “11.III.96. S[an] fr[ancisco]: O-S/tragen, Tracht, Schmuck/getragen werden/Einhüllen, nachahmen, sich mit dem Perpendikel identifizieren.” Aby Warburg, *Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde*, ed. Ulrich Pfisterer and Hans Christian Hönes (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), p. 147 and fig. 14.

opposites to touch, support, transport, and contain one another. The reason I offer this illustrated example as a response to a questionnaire on object-oriented and new materialist discourses is that in this instance subjectivity does not oppose objectivity (meaning the condition of being or becoming an object); on the contrary, they are in dialogue, or, as Warburg suggests, they “envelop” each other. Warburg’s aphoristic formulation is representative not only of an intimate communication between subjects and objects but also of an intense communication between epistemological disciplines, in this case art and cultural history with anthropology and philosophical aesthetics, converging on a comparative study of human artifacts and their effects on the human body.²

In his voluminous *Style*, Gottfried Semper (whose texts on artifacts and ornament are major sources for Warburg’s physiological aesthetics) elaborately describes the imprint of the bodily subject on an object’s form, as when the upper rim of a drinking vessel slightly bends to anticipate the contact with the lower lip, or when the base of the hydria broadens to facilitate its transport on top of an Athenian woman’s head (another sign of “transference” anticipating Warburg’s “identification of the perpendicular” between the subject’s and the object’s gravitational axes). For Semper and a host of nineteenth-century natural philosophers, humans and objects could only resume communication by stripping down to reach their lowest common denominator, gravity, the force that binds organic and inorganic bodies to the earth and realigns each of them toward a common ecological trajectory. During this physical contact between subject, object, and material environment, agency is not fixed but constantly transferred.

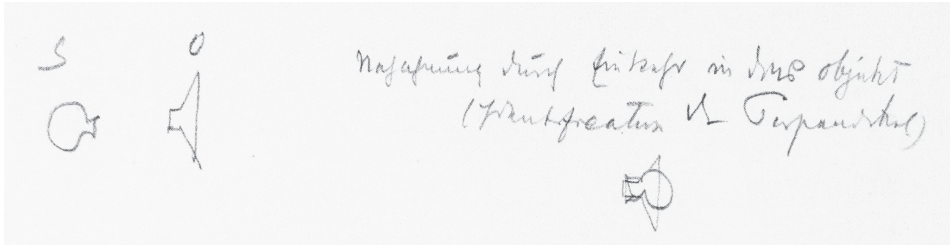
In spite of its graphic allegiance to models of the natural sciences, it would be hard to describe such materialism as ahistorical. Semper’s and Warburg’s reinscriptions of the object/subject conundrum follow a string of cataclysmic changes that span almost half a century provoked by the effects of industrial production and the global circulation of artifacts between colonies and metropolitan centers. While carefully arranged in museum collections alongside ancient specimens from recent archaeological discoveries and immobilized inside glass vitrines, part of the animist properties of these displaced rudiments survive. Once socially vivid in their original cultures, the same depleted artifacts are reanimated as models for the analogical comparison with (and eventually the design implementation of) the domestic artifacts of capitalist modernity’s *electro-animist* networks.

Tellingly, another Warburg aphorism, written two days after the previous one, returns to a similar “imitative” process by portraying the subject with the curvilinear symbol of an electric bulb (patented by Edison in 1880) and the object as the corresponding lamp-socket and/or shade-reflector.³ The perpendicular alignment of these two artifact-ideograms produces an illumination. The subject automatically “lights up” by its insertion into an object of matching circumference that facilitates energy transmission. The circular aperture of the lamp’s conical reflector constitutes the sub-

2. Warburg’s aphorism is written in San Francisco on March 11, 1896, following a trip to the Southwest; his theoretical propositions on the extension of the human subject by means of “costume (*Tracht*)” and “bodily ornament (*Schmuck*)” draw from his observations of ritual dances in the Pueblos.

3. “Nachahmung durch Einkehr in das Objekt (Identifikation d. Perpendikel)/Nachahmung durch Umfangbestimmung (oft Einkehr).” Warburg, *Fragmente*, p. 148 and figs. 15 and 25.

ject's and the object's common "*Umfangbestimmung*"—the geometric definition of their ideational periphery, as well as the radius of their common epistemological extension. Epistemology does not eclipse ontology in this formulation; rather, they appear as consecutive layers cladding a composite object.



Warburg's electrical graph leads us from objects and subjects to networks—force systems that transform all bodies, organic and inorganic, into energy containers and allow them to project beyond their individual material contours. This is the moment when contemporary sociological theorists reinvent animist conceptions of matter beyond individual “object” or personal souls towards a more collective understanding of agency. Prominent examples include Lévy-Bruhl's “law of participation,” implying that subjects are part of a primordial collectivity that allows them to partake in multiple forms of being, including those of objects, as well as Durkheim's idea of the “germinative plasm,” the immaterial substance that connects the members of the social organism beyond individual property or possession.⁴ Perhaps the diachronic appeal of animate epistemologies from archaic to modern social groups lies precisely in their veiled collective dimension that, contrary to commodity fetishism's fixation on the overvaluation of individual artifacts, seeks to mobilize and extend communication from interpersonal relations to reciprocal exchanges with and through objects.

All that is to say there may be little that is new in new materialisms, but one of its unacknowledged strengths lies in its connections with object theories of the past, even if some of the disciplinary premises of these theories have been long refuted. It would be intriguing if decades after the pronounced “death” of the authorial subject we were to experience a resurgence of theories of subjectivity as a reaction to the reanimation of objects. As though anticipating such a return, one of the ideograms used by Warburg in his aphorisms to illustrate his “physics of thinking” (*Physik des Denkens*) is the seesaw, an apparatus that signals the periodic reversal of power dynamics between attitudes, ideologies, movements, and discourses: what is now up will soon move down, propelled by the weight of its polar opposite; and yet this very palindromic shift has been already prescribed by the internal logic of an object.⁵

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4. See my entry on “Animism,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 91–96.

5. Warburg, *Fragmente*, pp. 56–57, figs. 2 and 23.

SUSANNE PFEFFER

Scientific knowledge such as the theory of infinite sets in mathematics compels us to call into question the post-Kantian concept of reality. We are forced to think a reality beyond perception and beyond the classical dualisms—perception and thought, subject and object, nature and culture, man and woman. Bidding farewell to this traditional and rigid dualistic order amounts to a liberation of thought and action. Dualisms of all kinds have been debunked as mere constructions. In an age characterized by ecological crises, profound socioeconomic changes, and technological innovation, it becomes possible to posit equality not just as a desirable end and the goal of human striving, but as a presupposition and an axiom valid for all forms of life. Where the Enlightenment tradition too often merely affirmed man's right to an untrammelled conquest of planet Earth, we're only beginning to glimpse the outline of a cosmos in which all beings deserve to flourish.

To conceive matter as inherently intelligible is an attempt to overcome the primacy of the human and to explore a post-human universe. There is a world after finitude, the exploration of which transforms our understanding of what it means to be contemporary. Insofar as it shows itself unwilling to embark on the discovery of this world, contemporary art has to come to an end.

These speculative endeavors through matter and beyond human finitude pave the way for new and seminal analyses of art, the idea of the work, the dynamic of reception and perception, drawing on a wholly different conceptual toolkit. They provide a new aesthetic language that, ultimately, allows us to defend the continued relevance of art and the human sciences.

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GREGOR QUACK

“Speculative Realism” is perhaps the most prevalent philosophical buzzword among young curators and artists today. To be sure, most of the philosophers originally associated with the term have long strained to distance themselves both from it and from each other, leaving art world chatter with an impoverished, smallest-common-denominator version of their ideas¹—one defined only *ex negativo* by a distaste for “correlationism,” the supposed assumption of all modern philosophy “that thought cannot have access to things-in-themselves, only to things as they appear for us.”² The simplistic curatorial thinking that can follow an overly eager adoption of Speculative Realist talking points was exemplified by a booklet published for a recent group exhibition in Mexico City. The show’s intention, the curator wrote, was to answer one question: “What would be an exhibition of things flat-out alone, requiring the presence of no one?”³

In September 2013, the exhibition *Speculations on Anonymous Materials* opened at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel. A compelling attempt by the new director Susanne Pfeffer to investigate formal and intellectual parallels between emerging art scenes in Berlin, London, and New York, the title prompted most critics to reduce the show to being somehow “about” Speculative Realism.⁴ Seen this way, it exemplified the contradiction that arises when an exhibition is thought to exemplify philosophical ideas set on decentering and even devaluing subjective, human experience. Most straightforwardly, many of the show’s most memorable pieces contained representations of human body parts. For his installation *Creative Hands* (2013), Josh Kline assembled a number of hands of “creative professionals” from his social circle, each holding some kind of tool, such as an iPhone or a bottle of hand sanitizer. Shaping both hand and tool from the same flesh-colored silicone, Kline stretches the Freudian interpretation of the tool as the body’s prosthetic extension to the extreme point where the two are barely distinguishable. Far from simply abandoning the subject in favor of objects, the piece seems set on mapping the changing relationship between the two, a project that requires an understanding of objects as *both* self-sufficient and beholden to human interpretation.

Both through individual works like Kline’s and through its central curatorial decisions, the show in Kassel seemed to demonstrate that few formats are less well suited to “challenge the centrality of human subjectivity” than temporary exhibitions of contemporary art, whose rotating displays, wall texts, and well-considered lighting

1. See Ray Brassier, “Speculative Autopsy,” in Peter Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon’s New Clothes* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014).

2. Mark Fisher, “Speculative Realism,” *Frieze*, May 11, 2009, http://blog.frieze.com/speculative_realism/.

3. Vincent Normand, *Sinking Islands* (Mexico City: LABOR, 2012), <https://www.scribd.com/doc/100686320/Sinking-Islands-BOOK>.

4. See Jörg Heiser, “Mein Rindfleisch wird aus reinem Marmor sein,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 12, 2013, <http://www.faz.net/-gqz-7kdtm>.

arrangements cannot help but betray a desire for spectatorship. Visitors were provided with an extensive interpretative guidebook. Many participating artists were asked to contribute a personal statement to the exhibition's catalog. It even became possible to read the exhibition's distribution of works throughout the Fridericianum's sprawling space as a correlationist move. Pfeffer drew connections between artworks by overlapping their sound tracks and even smells. Defying the recent tendency to consider the flat installation shot as the curator's primary product, Pfeffer's skillful installation emphasized and implied the physically present visitor. The exhibition demonstrated, in short, that the better an exhibition is at performing its constitutive functions of presenting and communicating art to an interested public, the less it proves a faithful embodiment of Speculative Realist ideas.

I do not mean to dismiss the legitimate theoretical concerns behind the various philosophies subsumed under the Speculative Realist label. Much of my academic education has been structured by a simple political distinction: whereas conservative scholars care about things (money, consumer goods, artworks), their progressive counterparts are focused on the people around them (workers, artists, consumers, spectators). Today, there is no shortage of indicators that this facile binary has outlived its usefulness. In the aftermath of police violence in Ferguson and Baltimore, right-wing commentators went through countless variations of the gun lobby slogan "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." By suggesting that the riots were the work of a few disgruntled teenagers, pundits sought to deflect attention from the role played by the absurdly militarized equipment wielded by a local police force. By the same token, it was progressives who argued that the violence was not merely the work of a few "bad apple" cops, but rather the result of poorly designed institutions. While activists and demonstrators were quick to adopt such pragmatic ontologies, academics have been grateful for the additional impulse from philosophy to reinvigorate stalling projects of institutional critique.

In the case of the art world, however, there is an added complication. If contemporary curatorial discourse is both eager and ill equipped to accommodate even simplified versions of Speculative Realist ideas, I suspect this has to do with the fact that the art world is already full of places "requiring the presence of no one." Recent decades have seen the rise of dedicated tax-free art-storage units in free trade zones. Describing one of these units, the 435,000-square-foot Geneva Freeport, the *New York Times* wrote that "there is a wide belief among art dealers, advisers and insurers that there is enough art tucked away [t]here to create one of the world's great museums."⁵ Yet such spaces are unlike museums in every other way. Here, paintings and sculptures trucked in the night after Art Basel's preview day do not expect visitors. While their jpeg representations are traded at often staggering profit margins, to remove the actual objects from their climate-controlled crates becomes little more than a conservation risk. Even upon eventual resale, works can, in theory, remain fully packed, simply

5. <http://nyti.ms/1BuK0Ka>.

moving one floor up or down to another collector's storage vault. Here, an assignment of numerical value has long replaced more recognizably human value standards. For a new generation of abstract painters, it has become a promising marketing strategy not to disturb this process of value creation. The less emotional, philosophical or narrative information a work throws at its beholder, the less it encourages interpretation, the better. Like much of the art that has begun to fill them, the freeports of Switzerland have "decentered" the human subject not to create a more equal or just distribution of agency among humans and nonhumans, subjects and objects, but to erode the relationships between them.

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CHARLES RAY

Hello. This is Charles Ray. I want to tell you a story that's really quite scary. I hike every morning in the predawn hours. I do this for health reasons. I get up at 3:30 to be on the trailhead by 4:10–4:15. It's very dark at that hour, and during certain times of year it stays dark even after I finish my hike and am at home in my kitchen. I find it necessary for several reasons to carry a flashlight. The light not only illuminates the rocky trail, but is also a protective bubble, warning people and animals that I am about. I've gone through many brands of flashlight, but there was a time when I bought a rather inexpensive light that guaranteed 400 hours of use. This light was powered by a small-scale, camera-type, 9-volt disk battery. It was very difficult to believe this battery could last 400 hours. The light had many different modes; it could blink, the bottom of it could flash red, it could also signal S.O.S., and it had two different brightnesses. I found low power to be bright enough, and in the morning on the trail I would start out using it, illuminating my footfall.

Every day when I passed a certain rock, a somewhat large rock, not as large as a car, but bigger, I would say, than a motorcycle, my light would turn off. I would shake it, drum it against my thigh, but though I couldn't figure out why, it would only turn right back on when I pressed the on/off button. I wondered, "Could there be a magnetic field around this rock?" That seemed very improbable, and how would a magnetic field turn my light off? Maybe it would dim it, or make it flicker brighter and dimmer, but it seemed unlikely that it would turn it off completely, especially since, as I said, there are many different modes and things you can do with this flashlight depending on how you press the buttons: two quick presses is bright; three quick ones is even brighter; one long, held click and it flashes red; etc., etc. It was hard to believe that a magnetic field would just simply turn the light off. So then I wondered, "Could there be a spirit or a ghost about, some being traumatized in the vicinity of this rock, and I was disturbing it every morning with my light? And was it this specter that was turning the light off?" I thought that could be true, perhaps, but I don't really believe in ghosts, and I'm not sure you really do either.

I didn't rule out the possibility of a ghost completely, but I continued to investigate other phenomena that could cause my light to turn off. What struck me was that it always occurred at the same exact location, marked by this large rock. That seemed odd somehow, but it did make me think that it must have something to do with the rock. I wondered, "Am I turning the light off accidentally? Am I getting the weebie jeebies by this rock and my thumb is accidentally on purpose switching my light off?" That seemed improbable also. But one morning, when thinking about this possibility, I cupped my thumb between my flashlight and my hand, and held it, and the light still went off. I continued to ponder and wonder and think about this for several weeks, really, but I couldn't get to the bottom of it. One day I said, "Today I am going to think my way through this. I don't

believe in ghosts—it can't be a ghost, it can't be a magnetic field, it just can't be." If that were the case, the light would do other things rather than just switch itself off. I thought it was an interesting problem, and it totally occupied my thinking, I have to admit, for more than one day. But one particular morning I said, "Now I am going to really concentrate on this issue," and I thought and I thought and I thought. And then it occurred to me: switch the location of the problem. I had the problem at the rock; I had the problem located within a magnetic field or a ghost in and about the rock, or even within my own self switching off the light from a kind of nervousness at the rock, so let's put the problem somewhere else, in a different location. So I found another location; it was at home in my kitchen. I came back from my walk on another day after the light had turned off yet again. I switched the flashlight on in my kitchen before making breakfast, and I put it in a drawer and shut the drawer and forgot about it.

So it was on in that drawer, burning away, illuminating an unseen spoon. Before I went to work I opened the drawer and looked in and the light was off. Certainly the ghost hadn't followed me home and taken up residence inside my drawer. Certainly there wasn't a magnetic field in the drawer. No, I had located the source of the problem. The flashlight that lasts for 400 hours is a very high-tech object, and I unscrewed it all the way and took the battery out. And then I took other objects out. I took the lamp and the bulb out, and under them, under them and the battery, I found a very small, round circuit board. This was what controlled the light. This is what made the light, if you pressed the button three times fast, blink red, or whatever the exact configuration was, or blink SOS, etc., so it must have had another function. If you forgot the light and left it on in the trunk of your car, or left it on in the basement at the fuse box, it was guaranteed to last 400 hours, so it simply turned itself off in an hour if it was left unattended. Most people don't use a flashlight for an hour. They only go to the basement to change a fuse, or go outside with it to investigate a strange noise. Very few people use this type of light for a full hour. Usually it would only be on for that long if you left it on accidentally. And to save power it simply turned itself off. Being so regular in my pace on my walk, which I do day after day, I arrived at this rock exactly one hour after turning the light on at the trailhead each and every day. I had found the location of my problem, and somehow it was still just as scary as before I knew the solution.

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MATTHEW RITCHIE

Hey, if you don't really believe in or care about global warming, mass migration, famine and drought in faraway places, almost-impossible science, your body, the drugs you take, breath, light, or love, or even where your favorite coffee will soon stop coming from, maybe this new materiality is not for you. Otherwise it, by which I mean everything not you, is for you, by which I mean us, in it together, all the way to the end.

Environmental, technological, and social phase shifts at the beginning of the twenty-first century have generated a timely and synoptic "spread" of new philosophies of being, less specular than speculative, overtly addressing many of the embodied and disembodied hierarchical force relations that define the physical systems of the universe. This re-evaluation is both welcome and inevitable, as physicalized information, vast and intimate, liquefied and monetized into commodity and trace, is quickly replacing the static image as the primary form of transactional communication. Each of the four emergent complexes of object-oriented relations in the questionnaire is intertwined, eliding all usual uses of the terms human, nonhuman, history, materiality, and historical materialism, collapsing them into a single global homeostatic system. Each complex is related to the others, shown here in the quadratic form favored by Greimas, Krauss, and Harman. Collectively they offer a succinct, if terrifying, view of human-to-nonhuman relations.

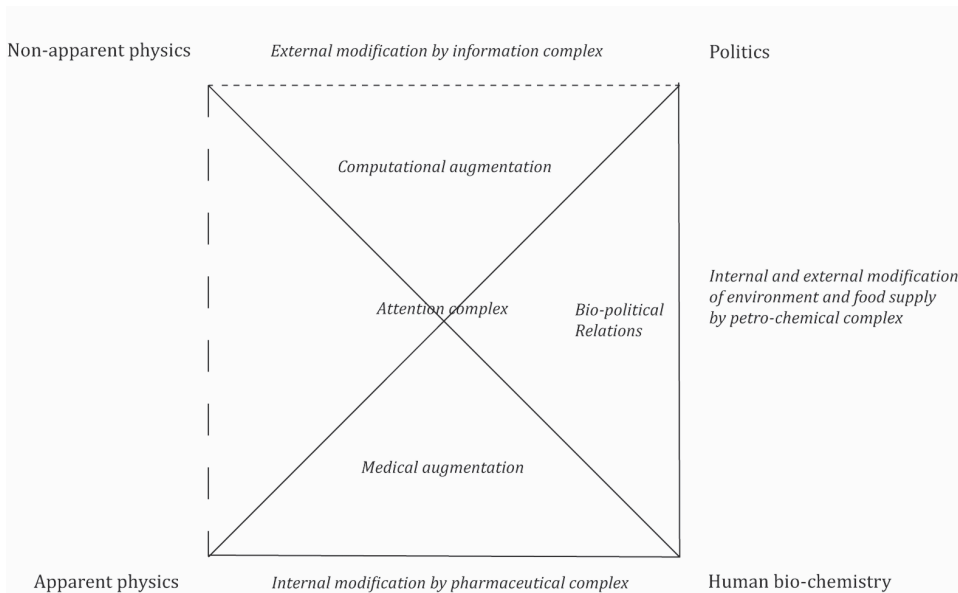


Figure 1.
Reciprocal human-to-object relations in the Anthropocene.

The first complex is the transnational regime of petro-chemical extraction and petro-agriculture, chief engine of the Anthropocene, which achieved the dubious honor of becoming both artificial nature and existential threat with the creation of the ozone hole and is responsible for the anthropogenic warming of the earth that will exterminate half of all living species within our lifetimes.

The second complex is the more recent fusion of six billion humans and twelve billion interconnected machines, our omnipresent neurological and cognitive partners, if that is the right word. The operating system is atomic (soon to be quantum), the product collated information states, massively redacted to produce output humans can recognize. The reflexive search for a subject in such data can retrieve nothing that is not actively mediated by the operating system.

Combining with the first two systems is a third, the medical-industrial complex, importing the effects and affects of the first and second complexes directly into the human body through designer molecules, psycho-pharmaceuticals, and cybernetic organs, consistently addicting, exciting and degrading the human-to-nonhuman biological relations each person naturally supports.

Finally, in a relentless exploratory process, all three human-to-nonhuman complexes are constantly stimulated by the fourth, the series of scientific discoveries that have destabilized all notions of physical limits at any scale, astronomical, planetary, biological, or atomic. None of the four complexes operate on scales that are verifiable through direct human access and the physics regimes revealed within them seem consistent only in how arbitrary they are in human terms, reinforcing a sense of a universally contingent kaos, not an ordered kosmos.

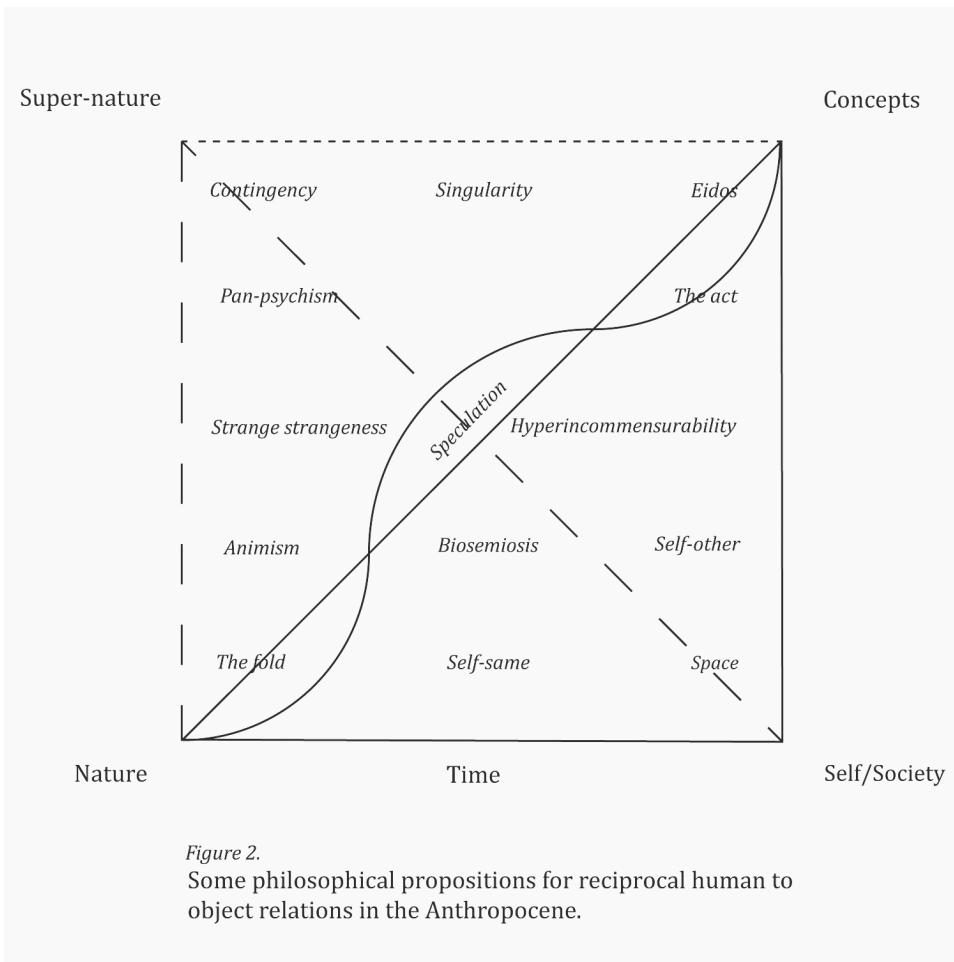
The cumulative effect has been to slowly lead to the acceptance of a “supernature” that cannot be meaningfully registered to human frames of reference, even when it is specifically being manipulated by and for humans, sometimes leading to a denial that anything significant can really be happening at all. But like the seismic wave of a tsunami, the shadowy line on the horizon prefigures epochal change. Nature is becoming history, inverting Barthes’s famous warning. Attempting to simply re-impose an enlarged version of contemporary human subjectivity—what Meillassoux has called “subjectalism,” and Malik “the domestication of alienating reason,” is an insufficient response. Facing such a comprehensive re-ordering of our proprioceptive limits, we need to reset our perceptual framework.

Ignoring the full dimensions of this phase shift would be the most apolitical act of all—precisely because it is also an opportunity to restate the fundamental terms of human-to-human relations in both transhuman and ethical terms.

Damage to or corruption of assets shared with nonhuman actors cannot currently be prosecuted under the current model of social justice. We may require a third legal system (one already being pursued in one form under the new crime of ecocide) that states clearly the ethics of the indeterminate middle ground between human “ownership,” life, and otherwise self-sustaining systems.

Under the current “human” model, not only are tens of millions of stateless humans already consigned to the limbo of partialized humanity that Agamben calls “Homo sacer” but the planetary system that sustains us all is fast becoming a Terra sacer or “cursed earth.” If political power constitutes itself through relations between multiple forces, then those forces must now include the systems discussed previously. Foucault’s proposal that life must enter into history and form a “government of souls” must be expanded to reflect the expressive power of a more inclusive and totalized planetary materiality, *with new definitions of life admitted as a governing principle*. Under the conditions that are emerging, increased biopolitical access to such a space could mean the emergence of a new polity, not limited by gender, class, or even species. We need an anti-myth, one that can ethically hypostasize human-to-nonhuman relations, transmuting old signs and new wonders.

Critical to contemplating this approach is accepting the metamorphic concepts of threshold and flux integral to all physical systems—such as humans—and



other objects we might hope or insist are nonhuman. No system is static; it oscillates constantly, acquiring a new identity only after passing multiple thresholds. We do not yet have a shared language to describe the constant flux in ontological force relations, but the second drawing provided here might provide a small step toward such an articulation, showing how the terms of traversal proposed by multiple thinkers might be reconciled and offering multiple possible paths for mutual illumination in a world that “exceeds our capacity to know it.”

As images are replaced by information, we can more easily embrace true alterity and polymodal connection in every context. In place of the identificatory traumas of photography, or the regulated regard of relational aesthetics, perhaps we can collectively articulate an anticipatory and projective transhuman art based on what is already embedded in the world.

The kinds of worked objects and experienced time found in visual and durational art have always offered somatic alternatives to contemporary models of inattention and may be of special interest in this context. *One characteristic of art might become the sense that something is emerging other than the artist and the viewer, a feeling of possibilities embedded unpredictably in, and through, interconnected objects in space and time, impenetrable to an immediate reading from the human perspective. Just as the combination of Expressionism and abstraction derived an internal narrative cohesion from Existentialism, expressed across multiple forms, eras, and movements, the art forms evolving inside the new and radiant abyss of artificial nature, both unclear and too certain, too large to understand but too detailed to grasp in this moment, might derive some clarity from this particularly open moment in philosophical enquiry, as they unpack themselves across an indefinitely complex future.*

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ANDRÉ ROTTMANN

Yet again all that is solid melts into air. At least, digital media purport to delineate the horizon of the present by implementing an all-pervasive technological imaginary predicated on the incessant conversion of all matter into mere information. The accelerated and seemingly effortless circulation and consumption of these immaterial data evidently feeds into the concurrent ideology of a single world culture and market with no boundaries and very few remaining zones of respite and refuge.¹ Numerical mirages not only epitomize global capitalism, but also facilitate and intensify the basic operations of financial speculation defining our economic era, which remain imperceptible and below the bandwidth of our senses while both their revenues and recurrent crises are palpable in all social spheres, including the field of art.² Gilles Deleuze thus has proven uncannily clairvoyant when describing in his tentative outline for a “socio-technological study of the mechanisms of control” of 1990 that we were witnessing an ongoing process of abstraction in which machines tend to be eclipsed by computers, factories by corporations, stable forms by flexible modulations, and isomorphic spaces by continuous networks; even art, Deleuze famously noted, has entered “the open circuits of the bank.”³

Contrary to these manifest tendencies of disembodiment, however, contemporary artistic production indeed is enthralled by a new materialism. Artists increasingly seem to resort to a kind of objecthood that in its orientation toward the untilled, raw, corporal, and natural would appear quite distant, if not outright opposed to the apogee of digital technology (or, more precisely, the rhetoric surrounding it). The latest edition of Documenta in 2012, for example, marked a surprising resurgence of the handmade and rarefied, resulting in anachronistic works made of unfired clay, wood, textiles, stone, assorted debris, or organic elements ranging from fruits and plants to living animals and entire ecological systems. The phenomenon is hardly unfamiliar, much less new. One only has to think of the archaic and artisanal stances taken by *arte povera* against the technological and industrial allegiances of American Minimalism. Or remember how the “materialist critique of art” undertaken by competing models of site-specificity explicitly countered Conceptualism’s redefinition of the artwork in purely analytic and administrative, i.e., “dematerialized” terms.⁴ Or recall the “return of the real” debated

1. On the changed temporality of global capitalism, see Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013).

2. See Joseph Vogl, “Taming Time: Media of Financialization,” *Grey Room* 46 (Winter 2012), pp. 80–81.

3. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control” [1990], *October* 59 (Winter 1992), pp. 6–7.

4. Douglas Crimp, “Redefining Site Specificity,” in *On the Museum’s Ruins: With Photographs by Louise Lawler* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), p. 155; see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” in *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2015), pp. 408–69.

throughout the 1990s that was partly based on evocations of the discarded, quotidian, visceral, and abject countering the enforced derealization of all things under the aegis of simulation and spectacle.⁵ Today's variants of anti-illusionism hence prompt the question of how the dialectic of compensation and contestation that once propelled these and other moments in modern art history could be resumed at a time when discrete material objects are more and more subjected to the instrumental logic of currencies and currents.⁶

Like the theoretical debates and assumptions underpinning it in current philosophy and science studies, the new materialism in contemporary art is far from constituting a unified formation, let alone a homogenous movement. In its most simplistic articulations, it sure enough does seem to propose encounters with things that supposedly possess will and fate, even thoughts and feelings, of their own.⁷ Largely oblivious to the historicity and lasting relevance of sculptural paradigms, in these instances the status of objects is not conceived in terms of a stratification of factors and forces, but confused with matter devoid of any exterior determination. Agency gets willfully replaced by animism, contextual considerations by objective encapsulation, the critical potential of the obsolete by the marvels of the obscure. For example, the press release for a survey show of so-called post-internet art tellingly titled *Speculations on Anonymous Materials* that took place at the Fridericianum in Kassel in 2013 claimed that the artworks on display would “fly in the face of any clear interpretation” and instead offer encounters with “material speculations on the intangibility of tangible objects that we are all familiar with and yet cannot really construe”; along the same lines, the announcement for a symposium accompanying the group show *Inhuman* at the same institution in 2015 stated that “fundamental doubts arise regarding the primacy of the human being, and one recognizes the need to reflect upon matter independent of the human being and develop a new materialism.” Although tensions and gaps between practice and theory obviously persist,⁸ this much-touted realism of intangible and independent matter strongly resonates with those strands of “Object-Oriented Ontology” that attempt to attribute autonomy to objects by freeing them from all forms of correlation to human beings. Yet the splendid isolation of things as well as their covert interconnectedness beyond any subject's sensorial reach remain entangled, as Andrew Cole recently has demonstrated, in the so abhorred think-

5. See Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

6. See David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

7. On this and other tropes pertinent to the pressures currently exerted on theory and critique in the name of affect, beauty, and the sensible, see Hal Foster, “Post-Critical,” *October* 139 (Winter 2012), pp. 3–8.

8. Among the many aporia resulting from the introduction of neo-ontological thing theories into the realm of visual arts, the question of mediation seems most glaring: For what exactly are we supposed to behold if the realness of the objects we encounter—in manmade art institutions and works or exhibitions associated with the still robust authorship of artists and curators, respectively—is structurally withdrawn and unobservable?

ing of relations—precisely because the very idea of any such rapport, even if it does not necessarily amount to anthropocentrism, always already requires our perspective, however limited and incomplete it might be.⁹

The novelty value of such an “inhuman” approach in terms of art criticism then seems to lie in nothing more than a grandiose reformulation of the aesthetic object’s ultimate unavailability and ancestral self-sufficiency, paired with the equally well-known unwillingness to account for the power mechanisms, economic conditions, and social frameworks pertinent to artworks, artists, and audiences alike. Complementary to this, the challenge such a myopic ontology seeks to pose to the centrality of subjectivity in the discourse of modernity is not any more convincing. For if art history, among many other disciplines in the humanities, in the recent past had relied on theories of the subject, these methodologies in their entirety stressed its making, regulation, and discontents over idealist notions of sovereignty; the decentering of the human hence certainly is not a gambit introduced by object-infatuated philosophies (though they undoubtedly exacerbate it, partially to the point of peripety, and thereby systematically bypass political issues of difference and dissent). Compared to the apocalyptic visions of poststructuralist anti-humanism—think of Foucault’s infamous prediction of man’s imminent erasure “like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea,” or Kittler’s premonition that technical media would engulf the once creative act of writing “and carry it off along with so-called Man”¹⁰—the posthumanism heralded under the rubric of a new materialism must register as comparatively benign.

Nonetheless, the theoretical perspectives opening up now—after the irrefutable exhaustion of paradigms exclusively predicated on textual and semiotic models—cannot be dismissed as retrograde *tout court*. To the contrary, the attention that some proponents and positions of new materialism at large direct toward the concrete structures and tangible effects of networks rather than singular items and instances harbors productive and necessary proposals for how to gauge the conditions artistic practices are facing under today’s conditions of control. In particular, recent studies of “cultural techniques,” as they have emerged both out of the insights and impasses of previous German media theory,¹¹ might yet allow us to navigate and overcome the false dichotomy between technophilic celebrations of dematerialization and circulation, on the one hand, and escapist relapses into a magical thinking of the inanimate, on the other hand. Cultural techniques, as media scholar Bernhard Siegert has programmatically argued, no longer designate the hardware of apparatuses, but “operative chains that precede the media concepts they generate,” while always presupposing “a historically given micronet-

9. Andrew Cole, “Those Obscure Objects of Desire,” *Artforum* (Summer 2015), p. 322.

10. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 387; Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. xxxix.

11. See my contribution to the survey “Do Media Really Determine Our Situation? Reflections on the Transatlantic Reception of Friedrich Kittler,” *Texte zur Kunst* 98 (June 2015), pp. 54–66.

work of technologies and techniques.”¹² In other words, they reconfigure existing material rapports between devices, artifacts, discourses, and bodies; in doing so, they form those assemblages of processes and practices “involved in operationalizing distinctions in the real,” such as the ones between inside/outside, human/animal, or signal/noise fundamental to all cultural formations.¹³

The German term *Kulturtechnik* originally stems from early twentieth-century treatises on agriculture. In view of a work such as Pierre Huyghe’s *Untilled* (2012)—produced for the aforementioned Documenta 13 and arguably the acme of contemporary art’s complex articulations of a new materialism—this etymology hardly seems circumstantial: aligning human beings (a guard maintaining the site as well as visitors to the exhibition), animals (the notorious white Podenco dog named Human with its foreleg painted bright pink, but also a beehive covering the head of a *Liegender Frauenakt* [Reclining female nude] and polliwogs populating a basin), and plant life with relicts of artworks previously installed in the context of Kassel (such as a deracinated specimen of Joseph Beuys’s *7000 Oaks*), the French artist created an ever-changing environment in the composting area of the Karlssau Park that ultimately resisted *Gestalt*, representation, or synthesis.¹⁴ Instead, Huyghe’s project, much like the one he recently installed on the rooftop of the Metropolitan Museum in New York under the title *Rite Passage* (2015), was a “situated network of both heterogeneous and porous elements in coactivity—a space, a garden, a set of coordinates rather than a monolithic object.”¹⁵ These volatile amalgamations of the organic and inorganic, ripe with allusions to the histories of Land Art, Surrealism, *arte povera*, and site-specificity, appear suspended between the poles of nature and culture. Since the temporal, spatial, and disciplinary boundaries of Huyghe’s recent projects are deliberately unstable and because most of their animate elements act beyond artistic control (a fact dramatized by the artist in his 2012 film *A Way in Untilled*), conventions of sculpture, performance, and medium are continuously decomposed, just as concepts of intentionality, spectatorship, and agency are resolutely recalibrated.¹⁶ These networks have not yet congealed to form predictable protocols; neither do they conceive of the matter they are made of as intangible, unobservable, or noncorrelative, quite to the contrary. By analogy, the study of cultural techniques likewise seeks to thwart any ontological understanding of categories such as object, man, time, space, and

12. Bernhard Siegert, “Cultural Techniques, or, the End of the Intellectual Postwar in German Media Theory,” in *Cultural Techniques. Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 1–17, p. 11.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

14. David Joselit, “Against Representation,” *Texte zur Kunst* 95 (September 2014), p. 94.

15. Sheena Wegstaff, “A Conversation with Pierre Huyghe,” in *The Roof Garden Commission: Pierre Huyghe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 32.

16. Huyghe himself has commented: “[T]here are transformations from one state to others, to different intensities, to new beings, as in a rite of passage. . . . There is a moment where things can no longer be measured: the medium is leaking, it’s diffused, processed like material in a compost, a moment where there is no clear limit or adequacy.” *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32.

image in favor of an analysis of their becoming and mutability. As the sequences and substitutions performed by the networks of cultural techniques provide the basal interface between the symbolic and the real, their operations necessarily presuppose an unmarked space excluded by the instigation of this very order. In turn, cultural techniques (as arguably allegorized and evidenced by the art of Huyghe and others) can “also serve to loosen cultural codes, erase signs, deterritorialize images and tones” and thus imply the possibility to bring those elements to the fore that are suppressed in every form of institutionalization, intrinsically connecting them to an analytics of power.¹⁷

Even in such an expanded understanding, media theory continues to shift “the focus from the representation of meaning to the conditions of representation, from semantics itself to the exterior and material conditions of what constitutes semantics.”¹⁸ Its acute awareness of the materialities (rather than simply the materials or matters) at the core of cultural production could furthermore be understood as an approach kindred with the passage “from work to frame”—to evoke the patently post-structuralist formula Craig Owens derived from Derrida almost three decades ago—variously enacted by advanced artistic practices since the late 1960s in ways that await to be explored more comprehensively.¹⁹ In this regard, contemporary art’s new materialism must not at all equal the end of critique, but can contribute to its continuation under dramatically changing circumstances.

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17. See Bernhard Siegert, “Cacography or Communication? Cultural Techniques in German Media Studies,” *Grey Room* 29 (Winter 2008), p. 31.

18. Siegert, “Cultural Techniques, or, the End of the Intellectual Postwar in German Media Theory,” p. 2.

19. Craig Owens, “From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After ‘The Death of the Author’?,” in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 126. For a first attempt to rethink site-specificity in terms of media theory, see my “Displacing the Site: John Knight and the Museum as Modulation” (2011), in *John Knight*, ed. André Rottmann (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2014), pp. 177–97.

AMIE SIEGEL

I once stepped into a psychoanalyst's office in Chicago, and, rather than the usual singular, authoritative Eames chair of the analyst—its bent rosewood and leather form like a modern English club chair—I was surprised to see two Eames lounge chairs facing each other, with a “kissing” (shared) ottoman. The arrangement suggested—via the objects—a potential for democratic, empathic exchange between patient and analyst, a visual loop of transference and counter-transference, the interchange of recording and playback, entering my own imagination to be returned as a work that itself took the form of a question.

*

To allow an object to become a protagonist is paradoxical. In making *Provenance*, a film following the Chandigarh furniture of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, there was almost immediately a recognition that people were ephemeral, merely passing through the frame, not capable of the kind of geologic time and persistence of the objects they collected, and therefore not visually central to the work. But in order to treat the chairs—bought, sold, exploited, restored, sat on, and discarded—as if they had their own centrality, or consciousness, the work, paradoxically, had to mimic the filmic tropes of transference reserved for humans, to deploy the narrative devices through which we become invested in and feel for others. The height of the camera was lowered, pitched in full sympathy with the objects, promoting the kind of cinematic identification we are accustomed to according human subjects, at standing height. In depicting a settee placed on a table, on its back for restoration, the camera moves slowly along its length, rendering the settee as a vulnerable body and the restoration warehouse a kind of operating theater, lit from a skylight above. In order to present the objects as of their own ontology, they had to be treated like people.

*

The sales office for what will soon be the world's tallest residential building—432 Park Avenue—is located across from Central Park in Manhattan. Presenting the showroom's model kitchen and bath, the marketing director stops before the bathroom's stone counter, the washbasin a minimalist negative void in the marble solid, to tell us that the sink is a single fifteen-hundred-pound block of Italian marble sourced from “the same quarry from which Michelangelo took the marble for his *David*.”

People are buying the sink not because it is white marble and has no veins in it, but because it is a spiritual event, performing the belief that there is something intrinsic in material, something that moves from thing to thing. To have this sink—this condo—is to possess something that the *David* possesses.

An interior design associate on the luxury project—in response to my query about the source of the marble for the bathroom sink—replies that he thinks the slabs were quarried and fabricated in China. The supplier's representative tells me

over the phone that that particular marble comes from Macedonia. I ask the design associate if the marble in fact came from Italy, as suggested by development's sales office, and he responds that the design firm has been only intermittently involved with material procurement, and some substitutions have been made along the way. A few hours later he writes back to say he believes the stone came from Carrara, Italy.

In mineralogy, a pseudomorph is a crystal system consisting of one mineral but retaining the appearance and form of another, which it has replaced. Autonite becomes meta-Autonite, Calcite after Argonite. Scalopite after Siderite. It is a "false form."



Amie Siegel.
Provenance. 2013.
Exhibition view, the
Metropolitan Museum of
Art, New York.

*

A yacht appears in *Provenance*. Sailing on the Mediterranean, its interiors are filled with furniture from Chandigarh—teak chairs, coffee tables, and settees cast adrift on plush white carpet. Shortly after I install *Provenance* in New York, I learn that the yacht's owners bought an edition of the work. I have the immediate vision of *Provenance*—and the overseas migration of the Le Corbusier furniture it depicts—sailing around the world on the very yacht that appears in the film.

Since then I've wondered if the movement of the chairs in the film comes to mimic the individuals who collect them—wintering here, summering there, on the move between homes, art fairs. . . . Or perhaps it is the inverse, and the collectors mimic the movements of their objects, imagining themselves as things to be looked at, emulated, photographed . . .

In fact there are two boats in *Provenance*—one for leisure (the yacht) and one for import/export (the cargo ship). Yet the cargo ship image is a licensed clip, a stock footage shot—one that I reuse from project to project. An image enacting the transit of objects and their up-marketing through restoration, resale, and auction thus transits through my works.

*

A camera is an object. It is a device that looks at other objects. It is always already deploying the psychoanalytic model—in a continual state of apprehending, forming a between, presenting and evacuating form, mimicking and repeating—becoming an object, becoming a subject, becoming an object again. Like two Eames chairs facing one another.

The diagram doubles itself, layering, or performing, the behavior, or properties, of the system or object it describes. I auctioned an edition of *Provenance*, a film depicting auctions, at Christie's London, and filmed the auction of the film, which became another film, *Lot 248*, exhibited together with the first. *Provenance* diagrams the movements, it *reveals* the script, or form, and then *Lot 248* doubles back and performs the script with the work itself as protagonist/object.

Recently, in a film work that slices through architecture offices like a section plan, I became preoccupied with a 3-D printer whose lateral repetitive gesture building up a single architectural model wall (or film screen) is mimicked by my motion picture camera, tracking back and forth in parallel movement.

*

Visitors to my New York studio often get a strange look upon entering: their eyes dart about and over things, a weather moves across their faces. They seem deflated, puzzled. It has taken me some time to realize that these curators and writers, having seen works of mine concerned in part with objects, expect a design aficionado, for my space to be a temple of clean lines, haute chairs, and rigorous selection of *objets*. In fact I love a mess, and while I know where things are amidst the piles of books, tables filled with project images, floor plans, hard drives, equip-

Siegel. The Architects.
2014. Exhibition view,
Storefront for Art and
Architecture, New York.
Photograph by
Miguel de Guzmán.



ment, cables, projectors, and magazines, these strangers who know only my work see a landscape of clutter.

The studio is a topography of things *to be put to use*, packed with latent possibility, but which in and of themselves have little interior animism. The animism is brought by the artist or viewer, born between objects, between images, on desktops, screens . . . a constellation of things or a thing in context. Sergei Eisenstein called montage copulative—two shots come together to form a third thing—but the third thing is not on screen, nor is it an object. It is an idea. It is conceptual. It forms in us.

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KERSTIN STAKEMEIER*

Philosophies of ontology indicate a problem. Their premodern versions sought to sublimate the manifest indifference that characterized all being in its role as an arbitrary appearance of divine mystery: in distinguishing its material qualities they sought to specify life beyond its metaphysical core. One might argue that the manifold manifestations of ontology today are thriving for just the same reason: a materialism that is stabilized by the assumption of a metaphysical complement. Only now, the divine mystery in question is not of a religious but of an economic order. It is the capitalistic indifference of all forms of being that today is supposedly sidestepped in claiming an ontological realm that demarcates a life beyond, before, between or even bordering it. Fundamental ontology, like that of Martin Heidegger, which returns in much recent Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), performs the relentless tearing down of a boundary between what is perceived as the delusional character of contemporary human life and the anticipation of a life beyond the former's mundane limitations, which it simultaneously manifests and stabilizes. But as much as one might sympathize with a propensity to escape the facticities of life under capitalism, this escape has a dubious side: Ontology, as philosopher Karl Heinz Haag rightfully noted in the 1950s, ultimately transfigures power as metaphysics. It "simply enunciates . . . to the individual that the abstract has to count as the concrete, that it is the truth." And "it thereby objectively serves the negation of humanity."¹ Because the individual is itself barred from taking that step, from "living its abstraction," humankind must experience its sublation in ontology.

In *Death Asshole Rave Video* (DARV) (2015) by dancer and performer Jeremy Wade, the audience is confronted with theatrical monologue and movement lasting ninety minutes, in which humanity is fictionalized as an entirely economically colonized and thus socially brutalized vessel of experience—a deadly life. But death here does not figure as an emblem of *vanitas*. Instead the atrocities of death are performed as an experience of life, as the individual's only (perpetually unlivable) chance of coming to terms with its ongoing (economical) abstraction, its (historical) ontological truth. Wade performs "total liquidation," a set of "agreements," a "death song," and "death jokes," and he presents the script of a "death movie" and "elegy"; in acting out the rituals and realities of death in such a dramaturgy, Wade's work does not attempt to sublimate this abject subject but performs *its abjection's* becoming ontological. And in the performances of this perpetually ruined life the artistic media of subjectivity's modern glory days become specific in their failure. For Wade, theater has turned from a representational stage into a voyeuristic arena. In DARV he proclaims: "Theater is dead because when nothing is true, everything is possible and when everything is true, nothing is possible and

* Thank you to Jenny Nachtigall for critically putting my arguments to the test.
 1. Karl Heinz Haag, *Kritik der Neueren Ontologie* (Kohlhammer: Stuttgart 1960), p. 83.

now everything is true.” With Wade one could assert that within such a state of abject subjectivity the artistic media contingent on the presence of that subject are dying quite specific deaths—each in accordance to the ideals of subjectivity their realizations were once attached to. In Wade’s piece, however, the death of theater is not hypostatized but performed, and ontological truth thus returns as an acting out of the subject’s symptoms. Even if, as in Wade, those symptoms are all that remains of the subject, for better or worse.

Of course, not all object-orientation necessarily seeks the ontological sublation of humankind. Yet in its current formulations philosophical object-orientations tend to identify humanity’s inadequacy as a *historical* fact, while assuming an ahistorical adequacy within the object-world confronting it. Speaking from the vantage point of a historical materialism, however, it is not primarily the subject’s reasoning that ties objects to subjects, and/or distinguishes them, but rather the lived synthesis of subject and object. Ontology might grasp the inadequacy of this unequal synthesis, the fact that it continuously splinters into insurmountably antagonistic relations. But simply identifying those antagonisms as being *of* the subject does little more than naturalizing it, “realizing” an asserted “ontological” vanity at its core. Capitalism’s appearance as “second nature,”² in other words, is not a historically arbitrary instance of a fundamental human inadequacy, but foundational to this faulty synthesis. As a symptom ontology thus remains historically significant. As Alenka Zupančič demonstrates in her critique of Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*,³ “the new real that emerges with the Galilean scientific revolution . . . is a real in which—and this is decisive—(the scientific) *discourse has consequences*.” It has systemic consequences—unlike, say, philosophy. This, as Zupančič argues via Jacques Lacan, creates a rather fateful ontological boundary that divides supposedly consequential discourse from discourses of no consequence. Wade has located his subject precisely within this ontological boundary. In DARV he exposes it to an ongoing chain of consequence without, however, rendering the subject itself consequential: its historical ontology here is precisely its lack of consequences.

We thus do live in a world in which philosophy still is constantly referred back to ontology, in which power appears metaphysical, because the syntheses it consists of are flawed and violent. Ontology would only be redundant within a fully consequential life. Such a continual consequentiality was envisioned in Hegel’s projection of a realized “world spirit,” but this model of historicity did not simply fail spectacularly, but arguably returned *as* capital, as its pretension to “second

2. See Georg Lukács’s critique of capitalism’s appearance as an autopoietic structure, in Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. A. Brostock (Merlin: London, 1971), which McKenzie Wark lately updated into its digitally remastered appearance as “third nature.” See Ali Dur and McKenzie Wark, “New New Babylon,” *October* 138 (Fall 2011), p. 44.

3. Thank you to Samo Tomšič for making me aware of this text. Alenka Zupančič, “Realism in Psychoanalysis,” in *Lacan and Philosophy: The New Generation*, ed. Lorenzo Chiesa (Melbourne: re:press, 2014), p. 25.

nature.”⁴ And the acceptance of capital’s boundless consequentiality characterizes exactly *that* unlimited social negativity, the financialized form of which has recently fostered fundamental ontology’s numerous returns. Current ontology may thus serve as a symptom of the financialized capitalist crisis.⁵ Karl Marx’s observation that the objective of capitalist production is not the preservation of humankind but that of capital is in this sense a truly Hegelian claim. But to affirm its perpetual logic of rendering humanity as an existence of no consequence seems politically as well as culturally disillusioned at best. It sides with the powers that be. Writers as diverse as Ernst Bloch, Gilbert Simondon or Donna Haraway have attempted to reconstruct ontology as a counter-scientific force that marks the boundaries of capital’s flawed and violent syntheses, registering its non-simultaneities, psychophysiological alienations, and cyborg hybridities. Such an understanding of ontology redefines what might be deemed consequential *within* a historical state of capital-induced negativity rather than just disposing of its human factor. This might be of specific relevance to contemporary art, in which the “human factor” needs to constantly re-assert its consequentiality if it wants to avoid limiting itself to appearing as the byproduct of a return to fundamental ontology, as a kneejerk reaction to the universal pervasiveness of capital.

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4. Frank Kuhne, *Begriff und Zitat bei Marx* (Klampen: Lüneburg 1995).

5. Giannis Milios/Dimitris P. Sotiropoulos/Spyros Lapatsioras, *A Political Economy of Contemporary Capitalism and Its Crisis: Demystifying Finance* (London: Routledge, 2013).

ARTIE VIERKANT

We are increasingly used to thinking our world through objects. This may seem counterintuitive in a time of screens and files, which pretend to be immaterial and untactile, but in fact it seems clear that these interfaces, as our primary methods of organizing and interacting with the world today, have made it easier to think the world as an enormous assemblage of objects,¹ including ourselves. If contemporary practices are primarily concerned with a kind of relational materiality—the work’s objecthood and form being dictated by a set of external structures and protocols—then they are interestingly emerging concurrent with the idea of “interobjectivity.” Interobjectivity is a term used variously by Bruno Latour,² Vivian Sobchack,³ and Timothy Morton⁴ as a framework for understanding the relational world as it exists amongst nonhuman entities, including but not limited to structures conceived by humans. In other words, it is a framework that could be used for understanding the impact that international monetary standards could have on the rising sea levels, or less abstractly the influence an erect nail might have on a bouncing ball. It is a kind of contemporary (and professed as non-anthropocentric) descendant of Norbert Wiener’s theorization of the world as a set of cybernetic systems caught in feedback loops,⁵ or a more loose advancement of Latour’s own “Actor-Network Theory.”

A running theme in writings on interobjectivity is that humans aren’t really so special, and that much like historical notions of the sublime we have been humbled by systems that are much vaster than we can comprehend—as Sobchack states, “we become acutely aware not only of the irrelevance of our subjective will but also of the extreme vulnerability of our material objectivity.”⁶ We see ourselves as objects within this system, and with it the notion of authorship has become strained and the cult of personality uncomfortably transparent. Vilém Flusser said of authorship that “if images were to become models for actions, they had to be made accessible, intersubjective, and they had to be stabilized, stored. They had to be published.”⁷ But how does Flusser’s phrase look if we replace intersubjective with interobjective? Arguably this substitution is being tested in the work of a num-

1. Here, the term “object” is used to connote not only material objects, but as a general term also referring to individuals and immaterial concepts.

2. Bruno Latour, “On Interobjectivity,” trans. Geoffrey Bowker, *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 3, no. 4 (1996).

3. Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, 2004.

4. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

5. Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1948).

6. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, p. 300.

7. Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (1985; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

ber of artists,⁸ whose work deals with objects that have their own interrelations to external cultural and technical systems. These artists re-assume the role of individuals in society who do not attempt to construct an authored, alternate facsimile of the world, but live inside it. By interpreting or interrupting the relationship between objects the artist can construct models for actions, to use Flusser's phrase, which do not make subjective claims about social, political, and biological structures—they interact with them directly.

In 2013 I began work on a project I broadly refer to as *Exploits*. These works are made by purchasing or licensing intellectual properties of any kind for use as a material. While I don't subscribe as a purist to these recent materialist philosophies, an understanding of interobjectivity allows for a more nuanced understanding of what we are used to thinking of as a fixed and dry legal structure. Intellectual property, in fact, has developed over the last four centuries into a technology—an object—that serves as the backbone for post-industrial society. It allows individuals and corporations to claim authorship over abstract ideas, production methods, managerial practices, and now life-forms. It, like other objects, isn't an absolute that came from nowhere but an objectivity that evolved in its relationship to ourselves, passed from generation to generation not unlike a symbiotic bacterium or virus. Its objectivity has transformed as our idea of our own subjectivity has—*she* made this, therefore she owns it—and now purports to provide individuals with a moral grammar with which to approach creative labor.

In wrestling with ideas of subjectivity, agency and authorship, art after modernism has been deeply entwined and rightfully at odds with intellectual property. In response to the legal codification of protections for creative labor, the twentieth century brought us “the readymade” and “appropriation” as key artistic tools. These tools are changing, however, or producing tools that aren't yet named.

With *Exploits*, for example, when I license a patent to produce objects this isn't quite appropriation because nothing is being taken. While I quite simply could have appropriated the IPs for use without permission, the work then would have been merely representational. It would be a work *about* intellectual property, as opposed to an actual *manifestation* of intellectual property. By engaging the intellectual property as an objectivity, the works involve an engagement with other entities or discourses, and only look and act the way they do as dictated by the terms of the licensing agreement. It is possible that these actions can be understood as examinations of interobjective relations, a new materialism that isn't so concerned with the specifics of *signs* and content so much as how that content acts on other entities.

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8. For brevity this statement discusses only my own work, but I am also alluding to the work of Dora Budor, Sean Raspet, Christopher Kulendran Thomas, Dis, Shanzhai Biennial, and others.

McKENZIE WARK

Perhaps one could ask what is elided in both the subject-centric attempts at a materialism and the object-centric ones displacing them. Perhaps there were silences in the psychoanalytic and Foucauldian obsessions with the production of subjectivity that are actually not made good in the turn to materialisms of the vibration, the vital, or the void. There's a mediating bit in between that escapes attention.

Whether thought in terms of the habits of a class or the habitus of an institution, intellectuals can't resist subjectivity. It is the ideological form in which we know ourselves. It also colors how we know objects—as objects of *contemplation*. It is remarkable how all of the allegedly thingy materialisms desire objects in their raw state, unmediated by the labor of a purely aesthetic or intellectual act.

Thinking what mediates, as “networks” of “actors,” does not break with the habits of intellectuals as a class, indeed it renews them. For “network” is at once the observable media and an ideology that legitimates the current form of that media. What is foreclosed is a critique of the dominant form of mediation and property that produces the appearance of objects and subjects, and which obscures the apparatus making the cut made between them.

The new materialisms reproduce the faults of the old but in updated language. They take the material as an object of contemplation and project onto it metaphors borrowed willy-nilly from the dominant forms in which objects and subjects are produced. They sometimes have the convenient side-effect of making power or exploitation inherent in such mediating relations invisible, either by ignoring those relations, or compressing them into the fetishized form of “network.”

The alternative path—from Alexander Bogdanov to Donna Haraway—is to inquire into that strange congealed aggregate of flesh and tech, of labor and apparatus, that does the work of making objects appear before subjects, and then makes cut between them. But this would not be that standpoint theory, from Georg Lukács to Sandra Harding, that takes the class, gender, or race of the producing subject as some stable point of self-interest. Rather, it shifts practice toward the production of *both* those subjects and the objects they apprehend. In short: theory can now only be a media theory entangled in media practices.

It is time to grasp how other kinds of labor and apparatus produce other worlds of objects and subjects, in the production process, in scientific inquiry, and in today's algorithmic machines. The real task is an art and theory of the Anthropocene, as a placeholder term for the world that collective labor is producing but which it is unable to perceive outside the limits of existing media and property forms. The goal must be to repair the metabolic rift, where exchange value produces all objects as dead objects of contemplation, of spectacle, for we mute chorines of flesh and tech deprived of the voice that joins our labors to the production of life.

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EYAL WEIZMAN

New object theories have the potential to introduce the dimension of comedy into the framework of critical theory which otherwise operates on a tragic mode, obsessed with history, trauma, memory, and testimony. The tragic theories of the twentieth century were about coming to terms with a world in ruins, with ethical dilemmas and the necessity, but also impossibility of judgment. To say that something is comic does not necessarily mean that it is funny. These theories have a comic potential because they enact a fantasy distinct to the genre: that of acting, sometimes speaking objects. In this upside-down world the social order is inverted and the fool is wise. Things act and interact with each other. Animals too: curatorial practice incorporates the “culture of apes,” and airborne microbes take the place of the proletariat in the vanguard of modernity. Such inversions have also a temporal dimension. Whereas the tragic theories of the twentieth century tried to re-assemble a world torn by the historical traumas, object comedies unfold in the expectation of a greater destruction that has not yet taken place. The ultimate object in the endless deliberation on global warming is the planet itself, or by its current name, the *Anthropocene*—our own Hotel Palenque that like Smithsonian’s “ruin in inverse” undergoes a simultaneous process of both construction and destruction.

Of all the object-oriented practices, forensics is simultaneously the grimmest and the one with the highest comic potential. After all, it is a mode by which the present theater of horrors is performed by objects for a public. Things do not speak by themselves, they have to be asked. Comic moments—a man asking things of a skull and expecting it to speak back, say—obviously also exist within the greatest of tragedies. Forensic experts often used figures of speech that animated the inorganic, made claims with and posed questions to objects large and small, ventriloquize not only skulls and ruins but physical and digital objects, forests, software, territories, technical networks, and glaciers.

If forensics is a tool with which the state polices its subject, counter-forensic comedies invert the roles of the judge and accused, they “turn the tribunal into a tribune” in the words of late anti-colonial lawyer Jacques Vergès. In them, activists-“experts” repurpose quasi- or faux-police and military technologies, animate objects to turn claims against states and armies.

Claiming that object theories can be comedic might seem like a frivolous simplification, but I hope to make a point: the spirit of comedy, latent in contemporary theory and practice, might be helpful in inverting the order of judgment, in articulating new claims and in defining objects, ecosystems and landscapes as rights-bearing subjects (as they have been by some central American states), while in the process profaning, if ever so slightly, the institutional forums of courts and other venues of legitimate speech. Another advantage is that it will allow us to take the most outrageous tropes of these theories a little less seriously.

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CHRISTOPHER S. WOOD

Matter is an alterity that occupies me, the medium of frustration but also of pleasure. Matter is both envelope and core, inescapable. I can't understand why matter requires a "materialism" to plead its case. The more fragile hypotheses, in need of advocates, are the self, the person, consciousness, imagination.

Consciousness doesn't ask for anything more than the freedom to choose when to work with matter, and when to work against it. Imagination wants to dominate matter, and without guilt. In fact, it is redundant to speak of imagination or mind "wanting" to dominate matter. As soon as you speak of "mind," you already name a contempt for matter. You are saying: "matter has no claims on me, things have no claims on me, no *ethical* claims."

The questionnaire identifies a double movement of contemporary thought, two directions, one opposed to the other, and yet in league. Some thinkers stress the ways that humans are like things, others stress the ways that things are like humans. The first tendency is guided by the death instincts, the desire to dial down all tensions. The second tendency is anthropomorphizing. The two tendencies work together to deprivilege the subject of consciousness, the alleged source of creativity in thought and in making, a source ungraspable but marked by first person pronouns. Both tendencies deplore the arrogance of the modern mind that believes it can build the reality it needs.

Within art criticism or art history, the materialist plea is pedestrian and literal-minded. Materialism makes a virtue of acknowledging the obvious: the environmental and somatic limits on thought and imagination. Materialist literalism punctures pretension, exposes mystification, and denaturalizes conventions. Materialism has situational rhetorical power. So do speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, neuroaesthetics, and the doctrines of the life or agency of things. These are ways of talking, discourse tactics. They are fictions safely embedded within larger unspeakable confidences in the subject-of-consciousness.

Matter and thing are passwords to a realism targeting hidden irrealisms. But matter and thing are themselves not equally real. It is notable that physicists recognize matter but not things. The thing is not a natural "unit" of reality. The thing is a device that helps consciousness grasp matter. Matter comes into focus through things. The thing, because it shares properties of closure with the person, stands out against a ground of non-things, including formless matter. The autonomy of the thing is borrowed from the person. For that reason the offer to restore agency to the thing, on the postcolonial model, strikes a false note. We didn't colonize the thing, we created it. The thing is not a subaltern.

Modern critical thought is sometimes shaped as a protest against the scientific picture of the world. Non-scientists cherish the thing precisely because the physical sciences do not recognize it. Materialism and "thing theory" are supposed to restore realism, but because the thing is already an anthropomorphism, and because its discursive function is to resist absorption into the scientific world-

picture, it soon takes on unrealistic and unlikely properties. Things are said to “have lives,” they “talk to us”; matter is said to be “vibrant.”

The thing is invented by the transfiguring imagination as its own internal horizon. Art re-creates the world as a field of interactions between people and things, re-staging the convertibility of objects and persons in fields of affect and desire. In dance, theater, and film, people become things and vice versa. In poetry and art, meanwhile, things and people become representations of things and people; the representations become things again. In art, the convertibility of persons and things is tested, but it is only a test. Persons and things are reappearing inside art as fictions of themselves. The “self,” or “self as consciousness,” is an aspect of the fiction of personhood encountered in art; “self,” too, is a “content” before it is an origin-point. But consciousness is a privileged content because it is recursive. The self is the staging of thought thinking its own origin. The non-identity of consciousness—its difference from itself—distinguishes it from the thing. Consciousness presents the thing, inside art and generally inside fictions, as its own other. The thing is created as the place within a fiction where the conversions and substitutions performed by consciousness as a way of connecting with other consciousnesses arrive at a point of rest.

The thing appears inside art—or *as* art—both in its opacity and in its apparent lifelikeness. The thing is only half there. It speaks to us, but it doesn’t listen. The effect of simultaneous familiarity and unavailability accounts for the prestige of things, their apparent power to shape the virtual spaces that host them. But not only virtual spaces: exported from fictions into life, the thing retains the quality of semi-availability it acquired inside the fiction. By applying pressure to space, it recreates pockets of the real world as fictions. Artists exploit this power, creating things as the “innermost” of the artwork, and then taking that irreducibility as the model of the next work.

Things conceived together with persons as actantial nodes in a network are much less interesting than things as opaque interruptions of signification. For when things and people are made to resemble one another, and nature and culture begin to collapse upon one another, as they do in actor-network theory, then there is no way out of culture, because there is no longer any will, inside the system, to find a way out of culture. The network of agents is a system more closed than culture, because it is not curious about what doesn’t participate in the network.

Things, in their opacity, drive signification. Metonymy defers understanding by displacing meaning sideways from thing to thing, from thing to person, from person to thing. The plots of fables, folk tales, romances, satires, and realist novels are carried by weapons, chalices, gems, articles of furniture or clothing. Such fantastical meaning-generating strategies must remain subroutines, framed. Irrealisms, once “sprung” from a nested hierarchy of fictions and asked to serve in reality as realisms, are implausible, unconvincing. Object-oriented ontology is such an irrealism that has been repositioned as a realism. It doesn’t

ring true as a conviction because it is not meshed with the gears of reality. Nothing is at stake. It is the wrong kind of irrealism because it is badly framed. (Art is irrealism well framed.)

The thing comes into focus as a challenge to the imagination only inside a constellation of signs and non-signs constructed by an imagination. The thing is always already anthropomorphic, in the sense that it customizes for human apprehension something that is outside the human. When things resist interpretation, block mind-to-mind exchanges, and—by virtue of their obduracy—keep plots moving, they serve as reminders of what stands outside of culture. They point to the limits of culture's reach. That is exactly the awareness of limits that speculative realism recommends.

Speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, and neuroaesthetics overrate matter in order to correct for careless anthropocentrism. But at the same time they underrate the human. The materialisms invoked by the questionnaire extend a long-standing critique of humanism, or the willingness to be guided by an invented, self-serving model of personhood. The problem with humanism, however, is not that its model of personhood is unrealistic. Models are supposed to differ from reality. The problem with humanism is rather that it “does not set the *humanitas* of man high enough.”¹

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1. Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism” (1947), in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper Collins, 1977), p. 210.

ZHANG GA

A work in progress helps to reconfigure the perspective:

Wang Yuyang#1 (2015) is a body of work conceived and generated by a software suite designed by Wang Yuyang.¹ Wang Yuyang#1 (WYY#1) and Wang Yuyang (WYY) are an interoperable one, that is to say there is no higher order between the two Wang Yuyangs. Though one is flesh and the other digits, one is neither an elucidation nor a representation of the other.

WYY#1 works, like the artist in flesh, with source materials—in this case a number of databases: the Raw Database is comprised of all sorts of 3-D models, texts of historical and literary importance, visual forms that reference art history by styles and formal significance, and also a collection of algorithms. Then there are the Process Database and the Outcome Database. WYY#1 also signs up for an email account and establishes its presence in social networks such as Wechat, Weibo, QQ, and Facebook. WYY#1 begins its operation first by browsing information that it has culled from online sources, including feeds from social media and the Raw Database, evaluates the contents and conducts its preliminary ideation and completes the process by depositing the results in the Process Database. WYY#1 then performs a close reading of the materials garnered from the initial selection, sorting them into various data types, from which it generates concepts that then get interpreted in ASCII codes. Next WYY#1 searches the Raw Database for visual forms that best express these ideas. Several nuanced deliberations by WYY#1 follow to ensure that the material properties of the forms approximate the initial description of the work. The processed individual units are then assembled in the Output Database to comply with the semantic interpretation of the ASCII codes. Finally WYY#1 assigns a title to the assemblage and outputs it as an artwork, which WYY proper, along with his human assistants, manufactures into concrete existence.

Wang Yuyang#1 thus constructs a paradigm by which intelligence and creativity are no longer a human privilege, breaching the anthropocentric taxonomy of the chain of command.

In reversing a typical creative operation from the human artist to the subservient tool-being of media, Wang Yuyang not only provides a wealth of stunningly formal possibilities, but also forces the viewer to think anew about a world in which the perception of the real can no longer be reduced to that of human consciousness alone, a reality wherein the production of knowledge becomes a reciprocal conviviality between the subject and the object.

In Cary Wolfe's account of the posthuman condition the Wang Yuyangs make a case in point:

It [the posthuman] comes both before and after humanism: before in

1. Wang Yuyang was the subject of a large-scale solo exhibition organized by the Long Museum in Shanghai in the summer of 2015. Titled *Tonight I Shall Meditate on That Which I Am*, the exhibition was curated by the author.

the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world, the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanism. . . . [It] comes after in the sense that it names a historical moment in which the decentering of human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore.²

The posthuman condition is therefore first of all a techno-logical condition by which life-forms of other orders are swiftly asserting their irrefutable presence. WYY#1 aside, examples such as transgenic organisms, synthetic cells, tissue engineering, clones, hybrids, and cyborgs are everywhere evident, as are emergent species, sentient machines, and emotive apparatuses, giving voices to otherwise reticent things through technological mediation.

The posthuman condition is furthermore a condition of the crises of representation whereby the postmodern paradigm of identity, agency, and signification is called into question as a result of the dissolution of the specific and the particular of the analog through the generic and the universal of the digital, which discombobulates temporal-spatiality. Heidegger in his 1949 essay “The Thing” had already intuited this impending inevitability wherein “all distances in time and space are shrinking.”³

Rather than merely a shrinking, there is an outright flattening. This circumstance is a time collapse, a spectacle of the Digital Now. Time collapse is multiple times conjugated at once through the erasure of distance, pressing past, present and future into the Deleuzian “plane of immanence” in which “there is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together.”⁴ This singularity, this unqualified immersion and embeddedness of life and death, desire and inertia, flesh and silicon, past and future into the pure plane of immanence, is the new nearness of simultaneity, juxtaposition and concatenation. Time collapse wipes out the Kantian duality of representation (phenomena) and the “in-itself” (noumena) through this flattening and folding. The flattening of time-space leaves representation no distance for signifying: the sign and the referent become one, and the poststructuralist has thus lost her premise of critique.

The posthuman condition is also an environmental exigency in which an overdraft of nature has resulted in geological disruptions and atmospheric anomalies in the epiphanies of ozone holes, deforestation, acid rain, oil spills, and

2. Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. XV.

3. Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 163.

4. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Seem Mark, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 2.

radioactive plumes: an irrevocable entropy on a planetary scale, which compels us to rethink agentic capacity, to count human and nonhuman, the organic and the inorganic, in order to organize a parliament of things (Latour) in which all kinds of constituents are gathered together for the business of the cosmos so that the survival of the microbes and the livelihood of the human species are equally discussed, the clamor of rocks heard and the appeal of the transistors adjudicated.

Much as poststructuralists once effectively confronted the postmodern condition, it is to the posthuman condition that the emergent discourses in the name of Thing Theory, Object-Oriented Ontology, or a plethora of debates under the banner of Speculative Realism are posited as a response. If contemporary art, according to Peter Osborne, is post-Conceptual art explicated by postmodern intersubjectivity, then what is called for here is contemporary art as “proprioceptional” art implicated by posthuman interobjectivity, where the Enlightenment subject becomes one instance of the object world.

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