

The New Existentialism

Tim Griffin

For decades and more, a perennial question in art has been, “To whom is it addressed?” Among many artists and critics during the postmodern era, for example, considering the specificity of art’s producing and viewing subjects—taking into account various parameters of identity—was a fundamental imperative. Looking back just a bit further, and more abstractly, one readily finds a precursor for such engagements in minimalism’s implicit attention to institutional context and, as significant, to those individual audience members understood to “complete” an artwork by virtue of beholding it. Indeed, this particular orientation of—or better, correspondence between—subject and object may be said to extend back to the very beginnings of modernism during the 19th century, given how that era’s grand exhibitions frequently posited audiences at the endpoint of a distinct chronological trajectory and narrative, whether of economic or cultural innovation and evolution. All of history, it seems, would be mobilized in such shows to choreograph viewers’ movements and render any audience an heir to the teleological passage of time. Even the introduction of linguistic and psychoanalytic models decades later, meant to interrogate any sense of such naturalism, left a fundamental conception of temporality intact.

Potentially overtaking these considerations in art, however, has been an increasing, if parallel, awareness of our jeopardized grasp on any notion of periodicity. As early as 1982, theorist Frederic Jameson would famously remark that our sense of history was disappearing throughout culture, arguing that radical developments in communications technologies were giving rise to perpetual changes in the fabric of society—which contributed, in turn, to our impression of living in a perpetual present, with extended cultural traditions and

lineages irrevocably eroded. More recently, any number of artists and curators have utilized the rubric of encyclopedic and archeological models to produce works and exhibitions situating contemporary objects alongside medieval and ancient ones, and trained artists beside outsiders. (In fact, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art recently announced plans to organize its permanent collection in this way, formalizing the approach on an institutional scale.) Yet if similar engagements at the turn of the millennium were understood by art historians and critics to manifest an “archival impulse” among artists—who were then adopting quasi-documentary frameworks in order to postulate new, largely fictional histories for culture as pathways out of modernism’s apparently exhausted aspirations and tropes—today a fragmentation and de-historicizing of cultural production and discourse has arisen instead. Periods frequently seem layered in exhibitions, one upon the other, in nearly sedimentary fashion, making the works of our time seem just one more sociological idiosyncrasy. As opposed to setting any narrative or chronology, or postulating any kind of alterity, current displays of art frequently manifest a radical decentralization of perspective and materialist note of finitude. Such is the case even to the extent that the notion of cultural production “after” the grand eras of modernism and postmodernism seems displaced, given that formulation’s implicit valuation of historical trajectory.

In this context, perhaps a crucial question for (and posed by) artists today is less a matter of “For whom?” than of “For when?” As Patricia Falguières notes in the present volume, “During periods of intense speculation, Western artists”—whether Land artists of the 1970s or Rustic Mannerists of the sixteenth century—“have been known to put themselves against geologic time.” So it should come as no surprise that contemporary artists and institutions have lately summoned archeological models—or, put another way, have

demonstrated some uncertainty regarding the relationship of our historical moment to what came before. Recent events globally have made it impossible to ignore a radical precariousness of the basic material conditions necessary for the kinds of consciousness and reflexivity articulated in art during the past century and more, to say nothing of swift transitions happening not only in social organization and technology but also, as important, in the living environment. (In this regard, one discerns how an eroded public sphere in art mirrors that of larger culture; and, more broadly, how the conventions of artistic address are necessarily correlated with, if not indebted to, the societal and material structures in which they are housed.) Indeed, by this measure it should come as no surprise that many artists and critics seeking an explication for recent art-making, and facing increasing ambiguity in contemporary life—what philosopher Patrice Maniglier calls in these pages a “radical novelty” permeating society—have turned to developments in philosophical circles, taking up in particular numerous thinkers who have moved away from semiotic and psychoanalytic models in order to displace human agency onto the world.

It was against this backdrop that “The New Existentialism” was conceived as a conference at The Kitchen on April 26, 2014, inviting scholars to take account of contemporary art with respect to such turns in philosophy and, more specifically, the emergence of Speculative Realism and its variants during the past ten years. That said, this invitation, and the title’s implicit proposition, was inspired in particular by a suspicion that the language attending such endeavors in philosophy—which, per Bruno Latour, are put forward in the spirit of “scientific” or “objective” exercise—might be reassessed productively using the prism of another era’s interrogations of rationalist analyses. After all, the tenuousness attributed to individual agency in our present context strongly resonates with

dilemmas first articulated by existentialists of the previous century, if only as a kind of negative image. And so, while the conference and present volume consider artistic production in light of contemporaneous philosophical discourses, it is only while taking a pivotal cue from a previous era's setting of stakes for humanity's creating its own potential (and capacity for) value and meaning. Simply put, in the face of increasingly prevalent tenets of materialism and realism, the human subject (and subjectivity) is once again faced with the prospect of defining itself and, in so doing, suggesting different terms for ethical thinking and conduct. The implications for art and, moreover, for its postulations (or evasions) of the producing and viewing subject, are enormous.

All too frequently, the art world has turned to continental—and especially French—theory when seeking precedents for its own motives and actions. In this respect, any New York-based institution would do well to recall the opacity of Jean Baudrillard, who, arriving here during the 1980s, intentionally frustrated and thereby rendered plain and obvious such a desire for neat philosophical precedents and prophecies. Mindful of this potential pitfall when organizing “The New Existentialism,” The Kitchen therefore invited scholars to consider recent artistic developments in dialogue with philosophy—and, moreover, to offer thoughts on the art world's attraction to the latter—but only while articulating these ideas as they were unfolding within philosophical circles. If artists were being drawn to philosophy only in a case of mistaken identity, we sought to make that error clear. (Falguières's contribution is especially helpful in this regard, as she accounts for how the contemporary art object is frequently oriented around the notion of “posterity” and, by extension, its material existence beyond the artist's life—a mindset particularly receptive for any philosophy that would de-privilege the human subject.) Further, if the art world is currently drawn to ideas that are

effectively outdated among practicing philosophers, we wished to bring forward a more accurate picture of philosophical discourse as it stands. Among participants, Falguières and Apter were asked specifically to engage understandings of contemporary artistic and cultural production through the prism of philosophy, while Maniglier and Garcia were encouraged to describe and elaborate on developments in philosophy as they stand within that field more specifically. Responding to both the presentations and a roundtable among these scholars—which took place at The Kitchen as part of the conference and has been edited for its publication here—is artist Matthew Ritchie, who finally situates these conversations in the context of contemporary artistic discourse.

For all such efforts to distinguish between the languages of artistic and philosophical spheres—and to avoid false equivalents—readers will no doubt be struck by strong resonances among their concerns nevertheless. In both arenas, there is clearly a sense that a paradigmatic shift is afoot. Many of the participants underline “material” and “ontological” turns in philosophy and other disciplines, for example, describing renewed attention to networks of relations in society at the same time as valuing speculation as an end in itself. Similarly, the erosion and increasing inadequacy of classificatory structures permeate discussions, even with respect to denominations of approaches within philosophy—all of which suggests, to appropriate a phrase from Maniglier, “profound cultural roots” and “the symptom of modernity coming to the end of a cycle.” This proposition will feel intuitively right for anyone strolling the galleries of artistic institutions, where structures rooted in a modern past house the work of artists wanting to articulate circumstances as they stand today, leading to a kind of cognitive disjunction in real space. If the terms for grasping the individual subject within a volatile field are changing our most fundamental lexicons—requiring that the

human subject define itself anew—it is only by considering the “when” (for the past or present) that the “whom” may become clear in art. Our hope is that the present volume serves as a signpost, however modest, for such a project.

In closing, The Kitchen would like to give special thanks to Apter, Falguières, Garcia, Maniglier, and Ritchie, not only for offering incredibly provocative perspectives on art and philosophy today, but also for fielding “New Existentialism” as a proposition and prompt. Similarly, the volume would not have been tenable without the generous invitation of Sophie Claudel, Rima Abdul-Malak, and Dorothée Charles. Their belief in the project from the start, along with that of Xavier Douroux and Franck Gautherot of *Les presses du réel*, has been deeply humbling. In addition, we would never have had the opportunity to bring these thinkers together without the invaluable support of *Etant donnés*: the French-American Fund for Contemporary Art, a program of FACE and the Cultural Services of the French Embassy in the United States, along with funding from the Florence Gould Foundation. I would also like to thank Katy Dammers, Lloyd Wise, and Abraham Adams for their editorial insights throughout the process, and The Kitchen staff and board members for their incredible endeavors on behalf of artistic and intellectual speculation toward cultural engagement across the decades. And finally, my deepest gratitude to Johanna Burton for our conversations, both regarding this volume and well beyond.

Fatal Attraction

Patricia Falguières

In recent years, “Speculative Realism,” also known as Object Oriented Ontology or Thing Theory, has become a password within artistic circles. Seminars, roundtables, and symposia, which are now the standard forms of accreditation in our globalized, post-medium art world, have enthroned it as the long-awaited doctrine that will take over from the last philosophical corpus pressed into service by art theory during the 1970s: phenomenology. It is significant that references to Speculative Realism have already widely infiltrated the syllabi of curatorial studies programs.

My role here is not to establish the issues and terms involved in the philosophical controversy arising around this work. Instead, I would like to discuss this phenomenon from the standpoint of art theory and criticism, as well as artistic practices. What, we may ask, makes a book like Graham Harman’s *The Quadruple Object* so appealing today?

The fact is that, as its original French title indicates—*L’Objet quadruple: Une métaphysique des choses après Heidegger*—the volume offers a “metaphysics of things” after Martin Heidegger. Here we know that we are dealing with an ambitious undertaking: the liquidation of postmodern “critique,” which is explicitly named as the book’s target. And I use the word “liquidation”, or “obviation”, because Harman’s idea is to retrain thought on its objects “after” the age of critique, with the latter understood to be “destroying” and “undermining” objects. (Regarding his own efforts, by contrast, he uses the expression “saving objects,” which calls up other associations like “saving phenomena.”) As Harman writes of strategies that undermine objects, “All are forms of critique that view individual

objects in a spirit of nihilism, destroying them with bulldozers to make way for something more fundamental. They view objects as too shallow to be the fundamental reality in the universe.”¹

We know that Harman places all these “forms of critical thought” under the common heading of “philosophies of human access,” a term with which he bundles together Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard and Gilbert Simondon, as well as Willard Van Orman Quine (the Quine of *Ontological Relativity*) and Bruno Latour. By a truly perverse sleight of hand, the author turns this disparate set of thinkers into an extension of Kant, who is himself reduced to the role of “guard” of “acceptable mainstream philosophy.”² This is the same Kant, it must be said, that these very authors, more than anyone else, subjected to a critical torsion—a radicalization that took us outside the “snug Kantian house” and away from the shores of the Western metaphysics of representation. Isn’t this duplicity?

It is difficult to assess how, or the degree to which, Speculative Realism “appeals” to contemporary artists. But allow me to venture a hypothesis: What appeals to artists is an operation of relief, of self-dispossession, a loss of position that directly contradicts the demand for “situated knowledge” promoted by postmodern critique—a demand that remains deeply alien to artistic practices when they cease to be informed by militant concerns such as feminism. This insistence on “dispossession” touches on something essential to the practice of art, which distinguishes it from dance or performance. For within the sphere of art, the point is to place the produced object outside oneself, “cleansed” of the pathos of personal imprints and subjective projections. Indeed, the abandoning of the object to its own necessity—this “objectification”—is the sign of art (at least since Aristotle). This shift is how the artwork enters into competition with natural objects, with their impersonality and their internal necessity, and ultimately with their own temporality.

During periods of intense speculation, Western artists have been known to pit themselves against geological time, as we can see throughout art history: Robert Smithson in the 1970s, for instance, or the protagonists of so-called Rustic Mannerism in the second half of the sixteenth century. This engagement is authorized again now by the appearance of Speculative Realism in the field of references for today's art, which takes a wide variety of forms. There is, for example, a fascination with Fukushima and the revelation of a geological time having no common measure with humanity; or, in a (little) less catastrophic vein, the timescale for nuclear waste, which is thirty million years. (Regarding the latter, it is significant that in France today, authorities are thinking of calling on artists to signal areas of buried waste to generations in the remote future, generations for whom, we may hypothesize, the languages we speak and their inscriptions will no longer have meaning.) On a different scale, sculpture is going through a powerful revival in modalities that seem to look back to very ancient paradigms, obtaining the timescale of archeological objects. An example is found in Gabriel Orozco's recent works with diorites, granites, jaspers, pegmatites, and volcanic, non porous stone.³ Such objects give evidence of this hunger for what Meillassoux calls "*le grand dehors, le dehors absolu des penseurs pré-critiques*," or "the cosmos, cosmic time as opposed to the human time"; for what Harman calls "things among themselves"; and for what Ray Brassier describes as "the inorganic matter."⁴

The moderns try to forget that the artwork is always "deposited," placed "in memory of," and abandoned to itself, belonging to a time frame that reaches beyond its "author"—in a word, that it is necessarily posthumous—by using all the resources of intentionality (and other notions) to try to forge a bond between the work and its maker. Even so, this conceit of dispossession is something of which certain philosophers, Derrida in particular, have reminded us. It is

also something that the aims or ends of art in premodern West explicitly embraced, in the time of eschatology and the resurrection of the body in Christian Europe, setting the scale for the values of art. Similarly, the Roman people imposed the longevity of the majesty of its own time on the destiny of its *ornamenta*, marbles and bronzes, statues and monuments, for more than a thousand years.⁵

I shall therefore put forward the following hypothesis: that much of Speculative Realism's pull on the art world is due to how it reminds us, in its way, of this posthumous vocation of the work of art: Speculative Realism posits and announces a world where we will no longer exist, offering a radical and amplified version of that theme, so popular during the 1970s, which was then "buried" in the decade that followed by the "death of the author." It is not surprising then that this new affiliation among many younger artists with Speculative Realism should appear as a kind of "conversion" or "ontological turn," and as an ascetic exercise of letting go of the self—of opening up to the cosmological scale in a register not so far removed from the Kantian sublime as we might initially think.

Therefore we need to question the success of this thematic from inside the artistic field, bearing in mind that art in the West has, on more than one occasion, been conceived as the place of the inhuman; and that it has sometimes been driven by the ideal of something "not made by the human hand" (as was the case up to and including the Renaissance) and was subsequently judged against the radical objectivity of the prodigy and of the machine.⁶ In fact, Aristotle posited the automaton as the horizon of art. That is the very meaning of mimesis, which must be analyzed on its proper, ontological level. Clearly, my Aristotle is not the Aristotle that Speculative Realism so loves to knock, which is the Aristotle of hylomorphism and the foundation of modern art academies. Instead, he is the Aristotle

whose most inspired commentators paradoxically include Heidegger alongside Aubenque, the Aristotle now being rediscovered by contemporary philology: the Aristotle of the *Physics*, of the treatise *On Generation and Corruption*, the *Meteorologica*, the *Parts of the Animals*, the *Movement of Animals*, and the *Treatise on the Heavens*, which informed European thinking about art up to the sixteenth century.⁷⁸

We must also ask whether it is appropriate in this discussion to leave at the door those sciences that until recently took charge of objects and, more particularly, of what I shall call their afterlife: the “sciences of culture,” as they were called in Germany during the nineteenth century; or the disciplines (to use a term favored by the Renaissance) of archaeology, anthropology, and art history. From this point of view, which is also my own, Speculative Realism reproduces an ordinary philosophical gesture: that of short-circuiting such disciplines, excluding them from the debate, “forgetting” them. Does this blindness mean that nothing is at stake speculatively in the cultural sciences? The irony of such an oversight today is that the disciplines I mention are being affected, at this very moment, by what they designate a “material turn”—a thoroughly renewed presence bestowed to objects, museums, and works, in terms of their materiality—even while anthropology is undergoing its “ontological turn.” I shall therefore ask two questions: Does Speculative Realism provide these disciplines with the ontology that their “material turn” has been lacking? What place in this brutal reconfiguration of the ontological horizon, proposed by Speculative Realism, is allowed or not allowed for art?

As I see it, the question today is the following: Has Speculative Realism at last given these disciplines their ontology? When it comes to answering this question, the paradox we face is that the “material turn” affecting anthropology, history, and art history is taking place

precisely via this “critical episode” Speculative Realism seeks to evince. We must note that some of these “sciences of culture,” or disciplines, have an ancient, programmatic relation to the object, as happens to be the case with archaeology, art history, and anthropology (in its premodern version). All of these disciplines emerged from sciences that, in the seventeenth century, went by the name of erudition—that is, the sciences founded on the knowledge of objects.⁹ Others accepted “the object” as their object only very recently—as is the case with Science Studies—which thus affirmed their break with epistemology.¹⁰ However, as I said above, all are now undergoing a methodological renewal, a “material turn,” a new attention (albeit to varying degrees) to places and instruments, to apparatus, to the material nature of devices, and to objects.¹¹ All these disciplines are making their way back to the museum or the archives, marking a break with their recent history. Regarding this shift for anthropology and the history of science, we could mention the new role attributed to archives by certain anthropologists: In particular, I am thinking of Anne Laura Stoler, whose “archival turn”—the “materiological” turn she admirably theorized in *The Archival Grain*—is being negotiated, precisely, via Foucault; as well as the programmatic antirealistism of the study carried out by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison in *Objectivity*. Regarding the latter book, precisely because the notion of objectivity as elaborated (and lost) by nineteenth-century scientists is taken as a target, the history of sciences is subsequently posited as a key critical resource against the metaphysics of representation.¹²

Let’s underline the effectiveness of such a mobilization of history as an intellectual tool for art scholars in reference to the notion of the afterlife of objects: the dislocation of the object given up to the trajectory of all the events that constitute it, restored to its paradoxical temporality, to its anachronism. This perspective is what we find in *Anachronic Renaissance* by Alex Nagel and Christopher Wood,¹³ or in