

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

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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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