

SPECULATIVE AESTHETICS

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary art today a constant reconceptualisation of artistic practice goes hand-in-hand with a perpetual renegotiation of its relation to the affective. The resultant thirst for new approaches has ensured a somewhat hasty appropriation of concepts developed under the (now rather splintered) rubric of 'speculative realism [SR]',¹ to the point where today those concepts have become little more than units of makeshift cultural currency.²

Given contemporary art's cultural privileging as the site of negotiation between the conceptual and the sensory, it is understandable that it should have played host to the convergence of SR and aesthetics. Yet such an alliance is puzzling when one considers what SR might bring to this negotiation, in so far as its primary selling point (according to the popularly diffused credo) is its dismissal of the mediating role of human experience. Indeed, if this 'movement' is concerned with wresting attention away from the primacy of intuition and interpretation, it could be (and has been) construed as an anti-aesthetic tendency.

In fact the adoption of SR into art practice and (more prevalently) art discourse has been determined less by an engagement with such concerns than by a series of symptomatic synchronicities. Its endorsement was boosted by the convergence of the anti-correlationist theme with ruminations on climate change and the anthropocene ('a world without us'). Likewise, its concern with nonhuman actants or material complicities speaks to the great inhuman networks within which we know we are enmeshed, but whose complexity artists struggle to figure.

Yet there are also specific and irresistible gains for art here: In its object-oriented guise, where every object whatsoever subsists on the same ontological plane, but simultaneously withdraws from our experience of it, 'SR art' realizes, more economically than the avant-garde's provocations or the social experiments of relational aesthetics, that old dream of levelling the artwork with a non-art universe:

1. On speculative realism, see *Collapse* vol. 2 (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2007), and 'Speculative Realism' in *Collapse* vol. 3 (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2008).

2. The most baffling proof of this was 'Speculative Realism's surprise entry at no.81 into *Art Review* magazine's 2013 'Power 100', 'A ranked list of the contemporary artworld's most powerful figures'.

An artwork is simply a thing, in meek and equal existence with other things (fridge; wombat; pen-lid; asteroid; crime-report; proton, etc.). Yet object-orientedness enlivens a retrenchment from expanded practice back to the autonomous object with the thrill of philosophical profundity: in a cosmic reinvigoration of the readymade, any object whatsoever, when supplemented with a faith in the subversive power of objectality as such, becomes not only art but also practical philosophy (multiple juxtaposed objects drawn from disparate fields even more so—what curator would not be invigorated by the notion that the People’s Liberation Army is commensurate with a coffee cup?).³ Following conceptualism’s acknowledged failure entirely to collapse aesthetic experience into conceptual proposition, ‘SR’ makes possible a new ‘art after philosophy’ in which a vacuously general concept (*object, thing, or material*) can mysteriously transform any stuff whatsoever into an aesthetically *and philosophically* significant experience. And finally, the promise of a great levelling of the geological and the anthropic, culture and nature, quarks and clerks into one gigantic objectal matrix converges happily with the flat eclecticism of the New Aesthetic and the Post-Internet generation—an endlessly multifarious universe that comes prequantified into discrete and isomorphic tumblr thumbnails. The concepts at work here are loose at best; the aesthetic effects as desultory as the curatorial apologia are extravagant.

In the face of this disappointing (if sociologically intriguing) phenomenon, the first stipulation for a project on ‘speculative aesthetics’ had to be that it refuse to create further materials for the construction of ‘a speculative aesthetic’ or to contribute further to the mannerism of ‘speculative’ art practice. The discussion documented in this volume, which initiated a longer-term project,⁴ focused on the structure of the aesthetic component of experience. When the latter is regarded as plastic rather than transcendently immutable, it suggests a set of definite questions in relation to the philosophical affirmation that cognition grasps a real that is not of its own making, and that its capacities may be reshaped as

3. On ‘Object-Oriented Art’, see Peter Wolfendale’s *Object Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon’s New Clothes* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), chapter 4.2, where he elaborates on the readymade nature of the object-oriented art object.

4. The Speculative Aesthetics Research Project was initiated in 2013 by Dr. James Trafford and Luke Pendrell for the consideration of open questions regarding the relation between aesthetics (broadly construed), and new forms of realism within post-Continental philosophy (influenced by, though not limited to positions identified with ‘Speculative Realism’).

a function of that real. The participants in this discussion explore ways in which a study of aesthetics can provide pointers for interrogating the conceptual underpinning of representation, and can furnish materials for an understanding of how experience is structured by various material regimes, from chemistry to digital media; and how these determinations are miscognized in received ideas of the 'aesthetic'. This in turn gives onto the issues that arise from considering the structuring of the aesthetic as an act of political force, and its relation to subjectivation. As far from the idioms of the SR art genre as this may seem, speculative aesthetics here reaffirms a relation between *the aesthetic* and *human creativity*, but within a conceptual framework that refuses to relinquish either of them to ineffability or to immutability. Across the varied contributions to this discussion, aesthetics is both naturalized (it is rooted in that vast 'memory bank' that is the evolutionary history of the species) and denaturalized (the intuitive legitimacy of its spontaneous forms is challenged by synthetic experiences), representation is rehabilitated, abstraction materialized, and cognition accelerated.

But before moving beyond the closed circle of art so as to orient the question of aesthetics in this way, the discussion sets out from an analysis of the stance of the contemporary art genre in relation to the aesthetic—that of a peculiarly ambivalent *aesthesophobia*.

An examination of 'the image' (i.e. aesthetic mediation) and its relation to contemporary art's quest for subversive political potency reveals a contradiction: The image is seen to index a real beyond the shackles of language, beyond temporal politics, beyond established power and frameworks of measure and assessment, and thus in a certain sense free of the constraining forces of the world. Yet despite this faith in the radical potential of aesthetic experience, any actual, particular image—including those that art itself produces—is assumed inevitably to be corrupted by those same forces. Aesthetic experience, incapable of realising its radical potential, can only *gesture* towards it, and must constantly strive to evade determination (or delegate it to the viewer). In the ensuing crisis, contemporary art vigilantly exposes its own compromises with the aesthetic, in an ongoing admission of failure and culpability.

Thus art seeks to discover in the freedom, indistinctness and fluidity of the aesthetic a figure for real freedom beyond politics, yet finds any image that 'works' to be complicit with structures of power. In parallel with certain strains

of SR, it attempts to overcome these established powers of representation by turning to forms of scientificity or literality that would bypass them, undoing the culpable particularity of its images (i.e., their *correlational* complicity with particular forms of representation). It mimics a stance of scientific objectivity in relation to its own methods and forms in order to pursue the chimera of an unmediated (uncorrelated) image—the phantasm of a practice which, finally directly accessing the radical level of aesthetic essence, would be absolutely ‘free’.

The parallels between this predicament and SR’s central question—How is it possible for thought to access that which is not always-already mediated by thought?—are not coincidental, given the similar institutional contexts within which they emerged. Both parties could possibly benefit from a shared examination of their conceptual and methodological problems, and their sometimes naive appeals to the ruin of mediation and direct access to the real. Unfortunately the story of this entanglement runs otherwise: art discourse and SR discourse have often spurred each other on in the employment of a set of idioms and mannerisms, mediations that *gesture* toward the dark rapture of de-mediation.

The participants in the following discussion are largely concerned with overturning this caricature of a speculative realist thought that seeks to bypass human mediation. Instead they ask how aesthesis, representation, and the image operate *within* the real—without their being, for all that, foundationally constitutive of it. The project of ‘undoing the image to undo power’ may be futile; but this is not because we must renounce the refusal to hypostatize human experience as the master-category through which the world is to be understood. Rather it is because we cannot simply slough off entrenched constraints in order to access the real that has priority over them. If speculation entails a release of thinking from the constraints of human phenomenality, this does not warrant our positing an absolute breach between the two. For the danger then is that we either return to naive realism, or deliver ourselves to ontological speculation that both occults and doubles its epistemological conceits. Contemporary art’s neurosis with regard to the aesthetic may well predispose it to collude in this error.

In reality, then, contemporary art encodes and perpetuates a certain set of propositions regarding the agency of the image. It is a cultural project that deploys aesthetic mediation in a way no less instrumentalised (if more perverse

and obfuscated) than other such projects. This deployment can therefore be considered and evaluated alongside a broader range of aesthetic practices. Such a revocation of contemporary art's privilege in relation to the aesthetic is crucial since the new modes of aesthetically-mediated practices that are bringing about profound changes in the way that we produce, disseminate and consume experience, do so with no regard to that privilege. It is the technological augmentation of the human sensorium, indissociable from the transformation of social forms and the mutation of subjectivity, that places the greatest demands upon a thinking of aesthetics today.

The contemporary structure of representation is the product of an interlocking series of augmented conceptual and sensory frameworks that make the boundaries of our perception transitional and provisional rather than fixed and impermeable. There are manifold new mediations between the human sensorium, the massive planetary media network within which it exists, and the wider universe of which both are minor tributaries. They draw on the advanced resources of scientific and technological abstraction (statistical analysis, mathematical modelling, neuropsychology, big data, etc.); but they are deployed largely in fortifying the comfort (and profitability) of what, following Wilfrid Sellars, we can call the 'manifest image', the inherited, traditional human self-conception. Take for example the aesthetic regime of social media and the response patterns and behaviours it programs at the symbolic-processing and sensori-motor level across whole populations. Aesthetics meets with the sociopolitical in real abstraction, when capital is the precondition for all production and experience at the level of material processes mediated by equally material images. These are abstractions that 'are not in the head but in everyday life'.

It is doubtful whether these aesthetic means of production can be voluntarily redeployed in order that we might interface with this complex system otherwise than as its passive client-producers. Retreat into a localist, anti-technological agenda in the face of complexities and abstractions that irrevocably exceed the compass of individual aesthetic experience is thus an understandable option. But inversely, the prosthetic extension of the human senses is a *sine qua non* of any engagement with the political reality of a planetary society operating at multiple scales of abstraction. Such realities perhaps cannot be encompassed in anything like 'an experience' in the individual phenomenological sense.

Distilling them into images of complexity figured through a technological sublime yields only an aestheticism that invites passive resignation. A speculative aesthetics may well have to operate in other terms altogether, rethinking aesthetics as a part of an exercise in collective cognition.

A major axis of the discussion emerges here around a Promethean or 'accelerationist' project of the unbinding of imagination, thought, and action oriented toward the enhancement of the human. It understands images as providing new modes of epistemic traction by processing sensory data through symbolic formalisms and technological devices. This is not a flight from a supposed bedrock of concrete immediacy to ideal abstractions, but a progressive reorientation to less localised models—the movement towards a 'universal address' reconsidered as a matter of cognitive navigation, and enabled by aesthetic reconfiguration.

If this suggests a disturbing instrumentalisation of aesthetics, again it should be recalled that a leisurely absorption in images, the rush of the sublime, the staging of a multimedia micro-utopian happening, all possess a certain purposiveness, form part of a project, and mandate certain patterns of behaviour. It is incumbent upon us to assess their effects and effectiveness. If we accept that the emancipatory epistemic function of aesthetic practice lies in its ability to undermine *urdoxa* and to illuminate the socio-cognitive conditioning of experience, it is crucial that this brings with it a commitment to something more than the provocation of moments of alienation or evanescent sentiments of liberation.

This conception breaks with the phantasm of an aesthetic realm that is radically immediate, indeterminate, free of conceptual constraints, or outside all extant power structures; it considers concrete and abstract as relative terms, and the aesthetic and conceptual as inextricably intertwined; and it entails a practice that no longer invests its faith in the essential promise of the aesthetic as such, but instead acknowledges the real force and traction of images, experimentally employing techniques of modelling, formalisation, and presentation so as to simultaneously 'engineer new domains of experience' and map them through a 'reconfigured aesthetics' that is transdisciplinary and indissociable from sociotechnical conditions.