And Another Thing: Nonanthropocentrism and Art
Katherine Behar, Emmy Mikelson

Published by Punctum Books

Katherine Behar and Emmy Mikelson.  
And Another Thing: Nonanthropocentrism and Art.  
Project MUSE.  

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76501
Demonstration and Description
Robert Jackson

In the often cited 1969 essay "Art After Philosophy," Joseph Kosuth proclaimed that "all art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually." Kosuth argued that Duchamp’s historical role was to align art with conceptual function, separate from a sensual aesthetics of transcendence, the “morphological” form of which had traditionally made art favorable to conventional critical taste. Kosuth put his finger on the moment when art’s autonomy was finally separated from the philosophy of aesthetics, with a smug declaration signaling “the end of philosophy and the beginning of art.” The relevance of discrete, portable art objects receded, and the linguistic, functional character of art as concept was foregrounded.

When objects are presented within the context of art (and until recently objects always have been used) they are eligible for aesthetic consideration as are any objects in the world, and an aesthetic consideration of an object existing in the realm of art means that the object’s existence or functioning in an art context is irrelevant to the aesthetic judgement.

In a way, it’s hard to criticize Kosuth; he simply took the general rejection of formalist criticism and its inherited philosophical baggage to its logical extreme. “His reasoning is in some way flawless,” as Thierry de Duve once described it.

How ironic, then, that in 2015 philosophy is now influencing how some contemporary artists relate themselves to the creation of work (and all the more ironic as, in the context of this publication, language and the finitude of human concepts are no longer privileged, while objects and things are). This strange historical leapfrogging between philosophy and art would be all the more fascinating if it weren’t so contingent on academic fashion, yet, Continental philosophy has now become subject to the same proliferation of ideas, development, urgency, and commitment that was evident in contemporary art in the late 1960s to mid-’70s (including Kosuth’s manifesto), and like many fields of study, it’s enjoying some renewed vigor after a period of vague stagnation.

Without wishing to overly generalize the situation, there has been a tremendous reevaluation of what Continental philosophy can and must do. This has, although not exclusively, been performed under the notorious title of speculative realism, a (now disbanded) movement that has galvanized dissatisfaction with language games, culture, and the overpoliticization of theory, rejecting them outright and/or radicalizing previous work, in a bid to approach the reality of things, thoughts, and the world beyond our access to it. We could be guilty of calling it a genuine paradigm shift—we could also be guilty of valuing its historical importance just as the lights go out—but whatever the speculative turn happens to be, one knows something has changed when no general consensus or outright definition can describe what’s going on.

At the heart of speculative realism lies the rallying call to reject what Quentin Meillassoux terms “correlationism,” which is important for aesthetic deliberation, not least because it exposes the specific issues and competing tensions in the relationship between a viewer and the artwork, or to be more specific, between the thought of the viewer and the being of the artwork. The rejection of correlationism, the definition of which states that thought and being are forever coimplicated together, bequeaths a deep challenge to the arts as well as philosophy, and it has broader consequences than simple specific attempts to illustrate what current philosophers have written—rather, it splits the very Kantian core of aesthetics itself.

That said, the disciplinary goals of philosophy and art sometimes launch mixed questions at each other, with each side unsure of what its goals are supposed to be, but should either discipline seek to unite an authentic engagement between speculative realism and aesthetics, it must first inquire whether one set of goals can be mapped on the other. That hasn’t stopped artists from “trying out” speculative realism, though, and the broader direction of this essay isn’t to explicitly judge the aesthetic maneuvers so far, but to at least focus on that ground, focus on the tensions involved, indicate directions of future debate, and provide key tools for interrogating each other’s goals, whether historical or current.
The chief aim is to illuminate one broad axis of division within the speculative realism movement and use it to illustrate or characterize certain modalities in the operation of aesthetics. Moreover, one could claim that these key differences between the proponents of speculative realism also radicalize existing tensions within art criticism that have bubbled underneath the surface and continue to remain controversial.

THINKING BEYOND THOUGHT / EXISTING BEYOND THOUGHT

The original four positions of speculative realism (Quentin Meillassoux’s “absolute contingency,” Ray Brassier’s “destruction of the manifest image,” Iain Hamilton Grant’s “idealist grounding of processual nature,” and Graham Harman’s “autonomy of objects”) can be grouped and oriented along a number of interesting but arbitrary divisions. Since the original 2007 symposium at Goldsmiths College, however, it has become overwhelmingly clear that one necessary axis of division lies at the core between the speculative positions. This divisive axis originates with Kant, yet it breaks away from him into two modes of orientation.

The first insists that reality is breached through the “truth” of epistemological knowledge, to think beyond or about the reality of correlated thought (Meillassoux and Brassier), that one must be able to rationally “think” reality beyond thought itself. The second chooses to disregard the importance of human knowledge outright and favor an ontological reality that is real by virtue of existing beyond any form of thought and knowledge (Harman and Grant). This central axis of division, I argue, underscores any engagement or disagreement on speculating reality that is real by virtue of existing beyond any human knowledge outright and favor an ontological reality (either in itself or the reality of thought) that can be deduced within its givenness. Meillassoux remains adamant that thinking reality (and it is only reality that can be thought) must pass through conceptual rigor and argument to deduce the world in its totality, while Harman insists that no amount of knowledge will make reality accessible or reveal its inner secrets, but this is not a definitive human attribute; all entities are primarily inaccessible to each other in equal measure.

This axis may be directly positioned as an explicit philosophical distinction, specifically designed to expose certain aesthetic modalities and consequences generated from either side. To coin two opposing neologisms, one could call this the difference between artists and philosophers who are interested in either of the following:

Demonstration: the view that artworks or an aesthetic experience should demonstrate a view from nowhere or from nothing: it is a view expressed from the outside, or from an extrinsic principle of reality, which is to say that reality (either in itself or the reality of thought) can be deduced within its givenness.

Description: the view that artworks or an aesthetic experience should describe a view from somewhere or from something; it is a view that can only be expressed from something, a viewer, an object, or from an intrinsic principle of reality, which is to say that reality is constituted by entities in their own right, by their own reason.

Both aesthetic orientations, like their philosophical counterparts, are heirs to Kant’s correlate but go their separate speculative ways by virtue of whether one decides to demonstrate the literal conditions of givenness within aesthetic experience or situate the description of aesthetic givenness in nonhuman entities. If any future negotiation between aesthetics and speculative realism is to be initiated, it must surely pick its variance between Demonstration and Description.
For the author’s part, my own interest and specialization lies in the computational arts, defined as any mode of artistic creation that incorporates the logic of computation in its creation, exhibition, and spectatorship. So too does computational art fall in between Demonstration and Description; in the former, the inception of computation was born from a failed totalizing, metamathematical demonstration, that is, a functional, logical entity that computed demonstrable knowledge for human thought. In the latter, it can be understood as an emergent mechanism producing undecidable surprises, which can only be described secondhand, as it executes independently from thought.

An aesthetics of Demonstration primarily demystifies the world by conceptual means. The ability of thought to demonstrate some basic logical ground, some inferential truth, or some contingent compression of knowledge becomes the means upon which all else rests. Demonstration is indicative of Meillassoux’s mathematically formalist materialism, which is subject to an absolute emergence of transfinite contingency, completely knowable by thought. So too can we include Brassier’s nihilist defense of a nonconceptual reality, which is not designed to be intelligible nor infused with special meaning. The contingent emergence of cognition in matter must be exposed for what it is, demonstrably passive and inert, or at least only active in such a way that it can be known and its consequences fully accounted for. One can justify a similar but different metaphysical approach from structural realists such as James Ladyman and Don Ross, or philosophers who seek demonstration through deducing cognition through neuroscience such as Thomas Metzinger or Paul Churchland. Demonstration seeks to pulverize ontology by epistemological means and fully identify a variance of nonanthropomorphism from the confines of a pure rational, natural, material thought. It seeks a realism that subsists without being given, or a reality that remains entirely asubjective and yet must be entirely known, completely unaffected by sensual or perceptive understanding. With thought radically divorced from being, Demonstration reverse engineers givenness into extinction, crushing delusions with one hand while digging for tautological truth with the other. Demonstration is utterly explicit, literal and external.

Such an aesthetics of Demonstration is speculatively new but not entirely new; demonstration and contingency are the key elements of the Duchampian legacy, which persist within artworks seeking to unveil or demythologize the appearance of the pictorial, the sculptural, and the authenticity of the creator together with his/her work. It is worth noting that Meillassoux in particular has a philosophical investment in Duchamp, although this influence remains unpublished. Brassier’s meditations on noise and sonic practice are entirely used to render the “destitution of the aesthetic,” one which “exacerbates the rift between knowing and feeling by splitting experience, forcing conception against sensation.”

Broadly speaking, an aesthetics that operates in the mode of demonstration rests on the ability of the artist to pierce through the givenness of art and expose an explicit, subtractive view of the world, usually grounded on social experiments, jokes, hoaxes, or one-liners. Demonstrative art must at all times strive to simultaneously explain the reality of “what’s going on”; expose its contingent emergence; remove any descriptive, subjective act of gesture; and rewrite (or mock) its state of affairs. In some cases it gives priority to materialist encounter, but with only a literal “nothingness” behind that focus; nothingness except impersonal conceptual knowledge. Rather unexpectedly, one could cite an example from Nicolas Bourriaud’s Relational Aesthetics, a influential body of criticism that is explicitly grounded in the philosophical tradition of an Althusserian “materialism of encounter,” for it “takes as its point of departure the world contingency, which has no pre-existing origin or sense, nor Reason, which might allot it a purpose.” Demonstrative art reverse engineers its way into novelty through explosions of context and the literal truth of the encounter. Any encounter in Demonstration is an encounter by nothing within nothing.

By contrast, the aesthetics of Description holds that knowledge is manqué and can never be secured, but only described and realized, or perhaps translated, absorbed, sensed, delayed, and morphized. Description is broadly championed by not only Harman and Grant, but also Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, and Steven Shaviro, whose common influences, Alfred North Whitehead and William James, proceeded as if Kant never existed. As a direct opposite of Demonstration, the experience of Description seeks to pulverize epistemology by ontological means. Thought becomes “common and humble, rather than rare and preeminent.” Proponents of Description radicalize the anthropomorphic correlation by articulating a reality constructed by a multitude of entity-centric views, or “morphisms,” that aren’t specifically conscious in all cases, but in terms of appearing “sensually” and “experientially” are every bit equal to human experience. The intentionality, or sensibility of things and entities is a feature of the physical world tout court.
and thus treats fictions seriously, not as delusions but as creative configurations of limited translation that come together randomly. Everything that must be the case takes place within primordial pockets of description where “nothing is known—only realized.”

The only entities that are beyond Description are more descriptions instigated into concrete objects, forces, powers, networks, or occasions. Taken to its speculative conclusion, Description’s logical conclusion halts at panpsychism, but for others, it need not halt there. It is utterly implicit, figurative and internal.

Similarly, such an aesthetics of Description is speculatively new, but its roots descend from a precorrelationist history. Harman, for instance, has a deep philosophical interest in Clement Greenberg, the archetypal modernist art critic who celebrated finite morphism and sought to articulate the unarticulable by appealing to the withdrawn core of the medium’s indescribable form, upon which describable content could be reconfigured. Description generally takes place as an intense aesthetic fascination with the autonomy of entities and as such, this ontological, autonomous relationship is beyond Demonstration, for it revels and rejoices in a piercing sensibility of the given, at once immediate and inexhaustible, no matter what entity it happens to operate in. Any encounter that occurs in Description is an encounter of something within something.

REEXAMINING THE KANTIAN DEADLOCK

Of crucial importance is the sudden realization that there is no middle ground or synthesis to this axis anymore, not least because correlationism was a presynthesis of these two positions. Considering that the speculative realism movement is defined by its break with correlationism, this, in effect, preempts any upcoming reconciliation between Demonstration and Description. If the original intention of artists or philosophers is to reject the anthropocentric view of correlationism, they must choose either sphere outright before laying down details within its threshold. They must either demonstrate claims of an indifferent reality through the art of epistemological deduction, or they must radicalize the ontological operation of description within the indifference of entities beyond human knowledge. Such arguments between Demonstration and Description reach a deadlock: the objection that one must demonstrate the description, versus the objection that one can only describe the demonstration. Philosophy attempts to make the stakes against opposing positions clear, but the stakes in contemporary aesthetics never quite reveal themselves until after the fact.

Why are transcendent fictions unnecessary in the aesthetics of Demonstration? The answer is that implicitness is not accepted in this aesthetic, as it is inherently dominated by the explicit, literal fact of the matter. The circumstance of human sentience plays the primary role by foregrounding the literal, contingent circumstances upon which sapience is grounded. In opposition to the aesthetics of Description, entities are not entities in their own right because they aren’t “literally” there; Demonstration’s chief role is to reduce them into scientific facts, mathematical functions, relational forces, or more favorably, political production. There is no knowledge to be made by grounding “pseudoentities” like artworks, objects, or institutions as autonomous instigators of aesthetic appreciation, let alone physical reality. Demonstration is utterly fascinated by correlationism, but only insofar as it bequeaths an undiscovered portal toward the literal truth of its own circumstance in the world.

By contrast, Description defends itself by arguing that Demonstration never fully articulates the reality it’s trying to uncover, for any such move is still a description and not a perfect, literal communication of what it purportedly performs. Description refuses any saliency for human sentience and focuses instead on something deeper that can account for any form of causal relationship in the cosmos; such an unfathomable descriptive mode of causation is reality, and under these conditions, the aesthetic effect for thought is one general instance of relation, or of a featured gradient, between any entity. To recount an aesthetic experience in Description is simply recounting one instance within a causal metaphysical scheme.

Having identified a very broad outline of this necessary distinction for speculative realism and art, we now have the operative tools to open up other key works, exhibitions, curatorial practices, texts, and publications, which offer their own insights into the logics of Demonstration and Description accordingly, and thus offer their own correspondences on a possible understanding of reality beyond human access, together with the purview of art. To reiterate, this essay does not judge the act of choosing between these two aesthetic experiences, but seeks to understand the speculative consequences of artists and philosophers choosing between these two aesthetic orientations. Such an understanding will not require a cataclysmic theoretical or curatorial break with all previous understandings of art, and especially not a simple import of philosophical insight fused with artistic
illustration. Rather, it will require a deeper, speculative reexamination of how artists have approached and will continue to approach the conflicting Kantian relationships between a viewer and the artwork in this new era.

For Demonstration, it may require the dismantling of this relationship to expose the literal truth of what is between viewer and work. The ontological discourse of being in Demonstration is of the fact. To be is to be a fact.1

For Description, it may require the expansion of this relationship to expose the wider, plural relationships between viewer and work. If there is such an ontological discourse attached to Description, then it must be of the thing that describes and is described. To be is to be a thing.

Continental philosophy and contemporary art already have a deep, complex history of reexamining their own and each other’s past; however, the conflict between Demonstration and Description, which bubbles underneath speculation, brings with it a set of renewed challenges but also new problems. With nothing to unite the two, we also have the most important orientation of all for the production of art: an orientation of persistent urgency.