And Another Thing: Nonanthropocentrism and Art
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In their curatorial statement, Katherine Behar and Emmy Mikelson propose that the exhibition *And Another Thing* was meant to critically engage the privilege of the human in relation to art, materialism, and the recent turn to ontology in the philosophical movements known as speculative realism and object-oriented ontologies. Here, I also want to engage the ontological turn, its reconception of materialism and the privilege of the human, while giving special attention to developments in media technology. After all, nearly all media technological developments have raised questions about the human in that they often trouble, if not transform, the relationship of time and space, memory and forgetting, embodiment and disembodiment, privacy and exposure, individual and collective, matter and life. In this sense, the development of a new media technology often is traumatic while providing a unique form of transmitting trauma. As Marshall McLuhan put it: “The emergence of a new media is too violent and superstimulated a social experience for the central nervous system simply to endure.” It is the usual relationship, or perhaps I should say the usual opposition of life and matter, that is central in this most recent ontological turn, a turn, I would propose, that is especially resonant with the traumatic changes wrought with the development of digital technologies.

The resonance with digital technology of the recent turn to ontology is in the latter’s aim to recover matter from its opposition to culture, to nature, to life, even to the extent of refusing cultural construction or the assimilating act of human consciousness deeply embedded in most of our materialisms. That is to say, materialist philosophy or the philosophical positions that we mostly share have presumed the impossibility of a world without human consciousness or knowing; our philosophical positions have been characterized by a primordial rapport between human and world, a correlation between knowing and being. Asking us to critically rethink what Quentin Meillassoux³ has called “correlationism,” this most recent ontological turn has signaled the end of materialism or, conversely, the creation of new materialisms.

In their introduction to a collection of essays titled *New Materialisms*, the editors Diana Coole and Samantha Frost suggest that the new materialisms “are rediscovering a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that compel us to think of causation in far more complex terms, to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency.” The new materialists suggest a rethinking of agencies and causation because they are conceiving matter as vibrant, vibrating with information/energy. Matter is conceived therefore as affective independent of cultural interpretation or cultural construction as well as independent of human cognition or consciousness. In a similar vein, the philosopher Timothy Morton takes up objects, proposing that “motion is not something that an object ‘does’ on occasion: motion is a deep ontological feature of a thing,” an ontological feature that is inciting a new ecological awareness in which each and every thing or object in its singularity is lively and with agency or the capacity to affect and be affected.

Along these lines, critical theorists, myself among them, have been arguing that affect, at least in the Spinozian-Deleuzian sense, is immanent to all scales of matter, from quantum to human to cosmic.⁵ Affect is matter’s capacity to affect and be affected; it is matter’s agency, its capacity to inform itself. This conceptualization of affect deeply disturbs the history of the use of the term agency because here affect is not confined to the human subject; it is not the human subject’s agency alone or even primarily. This reconception of matter as affective therefore puts ontology and epistemology out of sync with one another since affect is conceived as real, or an experienced experience, if you will, before it is a humanly known or conscious phenomenon or even an unconscious one. Thus the new materialisms are not a culturalization of matter in that there is a refusal of the thought of culture as an enlivening form or meaning to be given to what is presumed to be its opposite, inert or dumb matter.
This shift to rethinking matter as lively, unsettling culture as the privileged source of meaning, and the carrier of the agency of human subjects raises a question about what we have called cultural mediation, making us rethink media technology and transmission, as well as the transmission of trauma. What is invited is a rethinking of trauma and media technology, acknowledging the massive development of digital or computational technologies and the specific ways these can extend matter or intervene in matter’s materializing itself. For example, nanotechnologies demonstrate this as they offer a new kind of materiality that Luciana Parisi describes as an “artificiality . . . advancing underneath the natural strata” and as such can change the primary and the secondary (or the real and the sensual) qualities of matter, showing what atoms and molecules have been doing all along. Here technology heightens or intensifies (it can also deintensify) what already is in motion, what already is affective and circulating at nonphenomenological speeds.

Similarly, digital technologies allow for the appreciably rapid connectivity and virtual proximity of social media by mobilizing the affective allure of nonsymbolic images circulating at nonphenomenological speeds, thereby supporting the wildly popular dissemination of the autobiographical through the profiles of Facebook, self-blogs, YouTube, Twitter, and the like, while, however, bringing to a near end the articulation of subjectivity in terms of memory and forgetting that is pressed into a narrative logic of beginning, middle, and ending. Instead there is the rise in the value of big data or transactional data gathered as a by-product of institutional transactions that are far outstripping the privilege, as well as the utility, of large-scale social science research but also the soft narrative approaches of the social sciences and the humanities too. Trauma no longer is a matter of seeking voice for what cannot be said, a privacy that now has had no end of publicity. Trauma has become ubiquitous; it has gone viral, beyond human containment, beyond national containment, beyond environmental containment. Trauma no longer is distinctly symptomology or problematic of what has gone wrong with you and me. Instead trauma is infection in matter’s rhythms with wild reverberations, inciting a new view of media and mediation.

Such a view of media technology, derived from thinking of matter as lively or in motion, is different than thinking of media as offering culturally produced forms of consciousness or unconsciousness, ideologically inflected, hailing us as subjects—from subjects of the nation to the subjects of a globalized risk in a financialization of everyday life. Although these forms of subjectivity have been and remain critically suggestive, they usually have presumed the opposition of matter to culture, matter to life, matter to nature, and therefore have supported a philosophical assumption of the fall from nature into technology like the fall in Eden from innocence into sin, so a dialectic restoration, if not a secular salvation, usually has informed media criticism. But media technology now has induced another thought of mediation, whereby mediation is immanent to a rhythmic, vibrant, or vibrating matter such that media is better understood as modulation of what is already in motion, and whereby subjectivity (not only human subjectivity) is first and foremost affectivity or a capacity for entanglement with a sensibility of rhythm, vibration, and oscillation.

It is in this light that Jussi Parikka defines media as “contractions of forces of the world into specific resonating milieus,” or into “ecologies of sensation,” to use Amit Rai’s term. Media is understood to accelerate or decelerate, intensify or deintensify matter’s own rhythms, allowing for transitioning between temporal dimensions or speeds, not least the speeds of calculation. Steve Goodman writes of an ontology of vibration, and Parikka concludes: “We do not so much have media as we are media and of media.” So, for theorists like Goodman, Rai, and Parikka, mediation is modulation of affective forces of human perception and sensation but also perception and sensation above, below, or other than that of the human, at all scales of matter.

In this view, media is extended to various platforms—organic, inorganic, chemical, and neurochemical, not only bringing into crisis the boundary between life and matter, but also proposing that the distinction between analog and digital media be rethought. There is a move to deprivilege the analog against which the digital often is thought to be simultaneously exact and reductive—and if engaged with liveliness, engaged to reduce it exactly. The new media theorists I have drawn on refuse to privilege the analog. Instead they rethink the digital in terms of nonphenomenological speeds of calculation; they appreciate the “numerical dimensions of the virtual” and “the rhythmic oscillations that vibrate the microsonic and the molecular turbulence these generate.” Giving them insight into “the potential for mutation immanent to the numerical code itself.”

This is a perception of code as operating by entangling with the affective condition of each and every thing’s singular existence. And thus, the analog is taken to refer to a thing’s or an object’s network of ramifying
traces propagated virtually without end.11 While an object is part of such a network, it also stands apart from such a network as well.

Digital media thus conceived is both of an infraempiricism reaching to what is below or before human conception and cognition and of a metaphysical realism, speculating on what has agency without us, or is of a world that is neither for us nor against us, as Eugene Thacker has put it.12 This is the trauma that now faces us: what is to be the human response to a world that is neither for us nor against us, the world digital media has brought to our attention by modulating what is below or before our consciousness and cognition? The ontological turn is a first appreciation of a need for philosophy to rethink causality in a world of forces immanent to matter.

Start again, the philosophers are saying.
Start again with no presumed correlations between human and world, being and thinking.
Start again on a groundless ground.
Start again with an aesthetic causality: the attraction and repulsion of forces immanent to matter, forcing open new paths for creative practices seeking to regain a power for living artfully and for a lively art.

No matter what differences among the philosophers who have recently turned to ontology in order to rethink the vitality of matter and the liveliness of the object, all have agreed to the relevancy of aesthetics. Aesthetics is seen as a way to approach the object recognizing its agency or its being affective without these being correlated to human cognition or consciousness. At the same time, this is not merely to return the object to a naive empiricism or scientistic positivism. For philosophers engaged with speculative realism or object-oriented ontologies, like Morton, Graham Harman, Ian Bogost, and Jane Bennett—as well as for those influenced more by the process-oriented philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Alfred North Whitehead, like Brian Massumi, Elizabeth Grosz, Luciana Parisi, and Steven Shaviro—a return to ontology has brought with it a return to the aesthetic. This return both registers and responds to the current transmission of trauma, the trauma of the technological development of digital media. The return to the aesthetic both registers and responds to this trauma in that it trumps other forms of causality, those other forms that have given humans a sense of control over life, over matter, over each other.

The aesthetic to which there has been a return is that of the beautiful rather than that of the sublime. The return to the aesthetic is not about the experience of the overwhelming disjunction between imagination and understanding that, as Kant would propose, only becomes an experience of the sublime in the conscious recognition of the failure of human comprehension. The aesthetic of the beautiful instead refers to a responsiveness, a force of repulsion or attraction, that is without the guide of reason, concept, consciousness, or cognition. For Richard Moran, drawing on Kant and the post-Kantian history of aesthetics, this responsiveness suggests “that what is regarded as beautiful is not experienced as a passive thing or as something that merely produces an effect in us but rather as inviting or requiring something from us, a response that may be owed to it . . . , as if the beautiful thing had an independent life of its own.”13 Not surprisingly, then, Shaviro finds the aesthetic of the beautiful resonant with an object-oriented ontology in that the aesthetic of the beautiful meets the way objects “cannot be cognized, or subordinated to concepts; and also insofar as they cannot be utilized, or normatively regulated, or defined according to rules.”14 The aesthetic of the beautiful involves “feeling an object for its own sake,” beyond those aspects of it that can be understood or used. This, however, is not about the recognition of conceptualization or cognition failing or being limited; rather, it is about an ontology that proposes that objects can feel and be felt by each other; they can affect and be affected by each other. This is how objects connect to each other and how in doing so are slightly or massively changed, caused to become different things.15

What is being claimed is that “the aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension,” as Morton puts it.16 Harman too argues that “aesthetics is first philosophy,” and as such, “causality is alluring.”17 Shaviro goes along with Harman in arguing that “it is only aesthetically, beyond understanding and will, that I can appreciate the actus of the thing being what it is, in what Harman calls ‘the sheer sincerity of existence.’”18 And what the thing is or why the object is alluring is in the object’s differing from itself. It is in this sense that Morton argues: “Beauty works itself ‘in’ to the already existing rift between an object and that same object” and “causality happens because this dance of nonidentity is taking place on the ontological inside of an object,”19 from which the forces of repulsion or attraction radiate and are a “lure to feeling,” as Whitehead puts it.

To be clear, then, this turn to aesthetics is not about aestheticization, that is, the imposition of rules of taste; it is about an ontological turn to affective matter and lively objects, necessitating the philosophical stipulation of causality as allurement occurring
between all real things, which though singular and inaccessible to cognition or conceptualization are nonetheless sensually open to being affected and affective. All in all, this means that we are approaching the aesthetic as causal and the media as affective modulation just when the calculative speeds of digital technologies can produce qualitative changes in the sensual and real qualities of matter.

And thus, there is a new sense of the traumatic and its transmission. Morton concludes that if the aesthetic dimension, “its nontemporality and nonlocality, is not in some beyond but right here, in your face,” right where the object is, “then nothing is going to tell us categorically what counts as real and what counts as unreal.” Aesthetic causality points to what constitutes the trauma of digital technology: “It strips the world bare of the illusion that it isn’t an illusion or that illusion is just a surface on noncontradictory unified real.”

With the ontological turn, the real of trauma is no longer a matter of a noncontradictory real to be found in an excavation of the past; it is an intensivity of microtemporal modulations and multimodal expression of the rhythms and vibrations of all things, things that matter. This makes criticism a matter of art, a critical method that itself secretes ontological domains, a critical method that necessarily is performative and engaged in experimental practices of allurement. With the expansion of trauma and aesthetics, we may well be “exiting the era in which cool, ironic, critical distance is the signature of the intellectual,” and instead, the intellectual’s signature might be “mimetic involvement, high-strung emotion, and fascinated sincerity with the world.” In this expansion of aesthetics, art becomes ubiquitous but, for that, even more important. And Another Thing—with its concern both for the historical traditions of art that have been critically engaging the privilege of the human on behalf of the object and for its focus on current philosophical trends—is just the kind of exhibition we need for these times.

4. Timothy Morton, “Objects in the Mirror are Closer Than They Appear,” in “Another Phenomenology: Exploring the Sensuous Earth,” special issue, ed. Tom Sparrow and Bobby George, Singularium 1 (2012). There is much to say about the difference between the ontologies being elaborated that suggests the end of materialism and those that suggest a new materialism. For one, there is a difference in arguing that matter is in motion or that objects are in motion. Some philosophers argue that there is nothing else but objects and while objects are dynamic, the dynamism does not come from elsewhere, from matter, for example. Here I cannot develop these differences that now are being argued among philosophers, but I can suggest that matter here also might be taken as an object ontologically speaking, and, to be clear, subjects and bodies, as well as machines, dogs, cats, clouds, and the angels that sit upon clouds are all considered objects of one sort or another in the ontological turn.
15. Shaviro, “The Universe of Things.”
18. Shaviro, “The Universe of Things.” Shaviro is quoting Harman (Graham Harman, Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things [Chicago and LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 2005], 139). Although there is agreement between Harman and Shaviro, there also is disagreement. Shaviro has discussed this disagreement by contrasting the metaphysics of Harman and Whitehead. Shaviro prefers Whitehead as a matter of taste, or aesthetics, as he puts it (Stevens Shaviro, “The Actual Volcano: Whitehead, Harman, and the Problem of Relations,” in The Speculative Turn, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick S oice, and Graham Harman [Melbourne: re.press, 2011], 289). Shaviro further suggests that Harman is concerned more with the sublime than Whitehead, who prefers the beautiful. Shaviro suggests that this links Harman’s notion of allure to the sublime, easily making Harman fall into the modernist tradition (Shaviro, “The Actual Volcano,” 289–90). In a response to Shaviro, Harman makes the point I have made above that the sublime is a human experience, as is clear in Kant, while Harman’s notion of allure is not about the human experience of cognitive limitation but about the ontology of objects, including but not privileging the human (Graham Harman, “Response to Shaviro,” in The Speculative Turn, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick S oice, and Graham Harman [Melbourne: re.press, 2011], 302–3). There is much more to say about the difference and similarities among Whitehead, Harman, and Shaviro that I cannot take up here. What I am suggesting here is that the contrast between Shaviro’s and Harman’s thinking is entangled with the development of digital technology and the further development of that technology may give weight to one of their philosophies over the other.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.