

Art and the New Materialist Power: The Death of Anti-Representationalist Critique

Amanda Beech

Sore Heads

A lingering hangover from the artistic avant-garde is the tradition that artworks manifest a causal link between aesthetic autonomy and social change. This belief in the special power of a humanistic free will permeates the definition of contemporary art, in spite of its claims to have undertaken a critique of precisely this dimension. Critical labors such as de-materialization, de-sublimation, and the postmodernist and poststructuralist drives to decenter subjectivity in the grounds of interpretative and pluralized open-language systems have been in vain since all reveal a latent but intact subjectivity at their core that gets to author choice from particular positions of privilege (even when as we shall see that this privilege is deemed as tragic). We have seen this presupposition for a universal power of art as ‘difference,’ alterity and autonomy that would indicate its non-instrumental abstract capacity, in actuality to be conducive to a politics of local, temporal and short-term impact, in which social change can be measured and assessed. [1] This understanding of art as always already autonomous, or somehow beyond the space of reason, is symptomatically correlated to a measure, where ironically, the abstract principle of art’s freedom consistently manifests as a form of judgment in empirical terms: Art’s freedom has thus become pivotal to its critical agency. The concept of its freedom is assessed by itself, its makers and its audiences because art’s freedom promises the emancipation of people. However, as the crisis of the avant-garde played itself out, freedom –as autonomy - as both contract and promise, produces judgment, and this new self-understanding of art’s internal contradiction calcifies art’s critique as the visibility of a transcendental self-conscious awareness of the limits and failure of its own agency. This tragic critique has manifest in forms of negative dialectics, as well as in ironic forms of criticism, where art’s political claim has often relied upon its relation to an assessment

of its social efficacy—and not necessarily an assessment of social efficacy in itself or what we might understand as constructive change [2] In all cases, a concept of the autonomy of art as a form of *essentially free* material prevails in discourses and practices of its politics, even if it is defined negatively. This character continues to mark its value, and inflects its very definition.

A politics of art's autonomy understood as nature reinforces a transcendental subjectivity that correlates subjective intention and metaphysical objectivity. This transcendence describes the mythological and essential difference or alterity of art *and* subjectivity but, strangely, simultaneously writes its politics as a struggle for difference, a battle necessarily fought at the level of form. Here, art realizes its task of being a material derived from specific conditions, systems and contexts, but that is also free from any ulterior goals. In this, art's key enemy is framed as the mechanics of an instrumental reason of the kind that supports a propagandist art and rules exchange values. Theodor Adorno's essay "Commitment" (1962) outlines this picture more fully. "This is not a time for political art," Adorno writes, "but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead." [3]

At the heart of this critique is a defense of the contradiction that while art is always already different [4], we must labor in its name to *achieve* difference. Such difference may be understood as the ambiguation of identity that serves to declassify and therefore free art from the place of degradation—the kitsch of capitalist assimilation. For any art to acquire its status as critical (and therefore political) in this case, it must span the space of difference, connecting the ontological definition of art with its ontic assemblage. This approach makes autonomy art's cause and (invisible) nature. The struggle of autonomy founded in the territories of negative dialectics produces this tension as a form of abstract nature in itself. [5]

Although Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari do not predominantly use the term *autonomy*, in their essay "Percept, Affect, and Concept," [6] the text reveals persistent problems that shed light upon this theme. Here, Deleuze and Guattari outline an artistic method that

reaches across planes to generate the condition of clusters of percepts and affects. Despite the lack of a conceptual scheme for this method, it is important to point out that for them, not all art is capable of it. [7] The artworks that succeed are those that refuse the subjective conditions of affects and perceptions, and which are incommensurable and timeless: “Affects are precisely these non-human becomings of man.” [8] These clusters correlate with reality through their becoming zero of man in a liaison with “the universe.” Here, an impenetrable dimension of art is naturalized at the level of object formations in “zones of indiscernibility.” [9] Van Gogh *becomes* the sunflower, Yves Klein *becomes* the abstraction of blueness, characters *become* cities, and we merge with our cosmic milieus as conditional parts, authors, actors, and characters. In these works, difference is unified with autonomy, through excising the form of judgment that perception would classify as relative difference. Instead, this other form of absolute difference, found in particular constructions, subsumes subjects in the process of an unbinding of perceptual relations towards becoming, in a uniquely de-territorialized presence of freedom. Here, set in a particular modernity, the technical support and the content of works—as well as the material and the frame—dissolve into one another, enabling the artwork to free itself from the dominance of transcendence in “an innocent atheism.” [10] This serves to disengage art from all ideology, precisely through the assertion of ‘de-framing’ as a critical mechanism of the work over and beyond the normativity of difference-critique. [11]

In presenting to us the different modalities of critical idealism and manifest presence, these critiques aim to dislodge art from its conceptual and propositional function by the side - or back door, taking up the critical methods of dispersion, destabilization and desublimation. But these approaches struggle in the face of a global context composed of art’s monetization and the dominant narrative of invention as difference at the level at which capital and contemporary art now frame modernity *and* contemporary culture. In efforts to unbind the conditions of power through the image at the level of specific form-experience [12] we are left with the emptiness of epistemological hope, or with myths of the special qualities of located presence, ambiguation, de-framing and de-territorialization. This universal experience must be legislated by a transcendental-

mythological concept of art that, as we have seen, serves to dissect the art world into different categories, where some mediations are *more real* than others. It is this internal contradiction that serves to ultimately dislodge art from the political capacity that it claims. Here we get to the kernel of the firm and ubiquitous relation between artistic idealism, masquerading as realist materialisms, and the psychopathology of cognitive capitalism. In the heart of art's association with heteronomous nature(s) purchased through its own identity and the projection of 'real' contingent life that this identity accesses, we find the very picture of capital. In this sense, art's predilection for the real, as material or transcendental figures a pathology of the real. Furthermore, the idea that art might operate as a unique and independent system of knowledge production is all the more starkly challenged when we see that its value is accrued via an entirely separate system of philosophical knowledge. In these cases, art's purported autonomy produces an impoverished mythology that further constrains its claims to the project of irony.

The relation between aesthetic autonomy as the character of artistic modernity and a theory of nature has continued to be discussed and extended in the context of evolutionary theories of natural science, where the autonomy (that essential difference) of art that connects to its freedom to move in any direction – to be anything - is mediated by the reality of a complex de-ontologized system. Here, the autonomy of art prevails as a catalyst for and predictive hope of the social imaginary, as something that can transform all life at the level of perception—, affecting the swirl of relations, from the neurons in the brain to the buildings that we build and inhabit—, *and* the principles and laws around which we commune, in one diverse ecology. According to this definition, art's special character of alterity is sustained as a normatively conditioned site of difference, where it is pictured as *the life that changes life*, a dysfunctional but reliable element of a nature-system that guarantees the larger function of life systems.

Here, art works might reengineer life to produce the kinds of behaviors that would override the trap of normativity within which they reside – transforming not only the status of other categorizations, identifications and beliefs but significantly, those that constitute the definition of art itself. This theory of change is understood by enabling a

rewriting of the world in another ecology, a radical altering of the “whole human” toward a different social imaginary and art plays a key role in this process. Already, we are caught within the identities of a transcendental metaphysics and a pragmatic naturalism, between an account of evolutionary change and the kind of propositional modeling that could predict change. In this schema, we can see that despite validating an evolutionary paradigm wherein art would be heteronomous to natural science, art as a figure of difference persists in making ‘purpose’ an abstraction of art’s conceptual condition. This means that while art symbolizes difference, it cannot put this symbolic power to use or account for the possibility that it could engineer with specific direction and commitment. This predilection for autonomy bootstrapped to social change compels us to scrutinize the systems in which art finds itself, the rules it obeys, and how its traditions describe a normativity of practice that might lead toward a rethinking of modernity, and of critical autonomy without lapsing into this ideal correlation between project and nature that habituates art to difference.

How might we understand the difference between our pathology *to* difference and a reordering of our lives *as* different? This is a question of what it would be to transform the folk culture of certain false realisms that have become an expression of our nature without either dismantling all images to the level of the weak or illusory in the name of a misplaced fear of representation or reifying art as autonomous, or as the sole avatar promising an escape from these traditions?

A key aim of this essay is to identify how art can claim a materialist politics at the level of its materiality. This is a question of how art can ensure that its representational work does not set itself in opposition to the thought that it mediates while also refusing to correlate thought or image to ‘the real.’ To do this, we must first explore the dominant and prevalent trajectory of critique that has established materialist claims through a consistent investment in overcoming the problems of representation, rationalism, and perception. This trajectory witnesses the problem outlined above, that indicates a particular form of paranoia, wherein concepts are considered real and images false, or vice versa, and wherein concepts are understood as the most pervasive forms of images—

all the more powerful because we cannot see them. As we will find, it is how the terms of representation, conception, perception, and reason are mined and validated as problems in themselves that has resulted in a persistent problem for art, in that a reading of these terms has underscored a perennial valorization of an idealist's theme of freedom that runs counter to materialism.

Money

It is important to retrace some of the claims in my introduction through the operations of the artwork and its economic context. When we perceive an object of art *as* art, we engage with the framed assertion of its status as such something that Marcel Duchamp observed a long time ago and realized in his Readymades. The conceptualization and injunction of 'art as anything' still overdetermines and encircles art as the subject of its self-institutionalization. This systematization of art through and perhaps in spite of Duchamp's demand now shores itself up as the symptom of a prevalent capitalist ideology. This form of autonomy derived from a liberal humanism remains a key definition of art that supports its surplus value as a luxury commodity, it might be worth believing in it for lucrative reasons—to adhere to the normative narrative of its critical power. The existing reference of the name *art* as defended by a theory of aesthetic autonomy (the contradictory notion of difference as task and nature) therefore naturalizes itself to the processes of capitalist accumulation in which they together eulogize a concept of *difference*. If we are to build our politics on this paradigm, rule, or concept of art, we risk a political *status quo* that is essentially *non*-political and private. In other words, the thought of art's power to produce perceptual change, its thrust of the visible, and our sensing of different matter mark out art's perceived value. The idea that art has a special status in the operations of change not only brings us close to that worrying connection between aesthetic idealism and capital, but the idea that art is essentially and therefore always already different (the demand of the principle of aesthetic autonomy) is not a perception at all, but rather a concept that privileges subjective perception. In doing so, it also reduces perception to a dysfunctional and yet charismatic pastime. What is the

claim to difference at the level of perception that would challenge the pathology of the capitalist difference engine? [13]

The assumption of aesthetic autonomy as the bedrock of and catalyst for new forms of the imaginary is reliant on the idea that we have already imagined a place that engages this potential, since for art, this is something to dispel as much as to laud. As we have seen, the process of such a critique of freedom, against freedom, too often results in self-conscious expositions of failure where art can only attest to the traps in which it finds itself. How the theme of freedom persists in the art world is not the only issue here, since this notion of voluntarism remains crucial to fantasies of subjective power, and that are seen to prevail in accounts of change that claim science as their central method.. If images are participants in the complex of life systems, and they too require rules, then the consequences of insinuating a special apperception to art and artists seals the fate of the artist as the mere consumer of a capitalist ideal—the ideal of art’s essential difference. If art then has a role to play in the construction of change then we need to look beyond the abstraction of its nature to think this. The problem is that defining an aesthetic autonomy from this site of flux is the myth that supports capital’s accretion of power.

Rejection of Concepts

It is easy to see why one would want to evacuate the conceptual framework of art as free improvisation, free determination and free will from artistic practice; such a framework risks making perceptual difference a bland relativism, since all artworks labor under the operations of the banality of difference. However, a fundamental rejection of a conceptual frame also serves only to re-invite it more ubiquitously. This problem echoes Carl Schmitt’s complaint about the ubiquitous dominance of a tolerant liberalism, the kind of power that permits all forms within its jurisdiction so long as they do not antagonize the system that tolerates them. [14] This theory of an invisible but pervasive power reinforces the problem that political difference encountered at the perceptual level

is illusory, superficial, and unreal, since objects appear to serve a deeper purpose that may be disconnected from their intentions; in the context of the art world, they operate in the name of a larger and dominant concept of art. Here, we can identify an analogue between art and political labor since both are always already under the pathology of neoliberal desire.

Phenomenological and postmodern practices in the late twentieth century attempted to instigate the value of art by denying stability, representation, cause, and function, and naturalizing the image to theories of temporality, chance, contingency, interpretation, and fragmentation, ideas set in opposition to the systematic order of concept-power. We can see these theories of the object and image manifest in a multitude of practices from Minimalism and site specific art to the language games of conceptual art. This has meant that the former coalesces the reality of sense experience to the experience of reality in a mystification of presence (in the operations of phenomenological objects that require a form of performative attention on the behalf of the viewer) while the latter denies metaphysics though a hard fundamentalist ontology of the world as language (where works are constructed to revolve within the infinite possibilities of language, semantics and interpretative games).

The work of Minimalism is a key example in its claim to manifest the ‘stuff’ of presence over representational content in the interests of materialism. The mistake here is to assume that the claim to presence over representation can dismantle the conceptual normativity implicit to the distinction between art and life. A materialism of presence written through an interest in the anonymity of production in the categories of the mechanical and the natural misunderstands that; a) reality is a form of material; and b) that this material is capable of propositional content, or in other words, that it is capable of proposing new forms and ideas that might require a re-adjustment to our current standards. A proposition that might move beyond this weak or trivial identity of art, and that is opposed to art as operating as illustration, description or instruction is only to be made viable through understanding further the difference-concept of art in itself. It is the

name of art in this case that needs to be interrogated before such a propositional role for art can be assumed.

Postmodernist critiques of form and power that repeat, copy, appropriate, and reenact the historical formats and definitions of art in a Warholian vein, testify to the dominance of the concept of difference against perception; where we may encounter the repeated image of the same object before us,- maybe a few small things have been changed from its 'original.' maybe not. The works gesture with a deathly finger to the fundamentalism of difference, the core of this genre of artistic conceptualization. Here, critique is the establishing of the tragic 'fact' that repetition is impossible and we are constrained to difference.

These ironic forms further embed difference as the condition of art, compelling it to operate as a form of metaphysical social realism, the materials of which evidence the failure of hopes for radical difference engaged with at the level of either a perceptual encounter or a hubristic and incorrect concept of the impossibility of thinking simultaneity. This is an art that longs for difference and decries its impossibility, whilst at the same asserts that difference is inevitable.

More recently, in the curatorial or organizational turn, we witness a post-conceptual an-aesthetic claim by art and its curators that has fully inscribed the concept of art to in our perception of empirical artistic media. Here an artistic process, event or object is understood as a form of concept-image. The rise of curatorial strategies as and within artistic practice have attested to this realization where the process of framing works has produced a curatorial-artistic meta-image that can accommodate all forms of mediation within them often subsuming them to this larger framing mechanism.. The issue of perceived difference is crucial when considering the consequence of Object Oriented Ontology [15] in parts of the art world, and particularly within the curatorial discipline, for here there exists the claim that our experience of the data of material objects matters. But what is the significance that is claimed by materiality? What *is* materiality, and how does it relate to the claims of materialism?

Here, the focus on the epistemological power of the concept of ‘stuff’ as distinct from our experience of this ‘stuff’ is made categorically distinct. It would seem that as long as an artist is making something out of something (i.e.: that the artwork conjoins the specificity of choice with the indiscriminate nature of materiality that is chosen) then the artwork has been framed as meeting the demand of dealing with a materialism of object-based thinking. This crude assumption is worrying indeed, ironically producing as it does the landscape of art as a kind of formalist phenomenological horror wherein a fictional aesthetics of equality (that is, the political claim of this turn to material) acts only as a naïve mirror to the prevalence of capitalistic excess. Here, constructed objects take on the condition of factual organic material, as a part of a world, a history, and a future that includes us as other objects, but which is beyond us. These objects turn out to be weak symbols of a larger idea that locates a fiction of equivalence between objects in a genre of the real. This big idea, which articulates a vista of equivalence, does not translate to a politics, since this collectivist or universalist vision of the shared material of the world does not transform the conditions of its reception in the given conditions of the art world, nor does it account for or understand the role that norms play in our engagement with already existing ideological forces. Here, the identity-free nature of objects relies upon its immanent identity of abstract ideal material, and so we can purchase—at the level of the dollar or the senses—a bit of the real. This phenomenology relativizes substantive difference to the prevailing abstraction of the name *art* as we know it, and renders us incapable of understanding how perception and conception might order change.

One consequence of our post-conceptual moment is that a non-hierarchical concept of difference is fully naturalized to the designation of a critical artwork. In all these worlds, we still engage with the determining concept of an ideal transcendental critique that marks art’s contemporary condition as one of poetic contradiction and which prompts the artwork to take on a mystical and theistic status that squares with the reification of objects as subjects, the figuration of freedom, and the visibility of identity—all qualities that are commensurate with the principles of capital.

Worried about Dominance?

Complaints that this large description of art paints a paranoiac and inaccurately monolithic picture of the art world are unhelpful and misunderstand the conditions of our problem; such anxieties might lead readers to argue that this description holds but it is too negative, since this art-world is capable of offering important experiences if observed closely enough. On the other hand, one might argue that there are indeed no rules that can capture the domain of artistic practice, and by asserting that there are systems and rules that govern these operations, that there is an art-world, we are conjuring a problem out of thin air. But, if art is to be defended because the proliferation of aesthetic or formal difference constitutes some empirical proof that there is no overriding over-determining force that makes art *art*, and accordingly, we have nothing to worry about, then this argument falls short due to its failure to recognize the very normativity of difference that it appeals to.. Appealing to perceived difference, as a means to confront a theory of dominance, can only exacerbate the dominance of the concept of perceptual difference that establishes art as already established. And, if concepts are relegated to the space of non-empirical material, we then fail to account for the materiality of thought and its place within the construction of everyday information systems. Appealing to art as irrational to defend its complexity and freedom, well this simply repeats the problematic and blinkered idealisms that have dominated this text.

We should recognize that the art world operates with particular concepts that govern and participate in configuring the images we perceive. The image constitutes this power, and however mysterious or new an art form may appear, it did not come from nowhere. Therefore, to adopt the anti-art critique of previous generations—a form of escapism that would release art from the problems of institutional power—is not viable, since these ultimately modify and expand the aesthetics of artistic criteria safe within the tolerance of a principle of difference that has defined it. To construct a practice that worries about the constraints of the art work is as misguided an idea as the one that argues that there is no problem at all.

Consequently, to recognize the overdetermining and dominant paradigm of art today is not to claim that all art is confined within it. Rather, it is an argument about how we have misunderstood art, and that this dominant paradigm is one of *weak art*. Moreover, it is a paradigm that is supported by art as a name and system, because we have engaged in folkloric mythology around its power rather than understanding in real terms as the operations of power in itself.

Taking this into account, and drawing some early conclusions, we can say the following:

1) When we look at other artistic approaches to perception in, for example, a phenomenology of perception, we risk the fallacy that what we perceive with our senses is truer than other forms of representation, and at the same time less stable than conceptualization, that is, the way in which we attribute beliefs to objects. A theory of a type of difference that seeks to resist the measure of reason in the name of interpretative freedom, and a theory of the emancipatory potential of a work that attributes its value to its lack of purpose (conflating a critique of instrumentality, cause and history with an idealization of irrationalism), ends up producing ideological schematics of the *more true* (materiality to illusion) and the *more free* (constrained representational work to free unmediated expression). This validation of sense experience over thought serves, ironically, to weaken the condition of our experience of and in the world, since a perception that could be free by dint of its identity from ideological norms, traditions, and habits, through being free from the operations of conceptualization and representation fails to reflect the necessity of the concept, and is instead pathologically entrenched in those ideologies that it had sought to escape.

2) The transcendental nature of art's autonomy—that is, an understanding of art as abstraction without measure—refuses us the reason for any transformations in existing paradigms; it presumes a given subject/author who is always already free to enunciate this condition of freedom, and it employs its identity or self-image (written as infinite potential) to establish a politics that, paradoxically, can only reach out to this figure of change as that of non-directional tragic hope. A theory that the artistic image is somehow

capable of political change by claiming that its image is freer than other forms of image production is the bulwark to comprehending that function of language capable of direction. Art's hubristic and fantastical image of itself as a discreet system of power (that is, as the subject of its own criticism) actually prevents it from asserting clearly what its role and rules might be in any larger political project.

3) The rejection and denial of concept at the level of art's ontological framework, and its specific operation in discrete works, are not the means to reconstitute its agency according to the terms of modernity. The act of the concept in general need not be denied, since it is incorrect to presume that disavowing art as a concept enables it to realize its nature or to ascend to the status of nature. Art need not be tied to its pathology or its celebrated political referent, difference. The aim instead is to reengineer the operation of art in the name of another behavior and to re-imagine modernity without a theory of art's redemptive-autonomous nature.

Everything Changes But You

A form of thought engaged with a robust realism would overcome art's great claim to a unique pointlessness, disengaging it from any aspiration to a role in social antagonism, to the conjuring-up of the imaginary, or to gesturing toward the unknowable sublime. How often have we heard the political measure of art cited in defenses of its freedom and indirection, where art is banked on as a collective social risk that we as a community invest in? This stance is central to the language of arts funding and philanthropy. When some funders ask to see 'impact' in local, instrumental, and direct ways, liberal funders feel much better when they invest in artistic production, no strings attached. Thus art becomes a form of social work to be measured through mostly economic vectors, while liberals are prepared to invest in the abstract concept of art; that is, things that may or may not prove consequential to future change.

However, this side of the argument struggles to get past the level of its fantasy

investment. This is because it finds it hard to understand the idea that the things that we tend to invest in have already been through many channels of adjudication. Artists have already been vetted, discussed, introduced at parties, worked their way through the system, *seen*, to the extent that funding an artist with ‘no strings attached’ is not such a risk after all. Instead, this claim is a mark of the love affair with risk that is acted out at the level of art’s distribution. What is the risk? The possibility that the work won’t fulfill the obligations of its promise to difference? That it won’t be accepted into the arts community and thereby win prizes and economic assent?

To evacuate this drama of art’s freedom or cause at the level of production and reception would be a challenge to our standard conceptions of the field, mostly because it is this that makes us feel good without the responsibility that reason would require. ‘Feel-good’ art must detach subjective perception from empirical reason (the kind that would require an engagement with the constraints of material) in the name of interpretative freedom. It must recuperate the tensions between symbolic and real world economies while inventing those tensions as constitutive of works that admit their constraint to the these powers. Many artworks do this, but it might be worth examining one example here.

Walead Beshty’s *Processcolourfield*, 2014, takes the form of modernist sculptures that imply the industrial anonymity of a materialist nostalgia. Here is a description of the work from Regen Projects, Los Angeles:

The “Copper Surrogates” are polished copper tabletops that replaced existing gallery workspaces during the course of an exhibition and are subsequently displayed on the wall or as freestanding sculptures. These highly reflective copper fields take the aesthetics of the pre-existing gallery infrastructure as a readymade parameter, and bear the tarnishes, smudges, and other signs of use that occurred in the daily activities that support and manage the movements of works of art. [16]

These works travel and accrue value through repeated exposure. As they move from exhibition to exhibition, the fingerprints of art handlers collect on the objects' once-pristine industrial surfaces, which come to harbor a collective memory of the art world's labor ecology. These works are ironic demonstrations of an accumulation of economic value through reference to their experiential real-time lifespan. In this sense the work claims the 'truth' of art-world inequities as an art-world reality, presenting us with two materialities: first, the story of the fingerprint as and upon the work, as some form of performative evidence, and, second, the aesthetic of this proof made symbolic in the organization of the work as a larger performance – a performance upon another symbol, that of a standard ideal modernity. The artwork relies on a perceived difference that would split the real from the representational in order to play out these particular tensions. The works rely on a type of art history that divides art and life as a means to transcend these economies. A familiar mistake that becomes apparent here is the idea that conception can be played out as its own aesthetic category-form, and which can then be set in tension with the aesthetics of perception as a specific hierarchical arrangement.

Beshty plays with this belief, and can do so because these objects are underscored as stable historical forms. Yet it is clear that in fact no contradiction exists between the thumbprints of the installers and the materiality of the sculpture itself; Beshty's work indicates that this autonomy is a fiction precisely through the grafting of these categories of form, labor and time together. But it is in this antirealist act (this exposure of the truth of the life of the work) that we see a residual autonomy to be rescued, for art remains the transcendental figure that can access and expose such truth through inventing, knowing and mastering contradiction. The artwork is the agent that reveals its own internal contradictions that it constructs, and in doing so the work maintains a special autonomy that brackets and perpetuates its claim of de-automatization. Ironically, de-automatization thus becomes the real fiction in Beshty's work, because and in spite of itself.

These kinds of oppositions or dualisms call upon a faith in subjective actors and inter-subjective encounters. What backgrounds this and other work are the erroneous beliefs that perception constitutes a recognition of the value and rights of human speakers/actors

while ontological data is oppressive and determining, and that we must unleash ourselves from symbolic, normative categories by accessing the direct and unmediated mark of our time. Subscribing to this faith in human difference as free from constraint underscores difference as the collapsed re-production of repressive and narcissistic portraits of the subject, whose identity forms are cast in a narrative of regressive ontological relativism.

Materialism and New Rules of Art

Through these complaints, I am arguing for a shift away from the identarian critiques that have so far characterized critical arts practices, and for a new conception of art. As Ray Brassier's observations on the work of Wilfrid Sellars help to clarify, the pictures we make require conceptual and intuitive descriptions of the things and ideas that we encounter. These pictures are made up of a mixture of empirical data and our beliefs about those objects and images. In this bundle of representations it is impossible to establish an idealization of presence as a space of the real, whilst the idealism that would privilege the hubris of an unfettered conceptualism is also denied. In this sense, because perception is limited, it requires conception, and conception in turn requires the intuitive readings of data to perceive and to project. [17]

On Sellars, Brassier writes: "There is a difference between seeing something as something or seeing that something is the case, and seeing something of something." [18] Acknowledging these differences, Sellars's work supports the requirement for perceptual and rational work across the dynamics of intuition, rule production and mediation, since, as Brassier notes, "there is more to appearance than can be grasped in and through appearances." In this sense, Sellars seeks to integrate and explain the field of relations that make up a picture. "Conceptual form is anchored in linguistic function and grounds linguistic function in social practice." [19]

It is challenging to see how these explanations could lead us to another understanding of the construction of art, since reading artworks in their present context involves the

discovery that the material data extracted from what we see struggles to exert its force upon the norms of its naïve conceptual over-determination (the latter framing and binding artworks as unified and ideal blocs of concepts and percepts). This returns us to the question of the nature of abstraction that art presents: How we might understand such abstractions without idealizing them as objects/facts of dominance, and furthermore without idealizing cognition itself swinging abstractions between powerful mystery and ineffectual, disposable materiality? It also presents the question of what metaphysics and what metalinguistics art must operate within if it is to produce and work through the distinction between the scientific and the manifest image without relying on purchasing this distinction through transcendental means that would settle in simple divisions between perception and conception.

As I have attempted to show, the principle of various dualisms; of difference and equality, perception and conception, and experience and representation that supports the system of art as we know it (under the prevalent and pervasive systems of capital), resides within an incorrect idealization of art passed down from its producers, theorists, consumers, distributors, and managers. In response, we must ask how a correct and more rational understanding of our picturing of reality might demand different artistic and political action? How might this cognition of art inflect the prevalent conditions of its political mythology?

In this short review we have noted the limitations that arise when a theory of overcoming dominance identifies itself with future-orientated change. These have manifested themselves in at least four ways: 1) managing the conditional relation of perception and conception through the valorization of ambiguities of form that would destabilize both, in a final critical idealism; 2) deleting conceptualism read as the instrumental reason of normative power and valorizing the dispersed conditions of subjects, language, and form, the results of which are a theistic narrative of world and subject; 3) theorizing the embodiment of percept and affect as a means to overcome both, resulting in a vitalism of presence; and, 4) grafting a relation between the artwork either as epistemological authority or difference as presence in the context of the natural sciences.

This last theory is proven tenuous because it falls into the idealist trap of confusing a concept of art's political and social agency with reality. That is, it presumes that the reality of evolutionary change that is construed as pre-political has propositional power. [20] Taking this to the level of the artwork, we can see how a shift to a theory of a contingent nature has aimed to surpass the mythology of the voluntaristic freedom of art and indeed human autonomy. But we can also see how this move problematically recuperates the same characteristics of the former. We see this in the overwhelming contradiction that intuition and conception are unified into a concrete abstraction on the one hand, whilst at the same time, they must be sufficiently distinct that perception can determine emergent concepts that would antagonize the prevailing concept of art as autonomous on the other hand. In a theory of natural science that would reduce everything to "the culture-brain," art works often persist with the character of being irreducible to such scientific, networked functions even when they participate in forms of scientific rhetorics. We see this in artworks that whilst situating the network as the grounds of practice do so from a transcendental position of knowledge that either understands the 'system' or understands the limits of the self in relation to such a system. The claim that this is so, presents art as a weak mirror to a passive human existence. Here we see a dilemma in art's simultaneous categorization as free and capable of self-reinvention, and as a part of a contingent natural system that is conditioned by the limits of human perception.

What undergirds an identification of art as an agent of social transformation in the context of the natural sciences is thus the erroneous assertion of a link between ontology and political theory. This misstep denies art an escape route from its own pathologies, thereby prohibiting it from involvement in politics. Ironically, to figure art as free from the normative habits of the quotidian (that is, to assert that art is free to change our perception of life as we know it) it must be operationally relocated within another system, that of "brain-life." Art is trapped within its normative pathology because the system in which it finds itself is organized in particular ways. This misguided collapsing of art with neuroscience, and its dissection at the level of the political, imbues the operations of the

brain with the mythic characteristics of the 'open' artwork while positioning the artwork itself as a passive reflection of the status quo. The assumption of an intact relationship between brain and behavioral society cannot assure us of a coherent critical theory. [21]

These positions may reflect a common interest in undermining assumptions, and in refusing the abstract dominance of our pathology and uncritical spontaneity. They also fail to account completely for the fact of representational power, suggesting that we should revise our understanding of the artwork at the level of concept, whilst being aware that concepts are no more or less stable than perceptions. Rather, in the name of realism, and of a modernist debt to reason, we must instead comprehend materiality as significantly organizational. Here we can detect the relationship of Sellars's realism to art and its deeper challenge to a concept of art that has unremittingly validated freedom as its axiom.

Acknowledging the oversimplification and brevity of my reading of Sellars's theory via Brassier, we can recognize too that artworks pose further questions to this theory. Nevertheless, it can still point us toward a deeper comprehension of representation in art. Work still needs to be done at the level of the concept. If we are to understand this assemblage of reality, occurring as and through different administrative vectors, culture need not evince our bad habits; nor does it need to be the site of beliefs supportable only by mythology. It also need not be the grounds of a naïve spontaneity, because within this behavior toward the image lies a refusal to correlate perception to difference. The non-relation between our picturing of the world and the real is supported by the artwork as a set of montages of concepts and percepts that correspond to it via scientific realism. Our behavior towards images may thus be established through an ontology of art in the context of a materialism that undermines the diversity of interpretative difference. Here, instead, because images are 'un-free' they function in particular changeable ways.

The project of understanding the generic category of an art that could actively position these rules is urgent. Such an art would require a scientific method. It would be a conception of culture as a 'strong fiction'; an unconventional science fiction. This

paradigm of art would refuse the ironic hierarchy of perception over conception that has steered the destiny of the artwork away from its claimed modernity, and which dislocates itself from a project of difference at the level of production and construction. This attitude to art is not reliant on a theory of materiality to disclose its power; such an aesthetic theory does not substantiate art's political claim.

Art in this case requires a conceptual frame and a form of metaphysics—the ontology that makes it a specific activity and accounts for its hegemonic potential as the kind of project that might share its focus with other disciplines. However, this work must be asserted at the level of art material, within which we require an overdue acknowledgement of art's representational operations and the force they produce. This manifests art as another constitution that demands and permeates rules as a condition. The force of rule presses upon the local constraints in which art finds itself, and in doing so enacts new constraints that define another, non-contradictory, logic. These possibilities for planning, and the repurposing of art as project-based work, are more important than ever.

Endnotes

1. There are many examples of this, but Jeanne van Heeswijk's project for the 2012 Liverpool Biennial represents one model in which individual and collective social agency and economic benefit are unified. "The 2Up 2Down project seeks to revitalize an area in which four thousand low-income homes were emptied to make way for market-driven renewal that never materialized. 2Up 2Down is a self-build/collective ownership scheme; the pilot project is an eco-friendly renovation of a block of several housing units and a storefront. The project has engaged a wide swath of the community: Local architects and builders are mentoring Anfield's youth in the design and construction processes, and a cross-generational cooperative, called Home Baked, holds the community land trust that

owns the retrofitted properties, and plans to reopen a 100-year-old bakery as a social enterprise.” <http://currystonedesignprize.com/winner/2012/jeanne-van-heeswijk>

2. For example, see the celebration of failure archived in *Failure (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art)*, ed. Lisa Le Feuvre (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010): “Here success is deemed overrated, doubt embraced, experimentation encouraged, and risk considered a viable strategy [. . .] By amplifying both theoretical and practical failure, artists have sought new, unexpected ways of opening up endgame situations, ranging from the ideological shadow of the white cube to unfulfilled promises of political emancipation [. . .] Failure identifies moments of thought that have eschewed consensus, choosing to address questions rather than answers.” This essay moves in the opposite direction, highlighting the hubris of this manifestation of absolute knowledge, since the premise is that these artists are certain of their uncertainty, and this form of assurance sets out only a tragic politics.

3. Theodor Adorno, “Commitment,” in Ronald Taylor, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukacs*, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Verso, 1980), p. 89.

4. “Even in the most sublimated work of art there is a hidden ‘it should be otherwise’.” Adorno, “Commitment,” p. 89.

5. “The primacy of the esthetic object as pure re-figuration does not smuggle consumption or false harmony back by a detour. Although the moment of pleasure, even when it is extirpated from the effect of a work, constantly returns to it, the principle that governs autonomous works of art is not the totality of their effects, but their own inherent structure. They are knowledge as non-conceptual objects. This is the source of their greatness. It is not something of which they have to persuade men, because it should be given to them. This is why today autonomous rather than committed works of art should be encouraged in Germany.” Adorno, “Commitment,” p. 88.

6. Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

7. Deleuze and Guattari write: “Many works that claim to be art do not stand up for an instant,” but the method they describe by which art can “attain to the percept and the affect only as to autonomous and sufficient beings that no longer owe anything to those who experience or have experienced them” needs more accounting for in terms of how this project sits within this naturalism. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* 164, 168.

8. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 169.

9. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 183.

10. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 194.

11. Hinging art’s autonomy as its beginning or end is troublesome. In valorizing subjective perception in the name of political struggle, or in defense of artistic methods that would undermine the standards of subjective perception, autonomy is naturalized at the level of sense experience whether relational or non-relational to the recognition of power. See Deleuze and Guattari: “The composite sensation, made up of percepts and affects, deterritorializes the system of opinion that brought together dominant perceptions and affections within a natural, historical, and social milieu.” (*What is Philosophy?*, p. 197).

12. “The moment of true volition, however, is mediated through nothing other than the form of the work itself, whose crystallization becomes an analogy of that other condition which should be.” Adorno, “Commitment”, p. 89.

13. Deleuze and Guattari write that the conceptual art movement generalizes the concept to art and the abstraction movement assumes the task of sensation and its refinement.

These assignments are problematic, as abstraction finally makes sensations concepts, while conceptual art neutralizes composition. Conceptual art plans to become informative, and this dissolves the relations of concept and sensation, making sensation depend on the interpretation of the subject as perceiver. The question is, is this art or not? Conceptual art thus turns us towards the limitations of sensation and conception, because we engage with this question at the level of sensation and materiality. In this the work promotes a liaison between the perceiving subject and the infinite nature of art. See Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 198.

14. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

15. Giulia Smith's review of Mark Leckey's curated exhibition *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things* addresses the key problems I have outlined in this essay, though Smith uses the points of contradiction that I have described as untenable for art as much as unrelatable to Speculative Realism as a redemptive claim for the art project she discusses. Smith describes Leckey's work as "a mesmerizing assemblage of artifacts from different epochs and places" that draws on the rhetoric of science fiction. Smith sees this as "especially timely at a moment when sci-fi is gaining prominence among widening circles of writers and thinkers associated with speculative realism. Drawing on H.P. Lovecraft's descriptions of utterly alien horrors, this argues for the autonomy of the object against anthropocentrism." Whilst Smith confuses the claims of Object Oriented Ontology with those of SR, she argues that the work supports an interest in science fiction that is conducive to SR. However, in doing so, she also argues that the work demonstrates its own critical edge, one set *against* SR. The work critiques SR by questioning the role of the subject as spectator in this world of indifferent things. This would be the lost individual of a lacking humanism that is swallowed whole by the cold technocratic networks of an anonymous materiality. Smith writes: "The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things' may claim to reiterate the dumb script of the Internet of Things, but in doing so, it exposes a more profound dimension repressed by the logic of computing: the human residue that resists being subsumed by objects, cybernetic or

otherwise. At a time when technological advances are being enthusiastically embraced in the UK as an antidote to stagnation by the coalition government and the art world alike, Leckey's sci-fi feels particularly meaningful." We must be clear here that any exhibition whose aim is to ask where the locus of the human lies in a world of distracted economies and dispersed networks, and which expresses anxiety that the human is no longer the master of its world, is not a project that is interested in Speculative Realism. If Smith is correct, an exhibition that would critique SR by presenting back to it the contradictions of a poor humanism does not give its theorists much to worry or indeed think about. In that sense, the exhibition is less a critique than a retreat to basic and clichéd humanist principles in the site of an observed non-humanist world. *Frieze*, May 2013, issue 155, <http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/the-universal-addressability-of-dumb-things>.

16. Regen Projects, Los Angeles, press statement, http://www.regenprojects.com/exhibitions/2011_4_walead-beshty/pressrelease/.

17. Negative dialectics is another misapprehension of what power is and what reason is not, for when does reason assent to such autonomy? As such, it is incorrect to uncritically correlate representationalism with stability, and stability with ruthless, totalizing power.

18. I draw from "Function: Decomposition, Localization, Abstraction," Brassier and Negarestani's presentation at the New School, New York's Center for Transformative Media, on March 25, 2014, as well as <http://bebereignis.blogspot.com/2011/07/brassier-and-sellars-on-sensation-and.html>.

19. Ray Brassier, "Wandering Abstraction", *Mute*, February 13, 2014, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/wandering-abstraction>.

20. This risks idealizing the perceiving mind as open rather than engaging with the facts of the variable and required science of perceptual limits that situate Sellars's work.

21. Internal to this theory of change are particular telling images. Change happens because social, metaphysical, and neurological systems are collapsed in a telos of an infinite and unified nature within a networked cultural bioscope of the ‘culture-brain.’ But a theory of art as the agent of change must contradict this to work, because while it relies on the fantasy that brain and society are the same, it idealizes the distinction between culture and politics. It is a theory of art’s autonomy that holds this dialectic of transcendental subjectivity and biological materialism ‘together-apart.’ In this picture, society becomes the figure of a brain-like Leviathan—a site of one mind—but this is fractured by the brain that expresses plurality. Finally, this dialectic preserves change at the level of concept, and smacks of sci-fi adventure narratives that weave consciousness through the vitality of all material, compelling identity to the mass while preserving identity as a necessary drama of the loss of individuation to this as a form of apocalyptic totalization.