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Curatorial futures with the image: Overcoming scepticism and unbinding the relational

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Abstract

A standard comprehension of curatorial practice is conditioned upon the organizing of relations between objects and meaning, between art and its perception and between objects and other objects. A widespread tendency established in a culture of critique in art and curatorial practice responds to this primacy of the organizational by retreating from it by producing 'open frameworks of interaction' in the hope that this naturalism will secure itself away from what it sees to be problematic instrumentalism of the image. This attitude is underscored, moreover, in practices where the horror of a conscious inability to make this retreat is further standardized in ironic forms of production that correlate a theory of constraint to the materialities of economic dominance. This article argues that both these responses to meaning meet at the same terminus, impoverishing the image and its potential. Looking to and setting out some further problems within Quentin Meillassoux's speculative materialism, this text seeks to move past these problematic

realisms to examine the possibility for a future of the image without limits, asking first whether this thinking is possible, and if it is, what this demands for our understanding of its politics.

Keywords

anti-representationalism and representationalism

realism and antirealism

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correlationalism

adequation

literalism

Following the narrative, or literary, turn in philosophy that gained influence with mid-1960s structuralism, we have now also become familiar with the curatorial turn. The two moves have particular similarities: The curatorial turn has also meant a form of linguistic turn, a turn towards the materiality of language. It has meant a renewed focus on the mechanisms of the distribution of the image, its placing, its sitting and the management of its interpretative field. Alongside this, just as the narrative turn reversed the direction of traditional metaphysics and pointed any mark of transcendence back to its linguistic, local, material and substantive claims in a strong post-structuralism, the curatorial turn has also moved away from representational elements of the image, and instead has looked to a world of objects and their place in systems, arrangements, choreography and organization.

This primacy of ‘the organizational’ viewed through the axis of the curatorial, whilst appearing to be deeply administrative, has actually understood itself as a bulwark against, on the one hand, the instrumentalization of the image *within the* political, and on the other hand, against the idealization of the image *for the* political. In the name of security and freedom, it attacks essentially what it sees to be the representational problem of the image, namely that the image is dogmatic and non-dialogical, attaching itself to a normative (universal) referent that aims beyond itself and us to a true reality that we cannot contest. Now, this representationalist problem is also an instrumentalist problem: It is a problem of language and of power, where forms of bad power are understood to be connected with, indeed to produce, the stability between image and meaning, and cause and effect. This dark side of representationalism is alive and well in a society that adopts art as an icon of freedom as well as an actor of social change. The ambivalence of these two roles for art can be read in common genres of public production in their tendency to oscillate between promoting art as the monumental and yet entertaining object of our united pleasure, and art as the pedagogic friend of civil society – what we commonly refer to as ‘socially engaged practice’. The primary genres we are given here are two forms of cultural and political economy that invariably come at us from above and below: the thrills of entertainment and tourism in a spiralling industrial mediatized environment of shock and awe – big bucks big art – or the ethical moment of artistic practice – an art that knows us, and sits and talks with us ‘on the ground’. The social instrumentalism of the image by art and its managers alike has awakened an increasing fear of art’s critical and political purchase, especially when the options that lie outside these modes of

practice seem to locate art only within the small white stables of the international art fair. But the deeper horror is that the image might be a mere referent of the reality of power in the material world – that images are *incapable* of a politics since in this schema they are only means to particular ends. This is the totalitarian horror that Walter Benjamin identified in his ‘Work of Art’ essay as the aestheticization of politics that leads to the technologizing of society and its self-imprisonment.

Given this, it is easy to see why the curatorial turn’s disavowal of hypostatizing meaning and its predilection for method seem necessary. And as we know, this has taken the form of a hyper-relationality; where the making of art and curation share a focus on methodology as form and content – the image *becomes* curation that spotlights the processional, the unlocated ambiguity, interdisciplinarity and border-crossing.

This approach to curation as an attitude to art, and its exhibition has been played out in various antirealisms and phenomenologies, as well as tangled combinations of the two. The two generic approaches to the image identified above, which on the face of it might seem to be diametrically opposed, bear a shared identification: Both return an apparent interest in the agency and operations of the image to a scepticism of the image that is borne out in a confusion between naturalism and empiricism; and both ultimately struggle to do away with the causal yardstick of instrumentality that they seek to move against. It is here that we access the core of the curatorial conceit and the paradox that it cannot resolve: that the distributory mechanisms of curation – whether this is measuring, comparing, uniting or antagonizing – crash up against its desire to access and secure the

‘openness’ of language. Rehearsing this problematic, an ideal realism is matched across these two genres – conflicted within themselves – expressed on the one hand in a mastering of the relation between the image and its social and political meaning, and on the other hand, the asserting of the image as the expressive form of the ‘pure’ relation in itself.

The root of scepticism

To open up this point a little further, we will take up the latter first where Robert Storr’s 2007 Venice Biennale still operates as a key example. We are encouraged to ‘think with the senses and feel with the mind’, an instruction that tries to conjure exactly a world in which knowledge is overcome in a denial of all forms of reference, and where instead we are asked to embrace a world of the sensory in which we can luxuriate, where experience embodies meaning in a deep ambience of colour, image and form. This all-encompassing curatorial attitude of the Biennale went hand in hand with its sprawling geography, but also its marketization in an increasingly global context. Here the curatorial approach aids and abets the coalescence of physical, ideological and economic forces across a horizontal plane of affectual experience. A curatorial attitude ostensibly premised on the articulation of a deeper freedom turns out to be absolutely commensurate with the index of neo-liberal politics. The kind of warm sentiment expressed by Storr’s Biennale that implies that *everything is included and welcomed in its diversity* quickly becomes an exclusive statement, because what is censored is the thought that thinks beyond difference.¹

But what is also censored here is the potentiality of meaning in itself. This approach to the curatorial seeks to overcome meaning paradoxically by understanding that the objects that it deals with always already have stable referential capacities, that artworks are like chess pieces on a board, with their symbolic veracity intact, and are to be moved around with respect and some ease because we already know what they mean. In a game like this, the opportunities are abundant but not infinite, and the mixture of skill and ‘chance’ hammers out an experience of difference that attempts to forge the impression of real contingency. But this experience is only offered as some form of weak reproduction, which can only be achieved through the following of rules that are very much intact. The curatorial as it is described here allows us to think about the connected but open field of relations that the image is seen to symbolize. In fact, the proposed reading of the curatorial as an attitude to the form of the image *as use* (as a means to free the potentiality of relations), paradoxically, constrains relations to the possibilities of what can happen, delimiting what objects and experiences mean, and what can be imagined. To that extent art, under this condition, becomes an empty metaphor, or in other words a sign that is full of nothing: a vessel for the ethics of social hope.

Here the administrative world of the curatorial remains paramount, because we are asked once more to focus on *a theory of relations*, one that must deny the possibility that the operations of curation, and within them the interpretations of particular artworks, could be capable of being or meditating something *else*. Instead, the constructions that we encounter are understood as dumb but ‘feeling’ objects. In this world where all forms of

reference are denied, we encounter two problems: (1) that a politics of the image is bought at the price of an impoverishment of its meaning and (2) that in doing so we enter a deep(er) form of administrative power since the symbolic power of art as being always already intact extends to the regimes of belief that support and justify its production. The world of affect harbours a mixture of scepticism and rationalism. The paradox is thus: on the one hand the world is viewed as language, whilst on the other a vigilant scepticism guards against any mediation of meaning by this language.

Quite clearly this scepticism of the constructed image is subtended by a theory of the image as nature, evidenced in this attempt to emancipate the image from meaning and to see it as material that ‘happens’, and to accept artworks as always-already-constituted objects. To maintain this commitment to both nature *and freedom* (we will deal with *this relation* very shortly), the image must be redeemed from its attachment to a referent – it must not be capable of *any* adequation. But this aspiration for relativity without ontology, a means to access ‘true nature’, is paradoxical: it cannot recuperate the meta-structure that it requires to support it into its circle, for the assertion of relativity must be made from an outside, and cannot apply to itself. The terminus of such a relativism is ontological description, and this is mirrored directly in the problem with the phenomenological approach to the image we have just dealt with. It is here where we see how the ‘open experience’ achieved through the mingling of sense perception with the objecthood of art actually declares its world as finite, as bordered and as constructed, exposing itself to the irony that reduces these dreams of factual objecthood to fictive simulation. The territories that are produced are little pseudo-democracies that invest in

weak fictions of freedom, and that are actually non-distinct from the regimes of power and belief that define the politics of neo-liberalism. From this a twofold problem emerges: first, a naturalized epistemology cannot be accessed via phenomenology for it results in the mystification of the image; and second, the ontic world of the image must somehow be equivalent to the ontological description of it, because it is only where both come together that the image can find its place within this theory. This latter problem is transparent when the supposed access to the image as a true and sensory nature is tied to the political function of the image, where nature as ‘pure being’ and image as political effect are conflated. It is here that the image is charged with the potential to subvert normative forms of dominant power by accessing its own deeper reality. The image is natural and contingent, but at the same time it is an active agent with a role in a particular process. But to achieve this contradictory marriage between becoming-nature and political effect, the image must retreat from its own politics; it must doubt of its own making and its existence. Crucially, this contradiction bears out the consequence of an erroneous connection between empiricism and naturalism, where an objective material knowledge of world is capable of accessing a true nature. In this coupling, the problem is transparent – that knowledge of the manifest image becomes the basis for an idealist illusion; this is the illusion that a scientific and objective knowledge of image can exist somehow purified from the image, that it replaces the image, or at least dissipates its existence.

Bad irony and the organizing of doubt

The problems that the curatorial turn faces are not only evidenced in this mixture of affectual idealism and linguistic administrative formalism, but are equally alive in forms of antirealism. Skip forward two years, same location, the Venice Biennale 2009. Elmgreen and Dragset curate the Nordic and the Danish Pavilions. The Nordic Pavilion plays the role of a form of private gallery space and the Danish Pavilion takes the role of the private home of the art collector. This is part of the curatorial statement:

The public will be guided on a tour by a real estate agent through a 'For Sale' Danish Pavilion, and will be told the story of the Ingmar Bergman-style family dramas that used to haunt this house. A long swimming pool will lead the visitors to the neighbouring Nordic Pavilion – a flamboyant bachelor's pad. Inside they will encounter the domestic remnants of the mysterious Mr. B, and be met by a group of young male hustlers sipping vodka tonics in an environment that could be a case study motif taken from a David Hockney painting.

Danish and Nordic Pavillion (2009)

The experience is one of subversion, excess and power gone wrong. A body lies face down in a swimming pool, art supplies the dark erotic demands of private vanity, and as we move to the darker recesses of the private home, things get worse. This is a journey through the truth of the cultural psyche in neo-liberal capital. The show excavates the psychology of art through the figure of the nihilistic egoistic consumer who has too much money to care. Thus, the show enjoys the idea that the economic value of art is art's big

dirty secret, forcing its point through by eclipsing this with the revelations of illicit sex and death as ambiguous suicide-murder. Elmgreen and Dragset's hyper-fictionalized film set B-movie-style pleasuredrome further spectacularizes the money-sex-death dimension as the dramatic-real of the art world. This in an exposé that manages an aesthetics of excess in order to smuggle in our education to art's deep reality.

Move over to the Arsenale and head to the back. The United Arab Emirates Pavilion curated by Tirdad Zolghadr constructs a showcase of Dubai's future art complex. Again, the exhibition emphasizes the stage management of art, this time through the public face of a nation and corporate brand, where the pavilion layout mimics the flight experience-style management of the airline, complete with corporate banners, scale models and the press conference of a curatorial team that extends the aesthetics of power through the space.

Both exhibitions play out a set of relations between what is understood as real and autonomous power, and the work that is done to it and around it. Both exhibitions emphasize the critical and creative role of the curatorial, but unlike the curation of affect where the dispersal and freedom of experience is our lens, here we see the apparent opposite, in two different manifestations of an antirealism that identifies and claims a unique knowledge of the nature of our constraint. In both cases, the role of the curatorial is to attempt to unsettle the power that is their content and subject matter. The suggestion being that it is in the destabilization of meaning, essentially the undermining of its own voice, where the curatorial asserts its critique of power.

This approach to the image seems thoroughly Adornian, since for Adorno, in order for the image to remain valent it must escape its own nature – it must wrest itself away from its potential to become the thing that it mediates. As Ray Brassier has put it, this articulation of the nature of the image is centred upon a terror of its mimetic power: the image is capable of becoming like the thing that it resembles, ‘but without resembling it according to any criterion of conceptual equivalence’. (Brassier 2007: 45) This conceptless similitude spells out an ‘identitarian fear’, a formalism that smacks of later post-structuralist fears of realism that haunt both Lyotard’s and Baudillard’s theorizations of a politics of the image. For them, this notion of realism is complicit with power, and marks a dimension of the ‘evil’ nature of the image; and for Adorno it is the image’s success at simulation that weakens self-mastery and signals a regression to animal compulsion.

In response to this problem, the image must become the site of resistance that actively problematizes meaning. Here we see the *difficulty* of producing a knowledge of the image as the primary focus for a politics of it. This reaction to both image and power is written through the UAE and Nordic and Danish methodologies, where we see the same desire to rationalize the image as a means to manage power – and the same fear that image/power is essentially irrational. In the case of Elmgreen and Dragset, the exhibition works in a mode of self-destruction, disavowing its own content in pantomime style, this deliberate self-annihilation of burlesque excess and decadence over-identifying the power of the collector in the form of satirical caricature made larger. In the case of Zolghadr the agency of the image is disrupted not so much through over-identification as through

irony. Here the framework of the curatorial is articulated through the construction of formal layers of interpretation that seek to disassemble its own meaning. Zolghadr says, ‘The UAE Pavilion will be unapologetic about documenting the nation – even while the Pavilion as a whole can be seen as an exhibition about exhibition-making, reflecting on the very act of national showcasing at the Venice Biennale’ (Zolghadr 2009), but it is hard to see how these two moves can be reconciled: the move to document without apology, implying an objective, complicit or even celebratory account of the United Arab Emirates, and the promise that the structure of the event will be self-interrogating.

This problem is made obvious in the video documentation of the Jackson Pollock Bar’s performance, where performers took the place of the UAE curators and ventriloquized the curatorial team’s press conference presentation. This documentation was then screened in the UAE Pavilion to a new Biennale audience. Here performers performing the thing that actually happened to its real soundtrack teach us that reality is not what it seems, that the image is powerful and yet not to be trusted. The focus is on a more or less private curatorial game that emphasizes the constructed and unreal aspect of the role of the curation. But this transcendental statement that exposes the meta-structure of the curatorial gesture cannot match up to the reality of the fiction that is delivered in the UAE package: the architectural plans that will be built and the model that will soon be to scale. Moreover, the curation of the UAE Pavilion deliberately ungrounds *itself*, but leaves the United Arab Emirates’s economic-political-cultural aspirations untouched and uncompromised. The only consequence of this self-destabilizing mechanism is to lend the trope of a self-scrutinizing liberalism that equates scepticism with critique to the hard-

core capitalism of the United Arab Emirates. But what is compromised here are the very hopes for critique, since the self-fictionalizing taken up in this curatorial method actually serves to smooth the way for a more palatable, more digestible comprehension of the master plan, precisely through this strategy – because viewed this way the master plan is attempted to be constrained to a mere *plan*. Surely such an approach can only be met by a particular type of formalism that implies the real apology from the start? In a ‘don’t mention the war’-style scenario, the apology is invoked by its declared absence in the title ‘It’s Not You It’s Me’ – the generic false or absent apology. Unfortunately, this statement can only be taken literally when we see the method of self-interrogation that the curation takes up.

Therefore, just as, for Elmgreen and Dragset, the big secret of the art-world is the very point of their belief that the secret exists, so too here in the UAE Pavilion: the emphasizing of the fictional aspect of curation as a means to negotiate real material power not only leaves power untouched, but serves to mythologize its autonomy.

Quite clearly the response to understanding power as ‘nature’ (uncontrollable, autonomous and irrational) takes the form of antirealism, but whether curation seeks to manage itself and power through the construction of self-contained fictions (Venice 2009: Elmgreen and Dragset, Nordic and Danish Pavilions and the UAE Pavilion) or seeks to immerse us in this world without bounds (Venice Biennale 2007), what we end up with across these practices is the construction of twisted anthropocentric reflections of either the ‘real art-world’ or the ‘real world’. Such false realisms are a result of a belief in

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and a fear of bad power, and can only be replied to with *another* idealism: the notion that the curatorial can trump the real from the inside because it can shed, undermine and incapacitate the referentiality of language. But let us note the logic that gets us here once more: the image is understood as always already inconsistent, decentred and unstable, whilst at the same time and because of this it is predisposed to similitude, unity and normativity. Thus, according to this logic, to remain political the image must be rescued from its terminus – the location of meaning. Bearing this in mind my central point about these approaches to meaning is that they assume too quickly: (1) that the work of producing meaning is tied to a *theory* of causation that is always already a force of bad power; (2) that the mechanism that destabilizes meaning is free from the problems of myth, power and representation that it seeks to transcend; and (3) that the image itself is naturally ‘free’. Consequently, these practices present a nonsense argument that is impossible to actually put into practice. This is because the image must be understood in two distinct ways at the same time: as mutually weak and special or evil and banal – a tool for power – but at the same time the figure for freedom. In this schema the last stop for the image is unreason.

To draw some early conclusions, there is in fact no essential contradiction between these two approaches, because whether positively or negatively, the image as a form of power is understood as cause without reason. The resulting precipitate refusal of ‘meaning’ demonstrated in antirealism leads to an autonomy that generates its own deluded mythologies of political purchase, which we see in a politics of affect produces an image that can be nothing but an optic onto our own affect, in an apparently infinite dynamism

that – in a recognizably neo-liberal trope – obscures any relation to wider political stakes. Both forbid any gesture towards an outside because they can only imagine the relation to this outside as one of absolute and stable referential relations.² The curatorial in these instances fantasizes about the primacy of the real over the world of mundane reality, but paradoxically, the real is made ever present in the generic figures of the authoritarian power of hard economic wealth, in the irrational work of nations and the irresponsibility of oligarchs, or it is mystified as sensation. Deeply entrenched through curatorial scepticism is therefore the anxiety of the human; this is a form of tragic heroism that enjoys its self-immersion within and self-sacrifice to forms of power that exceed its finitude. The administration we see here is the product of a very modern anxiety, and as such it is tied to those sensations that coalesce with finitude, where pleasure, sex, death and the instability of our identities remain the point of redemption for the image. The image is the bridge and the vehicle by which this access is granted to our real nature, and whilst acting as the conduit for the resolution between subject and object in a world of affect, in antirealism, it also acts as a hiatus between the given world and the real, as if it can suspend the relation as well as produce it. In all of this conjuring and manipulation, the work of curation goes no further than a Kantian-inspired modernity. It reflects back to us an image of us, a perfect self-portrait of our ideals and our condition. It tells our story. This failure of curation to engage with the dualism that it sets out, the structured world of language set against ‘the reality of chaos’, is a failure not only because it is illogical, but because it is conservative. On the one hand it seeks to understand a naturalized epistemology as inaccessible to consciousness, whilst at the same time seeking to transcend this nature as a means to construct a relation to it. This transcendence, as we

have seen, through the mysticism of phenomenology or the rationalizations of antirealism, leads us back to the impasse of the image and nature, the flaw of a conceptual scheme, and finally, the deadlock of the human-centred world, all superintended by the banality of difference, the clichéd boredom of the dead-rich and the same old apologies.

Time without us [...]

We can already make some connections between this critique and Quentin Meillassoux's critique of correlationalism. (Meillassoux 2008, Chapter 3) For Meillassoux, the problem with correlationalism is that it forges an implacable connectedness between subject and object, reflected in the conception that there is no outside to human experience and thought, and that every thought of the beyond is embodied already within subjective experience. The circle of correlationalism therefore *is a circle* because it does not allow anything to exist outside of this sphere of subjective judgement. Even if you were to speak against correlationalism, this would be reduced to another 'point of view' in terms of a subjective claim. For example, God may be dead in western neo-liberal democracy, but you can believe in God, because he is *your God*.

The key complaint about correlationalism is that it cannot accommodate a connection of a truth that is beyond subjectivity. Certainly, this complaint is easily levelled at all of the previous examples I have described, since their attempts to think the image without metaphysics figuring the subjective conditions of power, freedom and knowledge as

central and it also allows us once more to re-make that connection between critiques of the dogmatism of post-structuralism's turn to language mentioned in my opening paragraph with the focus on primacy of the organizational in the curatorial. Whilst the relativism that privatizes faith in 'a God for you' might be something we are all accustomed to in liberalism, this gesture to an outside to human experience produces more serious problems in the case of scientific statements. As Meillassoux argues in his *After Finitude*, such relativism has disastrous consequences for the epistemic claims of science, effectively making philosophy the promoter of a limp relativism that produces frankly nonsensical statements. 'Correlationalism can't give any sense to ancestral statements, and, consequently to a science which is able to produce such statements' (Meillassoux 8 May 2008).

As such, for the correlationist, any talk of an absolute is censored, in a form of dogmatic post-structuralism or antirealism. It is seen as unhelpful to getting the work of politics done on the one hand: *how is it helpful to speak of things that do not relate to us?* But, on the other hand, as soon as any metaphysical language is iterated into the political sphere, it can only exist as an ultimately weak fiction within it. As a result of this, a hierarchy of iteration is produced that paradoxically threatens the relativity that correlationalism prizes. No longer is the field of language 'open'; instead it is administrated and organized in a conservative schematics that privileges a theory of the relation in a strong conceptual scheme that distinguishes between abstract language and substantive language. Here we can rehearse once more our prevailing critiques of the organizational impulse as the mask for a scepticism of the image and bring Meillassoux's critique face to face with it.

Following Meillassoux's critique, we are now asked to think about language as referential and as adequational, a demand that is not representationalist but instead materialist/realist. This is especially pertinent when we take this critique to art. The approaches to the image that I have sketched out above attempt to deny a connection between language and meaning for the sake of a 'good politics' capable of dissolving power rather than forming it. Ironically, it is the ability of language to dissolve meaning rather than produce it that pulls us back into the closure of the circle.

Meillassoux's work then performs three primary operations: (1) it upholds the need to escape from the passivity of naive realism whilst also fighting the notion that correlationism is the terminus of this escape route; (2) it promotes the possibility that language has a positive relation to meaning, but decimates the relation between a concept of becoming and the image, whether this is in the form of its rehabilitation to a purposive politics, our communion with it, or its inculcation to the mystical; and (3) it evidences that the consequence of a remastering of the image and its social hope turns out to be its absolute self-delimitation.

And the question of politics

The problems that Meillassoux describes add to this flattening-out of the distinctive qualities across these regimes of the curatorial that share the identification of the negativity of referential power. In a world that makes a time without us a fact, the

securities that are gained through the organizations of the image are no longer intact. We have moved past the traditional impasse that leaves us with the choice between the regimes of autonomy and affect, and now we head towards a new heteronomy of culture and politics.

I want to think through this now reconstituted picture to Meillassoux's description of world. In Meillassoux we find a world of super-contingency where any concept of the world being 'for us' is denied and any conception of practical reason is undone. This is a world without guarantees, involving a radical denial of perspective, relations and consistency. It becomes impossible to subordinate means to ends, threatening any investment in practical means. Instead Meillassoux proposes a truth – the principle of absolute contingency – that is correspondent with our reality, in as much as it guarantees the *inability* to produce a theory of meaning. 'There is nothing beneath or beyond the manifest gratuitousness of the given – nothing but the limitless and lawless power of its destruction, emergence or persistence.' (Meillassoux 2008: 63) Here we enter the realm of hyperchaos, where disorder no longer stands as the prime reality of existence; instead, contingency is so radical that disorder can be destroyed by order, since both are equally contingent.

Meillassoux's work refuses to condition another form of access or connectivity. He asks us to remember that contingency is banal, since not only does knowing contingency not transcend contingency, but for chaos '[...] to remain chaos, [it] *cannot* actually bring forth the unthinkable' (Meillassoux 2008: 67). But it is important here to think through

language a little more, for if we are to ask questions about the politics of Meillassoux's theoretical reason then it is clear that this is something that is not talked to in his work.

So how does this mind-independent reality have any connection to or place within the formation of politics? The question here then is how this thought of a time without us can be understood without handing back the statement itself to the primacy of the thought that thinks that time without us. What form of knowledge can recognize the primacy of contingency as a fact, without reducing absolute contingency to an object of knowledge? And what allows us to think Meillassoux's theoretical reason as something more than merely an auxiliary mechanism to defeat the problems of correlationalism?³ To answer, we must now understand how Meillassoux's work has consequences for understanding both reason and the image.

Language without correlationalism

The question of the politics of absolute contingency demands that we untie the question about what absolute contingency bears out in the political, from the question of what absolute contingency means 'for us'. We must then take this question from an anti-humanist perspective. Reviewing Meillassoux's approach to language, it is clear that whilst the representational faculty of the image is understood as *inadequate* to its object, the work of reason *is capable* of this adequation. Meillassoux contends that 'a reality separate from the subject can be thought by the subject' (Meillassoux 8 May 2008).

This move away from representationalism and towards realism is encountered through

scientific reason. It is here that Meillassoux's work shows that the representational faculty of the image cannot access the real, but reason can:

The fact that I can't imagine the non-existence of subjectivity, since to imagine is to exist as a subject, does not prove it is impossible: I can't imagine what it is like to be dead, since to imagine it means we are still alive, but, unfortunately, this fact does not prove that death is impossible. The limits of my imagination are not the index of my immortality. (Meillassoux 8 May 2008)

This problem of meaning allows Meillassoux to expose the limits of the correlationalist circle. Crucially, this is done by taking language (albeit a language of reason) more literally than those whose argument is based on the world *as language*. Here, unlike the correlationalist, Meillassoux does not return a thought that aims beyond us back to the relativist correlate of subjective will, *exactly because* he follows the correlationalist argument through to its logical conclusion. This irony of this methodology however, is that this logic highlights the immanent idealization of pure thought to Meillassoux's theory, in as much as the thought of the fact of death acts as the fact of non-relationality and in turn acts as a transposition to the primacy of thought itself. This necessitates (1) the rejection of a thorough analysis of how 'the world of the given' is conditioned through scientific statements, or how such statements emerge within it, and (2) the presumption and reliance upon a hard distinction between these two realms. Residing in

apparently pure thought then, this work creates an urgency for a renewed attention to language, specifically this form of rational language and its operations, as well as how this connects to the manifest image. Looking to how meaning works in relation to facticity seems central to the overcoming of idealism as well a means to attending to the censorship of the imagination. Here I want to sketch out a few points of departure. The first ties reason to cause, the second looks to absolute contingency as metaphor, and the third identifies a heteronomy of reason and imagination.

The thought of absolute contingency manifest as a scientific statement allows us to think through the relationship between reason, cause and action, without a principle of the relation that rationalizes these parts. Facts are taken seriously to the point that they exceed the subject who claims them. The methodology that gets us here takes a materialist, literal approach to language, which overturns the condition of the image as cause without reason, to reason as cause. In this sense, this 'death as a fact' statement is not reflective of a mortality, or finitude; instead it situates a new potentiality for the work of reason. But in its doing so, this literal approach to language allows us to identify how reason operates as cause in Meillassoux's argument.

Here we are presented with another *form of adequation* in a new correspondence where the statement itself unleashes the un-presentable paradox of reason as force, where the work of theoretical reason without a principle of cause is not directionless because reason is substantial matter in itself. The work of Donald Davidson lubricates this move,

specifically his assertion that ‘reasons are as much causes of, as they are explanations for action’. It is because reasons are causally related to actions that actions can be understood by referring to reasons: ‘suppose we grant that reasons alone justify actions in the course of explaining them; it does not follow that the explanation is not also – and necessarily – causal’ (Davidson 2001: 10).

What we see here is a subsumption of cause and effect into a complex set of circumstantial operations. The make-up of these operations is action and reason, and these now appear unbound from a general principle of cause, because cause is simply the non-linguistic physical relation of these objects.

It is here where we could say that the work of Meillassoux’s absolutism resides within the world of metaphor. According to Davidson, ‘metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more’ (Davidson 1984: 245). And I think the same goes for Meillassoux – whether he likes it or not – since the thought of the absolute in Meillassoux relies upon the referential qualities of language, both to justify the fact of absolute contingency and equally to cause the unbinding that speculation requires. The reason that thinks the absolute nature of contingency makes absolute contingency the metaphor par excellence, and this metaphor in its absolute nature has to be understood literally. This opens a vista of new possibilities, just as for Davidson, taking metaphors literally allows for new practices, understandings and meanings to be produced.

I would suggest that this consequence of reason is another kind of realism: a realism that works as and through metaphor, that produces a mix of the speculative (the might be) and the specific (the matter that is that speculation itself). ‘This is indeed a speculative thesis, (says Meillassoux) since we are not thinking an absolute, but it is not metaphysical, since we are not thinking any *thing* (entity) that would *be* absolute’ (Meillassoux 2007: 60).

We must also remember that by Meillassoux’s lights we would have to split reason and the imagination as categories that do not and will not meet. For it is pure rational thought alone that catalyses the kinds of speculation that might include the image. However, in thinking reason as cause, we must not only consider the language operations of scientific statements, but must also consider the alternative that this offers, that is, how the site of the imagination produces scientific facts. Here we can think through how the thought that thinks fact operates in a new heteronomy that complicates any distinction between reason and the imagination. Centrally, thought that is literal does not exclude the imagination, since it is a kind of representation.

Any reconnection between reason and cause, and reason and the imagination might seem to replicate all of the problems I reviewed at the beginning of this article. The former might fall back into some form of instrumentalism and the latter might suggest a renewed focus on the subject, moving us from the problem of idealism of thought in Meillassoux to another idealism: the subject that thinks thought. However, since there is no principle of cause at work here, there is also no ontology or objectifying concept that would ground these relations, and because we cannot tie this indistinction between reason and the

imagination back to a coherent subjectivity that thinks it, since facts are unrelated to human will, we do not idealize either the subject as a thinking being or the thinking that is thought by it.

Taking this to artistic culture, we now can think about a radical untying of what we understand to be the necessary and the instrumental. Whilst Meillassoux's speculative materialism guarantees the unbinding of instrumental reason, the understanding of the condition of meaning, and in particular not just what the image can mean, but what a conception of our reality without us means within the reality that we reside. This is a question of meaning without us, and the reconditioning of an understanding of language interpretation as being always already tied to our mind and body – as if art was a personal message to us and a general message about us.

The thought of the fact of the inaccessibility to what it is that we share confirms that we can no longer identify the political task of the image as the means to any event that would secure our becoming. However, it is crucial to point out here that, although this faith in the correspondence between image and reality is undone, the possibility of a politics is not undermined but generated – where its rethinking is potentialized. This is because the image does not hold such guarantees. *We cannot theorize the relation.* This is certainly not a return in any sense to the bad faith that we encountered earlier, where images figured our limits and our freedom. Instead, it speaks of how we can read the destruction of other monolithic and socializing concepts of life and the image that include a concept of the public and society itself in a positive sense.

This leads to a final proposition, which must remain unexplored here, that faces the objecthood of metaphors anew. But as a start, we have untied the image from these anxieties of relation by acknowledging the habits and traditions within which our theories of autonomy, affect and access preside. With this destruction, we can turn to understanding the image as reason without principle and cause without ontology, turning us to navigate a different and alien world.

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¹ See Alain Badiou (2010), specifically his comparison between the notion of Gesamkunstwerke and the totalizing operations of global capital. Badiou comments on the dream of totalization in art, and this certainly is analogous to this approach to curation: 'Some artists today are thinking that there is a possibility to fuse all the artistic forms, it's the dream of a complete multimedia. But it's not a new idea. As you probably know, it was the idea of Richard Wagner, the total art, with pictures, music, poetry and so on. So the first multimedia artist was Richard Wagner. And, I think multimedia is a false idea because it's the power of absolute integration and it's something like the projection in art of the dream of globalization. It's a question of the unity of art like the unity of the world but it's an abstraction too'.

² See 'Body Count', Amanda Beech and Robin Mackay, Parallax, *Image Damage*, May 2010, pp. 119–30, an essay that traces this critique through a response to Maurice Blanchot's *The Space of Literature*.

³ This is something that Nathan Brown crystallizes in his analysis of Meillassoux's realism, Nathan Brown, 'Rationalist Empiricism/Dialectical Materialism: from Althusser to Meillassoux', CRMEP Research Seminar, Middlesex University, London, 8 October 2009, specifically in his examination of the literalism of scientific statements and their consequential paradox: 'How is it then possible to affirm, *on the side of materialism*, both the distinction of the real from knowledge and the adequacy of knowledge to its object, while properly recognizing the primacy of the real over its knowledge, or of being over thought?'