

# The Art of the Real



# The Art of the Real:

## *Visual Studies and New Materialisms*

Edited by

Roger Rothman and Ian Verstegen

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The Art of the Real: Visual Studies and New Materialisms

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# INTRODUCTION

ROGER ROTHMAN AND IAN VERSTEGEN

## **Materialism anew**

Almost a generation separates the current moment from the heyday of deconstruction and critical theory, and yet there seems little consensus about what happened between then and now. Was it, as Bruno Latour insisted (with regard to critique), that it had simply “run out of steam”? Did it empty its own tank and find itself stranded on the side of the road? Or was it the victim of an external force, an alternative methodology that stormed the gates of post-structuralism with a blow impossible to defend?

Latour’s alternative notion of construction is central here, as reflected in Josh Toth’s claim that “critics who participate in this theorization of the end [of postmodernism] typically highlight a recent shift in contemporary narrative that is marked by the growing dominance of a type of neo-(or, “dirty”)-realism, and by an increased theoretical interest in the issues of community and ethical responsibility” (3). Whereas Baudrillard’s critique of the first Gulf War as symptomatic of the global simulacrum was recognized as trenchant, by the time of the Iraq war, such diagnoses seemed only to skirt about the surface, incapable of recognizing the material forces of capitalism. If this is the broadest umbrella under which materialism reappeared after the fall of postmodernism, there are other symptoms. Alongside the sense of fatigue with linguistic models came a new urgency to answer the question of sovereignty in the era of immaterial labor and the reemergence, via Žižek and others, of formerly “lost causes” like Communism.

The new materialisms of the present are poised to don the mantle once worn by the likes of structuralism, post-structuralism, and the Frankfurt School. In its most iconoclastic mold, contemporary theory aims to revive outmoded notions of materialist ontologies. Such is the case with the “new materiality,” “speculative realism,” and “object oriented ontology.” Their effect is slowly being registered in the arts, mostly through the blogosphere but also increasingly in new work. Of course, the reception of such ideas is no simple matter. What prompted this volume was our belief that this reception has yet to be sufficiently comprehended.

For example, new materialism has offered refreshing perspectives to art history and visual studies but it is not clear how these are related to those that formerly occupied us—gender, sexuality, community. If this identity-oriented paradigm, with its roots in semiotics and psychoanalysis, is fundamentally irreconcilable in a Kuhnian fashion with new materialism's brute encounters with the object, how is one to determine the superiority of one or the other? In a related vein, what are we to make of the fact that the older procedures were largely ones of doubt and suspended ontological commitments, whereas the new materialisms take these as given? One of the promises of new materialism is its permission to operate outside the *mise-en-abyme* of epistemological bracketing that defined postmodernism as ironic all the way down.

Here are some possibilities afforded by new materialism: a chance for art history and visual studies to engage with a new kind of philosophical discourse, even a changed landscape of philosophy itself (Bryant, Srnicek and Harman); a blurring of the old division of continental and analytic philosophy in favor of problem-based questions (Braver); an opening to attend to the politics of arrangements of matter rather than our interpretation of those arrangements; a move beyond the emblematic use of theory—art illustrating theory—toward a more productive engagement of art and theory in a dialectic (Sinnerbrink).

These are some of the exciting possibilities afforded by the new materialisms. Each of the authors in this volume seek, in different ways, to interrogate aspects of materialism as they relate to art history and visual studies. They chart new theories and their apologists, reexamine figures from the past, and rehearse answers from a range of points of view, from the affirmative to the skeptical. Collectively they provide a vantage point from which to engage in reflexive research from within this emerging paradigm.

## **Part One: Materialist Ontologies**

For postmodernism, the question of ontology was habitually approached from the negative, as a specter or bad-object to circumvent, if not obliterate. In retrospect, the postmodern belief in the inescapability of the frame ought to have led to the belief that it is not a matter of escaping ontology but of articulating its tacit outlines. The common denominator of contemporary materialisms, realist or not, could perhaps be described as the belief that “objects” and things in general act outside of the regime of the signifier and have the potential to affect one another outside of any reference system. The chapters in the first part of this book grapple with



the nature of this “matter” and propose a variety of materialisms as the means by which to move beyond the exhausted state of postmodernism without falling back on simple historicism and its numbing collection of well-archived “facts.”

In the opening chapter, Deborah Haynes expresses her weariness with the “race for theory”: the pursuit of the next paradigm that will save us if we only have the patience. Using her own grounding in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Haynes seconds Bakhtin’s critique of mere “theoretism”—theory emptied of the material practice that ought to fill it. The affirmation of materiality means that each and every theory has to be understood in its practice-domain. With such “mangling” (Pickering) permitted, some ontological reflection is possible. Drawing on the performance art of Marina Abramovic, the net art of Mark Amerika, the online projects of Margot Lovejoy, and the media art of Bjorn Melhus, Haynes outlines a political aesthetics of interdependence and ecological sensitivity. For Haynes, new materialism can reach its potential if it weds theory and practice while respecting cultural difference in a spirit of self-conscious modesty.

Jason Hoelscher deploys complexity theory as a tool to comprehend the art and art theory that characterizes the global art world since the 1960s. With reference to the work of Stuart Kauffman, Ilya Prigogine and others, Hoelscher shows how the rise of post-Duchampian art transformed the art world into a self-organizing adaptive system in which theories of art became enfolded into the practice of art as determining elements. The result is what he calls the “art intersystem” that functions much like a biological organism. The art intersystem behaves biologically in the following ways. First, it is autocatalytic in that it generates new intersystems. Second, in spite of much low-level variation, at the macro level it remains largely stable. Finally, the system is ergodic in the sense that it returns to strange attractors. In a manner similar to Haynes, Hoelscher shows the potential repetitiveness of apparently novel theoretical outcomes. Put another way, to complete the materialist turn, Hoelscher recommends that we take the mathematical formalization and biological foundations of complexity theory “all the way down” to reflexively include ourselves within it.

Elie During’s account of art, science and the nexus attempts to recover a coherent sense of totality while still maintaining a system of local pluralities that postmodernism—like that of Hoelscher’s adaptive systems—recognizes as the inescapable horizon of experience. During rejects the radically non-totalizing claims of Alain Badiou in favor of what he calls a “kinked classicism” in which the writings of Henri Bergson,

William James, and Alfred North Whitehead are shown to offer a third way, between Newtonian universality and the pure multiplicity of Badiou. Works by Dan Graham and VALIE EXPORT serve as emblematic attempts to articulate the non-universal totality that During identifies in works of American pragmatism and its European cognates.

Just as During proposes to reconsider historical conceptions of time and space within a materialist refusal to embrace an aperspectival totality, so too does Roger Rothman call for a materialist reconsideration of historical paradigms—in his case that of post-Kantian Idealism. Rothman’s essay opens with a proposal to deploy materialism as a tool to upend postmodern critique. The critical attitude, which has been dominant until recently, takes as the tacit status quo a suspicion and subversion of all potential metanarratives. Responding to the recent attention paid by Jacques Rancière to Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Rothman upends the Eighteenth Century Idealist’s thought in an effort to construct a materialist aesthetic more unforgiving than the one that Rancière imagines. The result is an “ateological” system in which the embrace of the new requires a rigorous acceptance of all things, whether good or evil. As a coda, Rothman proposes the radical openness of John Cage as the proper heir to the materialism that comes of turning Schiller upside down.

## Part Two: Materialist Politics

The essays in Part One already introduce a range of normative issues arising from the materialist turn, be it Haynes’ Bakhtinian insistence on the inseparability of theory and practice or Rothman’s anarchist politics that arise from an inverted Schiller. The essays in Part Two take on these concerns directly. Unsurprisingly, Frankfurt School theory plays a crucial role in a number of these essays. What new materialism brings to critical theory is a discourse of affirmation that the Frankfurt School found so difficult to engage. Whereas a dialectic of negation is compelled, as Adorno recognized, to manage the absence of a “firm criterion... between a determinate negation of meaning and a bad positivism of meaninglessness” (Adorno 191), the return to materialism suggests that beneath the dialectic lies a set of ontological specificities with the potential to proscribe concrete political actions.

In the opening chapter of Part Two, the New York collective Not an Alternative reviews the accumulating disaster wrought by global capitalism and charts the return of the “Radical,” the vital re-emergence of a culture of protest. Foremost, the Radical has surpassed an accommodationist/consensus

approach to politics in favor of antagonism. Opposing themselves to the Multitude, a species of “horizontalism,” the Radical does not bend to capitalism but seeks to end it. Against the tactics of capitalism that are endlessly morphing and therefore can effortlessly reappropriate critical artistic responses to it, Not an Alternative recommends occupying neutral institutions, which through their innocuousness prove their symbolic efficiency. Using the example of the 1980s Slovenian group, *Neuwe Slowenishe Kunst* and affiliated industrial music collective, *Laibach*, Not an Alternative shows how their fascist imagery exposed the contradictions of the decaying Yugoslav state.

The return to a politics superseding the liberal also marks the chapter by Christine Weiler. Focusing on the 2008 film, *Die Welle* (*The Wave*), Weiler reviews the delicate balance that German filmmakers have had to follow in treating the Nazi past. Needing to balance an identification with the perpetrator without promoting fascination, *The Wave* represents a new kind of movie that de-historicizes the Nazi past but brings its activating forces to the fore. Responding to a period that is rapidly losing interest to younger generations, the film investigates a high-school experiment in group formation and in so doing brings the mechanisms of fascism to terrifying life. The story is told in a way that acknowledges film’s complicity in the very process of propagandizing. In this way, Nazism is connected to rituals of *Volksgemeinschaft* active today.

Morton Schoolman’s project is founded on the dialectics of negation, but the focus here lies with Adorno’s critique of enlightenment rationality. In a manner sympathetic to Rothman’s post-critical discourse of affirmation, Schoolman seeks to reclaim the mass image—film in particular—as a positive, aesthetic form of enlightenment. Doing so requires that Schoolman radically rethink Adorno’s largely dismissive remarks on cinema by establishing a dialog between a materialist economy of elements and an idealist economy of images. Further, it proposes to rediscover in film the aesthetic form of reason productive of the image of reconciliation that Adorno believed could only be found in works of modernism. Crucial for Schoolman is the dialectical condition of the moving image, as it is simultaneously static material (celluloid film) and ephemeral image (shadows cast on the screen). What emerges from his account is a conception of images of “reconciliation” out of the twinned movement of the real and the representational.

Where Weiler’s chapter reinvigorates a search for deep structural mechanisms in a neo-Marxist vein, Ian Verstegen looks at the new materialisms from the other angle: not practices that connect to materialism, but self-named materialisms. Reviewing attempts by recent

authors to use varieties of materialism to give due to the “agency” of objects and energize our ideas of matter, Verstegen argues that Deleuzian and Latourian materiality is strongly influenced by narrow French debates over immanence; by the time it arrives in visual studies it makes impossible restrictions on theorizing. Because their French interest in denying limits creates a radically flat ontology, it is difficult to create any more differentiations on matter than simply that they should be treated equally in an unprejudiced way. In the end, such materialisms represent a kind of status quo that has more in common with previous trends in visual studies than anything one would propose to stand as its dialectical overcoming.

In its note of caution, Verstegen’s contribution forces a reflective consideration of the materialisms offered in the previous chapters and thus serves as a fitting conclusion to the volume. Whatever comes of the new materialisms on offer here, they will only survive if they can withstand the scrutiny of the skeptic.

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**PART I:**  
**MATERIALIST ONTOLOGIES**

# CHAPTER ONE

## NEW MATERIALISM? OR, THE USES OF THEORY

### DEBORAH J. HAYNES

#### **A Roundabout Introduction**

Writing this chapter has presented me with a conundrum, a tension between my ongoing engagement with, and my fatigue about, theory. In both teaching and writing, I have long been engaged by cultural theory construction and theoretical questions. From the early 1990s I regularly taught about modernist and postmodernist theories of art: neo-Marxism, new historicism, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, structuralism and semiotics, poststructuralism, feminism, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, queer and transgender theory, media studies, and performance studies, among others. Most recently, I taught a graduate seminar on theories of art history, from Vasari and Winckelmann through Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger, to Franz Fanon, Olu Oguibe, and Judith Butler. All of this teaching has been enormously rewarding, as I helped both undergraduates and graduate students to understand the significance of theoretical discourse and its application within historical, critical, and creative contexts.

My writing around theoretical issues has been more narrowly defined: a range of books and articles on topics such as ethical aesthetics, the purpose and function of the arts within the broader culture, and the pedagogical role of theory in aesthetic education; and two books and other publications on Russian moral philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin and the relevance of his ideas to the visual arts.<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin coined terms such as answerability, heteroglossia, outsideness, chronotope, and unfinalizability that are fruitful for understanding creative processes and artifacts in visual culture. Other twentieth- and twenty-first century writers have also given

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<sup>1</sup> Among my articles is a short essay titled “The Uses of Theory” that examines how Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of theoretism is useful within the arts, religious, and theological studies (Haynes 2012).

us a diverse lexicon for describing cultural objects and experiences: carceral continuum, chromophobia, cultural capital, docile body, floating signifier, male gaze, ideological state apparatus, and intertextuality, to name but a few. I have gained much from exploring these and other concepts in my teaching and writing.

The materialist turn in contemporary theory is connected to what I earlier called ethical aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> We are surrounded by challenges and dangers ranging from global climate change to ecological catastrophe and extreme violence in communities all over the world. The arts and visual culture more generally seem to be undergoing a process of rapid dematerialization and (d)evolution, where strategies of appropriation, pastiche, and remix dominate. Even if the arts remain a narrow zone of creative activity within our bureaucratized and technologized cultures, we need visual art that is responsive to the intersection of the material, ethical, and aesthetic, and informed by an apocalyptic sensibility.

These statements directly reflect what I have learned through sustained study of Mikhail Bakhtin's moral philosophy. He taught me to think about the interdependence of the material world with ethics and aesthetics. To review his perspective: Bakhtin was thoroughly familiar with the Kantian framework, which separates science, ethics, and aesthetics into three autonomous spheres. He considered this separation a wrong move with, as I believe, disastrous consequences. In a world of totally rationalized science and technology, ethics limited to narrow definitions of "family values" and the like, and aestheticized arts unconnected to life, it is no wonder we are in the midst of quarrelsome debates about nuclear energy, weapons, and waste, about genetic engineering, and about censorship and freedom of speech. Ethical and material aesthetics do not hesitate to engage questions about technology. Indeed, such a framework seeks to reconnect the aesthetic and ethical, as well as the scientific and technical domains of culture, to the material world. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost put it, new materialisms challenge some of the most fundamental assumptions of the modern world, including, "its normative sense of the human and its beliefs about human agency . . . [and] its material practices such as the ways we labor on, exploit, and interact with nature" (4).

Ever more resistant viruses, increasing extinctions of species, ongoing degradation of the land, water, and air, skyrocketing world populations, and devastating wars on several continents—most of us know all too well this litany that defines contemporary life in the natural world. I do not

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<sup>2</sup> In the 1990s I published several articles that address ethical aesthetics, beginning with a pithy essay, "The Technoseduction of the Artist" (Haynes 1996).

mean to be melodramatic or glib, but the conditions in which we live elicit such an apocalyptic sensibility. Ethical aesthetics, materialist aesthetics, and new materialisms seek to address these issues.

None of this means, however, that theory is always positive. Theory is never neutral; it is an instrument of power wielded by those who have power. At least until the last few decades, most influential theories have been created by men of European descent. Late twentieth-century debates about modernism and postmodernism, as well as current discussions about material aesthetics, visual culture, globalization, postcolonial critique, and identity and subjectivity, are part of the “race for theory,” to paraphrase the title of an influential essay by African-American feminist Barbara Christian (40-50). This “race” has left me weary. I find the particular pretenses and forms of much theorizing tiresome, especially when theory and practice do not interact to mutually transform each other.

### **What is theory actually *for*? How does theory *act*? And *for whom* is it useful?**

Thankfully, in its best articulations the materialist turn does not follow in the problematic direction of many modernist and postmodernist theories. The new materialisms touch many arenas, including the natural sciences and humanistic disciplines, where theorists address pressing global issues such as climate change and population growth, genetic engineering, economics, politics, and compelling changes in technology. Returning repeatedly to foundational questions about the nature of matter and our place in the material world, scholars, theorists, artists, and activists examine how “materiality is always something more than ‘mere’ matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality. . . .” (Coole and Frost 9). Matter is always active and creative — productive and unpredictable. As I will explore shortly, this view leads to new ontologies, where there can be no definitive boundaries between the sentient and nonsentient, between the material and spiritual. Analogous ideas have led scholars such as Manuel Vásquez within the study of religion to develop a materialist theory of religion based on themes of the body and embodiment, of ritual and practice, and place-making, or what Vásquez calls “emplacement.”

New interpretations of matter and an understanding of the interdependence of human agency in the material world were espoused in the twentieth century by feminists. Focusing on experience and the experiential, on the realities of oppression, on the body and embodiment, and on the complexities of social reality in a technological era, feminists have been at the forefront in developing what we now call materialist



theories. Especially, such feminist theories offer us new ways to question the old dualisms of human agents who exploit nature for their own ends. I will have more to say about this shortly. Feminist theorists have posited ontologies of the new materialism that lie beyond the old dualisms of the material and ideal, of the natural and human, of mind and body.

In what follows, I approach the uses of theory from three major directions: the problems of what Bakhtin called “theoretism,” a perspective on the so-called “new ontologies,” and further reflections on the new materialisms and digital culture. In the distance, I see an intersection — a crossroad of theories that defines our present moment. This crossroad, like the theories that intersect here, is open-ended, uneven, contingent, and in process of construction.

## Theoretism

As Mikhail Bakhtin cogently argued, a theory that remains rooted in formal or material concerns is only theoretism.<sup>3</sup> Developed in the abstract, as if the unique individual in particular situations did not exist, theories alone cannot provide criteria for shaping scholarly and artistic practice. To be effective, theories must be especially attentive to individual and cultural difference, to the specificity of both the theorist and that which is theorized. There is certainly a place for theory that uses convoluted technical language, yet only if it is accessible can such theory become the groundwork for creative work and cultural change.

Bakhtin used the term “theoretism” to describe his aversion to all such unified and orderly structures or systems. Like his writing on other topics, however, his critique of theoretism was neither sustained nor systematic. He developed this critique early in his intellectual life, while still in his 20s. In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, he wrote: “Any kind of practical orientation of my life within the theoretical world is impossible, it is impossible to live in it, impossible to perform answerable deeds. In that world I am unnecessary; I am essentially and fundamentally non-existent in it. The theoretical world is obtained through an essential and fundamental abstraction from the fact of my unique being” (Bakhtin 9).

In this statement Bakhtin made two interrelated assertions. On the one hand, he was convinced that theory cannot provide the basis for responsible action in the world, because it does not translate directly into

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<sup>3</sup> Bakhtin developed a strong critique of Formalist and Marxist material aesthetics of his time, including dominant concepts of material, form, and content, as well as ancillary concepts such as isolation (Haynes 1995, 108-120; Renfrew).

everyday life and experience. Too often, immersion in the theoretical takes place at the expense of the practical and mundane aspects of life. On the other hand, our specific acts or deeds do provide a basis for assessing what is most meaningful and for creating an adequate orientation in life. Nevertheless, his resistance to all forms of theoretism did not preclude writing theoretical texts that are difficult to unpack.

Bakhtin's view of theoretism may be best understood as a multistep process and way of thinking. First, it abstracts what can be generalized from specific human actions. Second, it considers that abstraction to be whole and complete; then, third, theoretism develops a set of rules from the abstraction. Fourth, norms are derived from this set of rules. As Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson summarize Bakhtin's view: "Faith in rules, norms, theories, and systems blinds us to the particular person and situation, which is where morality resides" (1989 9). By abstracting rules, norms, or theories from actual human actions and mistaking those theories for the truth, the philosopher or theorist loses connection to the unique human being and to real moral engagement. Bakhtin avoided systematic analyses of individual texts and authors, which might have demonstrated clearly what the implications of this model actually are in practice. He was ultimately more concerned with poetics, or what Morson and Emerson named "prosaics," the messiness of everyday life.

Among diverse contemporary theories, feminism is a prosaic philosophy that provides a powerful reference point for understanding Bakhtin's resistance to theory. Both Bakhtin's writing and feminist theory, including recent feminist materialist approaches,<sup>4</sup> demonstrate that theories can be used to understand systems (including the philosophical constructs) that affect our lives. In this sense theory is not a totalizing, but rather a partial and fragmentary process, as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze have also argued (Foucault and Deleuze). Theory is an especially useful ally in political struggles because of its empowering effects. Theory and practice are inextricable: practice can be seen as a set of relays from one theoretical point to another. Theories encounter walls, which practice helps one climb over. Theories are neither an expression nor translation of practice; they can also be forms of practice. Theory may be likened to a box of tools from which we take what we need. This theory toolbox might hold flexible, useful, and contingent concepts that can be evaluated and employed for their productivity and innovation (Leitch 10). The toolbox

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<sup>4</sup> See Hekman, especially its fine bibliography of feminist approaches in many disciplines. Also, see Rooney, 139-153; Ahmed, 23-39; as well as books by scholars such as Elizabeth Grosz and Iris Young.

concept is especially congenial for artists and other cultural workers, who use a wide variety of tools for creative work.

But what does it really mean to suggest that theory is like a box of tools? As part of her criticism of theory, Luce Irigaray pointed out long ago that the “tool” is not a feminine category, since women do not have tools (150). Or, in Audre Lorde’s classic language: “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (112). I continue to question these controversial statements. What do we have if not tools? We have our perceptions, intuitions, minds, and bodies, as well as material artifacts such as paintbrushes, angle grinders, and laptop computers. How do we use them? How do we exercise power with the aid of our “selves”? How is the self itself constructed? Although I cannot answer these questions adequately here, I think that theory, as one of the primary tools of radical thought during the past decades, has helped to expose the hidden agendas and biases of our language, cultural institutions, and art-making processes.

As I acknowledged earlier, a certain weariness with theory comes from infatuation with the new — Christian’s race for theory. Waves of interest in particular theorists crest, names become commonplace (“Bakhtin” is a relevant example), we search for the newest ideas (new materialisms?), attention turns to previously little known writers. A powerful consumer ethos pervades the academic and art worlds, an ethos that drives processes of global consumption, as well as often-oppressive political agendas. Christian’s 1987 essay was, and remains, a powerful indictment of current developments. As she wrote: “[T]heory has become a commodity which helps determine whether we are hired or promoted in academic institutions — worse, whether we are heard at all” (Christian 40). She criticizes the monolithic and often monotheistic constructs that govern theory-making, where “language as one form of pleasure is immediately restricted, and becomes heavy, abstract, prescriptive, monotonous” (Christian 47). Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of the new materialist theories is the concerted questioning of anthropocentric narratives developed during the Enlightenment that have guided human views of the world as lifeless object, at least within Euro-American contexts. To the extent that our theories are grounded in the material (not so abstract), flexible (not so prescriptive), and polyphonic (not so monologic), they will be creative resources for our larger projects, including addressing intractable global problems and sustaining sentient life on earth.

We must constantly ask: what remains viable and is genuinely useful in contemporary theory? I am aware that all writers necessarily build on the ideas, theories, and images of others. This is certainly true of my own thinking and writing. What I criticize are the particular pretenses and

forms of much theorizing. I am not against theorizing as such, as should be evident from my comments at the outset of this essay. However, theory and practice *must* interact and mutually transform each other. I think this is one of the main strengths of new materialist approaches, especially within the arts and visual culture studies.<sup>5</sup>

Another pressing question arises at this point. How is it possible to use our theories to transform ourselves, our relationships and social institutions, while we and our theories are still changing? In this situation we may need to embrace the very instability of analytical categories, using that instability to reflect on our political realities. Such instabilities may then be a resource for our thinking and action (Harding 18). As theories change, the process of deconstructing dominant theories of the past must also continue in order to suspend any pretense that we are producing truth and univocal meaning. Challenging philosophical discourse is useful because it remains the discourse on discourse, the theory of theories. We may go back to it to try to find out what accounts for its power and its position of mastery. We do not have to give ourselves over to a symbolic, point-by-point interpretation of a philosopher's ideas, but instead examine the way grammar and syntax, metaphors and silences, operate in a particular discourse (Irigaray 75-9). As Bakhtin seemed to understand, our own methods and theories for this deconstructive process may elude systematic definition.

To conclude this excursus on theory and theoretism, I emphasize again that Bakhtin identified all theories isolated from action as the enemy. Bakhtin was adamant about the limitations of theory, and we would do well to heed his concerns as we develop new materialisms. Theories cannot help us to gain practical orientation in life when developed in the abstract, as if the unique individual in particular situations did not exist. This abstract quality means that theories alone cannot provide criteria that would shape one's life in the world of action and practice (Bakhtin 9). Constructing theoretical frameworks and analyzing the theories of others, therefore, requires critical self-awareness and discernment about the interdependence of all things, including theory and practice.

### **“New” Ontologies?**

As part of my engagement with theory, I have been thinking about epistemology, ontology, and axiology for many years, especially as these philosophical categories relate to the emergence of digital culture and the

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<sup>5</sup> For a fine example of what this looks like, see the essays in Barrett and Bolt.

transformation of everyday life through all kinds of mobile devices. Each of us stands at a unique junction of epistemological, axiological, and ontological concerns that direct our lives.

In my view, ontology is the study of what Michael Heim once called the “relative reality of things,” differences between the real and the unreal. Ontology raises questions about the nature of the self who stands in the world and questions about the nature of our world or the worlds we inhabit. The so-called “new ontologies” of contemporary writers such as Manuel de Landa, Graham Harman, and Andrew Pickering have prompted my further reflection about these categories as a special kind of theorizing.

De Landa’s ontology of the social originated in his reading of Gilles Deleuze and has the goal of conveying a sense of the irreducible social complexity of the world. Related efforts to politicize ontology emphasize networks, rhizomes, and non-hierarchy — a kind of democratic universe of objects that includes neutrinos and stars, palm trees and armies, as in Graham Harman’s writing. Andrew Pickering articulates an open and pluralist ontology based on embodiment and becoming.

Pickering’s ideas are enormously generative for those of us studying visual cultures. In *The Cybernetic Brain*, for instance, Pickering raises a set of ontological questions about what the world is like, about what sort of “entities” populate it, and about how they, and we, engage with one another. He suggests that an adequate ontology refuses, first, to separate people and things, and second, that its grasp of time is evolutionary rather than causal. As he put it, we should understand these two features as thoroughly interconnected: “the reciprocal coupling of people and things happens in time, in a process that I called . . . ‘mangling’” (Pickering 19). Pickering’s idea of the mangle highlights “an always infinite horizon of constructive engagement with the world” (Pickering 406 note 8).<sup>6</sup>

In a curious way, Bakhtin’s concept of *unfinalizability* anticipates Pickering’s notion of mangling, and may be a fruitful addition to the vocabulary of new materialists. For many, Bakhtin was a frustrating philosopher and literary critic, for he seldom provided fully satisfactory definitions or discussions of the implications of his ideas. Plus, there is the ongoing vexing question of the so-called “disputed texts” and Bakhtin’s relationship to members of the Bakhtin Circle.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, his ideas were, and remain, generative.

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<sup>6</sup> I find it noteworthy that Susan Hekman integrates his notion of mangling into her own feminist analyses in *Material of Knowledge*.

<sup>7</sup> There are “many Bakhtins,” as the contentious scholarship about his work demonstrates. Bakhtin criticized the formalist and materialist perspectives of his own time, and was neither Formalist nor Marxist. Further, Bakhtin was

Bakhtin believed that nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, that the worlds we inhabit are open and free, where everything always remains in the future (1981 166). Works of literature and art are ultimately unfinalizable, but this is also an intrinsic condition of our daily lives, as Pickering also understood. Ultimately, the unrepeatability and open-endedness of creative acts make personal and cultural transformation possible.

According to Bakhtin, creativity is ubiquitous and unavoidable, and, as noted earlier, it should not be separated from one's responsibility toward others in the world. What can ever be fully finalized? There is always a tentative quality to one's work, one's action, and to life itself. Unfinalizability therefore has at least two distinct levels: the ways we need others in order to finalize the self; and the ultimate unfinalizability of all things, events, and persons. Art and life are ultimately open-ended. Even though a person's life is finalized in death, that person's work lives on to be extended and developed by others, an insight we certainly understand in relation to theorists of the past. The creative process, too, is unfinalizable, except insofar as an artist or writer says arbitrarily, "I stop here." Unfinalizability gives us a way to speak about the problems of representing the changing world through the lens of our diverse and ever-changing subjectivities — Pickering's "infinite horizon of constructive engagement."

Works of art can indeed serve as emblems of theory, as the editors of this volume assert. Bakhtin's unfinalizability, as well as the open pluralist ontology that Pickering describes, can be seen in the arts — in examples such as Brian Eno's music, Christopher Alexander's architecture and writing, and in interactive theatre and sculpture. I see a fascinating example of such ontological engagement in the 2010 Museum of Modern Art retrospective of Marina Abramović. She became the first performance artist to be so honored at MOMA.

Born in 1946 in Serbia, Marina Abramović began her career in the early 1970s. Along with artists such as Rachel Rosenthal and Carolee Schneemann, she is one of the grandmothers of performance art. Her earliest works were sound environments and photographs, but by 1973 she had begun formal performances, many of which lasted up to eight hours. In 1976 she began a 12-year collaboration with the artist Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen) that ended with the 90-day *Great Wall Walk*, where each artist traversed 1,553 miles to meet in the center of China's Great Wall. After a

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surprisingly apolitical, especially given the politics of his time. The fact that so many intellectuals of his generation were sent to the gulags, as well as his own illness and frailty, contributed to his choices (Haynes 1995).

hiatus of a few years, Abramović returned to creating performances and videos. In general, her work explores the interrelationships of performer and audience, the limits of the body, including working with pain, and possibilities for working with the mind in complex situations.

Abramović's MOMA exhibition, *The Artist Is Present*, took place from mid-March through May 2010. During this period, she sat in a chair for over 700 hours, first at a table in the museum atrium where visitors would come, one at a time, to sit facing her. Near the end of April she had the table removed in order to simplify the setting. This work of art was, as Abramović said, "about stillness and about literally doing nothing and being in the present."<sup>8</sup> She had earlier created silent durational performances involving time. For instance, she and Ulay performed *Nightsea Crossing* 22 times between 1981 and 1987, for periods ranging from one to 17 days. *Nightsea Crossing* also involved extended sitting across from each other (often at a table), where each performer watched the rise and fall of presence and the activity of consciousness.

*The Artist Is Present* invited viewers to open up to the present moment, even while confronting discomfort, pain, and fear — Pickering's mangling. The table, which was a central presence for more than half of the performance, provides a specific example of Pickering's concept — a reciprocal coupling of people and things in time. One can also see the relevance of another of Bakhtin's innovative terms here. The chronotope describes the time-space nexus in which life exists and creative interaction is possible. As Bakhtin explored in his long essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope," there is no experience outside of space and time, both of which always change (Bakhtin 1981, 84-258). Subjectivity dictates that an artist or writer creates objects that are always constituted differently. All conditions of experience are determined by space and time, which are themselves variable, and this means that every cultural artifact exists in a unique chronotope. Within any situation there can be many different chronotopes, values, and beliefs, and these derive from actual social relations. *The Artist Is Present* made these ideas palpable. With its focus on the body and embodiment, Marina Abramović's work directly challenges the viewer to reflect about the real, material, and ontological dimensions of human existence.

Beyond this, the sum of Abramović's oeuvre visualizes another of Bakhtin's longest held convictions: that self and other always exist in

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<sup>8</sup> From interview transcribed by Julia Kaganskiy, accessed January 29, 2012, URL: [http://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2010/06/03/marina-abramovic-the-artist-speaks](http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/06/03/marina-abramovic-the-artist-speaks). A fine catalogue of this performance is also available (Biesenbach).

relationship, interdependently. About Dostoevsky Bakhtin had noted: “He asserts the impossibility of solitude, the illusory nature of solitude. The very being of man... is the deepest communion. To be means to communicate... I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another (in mutual reflection and mutual acceptance)” (Bakhtin 287). Abramović quite literally has given form to Bakhtin’s ideas about solitude and relationship.

While Bakhtin’s language seems religious, what interests me here is the way it brings us back to the ontological dimensions of materialist and ethical aesthetics. Self *and* other, human being *and* world, artist *and* audience: each word in these pairs exists in a thoroughly interdependent relationship with the other. Such an ontology is not technically “new,” but my point is that in the twenty-first century we are called to write theory and to create out of such an awareness and appreciation of our profound interdependence with others.

## Material Aesthetics and Digital Culture

What might a fully ethical and materialist aesthetics actually look like for the artist, historian, and theorist of visual culture in the digital age? In the mid-1990s, Sherry Turkle defined three models of cultural criticism that I still find relevant for answering this question (Turkle). Analyzing the utopian, utilitarian, and apocalyptic aspirations of new media art provides a useful interpretative lens.

An artist driven by utopian aspirations might articulate a general optimism about technology’s role in our lives: the idea that we can solve our problems by increasing our engagement. From this point of view, the internet and cloud technologies are presently the place for the expansion of participatory democracy and community. Especially as issues of access are worked out, these media will transform opportunities for all of us. Artists working in this mode may advocate the employment of evolving technologies to build new communities, to extend the range of human perception and performance, and to define new notions of the self in relation to others. Margot Lovejoy’s online projects exemplify this approach.

A distinguished historian of new media, Lovejoy has lectured widely, written about technology and visual culture, and her installation and web works have been exhibited internationally. Her *Turns* (2002) and *Confess* (2009-11) projects exemplify the ways digital media are influencing and changing the notions of the individual self within a social context. In *Turns* Lovejoy collected personal stories and turning points in individuals’ lives, represented in her installation and on the original website with



pebble- and shard-like shapes that could be selected and opened. Visitors could browse stories according to various categories, contribute their own narratives, and reorganize the stories through filters such as gender, time, or age. Seen through these relational filters and links, one's own story could be understood as part of a social matrix.

According to Lovejoy's own description, the *Confess* project was a "participatory on-line group therapy project as well as an archive of personal narratives."<sup>9</sup> When I saw the installation in New York City in 2011, Lovejoy had created a dramatic gallery space with hanging audio sculptures that one could pull down in order to listen to others' narratives, as well as kiosks for submitting one's own confessions anonymously. The viewer/listener was free to explore a database of others' confessions, sorted by themes such as secrets, betrayal, and violence.

Over many years of watching her art evolve, I have been impressed by how Lovejoy's installation and performance works exemplify utopian aspirations about the self and/in the world. A primary effect of the proliferation of digital and social media can be described as isolation; and most of us do not thrive in isolation. These devices and media are, paradoxically, about separation. Our minds are separated from our bodies. We are physically separated from one another. We are, in the end, separated from the non-technological "natural" world. But Lovejoy's work literally embodies a new level, albeit temporary, of connection and relationship. She implicitly asks the viewer to reflect on what it means to be, and to be connected to others, in virtual space. Lovejoy's work highlights the question of what the self is and what it is becoming. The self does not have a center, but exists in different worlds and plays unique roles simultaneously. As far as I know, Lovejoy never called her installations materialist, but her work exists at the intersection of the material and virtual worlds.

In an interview I conducted with Lovejoy in 2005, she commented that as women artists get older, it is hard for their work to be shown if they have not been "anointed" within the art world (Haynes 175-84). Under the forces of globalization, many artists from diverse cultures are joining the art world fray. When work such as Lovejoy's is not material and saleable, the artist must depend upon websites, artists' books, and digital photographs. The question of who one's audience is and how to reach that audience is huge.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <http://rhizome.org/discuss/42617/>, accessed August 17, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> During the final months of preparing this essay for publication, I was not only unable to access the various websites that highlight Lovejoy's performances and

The digital and net art of Mark Amerika takes a less utopian and more utilitarian approach in establishing new ground rules for virtual relationships via social media. As an ethical philosophy, utilitarianism is based on the premise that the rightness or wrongness of an action or idea is determined by its usefulness in promoting the most happiness and pleasure for those involved. From this perspective our world, characterized by engagement with highly entertaining and seductive technologies, is a utilitarian paradise. A person driven by a utilitarian perspective emphasizes the practical side of this new way of life. So much information is available to us so much more easily than it used to be. We engage in research from our homes; artists create their own online communities; and curators create their own ideal museums.

Mark Amerika and his collaborators have been proactive in imagining and creating new types of net art, including the *Museum of Glitch Aesthetics*, which was initiated as part of an arts “olympiad” during the London 2012 Olympics. According to Amerika, this museum “tells the story of The Artist 2.0, an online persona whose personal mythology and body of digital artworks are rapidly being canonized into the annals of art history.”<sup>11</sup> The museum highlights the artist’s commitment to “glitch aesthetics,” an approach that online curator Margot Kittler describes as “an alternative dream world of inclusion where a utopian collective, comprised of networks of like-minded artists and intellectuals, use all available new media technologies to intervene in and/or disrupt global capitalist flows.”<sup>12</sup> The website for the museum features a rich and provocative, even humorous, combination of digital media, including photography, animation, and video, live performance and installation, electronic music and spoken word, films made with a mobile phone, 3D game design and conceptual writing.

Amerika is the author of many books, two of which address theories of new media and emerging forms of remix writing and art. He describes his writing, which cannot be separated from his digital art, as “improvisational, nomadic, surfing on the elliptical edge of its own possibility” (Amerika xvi). An artist who performs internationally, Amerika also recognizes the problem that Lovejoy describes: how to survive in a global art world. As an active cultural publisher of the Alt-X Online Network, he has been able

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installations, but also unable to reach her via email. Digital media are powerful, but also temporary and impermanent, like life itself. A 230-page book outlining her work is available at <http://www.margotlovejoy.net/>.

<sup>11</sup> Amerika’s diverse writings, net art, and video projects, including links to the Glitch Museum, are available at [markamerika.com](http://markamerika.com).

<sup>12</sup> Kittler is quoted on the home page of the Museum at [glitchmuseum.com](http://glitchmuseum.com).

to support hundreds of scholars and artists in further developing their audiences. He believes in and chooses to work within the “gift economy,” a term that was well defined by Lewis Hyde in the 1980s.<sup>13</sup> As Amerika wrote: “This means that I have gone out of my way to give away my work for free over the Net. I also try to invest my valuable time in finding ways to make the best work being developed by my peers freely available over the Net” (179). We might ask, how are new technologies reshaping individual and communal identity? Through such utilitarian aspirations and attempts to promote the wellbeing of others. Yes, the individual self has a role, but the work of digital artists such as Mark Amerika and Margot Kittler emphasizes the interdependent self in relation to material and virtual worlds.

The artist as radical ecologist may be utopian and pragmatic, but this artist has a decidedly more apocalyptic vision. To be a radical ecologist means paying attention to how all things and events are connected. It means asking if it is possible to modify individual and cultural consciousness. It does not mean articulating ironically, as performance art pioneer Rachel Rosenthal did in *filename: FUTURFAX* (1992), that “We are all waiting to die with time on our hands.” Many contemporary artists work in this arena, but I see an especially powerful example in the work of Bjorn Melhus.

Melhus premiered his installation, *Still Men Out There*, in 2003 in Frankfurt. Subsequently, it has been installed in venues including Istanbul in 2009 and Denver, Colorado, in 2011. Using 18 television monitors, it is a light and sound installation that brings dramatic attention to how cinema conditions our responses to war. Melhus presents the spectacle of war without images, however, instead using soundtracks from American commercial films such as *Platoon* (directed by Oliver Stone, 1986), the *Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998) and *We Were Soldiers* (Randall Wallace, 2002). The soundtracks include speeches and heroic soliloquys, marching troops and gunfire, as well as nostalgic moments of love. The result is a dramatic and potent statement about the consequences of war. In *Still Men Out There*, the material, aesthetic, and ethical come together seamlessly.

Listening in a darkened room at the Denver Art Museum, watching the light change as the screens flashed, I was reminded of Susan Sontag’s 2003 *Regarding the Pain of Others*. This book, written shortly before

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<sup>13</sup> The term was defined by Lewis Hyde in *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (Random House, 1983), reissued more recently with the subtitle, *Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (Vintage, 2007).

Sontag died in 2004, asks the question that Virginia Woolf posed in her 1938 *Three Guineas*: “How in your opinion are we to prevent war?” Sontag is not sanguine. Analyzing the long history of war photography, she notes that such images may give rise to calls for peace, or cries for revenge, or, sadly, bemused awareness that terrible things happen. In our era of information overload, she reminds us, the photograph may help us to apprehend something or memorize it. But it is not as simple as this, for images of war and human suffering are so ubiquitous and widely disseminated that many of us have lost the ability to feel. In our society of the spectacle, she says: “We don’t get it. We truly can’t imagine what it is like. We can’t imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is — and how normal it becomes” (Sontag 125-26). Without images and without creating a spectacle, Melhus’s *Still Men Out There* makes real the dreadful suffering and inhumanity of war. What is the relationship of actual phenomenological reality to virtual worlds? To call Melhus a radical ecologist is a way of acknowledging his creation of a material environment, using digital means, which makes an enormously effective ethical statement about the state of human relations in the physical world.

My own apocalypticism still rages. Will the contingency and fragility of life be of but fading significance if we anticipate a future in air-conditioned rooms, where all of our interactions are conducted through screens? I, for one, agree with Herbert Read, who wrote in a now obscure essay that only those serving an apprenticeship to nature should be trusted with machines (Read 357).<sup>14</sup> This exhortation may be thoroughly utopian, for who has the time to enter into such an apprenticeship? Nevertheless, matter *matters*, as theorists of the new materialism remind us.

## By Way of Conclusion

One thing should be clear by now: I am convinced that emerging artists and scholars should study theories of visual culture that have helped to define so many categories within the arts. Among contemporary theories, the new materialisms that are the subject of this book can guide us to question old assumptions and values that guide creative work. Artists in particular may be engaged by trying to understand how such social or aesthetic theories can aid them in developing and interpreting their own work. Here, I would mention the work of two emerging artists and one young scholar. Artist Amber Dawn Cobb devoted tremendous energy and time to studying Julia Kristeva’s difficult concept of the abject. Over the

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<sup>14</sup> Read’s prophetic essay was originally given as a talk at Yale University in 1946.

course of a year, this study helped her to find both a verbal language and new ways of giving form in her art to powerful formative experiences of childhood abuse and addiction. Her cognitive maps or cluster diagrams are exemplary explorations of how to link what she was learning with her creative process. The installations that emerged were challenging to look at and, for some viewers, enigmatic and nearly impossible to unpack.<sup>15</sup> Painter Andrew Williams has spoken to me about how certain aesthetic theories have been formative for him, especially Kant's discussion on the nature and perception of beauty, and Bakhtin's statement that art-for-life's-sake is preferable to art-for-art's sake. "I more clearly see my place within a post-post-modern art establishment that is as fragmented as Duchamp's *Bride Stripped Bare*. It is an art world that seems to revel in esoterica and originality at the expense of genuine human experience. In spite of an overall relativism, lines are still drawn in the sand, loyalties stated, deals struck."<sup>16</sup> His clear view of the politics of the museum-gallery system resonates with what I noted earlier.

Scholar Katherine Morrison is grappling with other issues I have mentioned: "We can talk all day (and this isn't necessarily a bad thing) about aesthetics, postmodern theory, semiotics... but all the while, marginalized people around the world are creating art that speaks to their very real, immediate struggle. It would be critical hubris to elide the identity politics driving these works."<sup>17</sup> She sees visual culture studies as potentially fruitful for overcoming the limitations of contemporary art historical practices.

I understand Katherine's enthusiasm. The forces of globalization present opportunities for encounters with radically diverse concepts and applications of theory, but there are also dangers here related to the consumer ethos. Teaching theory, and especially the new materialisms, we must address diverse cultures outside of Europe and North America, including the Middle East and across the African and Asian continents. But whose theory will aid us? This is certainly challenging for those of us steeped in European-based philosophy, aesthetics, and theory, but it is not impossible. I, for one, have chosen to engage deeply with traditions in central Africa, India, and the Himalayas — with the greatest possible sensitivity to the material and theoretical norms and values of those cultures.

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<sup>15</sup> Cobb's work can be seen at [www.amberdawncoobb.com](http://www.amberdawncoobb.com).

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication, December 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Personal communication, December 2012.

This essay is based on the central conviction that the new materialist theories must be especially attentive to individual and cultural difference, to the uniqueness, particularity, or specificity of both the theorist and that which is theorized. Further, our theories should be united with pragmatic strategies for action in the world. Thus, to paraphrase writer bell hooks, the broad purpose of studying and understanding theory is to provide a structure of analysis that synthesizes what is most visionary in contemporary discourse with strategies of resistance that aid us in our struggles for personal, social, and artistic liberation (Hooks 35). In order to do this, theories should be written and presented in ways that are accessible to all, including those without privileged educations. There is certainly a place for theory that uses convoluted technical language, yet only if it is accessible can the new materialisms become the groundwork for creative work and, in the future, for social change.

All of us who are developing and traversing the terrain of art history, the visual arts, and visual studies should be conversant with the history of philosophy and with contemporary theory. I have tried to show here some of the possibilities for thinking about new materialist theories in relation to the arts and visual culture. Their interpretive power lies in the ways that materialisms may help us to overcome the dualisms of mind and body, self and other, nature and the human world.

## **Final Words**

I began this essay with a conundrum that is ultimately unsolvable: I remain committed to theory, even as I experience profound fatigue with its commoditization. I end it with a few words from Mikhail Bakhtin. At the 1995 Bakhtin Centennial Conference in Moscow, Russia, I had the good fortune to be part of a large audience that heard, for the first time, the recording of an interview made by Victor Duvakin in early 1973, when the ailing Bakhtin was 78 years old. Sitting in a large auditorium at Moscow State Pedagogical University, we were privileged to hear the final minutes of the final session of Duvakin's 18 hours of recordings, during which Bakhtin recited verses from Goethe, Rilke, Pushkin, and Baudelaire. His last words bespeak the humility that characterized Bakhtin's presence and personal style: "Excuse me for having been so incoherent all this time" (Emerson 33). May we cultivate such modesty in our own theory construction.