

EVERYTHING YOU'VE HEARD IS TRUE.

EDITORS

Speculative Realism is a young branch of philosophy (the term was only coined in 2007) with a rather paradoxical goal: its metaphysicists hope to break free from the anthropocentric prison constricting our perceptions of reality. The apparent paradox is that SR aims to destroy for humanity the limitations of *being-as-humanity*.

To do this, SR uses a tactic of shock and awe: it first dares us to accept what science says about the vast timescale of the universe (which in its relative infinity exposes all human existence as insignificant and arguably meaningless). SR inculcates the same sense of vertigo as the Eames' *Powers of Ten*, but it also heightens our awareness of things around us, and prepares us to recognise that objects in the world enjoy the same status of being as ourselves. This is the zen-like aspect of its awe campaign: Speculative Realism rejects the notion that we can never know absolute reality (and that all we perceive of objects are subjective sensory data bundles) and it has several promising lines of inquiry to back this up (including, but not limited to, the holistic simultaneity of *Object-Oriented Ontology*, also known as OOO).

Speculative Realism is not deontological. And importantly, the word "speculative" should not be misunderstood as in any way narrative: it refers to the philosophical endeavour of reconciling scientific realism with evolutionary epistemology. Speculative Realism aims to deprecate the human "world" to a measure of being, not the centre of being.

This is not the realm of fantastic fictions and alternative realities. Speculative Realism means just that, the possibility of accessing external reality (it could equally comfortably be labelled *Neo-Realism*). Accordingly, it is not automatically related to the near-future "speculative" projects we've seen in recent years. Although it would be completely opposed to phenomenological architecture (since it has little interest in sensory response) and its pursuit of *object-being* means it doesn't support a minimalist materiality.

Since the new decade began (which we paradigmatically date as September 2007), new theories of architecture have abounded.

This sudden proliferation of ideas is not unique to our field: in science (especially astrophysics and chemistry), philosophy, art, politics, economics and technology, new developments and discoveries are destabilising established doctrine and overturning the *commonplace*.

With a certain economic predictability, architects are trying to reassert some sense of cohesion in the discipline, by proposing various degrees of unified and absolute theory.

"Architecture is now radically postmodern", we hear. It's a neo-Marxist political agent against neoliberal ideologies; it's a collaborative and localised social project (hands on craftsmanship); it's a territorial manifestation of political conflict; it's the infrastructure of systems logistics. Architecture will build space elevators, and terraform Mars, and so on...

The wonderful thing about architecture is that all these theories are simultaneously possible.

Everything you've ever heard about architecture is true.

The paradox of architecture is that, for a domain without limit or ambition, which aspires to design the fork and the weather, it remains sadly locked — as Robin Mackay puts it: architecture is myopic.

Any attempt at the meta-contextualisation of architecture is always derided as utopian, precisely because of its inability to overcome the original premise of architecture as a socially functional *sui generis*. Even more adventurous theories, like Schumacher's *autopoiesis of architecture*, which elevate the field, nonetheless remain constrained within the framework of human endeavour: that is, they are still unable to speak about the ontological status of architecture, only its perception and reception by society. The phenomenal potential of architecture in this period of flux precisely rests on its ultimate capacity to circumvent its own discipline.

THRESHOLD BRUNSWICK

The image on the reverse of this page, titled *Threshold Brunswick (In Magnolia) (2002/2012)*, was taken at the Brunswick Centre, London, in 2002 by British artist Becky Beasley.

It captures the moment just prior to the refurbishment of the derelict social housing block, when it was privatised and painted "magnolia cream" (a visual reference to the entablature of the quarter's Georgian terraces). The image depicts a homeless person's temporary shelter embedded in a doorway.

Unique silver gelatin photograph (plus artist's proof), 2004. 109x148cm. Collection: Eric Franck. Image courtesy the artist and Laura Bartlett Gallery.

Becky Beasley is an artist working primarily with photography and sculpture. Her current solo show at the Tate Britain is *The Outside*.

Jack Self edits the free weekly publication *Fulcrum* at the AA in London. Graphics by Graham Baldwin.

THE EXPERIENCE OF OBJECTS.

IAN BOGOST

Here are two new principles: everything whatsoever is an *alien* to everything else. And the experience of *being* something else can never be verified or validated, but only speculated, even if deduction might drive that speculation.

We usually understand *alien* either in a political or a cosmological sense: a terrestrial alien is a foreigner from another country, and an extraterrestrial alien is a foreigner from another planet. Whether from another nation or another galaxy, the other is someone we can *recognise* as enough like ourselves to warrant identification.

But why should we be so selective, so self-centred as to think that aliens are those beings whose intelligence we might recognise as intelligence? As Nicholas Rescher has observed, a true alien might not have intelligence akin to ours. So, rather than wondering if alien beings exist in the cosmos, let's assume that they are all around us, everywhere, at all scales: not just penguins and magnolia trees, but also cornbread and polyester. Then we can ask a different question: what do objects *experience*? What is it like to be a thing?

I came to this question by accident. Several years ago, I learned how to program the 1977 Atari Video Computer System, the console that made home videogame play popular. I was working on a book about the relationship between the hardware design of the Atari and the creative practices its designers and programmers invented in those early days of the videogame.

In order to produce television graphics and sound on the cheap, Atari designed a custom chip called the Television Interface Adapter (TIA). The TIA made bizarre demands: instead of drawing a screen's worth of television picture all at once, its programmer had to alter data the TIA transmitted in tandem with the scanline-by-scanline movement of the television's electron beam. Programming the Atari feels more like plowing a field than like painting a picture.

I thought I was concerned with the Atari's role in *human* culture: how computer hardware influenced game design and aesthetics. But I felt enchanted by the system's parts as much as its output. The Atari was made by people in order to entertain other people, and in that sense it's just a machine. But a machine and its components are also something more, something alive, almost. I found myself asking, what is it like to be an Atari, or a Television Interface Adapter, or a cathode ray tube television?

Such a question may seem daft. But is it really so strange to ponder the "experience" of objects, even while knowing that those objects don't really have experiences like you and I do? To be fascinated with the things in the world, from peaches to microprocessors, and to embrace such fascination not just as engineers, but as philosophers too? To do so, we must culture a new alliance between science and philosophy grounded in speculation.

Since the Enlightenment, human culture has spread in two directions. Science broke down the physical world into smaller and smaller bits in order to understand it. Meanwhile, philosophy concluded that reason could not explain the objects of experience but only describe experience itself. Nevertheless, science and philosophy have ultimately agreed that humanity is the ruler of being. Even among proponents of science for sustainability, the beneficiary is always *us*. And among the liberal arts, meaning arises only by straining reality through the sieve of culture.

Instead, what if we took all things as equal? Not equal in nature or use or value, but equal in their mere existence? If ontology is the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of being, then we need a *flat ontology*, an account of existence that holds nothing to be intrinsically more or less extant than anything else.

The philosopher Thomas Nagel famously pondered what it is like to be a bat, concluding that the creature's experience could not be reduced to a description of its method of echolocation. Despite our obsession with scientific observation and verification, the *experience* of alien objects cannot be explained through experimentation.

The same is true of everything — not just bats and dolphins, but neutrinos and Ataris. Once everything is on the ontological table, our human choices become more complex. The world is not just ours, nor is it just for us. Being is for microprocessors or petrol derricks as much as for kittens or bamboo.

A new humility emerges from this metaphysics, one that embraces science and humanism while acknowledging the limits of both. Instead of a world of knowledge or progress or justice, imagine a world in which everything possesses as rich and fascinating an existence as anything else. Characterising that existence requires a new breed of philosopher-engineer-poets who observe the operation of things while recognising that any description of their experience always remains metaphorical.

Ian Bogost is a video game designer, and philosopher. He is cofounder of *Persuasive Games*, and a proponent of *Object-Oriented Ontology*.

ECOSYSTEMS AND CORRELATION.

ROBIN MACKAY

Architecture is a *de facto* regional (limited) field of knowledge which, however, aspires to approach its project in a way not simply determined by the continual transformation of inherited forms and traditions, but which draws on a universal account of matter as information, an account enabled by computation.

It therefore wishes to access a real beyond its regional ontology, within which its projects and procedures have always been implicated, but hitherto were conceived and utilised in terms over-determined by its local exigencies and intentions.

A new generation of thinkers known, for better or worse, as 'speculative realists', have proposed various strategies for overcoming the obstacles to a realism that had formed the mainstay of 20th century philosophy, and which were also present in the form of an institutional exhaustion, an 'end of philosophy', an end to speculative thought.

According to Kant, we only have access to phenomena; reality as we know it is our consciousness taking up something outside itself and synthesising it in a certain way. Kant's is a philosophy of finitude; it seeks to identify the *limits* of our thought.

It is thus also a philosophy of form and matter: the matter of sensation is subject to a synthetic formation belonging to thought (for Kant, the spatiotemporal forms of intuition). Knowledge of reality as conceived by classical philosophical rationalism is impossible, because we no longer have any knowledge of the relation between object as phenomena and possible object in itself: every object is correlated to a subject. This is what has been dubbed, by Quentin Meillassoux, 'correlationism'.

Disturbed by the threat of skepticism, Kant invented a new type of thought: the transcendental — a thought that transcends, not the reality of the objects we experience, but the conditions under which they must appear to us. This tendency describes the problems of the real, of matter and of nature, as problems of access.

Our relation to phenomena is *intentional*, we are not abstract seats of consciousness passively receiving experiences as abstracted temporal-spatial objects. Our life-world is primary: our projects and relation to them, which is strictly correlated to ourselves as a particular type of being-there (Dasein). Even the division between object and subject is not as primary as it seems, because all experience is bound up with ourselves as subjects. This exacerbates correlationism: our knowledge is finite, and its limits are those of the

human world.

The aspiration here is to harness a materiality uncorrelated to dwelling or beauty. To articulate this movement as 'ecology' may well be an oxymoron, or worse, because the nature of such an ecology would consist in surpassing not only the exigencies of human 'worlding', but also the ordered realm of the terrestrial organic kingdom, and even its chemical basis: we are after all talking about a highly abstracted nature approached by mathematical or algorithmic means, freed from the happenstances of terrestrial history, and surpassing the limited range of phenomena human evolution has conditioned us to manifest.

It is above all scientific method and computation that produces a new speculative image of matter that exceeds our spontaneous relation to nature. These systems reveal to us things that fall outside any traditional concepts of nature or matter — we could point to the contemporary relationship between biology and computation, which indicates a reconfiguration of our conception of 'life' (as a data structure rather than a substantial form).

Like economics, which has also turned to paradigms drawn from physics ('performance'), architecture is involved in a similar experimentation as it tries to navigate out from its myopia as a regional practice to universal conditions of materiality that could underpin new practices and possibilities.

We must be careful not to mistake the multifarious symptoms of our encounter with the contingencies of matter with a rigorous thinking (out) of our place in the universe. What especially needs to be guarded against, or at least acknowledged, is that this project often becomes artificially welded to other, local projects.

This may be one of the imminent dangers of parametricism, for example. It proposes an unapologetically grand project in which architecture takes its place within a complex, multiversal ecosystem. But there is a slippage between its charting of the informational possibilities opened up by computation and the perceived exigency of becoming equal to the demands of a 'post-fordist' society. The danger here is that one ends up conflating the infinite possibilities of the concept of nature extended beyond human/terrestrial contingencies with the servicing of a very local and particular social formation: a concept of human/terrestrial contingencies as nature, where a historical predicament — or its ideological self-representation — becomes naturalised.

Robin Mackay is a philosopher and director of UK arts group *Urbanomic*. His journal *Collapse* has been integral to SR's dissemination.

