

# ***THIS MESS WE'RE IN***

## **Speculation and Materiality in Contemporary Art**

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# Abstract

*“The most merciful thing in the world, I think is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of the black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far.”*

- Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu*

We live in a time of anxiety; trouble lurks at every turn. Under the ongoing shadow of biological insecurity we are constantly brought face-to-face with the real or speculative extinction of humankind. *What's the Matter* plays with psychic discomfort and damaged and shattered imagery, it invites the viewer to experience instability; exploring the materials of a flawed humanity. Each component of the installation offers its own journey, history and vital force - deeper realities lie concealed beneath their perceivable surfaces. Wrecked, burnt and decaying manufactured materials carry qualities of obsolescence, they are freed from functionality and the empty promises of human technology and instead suggest the possibility of a dark vitality propelling us forward. *What's The Matter* lauds a species heading for certain doom, the debased euphoria of obliteration. A fleeting gasp of planetary breath and lick to taste the char.

Throughout the course of my Master's research I have come to see more and more the connection between art and philosophy. Contemporary art has the capacity to explore its own nonsensical condition through engagement with philosophy, we can turn to art for revelation, to interrogate the real through poetic artifice. Both art and philosophy can be viewed as types of cognisance that aren't direct forms of knowledge. Knowledge, like truth and reality, being a concept that is always an imperfect translation of its object. I believe that art can open experience to the unknowable uniqueness of the real and through metaphor point us towards the depth of things, despite the fact that we can never truly encounter this depth directly. In a sort of Meno's paradox,<sup>1</sup> there can be no grand, cosmic scheme because we are unequipped to perceive it, however, artists can act as LIDAR capturing matter energy flows external to formal reasoning and reflect them back at us. My research process began with Nietzsche's nihilistic despair, purposelessness and love of destruction and following the path of Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage and metallurgy work I soon found myself in the realms of speculative realism. Along this journey I have discovered artists whose work may not intentionally intend to illustrate a philosophical standpoint such as I propose, but whose positions seem strengthened in my opinion by an alignment with these modes of thought. Each of the four artists under discussion has experience across different ranges of media and scale in their practice. There is a tendency for each artist to draw elements away from traditional fine art media, subtly repositioning the way their 'messages' can be transmitted; the material is very important. The medium is the message.<sup>2</sup> Recent philosophers whose work have resonated for me are: David Peak and his views on horror and speculative annihilation, Ben Woodard and his brand of dark vitalism, Jane Bennett's vitality of materials, and Graham Harman's object oriented ontology. Both art and philosophy strike me as possible vehicles to examine what lies beyond, to draw aside the curtain of human language and consciousness, to speculate on the possibilities of the real and unreal. First I intend to discuss the categories above - consciousness and language and how they act as limiting devices. Following that I will attempt to operationalise some of the highly abstract modern theories found in speculative realism listed above and how these concepts are connected to my thinking and ontology of art.

The riddle of consciousness is a key topic in contemporary philosophy of mind. Does consciousness have a role to play in the evolutionary process? Nietzsche said "To what end does consciousness exist at all when it is basically superfluous?"<sup>3</sup> For him, perception refers not to an external reality of 'things' but the stimulation of nervous impulses which produce an 'image' of reality. Metaphor in a basic sense, as a method of transferring information or impulse from one experiential sphere to another - became a paramount consideration for Nietzsche<sup>4</sup> and it has been interesting to see the theme of metaphor arise again and again throughout my research process.

Nietzsche was influenced by the pre-Socratic philosophies of Heraclitus who is generally agreed to be the father of process philosophy. Rather than viewing the building blocks of life as 'things' (material bodies occupying places in space and time) Nietzsche set out to present a continuous spectrum of what exists and occurs, as events or processes. Consciousness,

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<sup>1</sup> Galbraith and Leonard eds.174

<sup>2</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, part 1 chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> Gunter Abel, Nietzsche, Consciousness, Language and Nature. *The University of Oxford*, podcast audio. December 22, 2009, <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/consciousness-language-and-nature-nietzsches-philosophy-mind-and-nature>.

<sup>4</sup> Emden, *Nietzsche on Language, Consciousness and the Body*, 105-106.

awareness and all mental states are the result of complex, multifarious interactions. He is backed up by current research which shows that processes such as imagining, learning and remembering do not occur in localised areas of the brain but are the result of dynamic neural assemblies.<sup>5</sup> Because perception and awareness are the result of the metaphoric processes of interpretation of sensory inputs, what enters into consciousness is continuously revised and edited (determined by process), so only a limited portion of reality can be represented. It is true, there is a difference between how things appear to us and what they are in an objective way. For example a crystal may appear solid and homogenous to us but physicists tell us it is a grid of atoms that consists largely of empty space. Viewed this way, consciousness is a device to assist us to understand and exert control on the world around us. We create 'reality' through our consciousness and thus are convinced that whatever we experience is life, that what we see and how we see it is the truth. A life built of illusions.<sup>6</sup> For Nietzsche, consciousness, awareness and ultimately language arose in tandem, principally owing to the need for individual human beings to communicate with others to make themselves quickly and precisely understood. A method of social interaction which soon developed into an organisation and stabilising of social systems. Language is based on the sensory input of signs and signals which act as the starting point for metaphoric interpretation. I mean language in a broad sense - including non-verbal language such as gesture and touch. So it makes sense that Nietzsche felt we can only think in linguistic form. He describes self awareness as the "result of our immersion in language, of the metaphorical operations drawing different mental images into one, and of the physiological processes of the brain".<sup>7</sup> However, consciousness seems to only constitute a small portion of what humans are and ultimately turns out to be something superficial, resting on the broader and more multifarious world of the organic. In fact consciousness and language could be viewed as human limiters that prevent us from accessing a full experience of the world-in-itself.

The conundrum here is to question how humans might begin to venture beyond linguistic and conscious limits. Propositional approaches (thinking in terms of beliefs, desires, fears and so forth) must surely only account for a small percentage, maybe 2-3%, of human cognition, therefore it stands to reason that the remaining 97-98% is outside conscious thought and doesn't rely on the structures and forms of language.<sup>8</sup> The visual sense is the one most closely related to the creation of language, "once our senses are exposed to images, our imagination will automatically envision a future of those images"<sup>9</sup> i.e. the image prefaces the generation of language; language is formed primarily through visual signs. Art becomes a useful tool to access areas of perception, thought and feeling, sensations that otherwise remain inaccessible to us, communicating a kind of thinking without language. An artwork can act as an object of knowledge, offering us a possible freedom from the protective casing of consensual reality, to realise that our words are 'only words'.

Ortega sums it up nicely:

"Imagine the importance of a language or system of expressive signs whose function was not to tell us about things but to present them to us in the act of executing

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<sup>5</sup> Gunter Abel, Nietzsche, Consciousness, Language and Nature. *The University of Oxford*, podcast audio. December 22, 2009, <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/consciousness-language-and-nature-nietzsches-philosophy-mind-and-nature>.

<sup>6</sup> Peak, *The Spectacle of the Void*, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Emden, *Nietzsche on Language, Consciousness and the Body*, 116.

<sup>8</sup> Churchland, "Demons Get Out!" 209.

<sup>9</sup> Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 17.

themselves. Art is just such a language; this is what art does. The esthetic object is inwardness as such - it is each thing as 'I'."<sup>10</sup>

Speculative realist Eugene Thacker describes three worlds: the 'world-for-us' which humanity is able to comprehend, the 'world-in-itself' which is inaccessible to us and the 'world-without-us', the world of speculation from which the human is subtracted.<sup>11</sup>

Speculative realism aims to go beyond the idea that humans cannot exist without the world, nor the world without humans<sup>12</sup>. In his book *After Finitude* Quentin Meillassoux<sup>13</sup> termed all post-Kantian philosophy 'correlationism', meaning that there must be a connection between thought, and what is thought about, to presume that the conditions of experience are adequate to determine the material conditions of reality.<sup>14</sup> An "idea according to which we only ever have access to the relationship between thinking and being and never to either term apart from each other."<sup>15</sup> As soon as you think you're outside of the correlation between thinking and being, you've thought about it and therefore you're back in the correlationist circle. Speculative realism (SR), also variously termed speculative materialism or weird materialism, aims to move clear of the correlationist circle and make the leap from idealism to realism. As unmediated access to the quintessence of reality is not available to us (to try and access it is mere speculation) speculative realism aims to return to metaphysics and address questions about absolute reality in a post critical way. It also throws the idea of perception wide open - if reasoning only operates as a necessity for human understanding of the world, when we imagine the world devoid of human reasoning we are speculating on complex realities of the world external to our limited consciousness.

SR sprang from a workshop at Goldsmiths University in London in 2007 and soon after burgeoned and split into many factions, each pursuing different methods to move beyond correlationism. Although its divisiveness has led some to label it nothing more than an internet blog sensation, to my mind there are impelling insights and questions to be addressed via the SR mechanism, particularly how we might use philosophical thought to examine art's essence beyond a physical condition, as I will discuss further in this essay. After all one person's 'online orgy of stupidity'<sup>16</sup> is another's *raison d'être*.

How do we sever our mental capacity from the reality of the cosmos? As Graham Harman says in *The Well-Wrought Iron Hammer*, "the speculative realists have all pursued reality as something far weirder than realists had ever guessed".<sup>17</sup> As discussed above SR intends to free us from the pro-human perspective from which we view the world, undermining the anthropocentricity of this correlation and allowing weirdness and to some extent, horror, to intervene. This may seem a departure but horror often examines the unknown or what lies

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<sup>10</sup> Ortega, "An Essay in Esthetics by Way of a Preface," 138-9.

<sup>11</sup> Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*, 4-5.

<sup>12</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.

<sup>13</sup> Quentin Meillassoux is recognised as one of the four key proponents of speculative realism along with Ray Brassier, Graham Harman and Iain Hamilton Grant.

<sup>14</sup> Brassier, *Concepts and Objects*, 63.

<sup>15</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Brassier, "I am a Nihilist Because I Still Believe in Truth."

<sup>17</sup> Harman, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism," 184.

outside human understanding;<sup>18</sup> it recognises that the human capacity for reason does not save us from the ultimate doleful end of all organisms, death. In horror and SR alike, dread of the traumatic idea of a humanless future is no longer sidestepped.

#### Speculative Annihilation and Teresa Margolles:

Taking Nietzsche's view of consciousness and language as a multi-track, interpretive process it now appears questionable whether anything at all can be described in literal terms. In his exploration of horror and the unreal *The Spectacle of the Void*, David Peak suggests that, "It's difficult to argue that anything more significant, more destructive than language has ever been, or possibly could be, inflicted upon the human race."<sup>19</sup> Peak recognises that reality itself is not linguistically structured and that an inability to truly communicate despite possessing consciousness and linguistic abilities, is the fundamental problem of human existence<sup>20</sup>, "our dilemma is that we believe something needs to be communicated yet are unable to use language to express it". Language always falls short of our expressive needs, which in turn creates the 'cosmic paralysis' of humanity<sup>21</sup>. Imprisoned as it seems we are by our limited comprehension of the universe and our inability to communicate the strangeness of the world, for Peak this now creates the horror reality in which humanity finds itself. "Take comfort in meaning all you'd like; believe that your language connects you to others in meaningful ways - it will always be overshadowed by the horrific implications of speculation."<sup>22</sup>

As Nietzsche describes in *The Birth of Tragedy*, when we view horror we think "I'm glad it's not me" so we can find comfort in the knowledge that this time it isn't me<sup>23</sup> and set aside for a moment the deep-seated, potentially calamitous understanding that at some point it will be me. In this regard, *The Birth of Tragedy* describes why we're drawn to representations of violence, suffering and horror. The view of the inevitable worst to come can provide temporary gratification. Nietzsche and Peak come to the conclusion that the "transcendence offered by such sights is capable of affirming the spirit of man."<sup>24</sup>

*The Spectacle of the Void* takes a speculative realist approach to the abject, that repressed part of ourselves that disturbs identity and order.<sup>25</sup> Peak coins the term speculative annihilation, which references a reflection on the meaninglessness of 'life' in the universe and the unthinkable thought of humankind's inevitable extinction. By constantly suppressing our fear of death, the unimaginable image of the world without-without-us is as fundamental to our creation of selfhood as the world we experience; as much a cultural construct as a scientific one. Speculative annihilation explores that which lies beyond the world/thought correlation, it never denies that we try to conceive of a world that exists in and of itself, but just that we can't escape our reliance on consciousness and language. For Peak the ideas

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<sup>18</sup> Peak, *The Spectacle of the Void*, 82.

<sup>19</sup> Peak, 95.

<sup>20</sup> Peak, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Peak, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Peak, 85-86.

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, 26.

<sup>24</sup> Peak, *The Spectacle of the Void*, 37.

<sup>25</sup> See Fillary, "Dirt" for more detail.

postulated by SR create an inescapable sensation of horror - the idea that we may be freed from the moorings of our corporeal humanness and associated consciousness, and thrust into a world of “unrecognisable signs and the unknowable shadows”.<sup>26</sup> Thinking along these lines assists us to imagine the idea of horror beyond description, to explore what lies beyond the world/mind correlation in “a whole bestiary of impossible life forms...”<sup>27</sup> Horror can be seen to provide a platform of speculation beyond our own limitations as a species, to subdue the anxiety of our failure to communicate, and to try to apprehend an uncoupling of being from thought. If we accept death as an inevitability, what happens to our thought processes, actions and culture as a whole?

At first glance Teresa Margolles' works appear as minimalist sculptures but they are in fact more like gruesome palimpsests of death. The work thrusts one deep into the heart of the horror, losing the security of a distanced viewpoint. When viewing such images of death and decay we are willingly and unwillingly drawn in. Contemporary art is an impression of our age and its troubles and Margolles presents the social and individual construction of death and the violence of Mexican drug trafficking as index and evidence. She examines the materiality of death and the institutional treatment of corpses, mapping the brutality of Mexican social experience.

Margolles was a member of artist collective and death metal band SEMEFO who set out to investigate the “life of the corpse”. The group used extreme horror as a macabre cognate for shared anxieties, seeming to revel in abjection.<sup>28</sup> In many ways capitalism seems to have fallen out of step with humanity<sup>29</sup> and SEMEFO presented a nihilistic backlash against the propaganda of a homogeneous modernity, submitting the reality of their social experience as an array of struggles and disasters. Like Heidegger's hammer metaphor<sup>30</sup>, when things start to break down, including social processes, we become aware of them and capitalism is no exception. It has become an unbalanced experience and Margolles presents an exploration of its outer limits. In Margolles' hands the modern illusion of progress and homogeneity is shattered by absolute horror - our limits are exposed. “The cyclical mass destruction of humans is an experience that marks the pulsations of contemporary political space.”<sup>31</sup> Through multilayered exploration; cleaning the floors with blood of the murdered, blood-soaked fabric embroidered in gold thread, jewellery created from shattered windscreens behind which people were shot and dirt imbued fabric used to clean execution sites, horror functions as a social commentary, braving the relation of capitalism to violence. Margolles illustrates the capitalist production and regulation of death.<sup>32</sup> Using the morgue as her studio

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<sup>26</sup> Peak, *The Spectacle of the Void*, 22.

<sup>27</sup> Thacker, *In The Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy vol 1*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Cuauhtémoc ed. *Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?* 17.

<sup>29</sup> Cuauhtémoc, 16.

<sup>30</sup> According to Graham Harman in “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object Oriented Literary Criticism,” 187, a tool is always “hidden from the mind” as one is generally focussed on the project at hand. When the tool breaks its sensual qualities begin to become accessible and the inscrutable reality of the “hammer-being” can be alluded to.

<sup>31</sup> Cuauhtémoc, 140.

<sup>32</sup> Cuauhtémoc, 140.

Margolles both disrupts the apparition of legal apparatus and contaminates the contemporary art world with horror.<sup>33</sup>

The body itself incarcerates our consciousness and is able to conceive of but never fully understand anything beyond. “The body gathers the qualities of things in the world, and the perceptible world therefore exists as a relation. Without the body, there are no such sensations of tastes, smell, sound, and sight”<sup>34</sup> Images of horror too are ultimately grounded in the consciousness of the body and Margolles’ use of corporeal substances such as fats expelled by cadaver processing techniques and recycled water from cleaning rites of the mortuary allow for a symbolic pollution, bringing her audiences face-to-face with the reality of death. Bringing the spectre of death beyond the confines of the mortuary and using social waste products such as the blood, dirt, glass, stains and fragments that remain in public spaces after the police and forensic technicians have finished with a crime scene, Margolles investigates how the violence of the drugs business steeps the physical and symbolic spaces of the public arena in death. Defined as “abject architecture” by Sergio González Rodríguez.<sup>35</sup> The murdered gangster is transformed from a human of “potentials, flaws, neuroses and lights”<sup>36</sup> and is reduced to formless remains, to base (gross) materiality - the fate that all humanity will eventually suffer. Margolles brings it right up to us, there’s nowhere to hide from this phantom of speculative annihilation. What the viewer of her work experiences is a correlation of the work with the unthinkable, the ungraspable inevitability of the end, a sight glimpsed of the beyond a “perforation in the fabric of reality.”<sup>37</sup> Margolles plumbs the depths of terror to impart new knowledge of the world- without-us and opens us to what Peak identifies as The Spectacle; “The insatiable need to view the suffering of others ... we all feel the need to look at the same time as go beyond mere looking”.<sup>38</sup>

Dark Vitalism and Marianne Vitale:

Dark vitalist Ben Woodard explores the material implications of speculative realism in his book *Slime Dynamics* and asks “what about life makes it life?”.<sup>39</sup> In his mutated metaphysical construct, vitalism must be more than an imaginary force propelling life forward that is not able to be reduced to or explained by its individual components. His theory rests on the oppositional forces of time and space. Organisms endeavour to extend their ‘aliveness’ across space through growth, mutation and reproduction and likewise through time, which, of course incorporates all birth and death, the ‘temporal-spatial construction of existence of life’.<sup>40</sup> Woodard embraces the likelihood that rather than following an evolutionary pattern leading us closer to eventual perfection, human creation was in fact, nothing more than a series of accidental coincidences, that we are random conglomerates of

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<sup>33</sup> Cuauhtémoc, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Wook Lee, “Thing Thinks.”

<sup>35</sup> González Rodríguez, *El hombre sin cabeza*, 161.

<sup>36</sup> Cuauhtémoc ed. *Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?* 26.

<sup>37</sup> Peak, *The Spectacle of the Void*, 58-59.

<sup>38</sup> Peak, 39.

<sup>39</sup> Woodard, *Slime Dynamics*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Woodard, 2.

elements and consciousness is simply a fluke of strong emergence which allowed these elements to briefly become more than a sum of their parts. <sup>41</sup>

“Humans, like any other polyp of living matter, are nothing but heaps of slime slapped together and shaped by the accidents of time and the contact of space. The fact that we have evolved self-consciousness should not guarantee or maintain meaning”. <sup>42</sup>

Despite having crawled from pools of primordial goop, we hold tight to the illusion of a separation from the gross and dirty materiality of human life and “in an effort to dominate and deny this reality, humankind has created firm structures of all types to which we rigorously cling.”<sup>43</sup> When the base materiality of humanness is illuminated, although our position at the top of the food chain is destabilised and we cease to be masters of our own house. The door is now opened to follow the process-dominated philosophies of Heraclitus and Nietzsche. “The production of life requires decay and a clearing away of the biosphere space to make room for new species...The stench of death is also the stench of fertilisation, of a turning over in the churning teeth of nature.” <sup>44</sup> Aesthetically it is possible to focus on the possibility of a vitality in materials, the playing field between human “life” and all other objects becomes levelled. As discussed above, anthropocentric, system-oriented theory has had its day and no longer affords philosophically interesting inquiry. The darkness of Woodard's vitalism rests on a viewpoint in which the universe may well be inhospitable or even malign, “it spells bad news for the human race in terms of our origin...our meaning... and our ultimate fate”.<sup>45</sup> It is also dark on an aesthetic and experiential plane, implying a darkness of our perception of existence given the harshness of time and space<sup>46</sup>. As humanity shifts away from a spiritual existence heading for benevolent enlightenment and into a material one of decay and entropy and the sublime indifference of the universe, the world descends into the horrific, radically empty void, but from this radiates endless philosophical, aesthetic and metaphoric possibility. Humans translate the world into a reductive sequence of fixed objects, we tend to understand reality as space and the dimensions of what fills that space.<sup>47</sup> Matter has a solidity and time a direction<sup>48</sup>, but when this logic is disrupted, a type of creative chaos ensues.

Marianne Vitale likens her process to that of a healthy “mental disorder” and whilst she doesn't spell out any loyalty to speculative realism she does echo Woodard's sentiments. “My studio is a lab of disobedience. It involves creation, obliteration and purification. There is the onslaught of time acting upon material”.<sup>49</sup> Vitale's burned bridges, creations of oxidised metal and neglected collections of humanity's ephemera reflect the burden of humankind upon the earth and a reverberation of Heraclitus' theories of process. Her work interposes ideas of our fate as an endangered humanity with the matter from which those ideas

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<sup>41</sup> Woodard, 65-66.

<sup>42</sup> Woodard, 21.

<sup>43</sup> Fillary, “Dirt”.

<sup>44</sup> Woodard, 36.

<sup>45</sup> Woodard, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Woodard, 11.

<sup>47</sup> Peak, *The Spectacle of the Void*, 32.

<sup>48</sup> Peak, 31.

<sup>49</sup> Vitale, “Marianne Vitale on Philosophical Decay and The Sweet Life”.

emanate; material disturbed from its former authority, utility unvoiced - familiar yet alien. The natural decomposition of Vitale's materials present a vitiation of any orderly conceptualisation, the work thrusts us into a state of emergency, invoking a culture desperate for regeneration and renewal of life. She aptly illustrates the fact that in spite of our deleterious treatment of the earth, life will continue unfolding, consuming and assimilating the materials we use to shape our version of the world. Rather than fleeing our possible fate, Vitale gets right up in its grill and juxtaposes our grandiose histories with the biological and physical constraints of our darkened downfall, she articulates the debased euphoria of obliteration, a celebration of living in a world described by Woodard as "always a being-towards-extinction."<sup>50</sup> Despite the urgency of climate change, global pandemics, famine and wars, for first-world citizens these imminent threats remain largely abstract.<sup>51</sup> Vitale's work goes beyond the mere act of witnessing the horrific downfall of humanity, the act of correlation, and ventures bravely into the speculative unknown - the larger sense of a searching weirdness, life and vitalism, eradicating any lingering sense of self.

#### Vital Materialism and Hany Armanious:

Jane Bennett attempts to displace the human subject and overcome correlationism through her theories of vital materialism.<sup>52</sup> I would consider her a fellow traveller of Woodard's in discussions of a spatio-temporal vitalism. Bennett suggests that "sometimes a life is experienced less as beatitude and more as terror, less as the plenitude of the virtual and more as a radically meaningless void". She expresses 'life' as "a quivering protoblob of creative élan"<sup>53</sup> and invokes a sort of theory of relativity in relation to aliveness and what appear as fixed, stable bodies. She takes Woodard's theory up a notch by articulating "the idea of a materiality that is itself heterogeneous... itself a life" with no point of inactivity, atoms being aquiver with vitality.<sup>54</sup> Bennett proposes the idea that matter is loaded with energy with potential for a morphogenesis, objects are mobile, amalgams of materials "whose rate of speed and change are *slow* compared to the duration and velocity of the human bodies participating in and perceiving them".<sup>55</sup> In other words, do apparently stable objects simply experience aliveness on a different spatio-temporal frame to humanity that we are too limited to comprehend? Although in terms of reductive human discernment a 'material' represents a reliable solidity, the world a series of fixed objects, could material possess a type of vitality? Could something as seemingly passive and inert as metal be animated? I briefly touched on the microstructure of crystals in relation to perception earlier, but it is metal which is of particular relevance to my practice. In fact for Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari metal is "a body without organs",<sup>56</sup> the exemplar of a vital materiality.<sup>57</sup> Metal holds a creative materiality with incipient qualities that can be brought out. Metal is

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<sup>50</sup> Woodard, *Slime Dynamics*, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Peak, *The Spectacle of the Void*, 91-92.

<sup>52</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 30.

<sup>53</sup> Bennett, 61.

<sup>54</sup> Bennett, 57

<sup>55</sup> Bennett, 58.

<sup>56</sup> Deleuze, Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 411.

<sup>57</sup> Deleuze, Guattari, 411.

everywhere; mineral elements are found in the whole of matter from water to plantlife.<sup>58</sup> Metal, like human consciousness, could be considered a kind of assemblage, the result of strong emergence in which things come together to form more than a sum of their parts.<sup>59</sup> The crystals of iron for example have “loose atoms” at the articulation of the grains, so the metal is full of “intercrystalline spaces” which are crucial in determining the properties of the metal. “A metallic *vitality*, a (impersonal) life, can be seen in the quivering of these free atoms at the edges between the grains of the polycrystalline edifice.”<sup>60</sup> It is the assemblage of the parts, and their creative elan over an indescribably slow duration that forms the vibrating, essential aliveness. Despite the various, irregular energies working within the ad hoc formation, assemblages are able to display apparent homogeneity, with each component of the assemblage bringing its own “vital force” to bear. The assemblage as a whole displaying emergent properties, such as those displayed as various neural stimulants and inputs come together to form consciousness. “A life draws attention not to a lifeworld of human designs or their accidental, accumulated effects, but to an interstitial field of non-personal, ahuman forces, flows, tendencies and trajectories.”<sup>61</sup>

Hany Armanious uses not the materials themselves, merely presenting their simulacra as stimuli to human comprehension. His surfaces are untrustworthy, casts of materials, nevertheless the assemblages present us with a sense of agency. When you experience a work such as that of Armanious there is a sensation of wanting to do more than merely look, but to come back and back again, as if you could draw aside a curtain to reveal the primeval image behind. It's as though his profusion of objects and heady mixed-messages will come together to form some sort of elaborate big picture cosmological illumination that lies just beyond reach. But then again, is he just perversely playing with our senses and scrambling our perceptions? The work evokes Nietzsche's perverted pessimism “One who has consecrated himself to loving life exactly because it is the worst thing imaginable, a sadomasochistic joyride through the twists and turns of being unto death.”<sup>62</sup> Armanious deftly leads us through these twists and turns via an exploration of the unseen, interconnectedness of things. Disparate objects come together to form perplexing and strange new experiences. “Nothing is really explained or cleared up, and we get mired in complexity, elaboration, digression.”<sup>63</sup> But confusion gives way to fascination as you become enveloped in the intricacies of the installation. Armanious enacts a nightmare in *Year of the Pig Sty* in a physical manifestation of all the elements under discussion in this essay we see Peak's metaphoric exploration of the unreal, Woodard's theory of dark vitalism smashing together with elements of the spectacle and an insatiable need to enter into the chaotic filth, the strife and turmoil of life. “His mixed metaphors point to the way we think; to the way we make sense of things as makers and readers of art.”<sup>64</sup> His work seems to draw allure from its contiguity to the real impenetrable, ineffable stuff of life. Inducing a state of disorientation to illuminate the limits of human perception and ignorance and perhaps a fundamental gap

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<sup>58</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 411.

<sup>59</sup> Woodard, *Slime Dynamics*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 59.

<sup>61</sup> Bennett, 61.

<sup>62</sup> Peak, *The Spectacle of the Void*, 38.

<sup>63</sup> Galbraith and Leonard eds. *Hany Armanious: Morphic Resonance*, 21.

<sup>64</sup> Galbraith and Leonard eds., 5.

or inability to completely grasp the actual deep reality of the universe, of ourselves, of what we call nature and our placement within it. Armanious frequently makes reference to the work of Carlos Castaneda who entered into states of “non-ordinary awareness” and learned the Toltec “art of seeing” which is a means for accessing a dimension ordinarily obscured us. Castaneda was also told by shaman Don Juan “that we are possessed by predatory reptiles that control our minds from their subterranean realm.”<sup>65</sup> Ironically, given the time in which we are living, Castaneda asserted that one had to stop the world in order to ‘see’ it. With the recent lockdown, humanity experienced a time when the world ostensibly stopped, the usual flow of information interrupted by an alien set of circumstances and we were afforded the unique opportunity to view the world through which we move through new eyes.<sup>66</sup>

OOTheory and Michael E. Smith:

Graham Harman’s brand of object oriented (OO) theory has enjoyed a brief buzz in contemporary art and I am conscious of being just another artist jumping on the OO bandwagon, rehashing a bankrupted subject. But Harman has pushed his realist boat out far into the waters of speculation and a discussion on SR and aesthetics would be lacking without recognition of his contribution. In contrast to Bennett’s view that things are holistic assemblages and it is their relationships that are of import, in his book *Object Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* Harman builds on Heidegger’s reasoning that the reality of things is withdrawn not only from us but also from one another <sup>67</sup> in a denigration of relations. However, where Bennett stresses the agency of non-human and inanimate objects she goes part way toward meeting Harman’s assertion that objects must be given equal attention. Harman also evokes Heraclitus when he asserts “objects are not identical with their properties, but have a tense relationship with them, and this very tension is responsible for all of the change that occurs in the world.”<sup>68</sup> For Harman every object, real or imagined, must hold equal footing, by this dictum Mickey Mouse is considered an object as veritable as a thousand year old igneous rock. But philosophy and reality must be concomitantly strange and Harman also recognises the close relationship between philosophy and aesthetics. Aesthetic experience in the form of metaphor is crucial to OOO as it provides a type of “non-literal access to the object”,<sup>69</sup> an oblique approach to a veiled reality. As the external world exists independently of human perception the true inward nature of every object (the world-in-itself) withdraws from us, thus preventing a full experience of any ‘thing’ outside the self. ‘I myself’ am the only real object of aesthetics, the only fully invested object in all experience.<sup>70</sup> Although this sounds like a continuation of the Meillassoux condemned pro-human-connate, correlationism; in the OO understanding of metaphor ‘I’ stand in for the object and fuse with its comparative, metaphoric object, taking on its sensual qualities and thereby creating a new object. It is this new compound, an object not based on pre-existing knowledge but an<sup>71</sup> amalgamated reality formed by the viewer/experiencer and the sensual qualities of the

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<sup>65</sup> Galbraith and Leonard eds., 21

<sup>66</sup> Galbraith and Leonard eds.78

<sup>67</sup> Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, 40.

<sup>68</sup> Harman, 9.

<sup>69</sup> Harman, 260.

<sup>70</sup> Harman, 85.

<sup>71</sup> Harman, 89.

object that metaphorically now points to something like the ‘thing in its own right’,<sup>72</sup> a thing more weighty and significant than any mere semblance. This being the central point of why Harman’s speculative, nihilistic brand of realism is integral to this discussion. Of course if we become uninvested, the artwork ceases to be art,<sup>73</sup> the ‘I’ is removed. Personal absorption is essential for aesthetic experience.

Metaphor plays a vital role in the work of Michael E. Smith, maker of installations. Smith provides little to guide us through the confusion of his montages, which are nothing less than the mess we’re in, presenting instead a quagmire or three, probing particular riddles, until we find ourselves in a maze, a network invoking the uncanny ontological infrastructure of our lives or at least the consensus reality of this life we can only understand as life. Smith sets up antagonistic relationships between objects, binary oppositions that speak to suggestions of “violence, decay, poverty, and injustice in a manner not easily translated into language.”<sup>74</sup> Allusion to corporeality functions to contrast mortality and decomposition with day-to-day referents. Taking his cue from the Arte Povera movement using non-traditional “everyday” materials, Smith presents the mythical, theatrical and corporeality of the world-for-us. Smith often mines the oddness of familiar objects such as used clothing, backpacks and chairs re-presented as *mélange* imbued with new meanings. They become objects of our time, creating a discourse that speaks to our present situation - vessels of communication that have been transformed, surpassing their original value. “The original intention of each object is less important as it is granted with a new resolve, or what some might describe as an anti-resolution”.<sup>75</sup> The interplay between human and non-human is blurred as ‘I myself’ mingle with Smith’s embodied assemblages. We are led into a kind of psychic space, an unexpected interiority, a mobius strip. Art Observed describes Smith’s fan installation, “unable to tell if the fans are on or if there is some other element emitting the sound, the arrangement conjures a strange sense of animated material, a sort of life outside the human body that makes the viewer question just what they are viewing”.<sup>76</sup>

An essay being written at this point in time, focussing as much as it does on humanity’s downfall would feel incomplete without some mention of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been the cause of many rewritings of this essay, as the threat has reduced from imminent extinction and a matter of life and death on a personal level, to an inconvenience to be managed. My own consciousness has tried to fit the potentially devastating into a manageable frame of reference; consciousness managing the terror of my inevitable death. With the advent of COVID-19, the strangeness and confusion of today’s world have come to form the very elements that make horror horrific. Contagion and viruses exemplify the terrifying “internality of dark vitalism through the unseen and unsettling interior productivity of life...”<sup>77</sup> Humanity is knocked from its pedestal as the natural world undermines our apparent dominion of the planet. Our sense of stability is eroded as we are forced to consider our human ontology and address questions around the way we live and how we engage with our planet and one another whilst concurrently equating the absurdity of our responses to what

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<sup>72</sup> Harman, 86.

<sup>73</sup> Harman, 182.

<sup>74</sup> Creahan, “New York - Michael E. Smith at Andrew Kreps Through March 28th, 2020.”

<sup>75</sup> Hamer, “Michael E. Smith @Galleria Zero, Milano.”

<sup>76</sup> Creahan, “New York - Michael E. Smith at Andrew Kreps Through March 28th, 2020.”

<sup>77</sup> Woodard, *Slime Dynamics*, 12.

we have constructed as the 'natural' order of things. In short we are forced to come face to face with the prospect of a world-without-us, the speculative world. Of course every society perceives itself at the point of unique crisis. As artists we aim to ruminate upon and respond to the specific heightened sense of emergency and horror that permeates society in 2020 as we lurch from one calamity to the next. This is precisely the time for artists to go to work. For me the entropic decay of materials represents the underlying chaos and strife beneath the thin veneer of social structure and cultural order we impose on the world to make it fit our limited cognisance. I discussed this idea of imposed order in my 2018 essay "Dirt", in which dirt is recognised as the material which questions, undermines and disrupts social order and our human separation from animals. Following on from "Dirt" my recent works are collections of materials, of a flawed humanity's accoutrements. *What's the Matter* aims to place us at the threshold between the cessation of an event and the outset of its investigation. Nothing can be taken for granted. What is natural dilapidation? What is decay, and what is creation? I have a complex relationship with detritus. The materials I choose tend to occupy the corporeal world as substantial havens of content and form but they also speak to the processes and journeys of their experiences, deeper realities skulk beneath their perceivable surfaces. Objects that are suggestive of that which lies between. I look for materials hungry for something; discarded matter that still retains the vestiges of worth, beams that do not support, windows that no longer frame a view, steel, insistently metal and unpliant, which are bounded and constrained by frames and formal shapes in an enforced order that echoes the structures human animals try to foist on earth. As Eugene Thacker says - there are no limits, only the ones we impose ourselves.<sup>78</sup>

This essay has attempted to bring abstract thought, materialism and art into dialogue. The preceding areas of speculative realism all feed into my work; the horrifying sense of the oncoming extinction of a humanity formed from pools of goop, a revelry in the protean vitality found in materials and a sense that materials brought together in an assemblage have the propensity to become more than a sum of their parts. As a weird human, I know this is all twisted through the lens of my reductive human consciousness, limited by my reliance on language and signs and shaped by my terror of death. What I have temporarily concluded here is that the inner-workings of the universe and the interactions of objects are far beyond the human senses and cognisance to try and understand. The external world moves autonomously of human consciousness, and as we are locked in our limited human capacity for understanding and a corresponding inability to truly communicate, the reality of things is always veiled. We live in a world composed of illusion. Nothing can be explained by literal language, language always acts as a distortion filter, one able to define only literal properties. To describe what a thing is we can either talk about what it does, or what it is made of while ignoring cognitive properties that do not translate easily into literal prose terms...A thing can't be exhausted by a hypothetical perfect description of itself.<sup>79</sup>

Speculative realism has the propensity to take us to the edge of consciousness and to speculate on the beyond, to question what is reality and what is perception. Art and philosophy can be viewed as types of cognition which remain discrete from knowledge. As Graham Harman points out, "The point of knowledge is not to experience the unknowable uniqueness of a real object," this is the role of art.<sup>80</sup> Although art may be unable to provide

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<sup>78</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.

<sup>79</sup> Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, 90.

<sup>80</sup> Harman, 170.

us with concrete knowledge, it can assist us to gain intellectual intuition via a projection of unreason and the weird onto the world, offering a revision of human metaphysics. A type of nascent perception, by which the need for the body's comprehension may be overcome via a direct sensory input to the mind. Art, like philosophy, is a practice of 'learned ignorance' .<sup>81</sup> "If we have learned anything at all, we have learned that we know nothing."<sup>82</sup>



*What's the Matter* (detail)

Image courtesy of the University of Auckland

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<sup>81</sup> Harman, 176.

<sup>82</sup> Peak, *The Spectacle of the Void*, 33.



*What's the Matter* (detail)

Image courtesy of the University of Auckland



*What's the Matter* (detail)

Image courtesy of the University of Auckland



*What's the Matter* (detail)

Image courtesy of the University of Auckland



*What's the Matter* (detail)

Image courtesy of the University of Auckland.

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