

## Coactivity

### Notes for “The Great Acceleration” (Taipei Biennial 2014)

Text/ Nicolas Bourriaud

Translated by Brent Heinrich

1. The extent and the acceleration of the industrialization process on the planet have led some scientists to hypothesize a new geophysical era, the Anthropocene. The emergence of this new era, after ten thousand years of the Holocene, refers to the effect of human activities on the earth’s biosphere: global warming, deforestation, soil pollution. It is the structure of the planet itself that is being modified by humans, whose impact is now more powerful than any other geological or natural force.

But the concept of the Anthropocene also points to a paradox: the more powerful and real the collective impact of the species is, the less contemporary individuals feel capable of influencing their surrounding reality. This sense of individual impotence goes hand in hand with the proven effects and the sheer mass of the species, even as the techno-structure generated by it appears uncontrollable. The collapse of the “human scale”: helpless in the face of a computerized economic system whose decisions are derived from algorithms capable of performing operations at the speed of light (“high-frequency trading” already accounts for nearly three quarters of financial activities in the United States), human beings have become both spectators and victims of their own infrastructure. Thus, we are witnessing the emergence of an unprecedented political coalition between the individual/citizen and a new subordinate class: animals, plants, minerals and the atmosphere, all attacked by a techno-industrial system now clearly detached from civil society.

2. Nearly twenty-five years after its public birth, the internet is now seen as a tool for the liberation of information and the generation of enjoyment and knowledge. Yet today the internet hosts more mechanical activity than human. Search engines, ad servers and collection algorithms for our “personal data” are now the dominant population of a network in which each human user is reduced essentially to the “data” that constitute the major part of their presence in the economic system, like a hunted animal. Individuals are profoundly altered by this massive apparatus, just as they are

by the natural environment.

Modernist art of the twentieth century assimilated the mechanical and industrial processes, by adopting them either as motif (Picabia, Duchamp) or as material (Moholy-Nagy, Tinguely). Today, technology is seen as an Other among others, a subject wrongly placed at the center of the world. And artists living within the technosphere, as if it were a second ecosystem, place search engines and living cells, minerals and artworks on the same level of utility. What matters most to the artists of our time is no longer things, but the circuits that distribute and connect them.

3. In *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx invented a strange image, that of the “ghost dance,” which may well represent the symbolic essence of capitalism: practical, social relationships of production are being reduced to abstractions, and conversely, the abstract (exchange value) is being transformed into something concrete. Thus, human beings actually live in an abstract world, that of trade and capital flows, and conversely, they live abstractly in the real world of work, proving the two to be interchangeable. This is the ghost dance that Marx described: Inanimate things start to dance like ghosts, while humans become the ghosts of themselves. Subjects become objects, and objects subjects. Things are personified, and relations of production are reified.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a period that could be called the political Anthropocene, this ghost dance not only concerns people and things in a relation of industrial production, but it places the subjects of the global economy and the global environment in a more dramatic reversal: the immaterial economy has invaded concrete geophysics, and the physical world has become a byproduct of the abstraction of capital. At an earlier stage of the capitalist system, when Marx discovered commodity fetishism, he described the worker as “alienated,” due to the lack of a living relationship with the product of their labor. Today, this alienation, inseparable from the accumulation of capital, extends to the biological and physicochemical: When a company files a patent to claim ownership of an Amazonian plant, when seeds become products, when natural resources become pure objects of speculation, it is capitalism that is the environment, and the environment is capital.

4. It is in this historical context that Speculative Realism has emerged – a holistic thought that humans and animals, plants and objects must be treated on an equal footing. Bruno Latour suggests a “parliament of things,” Levi Bryant a “democracy of

objects.” Graham Harman proposes an “object-oriented philosophy” that attempts to free objects from the shadow of our consciousness, giving them metaphysical autonomy, and putting collisions between things on an equal footing with relationships between thinking subjects, so that these two types of relationships can only be distinguished by their degree of complexity.

Considering the world in terms of substance, when we invite advocates of speculative realism to join us here, we will naturally decline to view this as a network of relations. Beings take precedence over knowledge, the thing envisaged by consciousness. A recent essay by Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, “attempts to think an object for-itself that isn't an object for the gaze of a subject, representation, or a cultural discourse. This, in short, is what the democracy of objects means... The claim that all objects equally exist is the claim that no object can be treated as constructed by another object... In short, no object such as the subject or culture is the ground of all others.” (1)

5. It is no coincidence that the art world has recently been seized by such a concept, which is not unrelated to animism. Indeed, an exhibition titled *Animism*, curated by Anselm Franke Bern and presented in Antwerp, Vienna, Berlin and New York, referenced Félix Guattari's contention that the subject of *animation*, or the endowment of life force, should be addressed outside its political or postcolonial scope. What gives an object a soul? And is not this precisely the essence of the colonial process? Dressing up an object with human characteristics or talking to an animal argues for the legitimacy of extending the human domain... Contemporary art constantly oscillates between reification (the transformation of the living into a thing) and *prosopopeia* (a figure of speech that represents a thing as having a voice). The relationship between the living and the inert now seems to be the main tension of contemporary culture, and artificial intelligence occupies the middle ground as an arbitrator. Beginning with Philip K. Dick, science fiction has also continued to explore the boundaries between human and machine. And artists of our time exhibit poetic machinery, robotic or vegetated humans, plants connected to sensors, animals at work... What may be seen in the artworks of the early twenty-first century is a circuit of the living, but in political terms: all things and all beings are presented as energy converters, catalysts or messengers. Animism is uni-directional, only imbuing the inanimate with a soul; conversely, contemporary art appropriates life in all directions.

A new generation of artists is exploring the intrinsic properties of materials “informed” by human activity, including polymers (Roger Hiorns, Marlie Mul, Sterling Ruby, Alisa Barenboym, Neil Beloufa, Pamela Rosenkranz) or the critical states of materials (the nebulizations of Peter Buggenhout, Harold Ancart or Hiorns). But polymerization has become a principle of composition, with the invention of flexible and artificial alloys of heterogeneous elements – as can be seen in the videos of Laura Prouvost, Ian Cheng, Rachel Rose or Camille Henrot, the installations of Mika Rottenberg, Nathaniel Mellors and Charles Avery, the paintings of Roberto Cabot or Tala Madani. Others explore weight, transposing the lightness of pixels onto monumental objects (David Douard, Neil Beloufa, Matheus Rocha Pitta...).

6. The context in which these “object-oriented” modes of thought appear is primarily that of economic globalization. This is accompanied by a process of reification so “natural” that endowing things with souls inoculates our servility and, somehow, contaminates them with our own alienation. In a fully capitalist world, life is nothing but a *moment* of merchandising, and human beings are a moment of the Great Reification. Alienated humanity is unable to rid the world of things: instead, it propagates them, like a contagion, causing its own alienation. The whole world has become a potential commodity, and some sanguinely consider it no more than an assemblage of objects moving in the direction of global capitalism: “There is only one type of being,” writes Levi Bryant: “objects.” (2) Everything living and the entire domain of the inert are thus drawn into this new ghost dance, in which workers and their products were once, in the time of Marx, the only protagonists.

7. In the name of critiquing anthropocentrism, the subject is attacked from all sides today. More generally, we may note that ever since post-structuralism became anemic, the invisible engine of contemporary thought has been a systematic critique of the concept of the “center.” Ethnocentrism, phallogentrism, anthropocentrism... The current burgeoning of these derogatory terms demonstrates that the *a priori* rejection of any centrality is the great cause of our time. Deconstruction occurs at the approach of any centrality whatsoever. The center, as a figure, represents the absolute foil of contemporary thought. But isn’t the human subject the supreme center? We have no choice but to hold this notion in general suspicion, as any such claim would be seen as a crime. The real crime of humanity, after all, lies in being a colonial species: Since the dawn of time, human populations have invaded and occupied neighboring kingdoms, reducing other forms of life to the rank of slave, absurdly exploiting their environment. But contemporary thinkers, instead of trying to redefine the relationship between conspecifics and others, rather than contributing to the consideration of other

types of relationships between humans and the world, have ultimately reduced philosophy to a bad conscience constantly ruminating, a simple act of penance, even a fetish device. Is not this theatrical display of humility, this so-called contrition, merely an extension of the old Western humanism, though it appears today in reverse form?

8. Since the 1990s, art has highlighted the social sphere and held inter-human relations, whether individual or social, friendly or antagonistic, to be the main domain of reference. The aesthetic atmosphere seems to have changed, as evidenced by the immediate success of speculative realism in the field of art. In truth, relational art has reaped its greatest censure for still being too anthropocentric or humanist, considering humans as an aesthetic or political milieu, and even extending its range invasively into the realms of objects, networks, nature and machinery, in a manner deemed by some as old-fashioned or unbearable.

This involves a certain amount of bad faith, because art as a whole advocates on behalf of humanity. And the major political issue of the twenty-first century is precisely the *return of humanity*, to all the areas we have vacated: computerized finance, delivered in mechanically regulated markets, but primarily in policies fixed on the sole objective of profit.

9. By extension, what would an exhibition be like if it were rid of all “correlationism”? This term, coined by Quentin Meillassoux, refers to the idea that knowledge of the world is always the result of a correlation between a subject and an object, the typical perspective of Western philosophy. A fascinating hypothesis, but one that only leads to an impossibility: it is the concept of art itself which then shatters, because it is based specifically on and within such correlationism. As Duchamp said, “The spectator makes the picture” – the latter being transformed into an object as soon as it is taken out of sight. The difference lies in what generates an action: either collisions between objects, or the analysis of data with intelligence, or the production of works of art – that is to say, Brownian motion, unpredictable and fertile.

10. Quentin Meillassoux raises a fundamental question: how can one grasp the meaning of a statement on data prior to any human form of relationship to the world, prior to the existence of any subject/object relationship? In short, how can one think about something that exists completely outside of human thought? He then develops the concept of the “*arche-fossil*,” which means a reality that preceded the existence of any observer (3). Human consciousness is actually a universal measure. In this context, we can compare it to currency, which Marx defined as an “abstract general

equivalent” used in the economy. In posing the theoretical question of the “arche-fossil,” Meillassoux sets philosophy in relation to the absolute, which here may be considered a purely coincidental event. Or art is merely the “currency of the absolute,” to quote the remarkable expression of André Malraux. That is to say, art is the simple residue of humanity’s commerce with everything else, the surplus of humanity’s relationship with the world.

11. Art also plays host to an entanglement between the human and non-human, a presentation of coactivity as such: Multiple energies are at work, and logical organic growth machines are everywhere. All relations between different regimes of the living and the inert are alive with tension. Contemporary art is a gateway between the human and the nonhuman, where the binary opposition between subject and object dissolves in multiplicitous images: the reified speaking, the living petrified, illusions of life, illusions of the inert, biological maps redistributing constantly.

*The Great Acceleration* is presented as a tribute to this coactivity, the assumed parallelism between the different kingdoms and their negotiations. This exhibition is organized around the cohabitation of human consciousness with swarming animals, data processing, the rapid growth of plants and the slow movements of matter. So we find ancestrality (the world before human consciousness) and its landscape of minerals, alongside vegetable transplants or couplings between humans, machines and beasts. At the center is this reality: human beings are only one element among others in a wide-area network, which is why we need to rethink our relational universe to include new partners.

12. In this space of coactivity, the term *form* takes on new meanings. How should one define it, beyond the famous classifications of Roger Caillois, who proposed that forms should be distinguished by how they are brought into being – growth, accident, will or molding? How should one describe the subset within which, in an exhibition, these different regimes interact? What I call *exforme* is a thing that is subject to a struggle between a center and a periphery, a form that has taken shape in a process of exclusion or inclusion – that is to say, any sign in transit between dissent and power, the excluded and the admitted, the object and waste, nature and culture. From Gustave Courbet’s stone breakers to the pop aesthetic, from Edouard Manet’s portraits to Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, the history of art is full of *exformes*. For the past two centuries, the ties between aesthetics and politics may be summarized as a series of inclusive and exclusive movements: on the one hand, a constantly repeated sharing between the signifier and the *unsignifier* in art, and on the other hand, the ideological

boundaries drawn by biopolitics, the government of the human body. The ontology proposed by speculative realism brings with it new examples of *exformes*, and this is its major impact on contemporary art.

13. The engine of economic globalization is the ideology of “growth,” i.e., the narrative that the future of humanity depends on exponential growth. According to Jean-François Lyotard, “Development is not attached to an Idea, like that of the emancipation of reason and of human freedoms. It is reproduced by accelerating and extending itself according to its internal dynamic alone.” (4) Likewise, the “Great Acceleration” is capitalism’s process of naturalization: organic and universal, it is the natural law of the Anthropocene. Its main tool is the algorithm, on which the global economy is now founded. The only known limitation of industrial “development,” for Lyotard, resides in the life expectancy of the sun – “the only challenge objectively posed to development.” In a world ruled by the ideology of unlimited growth, what role could there be for individual emancipation, which has been the goal of culture since the Enlightenment?

14. The foremost objective of speculative realism is to blur the line between nature and culture. The former is governed by mechanical causality, while the latter is the domain of meaning, free will, representations, language, etc. But hasn’t the dichotomy of subject/object, which governs Western thought, been challenged in other times? In his famous 1969 text “What Is an Author?” Michel Foucault decoupled the “field of discourse” and the notion of the subject, for which he used the alternative term the “field of subjectivation,” defining them as an alloy of heterogeneous elements. Structure had already replaced the human subject: “The text is a historical object like the trunk of a tree,” said Foucault. But isn’t the most surprising premise of speculative realism the eradication of the concept of structure, the disappearance of which creates a short circuit via direct contact between human beings and the world of things? Yet is it difficult to deal with economics or politics without envisaging them as structures.

15. In the “flat ontology” claimed by speculative realism, which places all the objects that make up the world on the same plane, only art can enjoy an exceptional status, because it exists only in the dimension of the encounter. Its mathematical essence is the figure Omega, which means the infinity of primes +1. Indeed, art is this “+1” – that is to say, when a unique encounter, virtual or otherwise, transforms an object (speech, gesture, sound, drawing, etc...) into a work, what arises from this infinite conversation is called “art.” Therefore, we may view art as the cardinal of meaningfulness (everything makes sense), since meaning is the precondition for art’s

existence: In this space, objects are essentially transitional. In art, nothing remains reified for long.

- (1) Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, Open Humanities Press, p. 19.
- (2) Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, p.20.
- (3) Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*. Le Seuil, 2006.
- (4) Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*. Stanford University Press, p. 7.