

Distant Affinities: Speculative Realism and the Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze

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Summary. This article explores and contrasts Deleuze’s thought and speculative realism (SR). Focusing on their respective approaches to art, it aims to show that the Deleuzian perspective can be regarded as a critique of SR’s treatment of art. It starts by demonstrating that a particular strand of SR known as object-oriented ontology (OOO) is unable to account for contemporary art as we know it. It then contrasts the approach of OOO with Deleuze’s thought, which endorses art and demonstrates an understanding of the nonhuman that can help to resolve some of the problems encountered by OOO. Having explored the differences between Deleuze’s thought and SR with respect to art, the article goes on to examine their similarities. It shows that both Deleuze and a rationalist offshoot of SR take an analogous approach to the relation between philosophy, art and science. Here, not only Deleuze and SR, but also SR and art, find common ground.

Keywords: *Deleuze, speculative realism, contemporary art, science, nonhuman.*

Although labelled a post-structuralist during his lifetime, Gilles Deleuze has since been garnering increasing recognition for his efforts to push philosophy beyond linguistic and human-centred concerns. From the desiring-machines to the machinic phylum and his non-phenomenological treatment of time, he developed a machinic understanding of the world that resonates with contemporary non-anthropocentric philosophies, among which speculative realism. Yet despite these parallels, his work has elicited criticism from philosophers who have been associated with SR: whether Ray Brassier and Quentin Meillassoux, who critique Deleuze’s engagement with vitalism, or Ben Woodard, the title of whose blog post “Post-Deleuze? or New Materialisms, Post-Humanism, and Speculative Realism” (Naught Thought, 2011), seems to imply that the new philosophies may have superseded Deleuze. In this paper, I will explore some of the divergences and similarities

between Deleuze's philosophy and SR – as seen through the prism of their respective approaches to and impact on art. I will show that in the art context, where the tensions between these two lines of thought are very visible, Deleuze's relevance is undimmed.

SR, and in particular that branch of it known as object-oriented ontology, have been attracting the attention of numerous artists and curators over the last few years – whether as a result of the ongoing across-the-board critique of Western anthropocentrism, whether because OOO signals a welcome return to objects, matter and the real after the emphasis on interpretation, discourse and textuality that has dominated cultural practice in recent decades (Cox, Jaskey, Malik, 2015, 15), or because, as João Ribas (2015, 346) suggests, art's speculative or irrational function has been repressed or lost, and speculative realism fills that gap. SR/OOO reflect these views: foregrounding their resistance to correlationism – the postulate that we only have access to things as they appear to us and not to things in themselves – they suggest that the world is mind-independent or even, in the case of OOO, object-centred, humans being among these objects. Applied to the art context, OOO counters contemporary art's emphasis on the viewer who completes the artwork, implying instead a nonhuman-centred approach. Artists inspired by these ideas decentre the human subject, reflect on the object as such, as opposed to human perception of it, and highlight its materiality and agency. The work of Sara Deraedt, for instance, sheds a new light on apparently mundane objects: her *Car Interior* series (2009–2011) consists of photographs empty car interiors taken from unusual angles, which focus on the anonymous and normally unnoticed car seat, its shape and the standardized fabrics from which it is made. Her images emphasize the presence of the seats, making them appear baleful and threatening. They suggest that car seats might have other sides to them of which we humans are unaware.

Yet although works such as these succeed in conveying some of the ideas underlying SR/OOO, they do so by attributing typically human characteristics such as feelings, emotions and agency to objects. As a result, they do not – in the end – avoid correlationism at all. They are also correlationist for other reasons, as Suhail Malik points out in his text “Reason to Destroy Contemporary Art”:

Contemporary art as the aesthetic experience of sense- and value-making, as the co-constitution of the art object *and* subject, assumes correlationism and reproduces it, affirms it, in every moment of its open-ended experience. The artworks and the discursive formulation of contemporary art – objects, events, performances, images, press releases, reviews, magazine essays, auction catalogues – stylize and configure a correlationism in how art is to be taken by its audience [...] Artists have an ‘interest’ in this or that; the artwork or exhibition ‘explores’, ‘plays with’, ‘interrogates’, or ‘shows a sensitivity about’ such and such topic. No more definitive or precise an account can be permitted at the cost of reducing viewers’ own capacities to make their call on the art (Malik, 2015, 186).

To put it another way, in contemporary art the role of the viewer – as opposed to that of the artwork or even the artist – is key, which is precisely what these philosophies

aim to contest. If this is indeed the way contemporary art operates, then neither SR nor OOO can accommodate or account for art at all. Deleuze's thought on the other hand endorses art, does not deny its specificity and even goes a little way towards resolving some of the problems encountered by OOO. Cultural critic Steven Shaviro points out in a blog post that OOO does not explain how objects come to exist and persist over time, because it considers that objects are 'already there' (The Pinocchio Theory, 2011). The persistence of object-based artworks over time is accounted for by process philosophies such as that of Deleuze. Deleuze's thought can also, unlike SR and OOO, help to explain how we might ascribe agency to object-based works. In her essay "The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter", Jane Bennett (2004) draws on Deleuze to develop her theory of thing-power materialism, in which she seeks to give expression to the vitality of nonhuman entities, raise awareness of the dense web of relations connecting things to each other and to human bodies, and show how the human being and thinghood overlap.

Likewise countering SR's rejection of art on the grounds of its correlationism, the Deleuzian approach explicitly links art with the nonhuman. For Deleuze considers that art produces affects and percepts, and that even though the latter are produced by human activity, affects are nonhuman becomings of man and percepts nonhuman landscapes of nature (1994, 169). Deleuze also links sensations to the nonhuman, thereby rejecting phenomenological readings of art, as Elizabeth Grosz points out: "Art is not the activation of the perceptions and sensations of the lived body – the merging and undecidability of subject and object, seer and seen in a common flesh as suggested by Straus (1963) and later elaborated by Merleau-Ponty (1968) [...] Deleuze's criticism of phenomenology is clear: flesh is the field for the elaboration of sensations but cannot be understood as sensation itself. Sensation heralds the nonhuman becomings of mankind" (Grosz, 2008, 22). This distancing from the body is inherent to Deleuze's conception of art, as Grosz writes:

Art is not linked to some intrinsic relation to one's own body but exactly the opposite: it is linked to those processes of distancing and the production of a plane of composition that abstracts sensation from the body. The emergence of the 'frame' is the condition of all the arts and is the particular contribution of architecture to the taming of the virtual [...] It is the frame that constitutes painting and cinema just as readily as architecture; it is the architectural force of framing that liberates the qualities of objects or events that come to constitute the substance, the matter, of the art-work (Grosz, 2008, 11).

Deleuze's conception of art also references another nonhuman element, the animal. As Deleuze and Guattari write in *What is Philosophy?*: "Perhaps art begins with the animal, at least with the animal that carves out a territory and constructs a house [...] The territory implies the emergence of pure sensory qualities, of sensibilia that cease to be merely functional and become expressive features, making possible a transformation of functions" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1994, 183).

More versatile and open-ended than OOO, Deleuzian concepts can also be used to articulate certain ideas and strategies employed by artists. In her project "Trust and the

Unfolding Dialogue”, the artist-researcher Esther Shalev-Gerz reflects on the connection between trust and dialogue in her work. This relationship can be seen as an unstable field that embodies a Deleuzian state of becoming, being located between heterogeneous terms and eschewing any particular goal (Baumann, 2013,163) – or as Elizabeth Grosz writes, as a process of “compounding or composing, not a pure creation from nothing, but the act of extracting from the materiality of forces, sensations, or powers of affecting life, that is, becomings, that have not existed before and may summon up and generate future sensations, new becomings” (Grosz, 2008, 75)

We might compare Shalev-Gerz’s open-ended project with a type of art that would fulfill the requirements not of OOO but of rationalist offshoots of SR – which claim that the real can be grasped by rational thought. For Suhail Malik, these artworks would disregard experience and reception entirely, as in the case of the instruction-based art of artists such as Sol LeWitt, who provided gallery workers with written instructions as to how to realize the piece. In such cases, it didn’t matter if the work was realized or not, nor even if the instructions were actually read. It was a type of art, in other words, that did not need to be experienced but only known of in order to be regarded as art (Malik, 2015, 190).

Yet Malik’s proposal raises several problems. Compared to OOO, which despite its inability to account for art has the merit of questioning the latter’s engagement with the object in new and inspiring ways, the type of art Malik champions is extremely reductive and limited in its impact, means and scope, being restricted to instructions that do not need to be carried out. Secondly, such artworks are channelled through text and therefore through language and human understanding, which is what SR sought to get away from in the first place. Malik’s proposal furthermore fails to take into account the fact that the realization of an instruction piece is also part of the work and that realization, if it happens, can affect the work’s reception by the viewer because the work will have been experienced and will no longer only be known. Finally, by denying the possibility of a subjective or experiential interpretation of a work of instruction art, rationalist SR retains only the work’s systematicity – a quality that on its own hardly qualifies as art. SR can therefore account neither for object-based nor for immaterial artworks, unlike Deleuze’s thought, which relates to any type of art.

So far I have focused on the differences between OOO and the philosophy of Deleuze, but in the last part of this text I will look at what Deleuze’s thought might have in common not with OOO – as we have seen there are few grounds for comparison – but with SR itself, and in particular the way each of these two lines of thought views the relation between art and science. As João Ribas has suggested, a repressed function of art may be as a speculative form of science:

As a speculative science, a way to articulate an account of the world, can art amend the potential of what belongs to the domain of scientific or philosophical speculation? What of those forms of speculation or understanding that transcend, or merely fall beyond,

the domain of any particular science [...] Is this the place where artistic speculation of the type described above resides? [...] Perhaps it is this domain of the speculative that art has always addressed, though it has sat uneasily between metaphysics and science, and so reduced the aesthetic to regimes of taste, beauty, or affect as a result of its own Kantian bias (Ribas, 2015, 350).

Seen from this angle, SR could help to re-envisage art as a speculative science somewhere between the ‘experimental’ in the empirical sciences, and a form of knowledge beyond falsificationist criteria (Ribas, 2015, 350), one which would be capable of transcending the limits of the individual sciences and offering new speculative interpretations of the world.

This approach moreover has a distant affinity with Deleuze and Guattari’s reflections on the relation between philosophy, science and art. In *What is Philosophy?*, they pair philosophy with concepts, art with sensations and science with functions, evoking culminating points where sensation becomes sensation of concept or function, where the concept becomes concept of function or sensation and where function becomes function of sensation or concept (Deleuze, Guattari, 1994, 199). Here, as Henning Schmidgen points out, Deleuze’s interest is “in describing connections, overlappings and ‘neighbourhoods’ between philosophy and the other two ‘disciplines’, that is, to grasp commonalities that had previously not been thought of or seen” (Schmidgen, 2015, 14) – an approach akin to that described by Ribas, where art, science and philosophy also intertwine in new ways. Deleuze and Guattari’s statement that “philosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts” (Deleuze, Guattari, 1994, 2) likewise suggests that their practice “is intimately connected to art *and* science” (Schmidgen, 2015, 1): Deleuze’s concepts are connected to art in that they make phenomena visible, while science is frequently the source for these same concepts (Schmidgen, 2015, 22). Is this not analogous to the way philosophy, in this instance SR, connects art with science in Ribas’s proposition? In the liminal spaces between these three modes of thought, not only Deleuze and SR, but also SR and art find common ground – with SR addressing an issue explored twenty-five years ago by the ever-relevant Deleuze.

Conclusions

1. The comparative method adopted in this article achieves the aims of highlighting the differences and similarities between Deleuze’s thought and SR and the ways in which each of them relates to art.
2. Deleuze’s treatment of art is in fact a critique of SR/OOO that goes some way towards resolving the problems encountered by SR.
3. Generally speaking, SR cannot be applied to art. However in one of the rare cases where SR can be applied to art, the result resembles the approach of Deleuze.

2. The critique of SR through the prism of Deleuze's thought is of particular relevance to the field of art, where SR/OOO are currently very prominent.

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Tolima giminystė: Gillesio Deleuze'o spekuliatyvusis realizmas ir filosofija

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojami ir gretinami Deleuze'o filosofija ir spekuliatyvusis realizmas. Remdamasi jo požiūriu į meną, autorė teigia, kad Deleuze'o filosofija laikytina spekuliatyviojo meno suvokimo kritika. Straipsnyje atskleidžiama, kad spekuliatyviojo realizmo kryptis, vadinamoji į objektą orientuota ontologija, nepajėgi paaiškinti mums žinomo šiuolaikinio meno. Nustatomi

skirtumai tarp į objektą orientuotos ontologijos (OOO) ir Deleuze'o požiūrio, kuris atskleidžia meną kaip tai, kas antžmogiška, kas gali padėti spręsti OOO patiriamas problemas. Išanalizavus Deleuze'o filosofiją apie meną ir palyginus ją su SR, straipsnyje bandoma ieškoti jų panašumų. Atskleidžiamas analogiškas Deleuze'o ir racionalistinės SR krypties požiūris į filosofijos, meno ir mokslo sąryšį. Randama panašumų ne tik tarp Deleuze'o ir SR, bet ir tarp SR ir meno.

Esminiai žodžiai: Deleuze, spekuliatyvusis realizmas, šiuolaikinis menas, mokslas, antžmogiškas.
