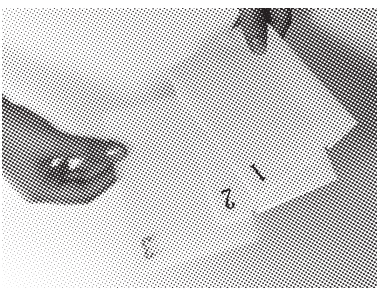


NOT THE FRAMES BUT THE THINGS

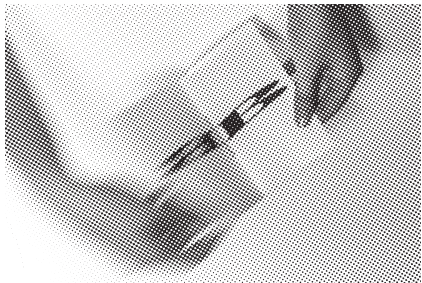
AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE OBJECT
QUA RADICAL
ESTRANGEMENT

LENA-JOHANNA HERRMANN

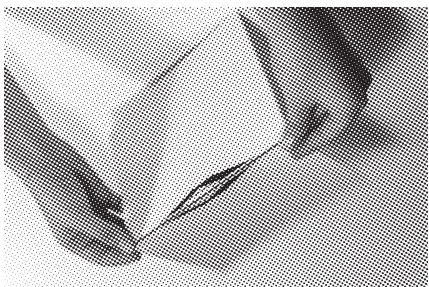
NOT THE FRAMES BUT THE THINGS
—
AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE OBJECT
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reciprocal turn



issue #2



LENA-JOHANNA HERRMANN

Can immediate experience of objects of any kind be guaranteed by frameless presentation?

When paintings became objects on their own right in Abstract Expressionism they lost their frames. They lose their window-like appearance, leading the viewers gaze nowhere but to the object right in front of him. Within the frameless confrontation they ought to be encountered in the mode of immediacy. What can the art of our days gain from a philosophy that promises to bring about a new orientation toward the object? By framing an object we draw nearer to it. We find out what it can be *for us*. Hence framing an object is a way of determining it in order to arrive at the meaning that we hope to find in it. This works in analogous manner for the conceptual frame we give to an object. What would be estranged to our understanding

becomes a *for-us* through the conceptual frame we add to it in the process of our thinking.

What shall be tried here is a face to face encounter with the object as an alienated one. It is a thought-experiment in dialogue with the texts of Ray Brassier, who became well-known in connection with the philosophical movement called *speculative realism*.

So let's begin: We encounter the object by strolling nearer to it. There it is. What do we see through the eyes of philosophy?

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in which
junction it is the concept
representation.¹ Understood as this
and epistemology with the seal of conceptual
exactly, it marks the junction of metaphysics
roads of metaphysics and epistemology. More
The question, What is real? stands at the cross-
of it. Thus we read in the writing of Ray Brassier:
it arrives in my consciousness as what I perceive
can I know? – Because whatever this world is,
two questions: «What is the world?» and «How
concept stands at the very point of contact between
And this is where concepts become important. A
in our consciousness.

working and struggling with the object that appears
in space and time. We can see reason
we can comprehend how we perceive the ob-
ject on the object and on our thought about it,
us no step closer to the object-in-itself. By focus-
each possible angle, we know that this brings
we now start to circle the object, facing it from
mined by what we a priori put into it. And while
object, while knowing that what we see is deter-
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2
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we see objects represented. Concepts are maximal-
ly correlated to our mode of thought and language.
What represents the object corresponds to us and
our cognitive capacity but is maybe not at all cor-
responding the object it represents.

Yet however far we are in our conceptual framing
from the object itself we establish the possibility
to relate to it on safe grounds. Based on these
grounds discourse can take place. Only in this
relation to the object can we draw nearer to the
object or establish – speaking with Heidegger –
any kind of relation that presupposes a
being-at-hand of the object. The object stays
alienated to us, as what it is *in-itself*, but it
can be faced as related to our capacity of
thinking within any possible conceptual
framework.

But now a new scientific attitude toward
the object is supposed to pave the way for
a new approach to the object. Further-
more it shall be able to fathom the depths
between the *thing-in-itself* and the con-
cept. «The scientific stance is one in which
the reality of the object determines the
meaning of its conception, and allows
the discrepancy between that reality
and the way in which it is conceptually
circumscribed to be measured.»²

2 Ray Brassier: «Concepts and Objects», in: «The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism», Melbourne 2011, p.55.

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The question remains: why of all things has
such a philosophy caused such an over-
whelmingly positive reaction in the «art-
world»? The wish to escape an all too present
discourse and strong conceptual frame-
works, to make the experience of the object
possible, these may have been reasons.
Nevertheless the direction of this flight is
still odd. Why would art throw itself into
the arms of a philosophy that takes inhu-
manity as one of its most important ref-
erence points? This cannot be anything
but a misunderstanding, can it?

lose the possibility to draw nearer to it on human
feet. As philosophy lifts its eyes to the object again,
we have established in front of us a radically es-
tranged one. Between it and ourselves lies nothing
but speculative emptiness that gives room for the
experience of alienation or scientific enthusiasm.
Our relation to the object becomes a non-rela-
tion in the enfolding nothingness.

*these dogmatic semblances, which through imagined happiness
hold so many subject to theories and systems, and limit all our
speculative claims, [...] [can prevent us from] venturing out into
a shoreless ocean, which, among always deceptive prospects,
forces us in the end to abandon as hopeless all our troublesome
and tedious efforts.»⁵*

An unframed non-relation

What have we gained through our speculative gaze on the ob-
ject that we are facing? What have we gained, leaving behind
concepts turning towards a thinking that claims to overstep
the limitations of human thought? By turning towards a phi-
losophy that, as non-human-correlated, takes the extinction of
humanity as highest reference point? Is this a new philosoph-
ical modesty that is conscious of its inadequacy towards the
autonomous object it faces? Does this allow for a new view on
our non-understanding of the *in-itself* of the object? Is this a
new scientific approach, finally establishing an adequate access
to the object? – Whatever it is, in none of these options lies the
possibility to relate to the object as a human being.

By trying to finally get closer to the
thing-in-itself, we

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5 Immanuel Kant: «Critique of Pure Reason», trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge 1998, p.439.

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autonomous from our conceptual framework. The thinking of Ray Brassier does *de facto* bring about strong and elaborate motives for nihilistic thought. But as there is a strong temptation to offer more than nothing and pure abyss, he goes one step further to bridge nothingness and to arrive at the object.

The step into a new scientific attitude in philosophical thinking
The weaker – maybe even naive – trait of this philosophy comes about when the newly established access to this place of speculative emptiness shall be used to host some scientific knowledge. All speculative hopes are pinned on science.
Is it not true that science analyses objects, independent from their concepts? And if that is so, does science not look at objects from an angle that is uncorrelated to our conceptual framework, to our human approach? Through this use of scientific knowledge speculative thought reckons to be able to leave behind the concept and with it the human-correlated framework, which it adds to the object. Object and concept are now seen as lo-

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The step into a new kind of nihilism
What is sought in this scientific approach is concrete knowledge about the measure of the distance between the thinkable concept and the, until now, unthinkable space lying between the object and its representation in a concept. To measure the unthinkable, maybe even to establish some knowledge in its former space, is what speculative thinking wants to achieve. From now on, say the realists, our gaze is meant to be fixed on the space between the *object-in-itself* and the empty space around it, impassable for any human thought. This enfolding nothingness can be seen as one of the figures of speculative thinking, if it is to be neither idealistic nor dogmatic. Already in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant indicates this tendency: «By such procedures speculative reason has at least made room for such an extension [of reason], even if it had to leave it empty.»³ Focusing solely on this emptiness, the speculative realists could have given rise to a new nihilism. They could have gained the possibility to understand the object as an estranged one, as one that is not *at-hand*, as

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3 Immanuel Kant: «Critique of Pure Reason», trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge 1998, p.113.

cated within a relationship of contravalence (object ≠ concept). This allows for the possibility to differentiate between the limit to conceptual understanding and the limit to any mind-dependent understanding. This way the correlational limitations ought to be left behind. In the words of Ray Brassier «*the classic correlationist claim [...] [is] a fundamental confusion between mind-independence and concept-independence.*»⁴ Now science will finally carry our minds further than any conceptual framework ever could.
Why would this approach in its flattering hopefulness be naive? To call something «naive» is indeed beyond the standard of any philosophical discourse. So let us just call this speculative realist method problematic. And here is why: Science can be seen as just another conceptual form. It is driven by the correlationist desire to make the world knowable for human beings. While not operating primarily with linguistic concepts, it requires concepts based on scientific models, data and algorithms. Many of these demand a higher standard of objectivity, while they are really – just as the

4 Ray Brassier: «Concepts and Objects», in: «The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism», Melbourne 2011, p.58.

linguistic concept – far from reaching at any point the object as autonomous from human thought. It is just another quality of correlation, not something altogether different. To fill a space, that is better left empty, with scientific knowledge leads to scientific dogmatism, a dogmatism that is in no way better than the metaphysical dogmatism Kant fought off. It causes an unreflective acceptance of data that would be better to be constantly put into question by human thought, rather than accepted as scientific truth.
But why would concepts be any better than this data? Any conceptual discourse is still rooted in critical thinking. And while it is very well true that any discourse taking place among human subjects is full of dodges, sophistry, rhetorical tricks, illusions and simulacra, it still has the ability to reflect and comprehend its own limits. Concepts are designed to be thought while the thinker is constantly on his guard against them. We cannot just leave our conceptual framework behind to head off on a speculative realist adventure. Kant, who knew about the temptation of this kind, writes in the end of the «Critique of Pure Reason»: «*Nothing but the sobriety of a strict but just criticism can liberate us from*

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