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## REALISM AND ANTI-REALISM: NEW PERSPECTIVES

Guest Editors:

*Leonardo Caffo, Sarah De Sanctis  
and Vincenzo Santarcangelo*

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## Philosophical Readings

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*Philosophical Readings*, ISSN 2036-4989, features articles, discussions, translations, reviews, and bibliographical information on all philosophical disciplines. *Philosophical Readings* is devoted to the promotion of competent and definitive contributions to philosophical knowledge. Not associated with any school or group, not the organ of any association or institution, it is interested in persistent and resolute inquiries into root questions, regardless of the writer's affiliation. The journal welcomes also works that fall into various disciplines: religion, history, literature, law, political science, computer science, economics, and empirical sciences that deal with philosophical problems. *Philosophical Readings* uses a policy of blind review by at least two consultants to evaluate articles accepted for serious consideration. *Philosophical Readings* promotes special issues on particular topics of special relevance in the philosophical debates. *Philosophical Readings* occasionally has opportunities for Guest Editors for special issues of the journal. Anyone who has an idea for a special issue and would like that idea to be considered, should contact the Executive editor.

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### Foreword

The 2000s have been unequivocally marked by a ‘return to realism’ or a ‘shift’ to realism. The now widespread term ‘Object-oriented philosophy’ was coined in 1999, in Graham Harman’s PhD dissertation, published in 2002 as *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. The same year, Manuel De Landa’s *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* came out. In 2006 Quentin Meillassoux’s *Après la finitude* was published, followed in 2007 by Paul Boghossian’s *Fear of Knowledge*. The same year, a conference was held in which Speculative Realism was born. In 2011, a notorious article on *La Repubblica*, which then was turned into a full manifesto, marked the birth of New Realism in Italy, and the year after Markus Gabriel’s *Il senso dell’esistenza. Per un nuovo realismo ontologico* came out. And this is just to name the most famous publications.

So, all these books seem to signal a certain paradigm shift in philosophy. Furthermore, two new movements appear to have been born. The name ‘Speculative Realism,’ which later became that of an entire philosophical movement (even though a very vaguely defined one), was originally the title of a conference held at Goldsmiths College in London on April 27th 2007. Italian New Realism was born during a conversation between Markus Gabriel and Maurizio Ferraris (apparently in Naples, at half past one on June 23, 2011) and was later inaugurated at an eponymous conference in Bonn in 2012.

The debate triggered by this turn was immense (to get an idea, visit the [Press Review on New Realism](#), or the many blogs and journals devoted to Speculative Realism, such as *Speculations* or *D.U.S.T.*). What follows is a contribution to the discussion, including some of the protagonists (an essay by Maurizio Ferraris and a triple interview to Tristan Garcia, Graham Harman and Lee Braver) and many interpreters and young scholars reacting to it.

The topic addressed are varied: from documentality (Davies and Cecchi) to art and aesthetics (Andina, Dal Sasso), the role of anthropocentrism in philosophy (Caffo) and that of realism as a frame of reference (Taddio). Also, this is one of the very first issues gathering the receptions of Speculative Realism and Object Oriented Ontology in Italy (see, especially, Longo).

We hope to provide the reader with a good overview of the relation between different forms of post-postmodern realism and the “consequences of realism” – to quote the title of a recent international conference – on other fields of knowledge.

The Editors

## Why Matter Matters

.....  
*Maurizio Ferraris*  
*Università di Torino*  
*(Italia)*  
 .....

### 1. Work of Aura

**H**ow do you picture your funeral? If you think you'll opt for a civil ceremony, then you know there will be relatively improvised speeches and applause: the impromptu is likely to prevail. There will be no structuring ritual, no formal apparatus to make the pain bearable. And yet the same might happen in a religious ceremony, if it were to mimic the civil rite and acquire its uncertainties and difficulties: imagine it took place in an ugly church with poor ornaments, and the speeches did not make use of a high register but of everyday language. The experiment of the funeral is somewhat extreme but, in the end, appropriate (as it affects everyone) to address the difficulties of sacred art – currently confused with profane art, which is not in its golden age either.

Why is it so? Camille Paglia, in *Glittering Images: A Journey Through Art from Egypt to Star Wars*,<sup>1</sup> speaks of a crisis of the spirit. Gone are the days of the cathedrals, and religion is no longer the subject of art. According to the author, this is manifested at a mac-

rosopic level in the oblivion of the canon (people don't understand an annunciation or a flight into Egypt because they do not know what they are). I would add that the main client of art has changed, as it is no longer the Church but the government: artists now have to simulate social interests just as they had to simulate religious interests in the past. And the public does no longer go see art in the church, but at exhibitions, pushed by the media and advertisements. As a result, the only occasions in which there is talk of sacred art is when it comes to provocations, such as *Piss Christ* by Serrano, Kippenberger's crucified frog, or Cattelan's John Paul II crushed by a meteorite.

To counter this trend, the Catholic Church is now seeking to recover a relationship with art that would not be subordinated or mimetic, by designing a Vatican pavilion at the Venice Biennale or involving contemporary artists in ancient churches (think of the altar by Parmeggiani in the cathedral of Reggio Emilia, Kounellis' bishop's chair or the candlestick by Spalletti). The results are not obvious, because the difficulties of sacred art are only the strongest symptom of the difficulties of art in general – as authoritative and even conservative commentators have recently pointed out, see Marc Fumaroli,<sup>2</sup> Jean Clair<sup>3</sup> and Roger Scruton.<sup>4</sup> Art, in fact, seems to be realizing Nietzsche's prophecy about humanity after Copernicus:

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<sup>2</sup> Claire 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Fumaroli 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Scruton 2009.

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<sup>1</sup> Paglia 2012.

it is “rolling off toward the x”, without an end and without an orientation.

Now, it is easy to see that many sectors of contemporary art are in crisis. It is even easier to see that the “return to religion” talked about for the past twenty years has largely been a false alarm: it has not led to any real change of customs or beliefs, which remain secular in all respects. However, I find it too easy and simplistic to establish (as Paglia does) a direct relationship between a spiritual crisis and an aesthetic crisis. There surely is a relationship between the two but, if anything, it is the reverse of what the author posits: the hyper-spiritualization of art, become conceptual, is what has caused the aesthetic crisis. This phenomenon was described very well by Hegel: while ancient classical art develops an “aesthetic religion” characterized by a strict correspondence between form and content, in modern romantic art content (the spirit, the concept) prevails over form. Christ on the cross is not nice to look at, what matters is the spiritual significance of the scene: here, in this extreme conceptualism, we have the most powerful antecedent of Duchamp.

All romantic art – as well as its heirs, the avant-garde, which not coincidentally mainly took place in the Christian world (to my knowledge there are no Islamic, Jewish, Confucian, Taoist, or Hindu avant-gardes) – develops this hyper-spiritual vocation. The claim made by contemporary visual art that beauty is not at its centre<sup>5</sup> is a statement

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin 1968.

of hyper-conceptuality. It is not true, as is always repeated following Benjamin, that in the age of mechanical reproduction art has lost the aura resulting from uniqueness. What has happened is exactly the opposite, the artwork is now essentially a work of aura, the result of a fully spiritual consecration by which any object is transformed into artwork, museums are transformed into temples, visitors turn into pilgrims and penitents, and art dealers become merchants of aura.<sup>6</sup>

Assuming that, if exposed in a favourable location and with the appropriate ritual, anything can become a work of art, means placing transubstantiation within artistic production: the artist consecrates any object, transforming it into an artwork, through reading a devotional text written by an art-critic. So it is true that there is no more sacred art (with sacred subjects) and that we no longer know how to build beautiful churches. But in new and often beautiful cathedrals – museums – we are engaging in a perpetual adoration. If this is the case, then, art is not dead, but more alive than ever, and indeed it has taken the place of religion.

One can always object to this interpretation that “conceptual” is not equivalent to “spiritual,” that the spirit may be mystery and revelation, while the concept is transparency, clarity, and often a futile game. It might also be objected that the aura of conceptual works is an aura of plastic. Sure, but the problem is that in order to restore the

<sup>6</sup> Dal Lago – Giordano 2006.

myth – perhaps to create a “new mythology” as the romantics dreamed two centuries ago – the will to do so isn’t enough. After all, the whole story is already written in *War and Peace*: at the eve of the battle of Borodino, Napoleon, the bourgeois and Enlightened emperor, contemplates the picture of his son, the King of Rome. His opponent, Kutusov, kneels in front of the icons. The outcome of the battle is uncertain, while that of the war will be disastrous for Napoleon. But in the long run, in the two centuries that separate us from Borodino, Napoleon’s principles have had the upper hand. We are now more able to see the limits of those principles, in art, economy and politics, as well as in our own lives. But we are also aware (or at least this is my steadfast belief) that spirituality and the divine are bound to a power we have to acknowledge, but with which we can not reconcile if not in an illusory form, sacrificing the values, merits and pains of modernity.

## 2. Contractual Art

**I**t is important to define the meaning of “concept” in the phrase “conceptual art.” In what sense is Duchamp’s bottle rack more conceptual than the School of Athens by Raphael, who manages to embody in the single gesture of Aristotle’s half-raised hand the *via media* character of ethical virtues? In hindsight, the notion of conceptual art is a legal concept: if we take

the couple “law and art”,<sup>7</sup> we will notice that the former is not extrinsic to the latter (unlike what would happen if, say, we tried to explain artworks through their authors’ pathologies according to the couple “psychiatry and art.”)

For the past century conceptual art has, in fact, been contractual: it deals with the economic data (the world of art is above all the art market) and seeks to broaden the definition of art, renegotiating the implicit contract between buyer, author and user to the point of essentially becoming a contract itself. In fact, the only concept used by conceptual-contractual art is, after all, the law of art, the canonical idea that an artwork is a physical thing, made by an author and endowed with an attractive appearance. Therefore, it is necessary to contradict the canons, move around them, expand them, remove them, and all this, rather perversely, happens through a tool that is traditionally associated with the canon and legality: the contract.

The powers of the contract are great, as it has a performative dimension and allows one to do things with words, as suggested by the English philosopher John L. Austin,<sup>8</sup> the theoretician of speech acts, who noted that the words “I do” at a wedding do not merely describe a ceremony, but produce two new social objects, a husband and a wife. The same thing systematically happens with documents, which allow one to certify, document, archive, name, and so forth ac-

<sup>7</sup> See Donati 2012, Ajani-Donati (eds), 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Austin 1962.

ording to a dual mode which I believe can be traced back to the following: “weak document” (record of a fact) and “strong document” (inscription of an act). To be clear, all the artists that record performances otherwise destined to disappear produce weak documents. The same happens when artists – such as Gordon Matta-Clark, who makes collages with legal papers – take advantage of the aesthetic appeal of paperwork and the magic power of archive.

But documents can be used in a stronger form, that is, to literally produce acts: Theodore Fu Wan contractually changes his name to Saskatche Wan, Alix Lambert gets married with five different wives in six months, Maria Eichhorn conceives of her own artistic activity as the drafting of contracts in order to protect urban areas threatened by speculation. The conferring power of the document is at the heart of practices such as those by Stefan Bruggemann and Robert Barry, who have two of their works assigned by contract every five years to one or the other. Similarly, exploiting the laws of copyright, Philippe Parreno and Peter Huyge acquire the rights to use a Manga figure. The contract can go up to the staging of a subversion of the rules that are no longer those of art, but of the Criminal Code, such as when the artist gives the order to rob a grocery store, or, as in “Corruption Contract” by the group Superflex, the buyer – in obvious derogation from the standard theory of beauty as a symbol of moral goodness – is committed to extort or bribe.

One can also create artworks by a mere contractual *fiat*. In 1959 Yves Klein made

”Empty Artist,” an exhibition without works, in which the user was issued a contract for the sale of a “zone of immaterial pictorial sensibility”. Much later, in 2010, Etienne Chambaud made a work that consists only of contracts, certificates and statements of authenticity. Similarly, the contract can turn the author into an artwork, as in the arrangement by which Jill Magid gives a specialized company a mandate to transform its charred remains into a diamond. But the extreme case is perhaps that of Robert Morris’ 1963 contract, which consists of two parts: on the left, an iron plate with a few lines engraved on it, on the right a statement in which the artist withdraws the artwork status from the artwork itself, transferring the artistic aura onto the document.

Immanuel Kant said that the character of art consists in making people think. But what thoughts are aroused by these works? Questions of an essentially legal nature. For example: who is the author, if she merely gives instructions for others to make the work? She can be intimidating if, as Seth Siegelaub did, she prescribes in the contract that even the slightest change involves an irreversible alteration of the artwork. She can even be despotic, in a perverse way: this is the case of Daniel Buren who rigorously avoids signing or authenticating his works. And again, can we say that the curator of an exhibition or a museum is an author, when his responsibility goes far beyond the management of the exhibition space? (For instance, an artist like Cattelan has co-curated the Berlin Biennial in 2006 with Massimiliano Gioni).

And is the performance really an immaterial artwork that escapes the market? It was so according to the original ideology, but now the world is full of recordings of performances. Indeed, the world is full of documents, as in the philosophical conversations with Ian Wilson, of which only a piece of paper with a signature is left. There are even “scripta”, works that can be assembled and unassembled following instructions for use. Or works that only consist in documents, such as the sheet of the complaint lodged by Cattelan at the police headquarters in Forlì, reporting the theft of an invisible work of art from his car.

However, contemporary art simply brings to the fore a character proper of the artworks of all time and type. A documental aspect has always defined the horizon of art, as it has to do with the establishment of social objects in general. So, like any other social object, the artwork is defined by a law which I have tried to formalize in the terms of Object = Inscribed Act. That is to say that social objects are the result of social acts (such as to involve at least two people) characterized by the fact of being recorded, on a piece of paper, a computer file, or even only in people’s minds. Therefore, the dimension of the contract is not a break with the essence of traditional art, which as such postulates the cooperation between author and user suggested over thirty years ago by Umberto Eco in *Lector in fabula*.<sup>9</sup> The full realization of expectations, even in traditional

art, often led to a factor of surprise, a slight transgression of the rule, so as to give a breath of authorship and novelty to the arts that (unlike heavily coded traditions) call for such things.

The contemporary variant is precisely the thrill of the contract, in which the artist feels the more revolutionary the more he develops the sophistication of a shyster. Here transgression and the surprise element become the most important features of the work, and the bureaucratic frisson takes the place of other elements (information, emotion, aesthetic satisfaction) that were constitutive of traditional artworks. The romantic dream of turning the world into a work of art was realized in the paperwork, where art really comes down to life. The bartender that does not give you the receipt is potentially an absolute performer, and the event would be even more sublime and complete if it is accompanied by a report to the financial police.

We all await the time when a condominium assembly will become a work of art, whose vestige, the minutes, will be hung on the wall as a decoration. In contractual art, an old cartoon by Giuseppe Novello comes true. The cartoon depicts a young man whose noble and cultured family wanted him to be a composer, but who at night – under the frowning eyes of Beethoven’s bust – gave vent to his true Muse: accounting. Nothing wrong with that. After all, Jeff Koons worked in the stock market. Perfection would be reached if Cattelan received a chair of commercial law drawing on the ex-

<sup>9</sup> Eco 1979.



pertise accumulated in his years of artistic militancy.

### 3. From the Vittoriano to the Urinal

**A**nd beauty? It is no longer a problem, of course, provided that it has ever been one. Since 1993, in Boston, there has been a MOBA, a Museum of Bad Art which organises exhibitions and conferences developing an idea that is simple but efficacious: take some bad paintings and call them by their real name. This doesn't always work, some pieces are not that bad after all, and overall one gets the impression that the percentage of bad art is not significantly greater than that present in many museums of fine arts, both ancient and modern. What matters, though, is that MOBA ironizes about what for a century now has been the fundamental aesthetic creed of avant-gardes, which I would call "dogma of aesthetic indifference". That is, the thesis according to which beauty is no longer the primary objective of what used to be called "fine arts" to distinguish them from useful arts.

This aesthetic (or more exactly anaesthetic) creed comes from afar and goes back at least to Romanticism, characterised by Hegel (who didn't really like the Romantics) as a prevalence of content over form, as a prearranged and strongly wanted disharmony. It is not by chance that in 1853 a Hegelian, Rosenkranz, wrote *Aesthetics of*

*the Ugliness*,<sup>10</sup> grasping the spirit of the age: beauty is not needed, aura is enough, although this took place in the epoch of daguerreotype – that is, of that technical reproducibility which, according to Benjamin, endorses the end of artistic aura. This is a precocious and evident proof, I believe, of the thesis I am trying to defend, namely that the disappearance of beauty and the imposition of aura are two concomitant phenomena.

Nonetheless, like in any religion, the dogma of aesthetic indifference has many more followers in theory than in practice. When writing an essay on aesthetics, one is always ready to affirm that what one is dealing with is a conceptual experience in which beauty is a fossil out of place. One is not as ready, though, to affirm the same when buying a table or an armchair, a carpet or a dress: then the requirement of aesthetic pleasantness stays unchanged. It is not hard to recognise a contradiction here (or, to stick to religious jargon, a double truth), so that we have an age, ours, that carefully cultivates the myth of beauty and yet easily accepts that what used to be called "fine arts" no longer have beauty as their primary objective.

Thus we have, on the one hand, the most beautiful women and men in history, the best-finished objects, the most-selected food, incomparably better wines than all the wines mankind has ever drunk – and works of art that are ugly, on purpose so, or unkempt, or

<sup>10</sup> Rosenkranz 1853.

meaningless, or at least an art that thinks it can be ugly because it sees itself as intelligent. And since looks (and taste) still matter, the consolation for visitors is offered by galleries, which are beautiful (we shall come back to this later, as it's not a detail). Or perhaps the gratification lies in the free wine and cheese you are offered at inaugurations (unlike the cinema, where you're the one to pay for wine and cheese, if you want them, since supposedly the aesthetic gratification comes from the show). Now, there are people convinced that between what you see in a gallery and what you put into your own house there is an abyss. I (and I doubt I am the only one) believe it is not so, also because many works are destined to enter people's houses, just like many other handiworks. In the following pages I will therefore try to fight the correlated dogmas of aesthetic indifference and auratic omnipotence attempting an answer to the question: what can be done to avoid that any MOMA or MOCA or MACBA or MADRE or MAMBO becomes indistinguishable from a MOBA?

Despite the appearances, the MOBA belongs to an ancient tradition, as its predecessors can already be found in the situation described by Carlo Dossi when commenting on the sketches for the Vittoriano in *I mattoidi: al primo concorso pel monumento in Roma a Vittorio Emanuele II* (literally, *The nutcases: for the first competition for the Victor Emmanuel II monument in Rome*)<sup>11</sup>: “Èccomi

<sup>11</sup> Dossi 1884.

a voi, pòveri bozzetti fuggiti od avviati al manicomio, dinanzi ai quali chi prende la vita sul tràgico passa facendo atti di sdegno e chi la prende, come si deve, a gioco, si abbandona a momenti di clamorosa ilarità”.<sup>12</sup> This was in 1884, that is, in an age of bad taste and eclecticism possibly produced by the vast photographic material at disposal (it is on this side, rather than that of the loss of aura, that we should measure the impact of technical reproducibility on art). Beauty was still being searched-for, but it wasn't found, and the outcome was the very white, marble writing machine that we can still see in Piazza Venezia in Rome – which is not so bad, after all, if we compare it with other rejected sketches that Dossi laughed about.

Also, it is not so bad when compared with many works of art that fill galleries and museums, and that appeal to what I propose we call Great Conceptual Art: the art that has cultivated the dogmas of aesthetic indifference and auratic omnipotence. If the works of the “nutcases” were often ugly but not on purpose, those of the Great Conceptual Art are just as ugly, but purposely so. One would be tempted to see in this an extra responsibility but instead, with a somehow miraculous proceeding (as it has to do with transfiguration) it is not so. While laughing at the Vittoriano, scorning its ugliness and pitying its author are all accepted attitudes, if

<sup>12</sup> “Here I am, you poor sketches escaped from – or made in – the madhouse, before whom those who take life tragically pass showing disdain, and those who take it (as they should) as a game abandon themselves to moments of clamorous hilarity”.

one risked doing the same with Great Conceptual Art one would be in trouble, accused of nostalgia, incompetence, bad taste and aesthetic insensibility (and it's bizarre, given that this art does not aspire to beauty). Beauty is no longer art's business and if you didn't get that you're an ignoramus.

If you think about it, this doctrine it is bizarre because it would be like saying that health is not medicine's priority. Given that Great Conceptual Art comes not long after the Vittoriano, someone could malevolently think that the dogma of aesthetic indifference is a late version of the fable of the fox and the grapes. Yet the intimidated audience accepts and endures. They go to exhibitions, applaud and buy if they can, proving to be much less self-confident than the nineteenth century bourgeoisie, that would perhaps scorn Impressionism, but at least, in doing so, showed that it had its own taste. Great Conceptual Art users can, at most, say to themselves: "I could have made this". But they are wrong: the endeavour is far beyond their reach, it is very, and romantically, monumental. In the age when nutcases were competing for the Vittoriano, Nietzsche wrote *Beyond Good and Evil* proposing a transvaluation of all values. An undoubtedly vast project, that nonetheless was realised in art. When the last unprepared visitors – those ready to shout "Ugly! Ugly!", in the right or the wrong, in front of ugly or beautiful works – were gone, a spell was cast so that their very sons or grandchildren say "Beautiful! Beautiful!" before works that have only one declared feature, namely that of not aspiring to beauty.

The Zarathustra of this transvaluation was obviously Duchamp, thirty years after the nutcases of the Vittoriano. But Duchamp's genius did not consist, as is sometimes believed, of his breaking with the past. Rather, in the opposite way, it consisted of his art's ultimate continuity with it. His urinal, as well as the Mona Lisa with moustaches, draws together the threads of the aesthetic frustrations accumulated by generations of eclecticism and pompierism, together with a forced and semi-religious cult of Great Non Conceptual Art. Are you tired of showing an aesthetic devotion that doesn't belong to you before the Mona Lisa? Don't worry, draw some moustaches on her and you shall be saved by the intervention of Great Conceptual Art. Are you fed up with works that struggle to be beautiful and are just vulgar or ordinary? Again, don't worry: take a urinal, or a bottle rack (curious tool, by the way) or a bicycle wheel, exhibit it in a pertinent environment (a gallery or a museum), give it a title and sign it: you'll have realised the marvellous conceptual transubstantiation thanks to which a common object becomes a work of aura. From this point of view, applying the dogma of aesthetic indifference and auraticity at all costs is crucial, so as to avoid some incompetent thinking that the miracle depends on the action of aesthetic properties instead of the conceptual invention. Here's the first difference from the Vittoriano, a monument that loved beauty, despite not being loved back.

There is a second difference. Dossi could easily laugh at the Vittoriano, whereas with

Duchamp's urinal one needs to be very serious and thoughtful, admiring and concentrated. Otherwise one risks ending up like Franti, who in *Cuore* is defined a "villain" for smiling when the teacher narrates the funerals of king Umberto. Like in every miracle, a good deal of faith is necessary on the part of the observers. You have to believe it. But once you do, then any transvaluation is truly possible. It'd like to demonstrate this with an anecdote. A few years ago an important foundation of Great Conceptual Art asked me to organise a cycle of conferences in conjunction with the exhibition of an artist who proposed, I was told, a profound reflection on violence. When I requested to know what the meditation was about they explained to me that the artist had gone to a slaughterhouse in Mexico and had killed, with a hammer, a dozen horses there. The reflection on violence consisted of the recordings of the massacre. I pointed out that I couldn't see the meditative side, given that (if words have any meaning at all) it was not a reflection but an action, a cruel and extremely violent one, a kind of snuff movie against animals. I was then told that those animals were going to be slaughtered anyway.

So if the artist had gone to the showers in Auschwitz hammering to death the wretched people who entered (and who were going to die anyway) maybe some critics or curators would have said that the artist's was a profound reflection on violence. The entire conversation took place, as it had to (we shall get back to this point, which might seem lateral or environmental but it's cru-

cial in its being lateral or environmental), in a white room, minimal and very elegant like an Apple Store, and the people talking to me were all educated, well-mannered and kind men and (mostly) women. I was the ill-mannered one, unwilling to understand. On my way back home, I wondered if the transvaluation of all values wasn't moving from aesthetics to ethics, because perhaps aesthetic atrophy, the habit of swallowing anything, has started to unleash a form of moral atrophy.

#### 4. Intimidation and Indulgence

In the end the exhibition didn't take place, as it was prohibited by animal rights activists and by the superintendent. I wonder: if it had taken place, what would the artist have done? Would he have stood at the door of the gallery holding a hammer? Maybe, but even without armed artists welcoming them, visitors normally seem quite intimidated in art galleries: they often pay to see an exhibition, and yet they walk around with a shy and respectful attitude. One may wonder how much fear people have, and who exactly is threatening them. Also, one may wonder whether it is humanly possible to find *everything* beautiful: at a restaurant or in a shop that is never the case, as there are always things one does not like. In art, however, everything is taken to be beautiful, and this – for a further paradox – happens just at the time when Great Conceptual art imposes the canon of aesthetic indifference. And yet this paradox

ceases to be when one realizes that the aesthetic indifference hides an auratic omnipotence.

One is tempted to reach a very simple conclusion: in this transfiguration (as in all transformations) not only is there circumvention but also a good deal of social intimidation. This intimidating factor relies on the solid bourgeois element that thinkers from Nietzsche to Bourdieu have called “distinction”.<sup>13</sup> It is not distinguished not to appreciate the slaughter of horses. It is not distinguished to show hesitation in the face of a work that consists (I happened to see it) of a chainsaw put into a boat – I guess it was meant to refer to the transience of all human affairs, somehow like a *Stilleben* created by Leroy Merlin. The chainsaw in the dinghy was the repetitive and almost paroxysmal version of the readymade, almost a hundred years later. Now, I know that this observation is far from original, but the readymade truly seems to be a gimmick that changes with time, with iteration and by imitation, in an intellectual swindle with motivations of economic interest. At its heart there is a powerful intuition. At a time when the nutcases of the Vittoriano are looking for beauty in vain and are committed to cover anything up with an aesthetic patina, the readymade proposes a radical gesture and says that the search is useless: anything can be a work of art.

The first movement, then, is desecration. The artwork has nothing special about it, it

can be anything: at least nominally, it can be a thing without aura or nor art. In reality, though, it isn't true that anything can be a work of art, because it would be difficult to turn a natural event such as a hurricane into a work of art. The same goes for an ideal object such as an equilateral triangle (at most, there would be a concrete object, the design of the equilateral triangle, and that, not the triangle itself, would be the artwork).<sup>14</sup> Rather, what Duchamp suggests is something very reasonable that I personally fully agree with: *the artwork is first and foremost a thing*, with certain dimensions, features etc. Indeed, it is from time immemorial that museums (and the royal galleries that preceded them) have included all sorts of things that were not intended for aesthetic contemplation: weapons, buckles, tombstones, and of course human bodies (such as in Egyptian museums, which show how body art has an ancient soul).

The real desecration, therefore, lies not so much in the idea that anything can be a work of art, but rather in saying that, whatever it is, the work of art can afford to be ugly, i.e. not to aspire to beauty, to the status of what Duchamp called “retinal art”.<sup>15</sup> Besides, this does not apply to other things of supposed aesthetic value, such as design objects. Therefore, Duchamp's real stroke of genius, much more than the readymade, was the practical elaboration of the thesis of aesthetic indifference as auratic omnipotence. This

<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu 1987.

<sup>14</sup> I have developed this point in Ferraris 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Cabanne 1967.

thesis proves to be valuable and salvific in an age of aesthetic confusion, in which the eclecticism of many traditions generates the situation described by Gadda in *Acquainted with Grief*: the villas in Brianza “had something of the pagoda and something of the spinning mill, and they were also a compromise between the Alhambra and the Kremlin”.<sup>16</sup> In this grab-bag of styles, classes, tastes and cultures, no one could be sure of one’s own taste, and everyone had reasonable grounds to think one was wrong: the estimators of Impressionism felt insecure because now that taste had been overcome by Cubism, the lovers of Art Pompier felt the same because it was considered “poor in spirit” by the enthusiasts of Impressionism and Cubism, and so forth. On the one hand, therefore, there is the path that leads from the Vittoriale to the Vittoriano: that is, the inclusive and syncretic path which collects all kinds of horrors in a museum. On the other hand, there is Duchamp’s break with the past: what matters is not the beauty, but the concept of a work. Once this is clear, with a radical Copernican revolution, one can stop worrying.

However, this apparent desecration fully capitalizes on the sacred value of art, and here lies the crux of intimidation. Just as the moustache drawn on the Mona Lisa derive their prestige through transgression and lese majeste, so the readymade presupposes a consecration that is inseparable from its desecration. Duchamp, in showing its ob-

<sup>16</sup> Gadda 1969.

jects, exploited the canonical value of art: a whole heritage of respectability and auraticity. Bow down to this ugliness, to the dishonour of Golgotha (recall that for Hegel romanticism found its fundamental paradigm in the scandal of Christ on the cross),<sup>17</sup> because through this genuflection you shall burn incense to the god unknown. Once put on a pedestal, the thing becomes an artwork, and the devotee will contemplate urinals and bottle racks with the same tension and aesthetically concentrated attitude dedicated to romantic art. In fact, people at exhibitions behave exactly as in church, or at Bayreuth: they are often silent or whispering, and would never dare to act as was common in the eighteenth century, an age in which the theatre lights were on and people ate while watching the show. Even the Chardonnay and cheddar that they give you at inaugurations somehow have the function of the Eucharist rather than that of “party food” – as this would reduce the works to a mere ornament and accompaniment.

Surprisingly, then, while the artist desecrates (at least in appearance), the user consecrates and feels bestowed with a decisive task: making art valuable, auraticizing it with her faith – just like a meteorite in the desert can be transformed by the faithful into the symbol of God. The two experiences – the rite in the gallery and the one in the desert – have a common element: the mystery. It is not clear what is expected from the artwork, but it’s a kind of redemption. This is a strik-

<sup>17</sup> Hegel 1975.

ing confirmation of the fact that if technical reproducibility produced a loss of the aura of uniqueness, the aura was promptly (and much more abundantly) reconstructed by the faith of the users. The outward manifestation of devotion is often inadequate, and therefore people's saying "beautiful, beautiful" is an invocation rather than an appreciation. Theirs is a strategy of the sublime, which not coincidentally was extensively rehabilitated in the critical discourse on the avant-garde. Beauty becomes conspicuous by its absence where there's nothing beautiful and one is deliberately seeking the common and the ugly. But this lack, this mismatch between the concept and the object (this is essentially the sublime, especially the mathematical one, as Kant theorizes it in the *Critique of Judgment*)<sup>18</sup> gives the impression to go far beyond the beautiful, because what matters are the intentions and thoughts, not the sensible appearance – as suggested, with terrifying machismo, again by Kant, when he said that a woman can be beautiful, but only man is sublime.<sup>19</sup>

Like all forms of asceticism, intimidation involves more than an indulgence: it implies spaces in which pleasure is returned and devotion is rewarded. It is no coincidence that the era of Great Conceptual Art, as that of the romantic spirit, is the only one in the history of taste that has come up with compensatory sub-categories: Kitsch, Camp, Pop (Pop was assumed by Great Conceptual Art

with a stratagem, on which we will return later). The situation is that of the Vittoriano and the Vittoriale: taste is no longer sure of itself, or cannot confess its predilections. If one wants to listen to Madonna, much preferring her to Stockhausen, or if one likes Campbell's soup cans and understands nothing of Picasso, and above all if one is bored to death watching Duchamp's urinal for the millionth time, there is a way out: one can claim that one likes Kitsch, Camp, and Pop – and will make a great impression too. This suggests that the common element in the compensatory triad Kitsch-Camp-Pop is the fear of being judged and (even more) of judging, due to an uncertainty of taste.

For a full "acceptance" of the phenomenon, one has to wait for its outcome and natural development: postmodernism, which follows from it in an explicit form, as one can read, for example, in a meaningful conversation between Charles Jencks and Susan Sontag.<sup>20</sup> Jencks' idea is that people ruin their lives for the sake of principles and that it is better to be nihilists – that is, among other things, not to care about those who judge us Kitsch or Camp or Pop. The genealogy of postmodern taste is the following. It begins with Camp (first English and then global), it continues with Kitsch and Pop, and culminates with postmodernism and weak thought, which returns Camp, Kitsch and Pop aficionados (that is, the greater part of humanity) some kind of good conscience: a kind of absolution or indulgence. "Don't

<sup>18</sup> Kant 1961.

<sup>19</sup> Kant I. 1951: ch. III.

<sup>20</sup> The conversation appears in Cleto 2008 (ed).

worry, yours is not bad taste” Or rather, even bad taste has a space and a social dignity: there are essays, handbooks, conferences and conventions about it.

Like all indulgences, of course, it leaves some doubts: does this forgiveness extend to Dolce and Gabbana and Lady Gaga? But the core of the matter is clear. The Romantics wanted a synthesis between philosophy and art, they pursued a new mythology. Two outcomes were produced by this dream: ascetic art, which took its first steps in Beethoven’s late style, and Kitsch, which originally designated the taste of the new bourgeoisie of Monaco, who could not suffer Beethoven’s quartets but much enjoyed Loden capes. With time and industry, with capitalism and imperialism, the phenomenon was universalized, reaching stronger cultural circuits and more important industrial circuits. This is how Friedrich Hölderlin’s solitary Kitsch (leading to the saying that that man dwells poetically) was replaced by a Swinging London Brian Jones, Gina Lollobrigida, Victor Mature, Flash Gordon and the double-breasted Gianni Agnelli.

In this context Nietzsche’s words would fit perfectly: “I am all the names in history,” as he wrote to Burckhardt.<sup>21</sup> Or, as Alberto Arbasino wrote in *Super Eliogabalo* [Super Heliogabalus], “Nietzsche, Adorno, Lacan, Toto’ .” All camp, no doubt. If this is the case, the campest of all is Martin Heidegger, in his Tyrolean jacket and a nightcap on his head (this was very well grasped in *Old*

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche 1885/1889, letter dated 6 January 1889.

*Masters* by Thomas Bernhard, who is also camp),<sup>22</sup> proclaiming that the work of art is no less than truth’s setting-itself-to-work, illustrating his thesis with the temple of Paestum (originally the Nuremberg Zeppelin Field set up on the pattern of the altar of Pergamon to accommodate Hitler’s speeches), the shoes painted by Van Gogh, and a poem by Conrad Ferdinand Meyer.<sup>23</sup>

### 5. Matter Matters

So, this is the crime scene. What to do? First of all, against the totalitarianism of the concept, it is worth noting that there is no art without appeal to perception, namely something that is not thought; therefore, the artwork is not simply the reminder of the ideas of a guy who, for some reason, chose to be an artist rather than a philosopher. This is about learning from Hegel, not when he speaks of romanticism and the death of art, but where he says that “sense” is a wonderful word, because it has two opposite meanings. On the one hand, it refers to the senses – vision, hearing, touch, smell, taste – and everything that has to do with perception. On the other hand, it indicates the meaning, related to thought, as when we say “the sense of life.” It is not surprising that aesthetics – the study of art – derives its name from sense perception (*aisthesis* in Greek).<sup>24</sup> Trying to prevent the solidarity

<sup>22</sup> Bernhard 1985.

<sup>23</sup> Heidegger 2002.

<sup>24</sup> I have developed this point in Ferraris 1997.



between these two poles, not considering that matter matters and thinking that art is the greater the more it deviates from perception: these were the first mistakes that led to the dead-end of Great Conceptual Art. And yet, it is by never breaking with the senses and with perception that one can keep the way open for beauty.

But there's more. As Jane Austen noted in her *Sense and Sensibility*, there is another duality similar to the "wonderful" duplicity of sense and the senses. The concept must always be accompanied by feeling, because those who reject feeling in art do so only because they confuse feeling with sentimentality. The idea is very simple. What do we look for when we look at artworks? Mainly feelings.<sup>25</sup> Otherwise, we would read a treatise instead. It is not truth that we look for in art: this is why art has always been linked to beauty. By the same token, one can understand why, as we have seen in the case of the horse-slaughterer, a certain degree of aesthetic atrophy can go hand in hand with moral atrophy.

Finally, there is a third element of Great Conceptual Art that we should take into account. It is the search for a style that is immediately recognizable, even through the wide variety of realizations, media, issues. They say the style is the man himself. But it is also the artwork, because what we expect from the works is something unique and individual, just like people.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> I have developed this point in Ferraris 2007.

<sup>26</sup> I have developed this notion in Ferraris 2009.

## 6. Ten, Eleven, Twelve Muses

**A**fter the recovery of perception, feeling and style, we can move further. Very often philosophers, when elaborating theories on art, only refer to visual art, as if it were paradigmatic. And yet, this is not the case. Contemporary visual art and its church-like museums leads to a form of consecration, rite and admiration governed by the theory of aesthetic indifference. But there is a great deal of artistic objects (think of videoclips, movies, comic books, songs) that occupy our lives much more intensely than visual art. Such objects follow completely different cults, trying to capture the user with the most profane things, without being able to afford the luxury of aesthetic indifference. Given that good will is not enough, it can often happen that these objects are ugly or nothing special, but the point is that the user can say, "I like that" or "I do not like that", while with visual art things are different. So the death of art prophesied by Hegel two centuries ago was perfectly realized. At least it was perfectly realized in visual art, or rather, in that part of visual art that understands itself as Great Conceptual Art. The other kinds of art are doing well, and new ones emerge (think of video clips, or graphic novels). It is not the first time that new forms of art replace old ones (for example, at some point epic poems disappeared and novels appeared) and the really interesting thing is wondering what will be next.

Returning to the issue of aura, we realize that perhaps things have gone very differ-

ently from what we expected. Almost a hundred years ago, Benjamin had argued that technical reproducibility would lead to a loss of aura. He was referring to the fact that paintings were being replaced by photographs, and the single work was substituted by many identical copies. Fifty years ago Andy Warhol began to take pictures with the Polaroid signing the shots, because those photos without negative were unique pieces. But, of course, they were also anomalies, because the ordinary photo has a negative, so it is infinitely reproducible – even more so in the case of digital photos. I wonder what Benjamin (who died in 1940) and Warhol (who died in 1987) would have said if they had predicted that this reproducibility was going to grow enormously, thanks to the Internet. Concretely, if I type “Brillo Box” + “Warhol” I will get almost nine thousand hits on Google, and if I select the image search I will find almost three thousand reproductions of the *Brillo Box*, the box of steel wool exhibited by Warhol in 1964 and considered a pop icon. But if I do this research on my tablet I will have three thousand images available in another place, and the same happens if I do the same thing on my smartphone. As a result, on the same table, I will have virtually nine thousand images of the *Brillo Box* and twenty-seven websites that talk about it or reproduce it.

Now, the question is: has this infinite reproducibility led to the disappearance of art? Of course not. In a sense, there is too much of it. There are countless works of pop art, countless forms of art. The only thing that disappeared, or that has dropped drastically

in the case of reproduced works of art, is the price. But it is precisely to remedy this problem that the work of aura was devised, that is, the most spiteful and intractable creation of the last century, the most resolute to displease the taste, the most pretentious in declaring that beauty is not on top of its aspirations. I once happened to have a discussion with a museum director who told me “Of course, in order to fully understand these works one must be part of the art world.” I pointed out that it was not very different from saying that to understand certain works one must be Aryan. This is an aspect that normally, to my knowledge, is not talked about, but I think it is crucial. Why do we condemn the surplus in industrial production and blame the financial capital, while passively accepting the very same things when it comes to art?

Reconsidering the relationship between art and social reality does not mean (God forbid) defending some form of realism. Rather, it means realistically examining what can keep up with some puzzling phenomena, which affect not only the production of artworks, but the art world as a whole. How is it possible that an architect such as Alvaro Siza has been able to realize beautiful exhibition spaces at the Madre in Naples but did not put outlets and switches in them? And the worst is that this great dysfunctionality was motivated by aesthetic reasons, much like what happened with the infamous Starck juicer.

The ones I mentioned are the side effects of the rejection of beauty in art and the following genesis of the work of aura. The

great “No” to beauty must be followed by other agencies carrying out a supplying function – generating figures that were once unimaginable, like fashion victims, design maniacs, or compulsive exhibition visitors. Or strange couples like the one between hyper-architectural museums and the works contained in them. The museums are generally all different, except for the name, which is a variation of Moma. The works contained, however, are all the same, all equally transgressive, all equally decided not to seek beauty (because if they did, they would be relegated in a more modest space, for example, a design shop). Hence a paradox on which it might be worth pondering. Intimidated common sense agrees that anything can be a work of art (and not a work of aura, a thing to which some conventionally auratic value is usually attached) . But at the same time design has taught us how difficult it is to produce good objects: it is not true that any object can be an object of design. As a result, if it is true that being a work of art is, for an object, something like a sanctification, while being a design object is, so to speak, a promotion of lesser rank, than it seems that in the twentieth century it was easier to be saints than blessed.

Now, the salt-cellar by Cellini is cumbersome, but it still can contain salt, if necessary, while the Starck juicer will never squeeze a decent juice. What happened between Cellini and Starck? After all, it is a good question. I think the answer is simpler than it appears. The middle class (not necessarily very educated, unlike the courtly and aristocratic patronage that had preceded it)

saw the work of aura as an instrument of social advancement and enrichment. At this point, the industrial production of works of aura began, filling the galleries and museums that proliferated through the establishment of public expenditure in which officials bought with the people’s money. And I’m not at all convinced that museum directors would ever take home many of the works of aura they expose, nor would they ever buy them if they had to pay out of their pockets. Mind you: there have always been bad artworks, the Louvre or the Alte Pinakothek are full of them, as anyone can see. Man is not perfect and, above all, perfection is rare. But what the twentieth century has managed to achieve is the ideological legitimacy of ugliness through the work of aura. I wonder what the archaeologists of the future will think, if and when they find the works of aura. Maybe they will not even notice, and consider as works of art those that are currently regarded as minor productions.

### 7. Future Archaeologists

**I**n this regard I would like to suggest a reflection. In George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, a professor (Henry Higgins) is committed to transform a simple girl (Eliza Doolittle) into a woman of high society. The *topos* is turned upside down by Mauro Covacich in *L’ arte contemporanea spiegata a mio marito* [Contemporary art ex-

plained to my husband],<sup>27</sup> where an educated wife or girlfriend takes a wealthy but unruly man out of the abyss of ignorance and distrust of contemporary art, by explaining word by word (but without too much arrogance) the sense of provocation wished for by Duchamp (urinal in the gallery), Cattelan (Pope hit by meteorite) and Manzoni (poop in the box). Or why Marina Abramović has spent her time stripping the flesh off some bones at the Venice Biennale. Or what is beautiful in Koons' Kitsch.

Covacich beautifully explains thirty artists starting from a paradigmatic work, and does so with clarity and without technical jargon, as a good professor of art history would (even though he is trained as a philosopher and is a professional writer). In Covacich's book, the husband is finally redeemed by the wife, and eventually understands. A happy ending, then. According to me, however, even if she wins almost all her battles, Eliza loses the war – and it's not her fault, but the object's. While the initiation takes place, Covacich notes over and over again that Pygmalion, as she explains the art, thinks about his technological gadgets, that really fascinate him. What if Pygmalion was right? In fact, many of the recent works that Eliza explains to him (from Viola Calle's, still in the pre-digital era, to Barney and Hockney's, which concludes the review) hint precisely to those objects he longingly thinks of while she drags him into museums. One is tempted to think that those objects,

<sup>27</sup> Covacich 2011.

filling advertising and the web as well as Pygmalion as Eliza's lives, do not emerge by contrast, but by association. This brings an afterthought: why come here to watch videos and installations when all this is available elsewhere, in the form of technologies and innovative objects of which the works displayed here are often the verbose echo? So, while listening to Eliza's explanations, Pygmalion could bring out another book: *Parole chiave della nuova estetica* [Keywords of the new aesthetics], edited by Richard Fennel and Daniel Guastini.<sup>28</sup> In this book there are 82 entries written by 38 authors, and at least fifty of them concern precisely the age of technology: the smartphone, the camera, the flash memory and so on, while a significant minority regards the senses, taste, and slow food: the profit, the pleasure, the practical side and the repressed of the work of aura.

Moral of the story: the work of aura does not prevent the peaceful or even aesthetic enjoyment of objects. The *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*<sup>29</sup> that Arthur Danto attaches to Duchamp and Warhol has a specific background in Dutch interior painting, particularly Vermeer's, who successfully engages in a "transfiguration of the everyday" (which becomes "acceptance of the everyday" in Edouard Vuillard). In fact, the Dutch have taught us long before Pop Art that there is always a potential artwork in the object. Nevertheless, this comparison re-

<sup>28</sup> Finocchi, Guastini 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Danto 1981.

veals a deep affinity between the inhabitants of seventeenth century Amsterdam and those of twentieth century New Amsterdam: they share a deep bourgeois pride of possession of properties. Now, the affinity between furniture and museums, as well as between object and artwork, is greater than one may think. This is the teaching of Mario Praz's *An Illustrated history in Interior Design*<sup>30</sup>: the representation of a chamber of the Prinz-Max-Palais in Dresden dates back to 1776, one of the first pieces of evidence of a genre that was extremely successful in the nineteenth century, that of "an interior portrayed by itself" without human figures. This is similar to the watercolour at the Malmaison, started in 1812 and completed twenty years later, representing a sitting room with a sofa and an abandoned cashmere shawl on it. From another watercolour made in 1807 it is inferred that the shawl belongs to Josephine, Napoleon's first wife, who had left that chair twenty years earlier. A slight shiver runs through these desert interiors – perhaps this is why in furniture catalogues the advertisers generally place happy people as well. In the room in which every living thing is absent, there lies the secret of being, of what was there before our birth and will still be there after our death.

In the end, there is a relationship between the object and the environment on which we should reflect more. Goethe once wrote that it is not necessary that the real should take

form: it suffices for it to hover around.<sup>31</sup> This principle is indecipherable as per the truth (what would an environmental truth be?) but it fits perfectly to the museum. Artists argue that beauty is not the priority of artworks. Thus, beauty migrates elsewhere, hovering in the environment, with a transition from the *ergon* to the *parergon*, from the work of aura to its frame (already less auratic). Then, from the frame, the aesthetic appeal may return to the fore, but not in the works of aura: it re-emerges in the museum shop, where you can find objects that participate in the ritual and allow you to make it fit in your life in the form of bags, ties, pencils and stationery.

## 8. The Nude Readymade

The work of aura has accustomed us (and I say "accustomed" to be polite, because as we have seen, there is also a bit of intimidation) to accepting the thesis that "anything can be a work of art" (while it is true that, rather, "anything can be a work of aura"): buy a coffee-maker, exhibit it in a gallery entitling it "Melancholy at dawn", and it will be a work of art. However (this, in my opinion, is the original experience underlying Nespolo's works), if you take the same corkscrew and put it in a design shop, saying it is a work of design, the users will not agree to consider it as such, unless it actually works. Is it not

<sup>30</sup> Praz 1964.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Heidegger 1969.

strange? There seems to be a singular antithesis between the design object and the ready-made.

In the case of ready-made, in fact, the idea is that anything taken from a standardized production environment can be a work of art if it receives the blessing of the art world. In the case of design there is rather a search with the purpose of producing a good object, for which (unlike in the case of art) the consent of the critics and a gallery is not enough. You have to deal with the needs of functionality, technical reproducibility, industrial feasibility and so forth. Design, unlike Great Conceptual Art, cannot afford the romanticism, the surplus of meaning and aesthetic indifference. No, it must retain some classical balance between inside and outside, as well as between form and function. This highlights the unsaid of ready-made, its dark side and its truth. As suggested by the example of the museum, there is a relationship between the object and the environment. The urinal out of a museum, for example in a landfill, would not generate any kind of conflict – which shows that Duchamp was not fully sincere when he declared his indifference of “retinal art.” On the contrary, he was very sensitive to this fact, but kept it to himself.

Now let’s come to the unique transfiguration of the ready-made known as *Brillo Box*. It would be wrong to think that such a thing as a *Brillo Box* resumes Duchamp’s urinal. Strictly speaking, the former has nothing in common with the latter. First of all, it is not a ready-made: it was manufactured, with no practical purpose, especially

for an exhibition, and inside there is no steel wool, because the box is much larger than the original, and if it contained steel wool would it weigh a ton. Just like the *Pietà* by Michelangelo (and unlike Duchamp’s urinal or bottle rack) the *Brillo Box* was manufactured *to be an artwork*. Far from being found and exhibited with a nihilistic gesture, it is literally (given its increased size) the magnification of aspects of our lives, the life of mass society and advertising (with the soups, the divas, the powerful television) that is to say, “look at how beautiful your world is, look at that glow, look at the beautiful women, look at the powerful men.” Warhol gives his works a strong aesthetic dimension: he literally magnifies (i.e. makes bigger and more obvious) Campbell’s soups, Brillo Boxes and, of course, Marilyn Monroe and Liz Taylor. He does so for a simple and decisive reason, namely, that they are beautiful – which, again, can not be said of the urinal, or the bottle rack, nor of Duchamp’s mariée. One might almost think that is the only similarity between Duchamp and Warhol consisted in having worked in New York.

*Brillo Box* metaphorically refers to the ready-made only because it reproduces things that belong to the world of consumer items. So, it makes aesthetically pleasing what was just bad or insignificant in the real ready-made, that is, in Great Conceptual Art. More than a transfiguration of the commonplace promoted to art, *Brillo Box* appears as a secularization of the ready-made, which limits the harsh and ugly provocations of Great Conceptual Art to the

welcoming land of Pop. This process has the same dynamics and the same motivations as the relationship between haute couture and prêt-à-porter: take a abstruse phenomenon, an intellectual game without any aesthetic appeal and re-propose it in an infinitely more attractive and sensual frame (sensual and attractive at least as the boxes). Very little remains of the original phenomenon: essentially nothing, because Warhol's are not real ready-mades, no more than Lichtenstein's are real comics. However, their colourful and ornamental pleasantness is ennobled by a metaphorical call for the big game: the game of Great Conceptual Art.

Here is the secret that makes the work of aura tolerable. The public bears vexations (in the sense in which, with lucid humour, Eric Satie's titled his piano piece to be performed eight-hundred times in a row *Vexations*) because beauty has taken refuge elsewhere, away from the intimidation of Great Conceptual Art and the indulgence of Kitsch-Camp-Pop. It is in the elegant walls of the gallery, in the design of furniture, hotels and restaurants, and especially in the amount of wonderful items that are produced industrially: things like the Olivetti lettera 32, smartphones and tablets, Japanese cars and markers, Moleskine diaries, juke boxes and Mont Blanc pens. These things are beautiful, and of course they are: their beauty makes them likelier to be purchased. They have a culturally recognized aesthetic dignity, so that at the MOMA and elsewhere they are exposed in the Design section.

But wasn't this the best kept secret of ready-mades, namely the fact that the object

has its own character, its own hidden beauty? In these objects, which are hastily called "minor art", there is now the basis for the major art, for something that can overcome the era of Great Conceptual Art. This beauty has always been there, waiting wherever these objects are: in attics, flea markets, or in those wonderful archives of objects that are hardware stores. There, between nails, pliers, hammers, keys, screws and thousands of other objects classified in detail (how would you find them otherwise?) there is an inventory of worlds and therefore of possible stories, from which to draw hundreds of novels (such as the couple buying hammer and nails to hang paintings in the new house, where he or she returns a few years later to get the locks changed) and especially of potential shapes whose aesthetic resources are under the eyes of all, and in a much less intimidating way than the works of aura.

Let me make an easy prediction. It is hard to think that many of the works of the twentieth century will remain, the priority of which was not beauty. Maybe a few will be saved for documentary and ethnographic reasons, or as a somehow sadistic curiosity, just as there are museums of torture or of the Inquisition. But objects will certainly remain. Designer ones, probably. But most certainly, more profoundly, objects *tout court*: they are the ones that remain by definition. Duchamp thought he showed that anything can be a work of art, but what he really showed is (thankfully) something completely different. On the one hand, as we have seen so far, he expressed a tautological

argument: anything can be a work of aura, it suffices that we come to an agreement as with the emperor's new clothes. On the other hand, however, he brought attention to a condition that was far from obvious and yet is crucial, as well as antithetical to the hyper-conceptualism of the work of aura: namely the fact that the work of art is above all a *thing*.

Many artists have followed Duchamp on the first path, that is, on the track of the work of aura, in a pursuit of gimmicks and wonders increasingly less surprising and more repetitive, in which the basic rule is the idea – worthy of the worst bureaucrat – that a certificate is enough for a toothache to become a masterpiece. Far fewer have followed him (or rather, contradicted and perfected him) on the second path, that is, on the thesis that the artwork is first of all a thing. But it is not too important, because in this struggle of concepts the big winner is always the object, with the Egyptian charm of its survival.

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## Speculative Realism and Other Heresies

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### 1. Speculative Realism

Speculative realism is the title of a workshop held on April 27<sup>th</sup> 2007 at the Goldsmiths University in London. Four participants were on the program of that unforgettable event: Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux. All the debate was recorded and transcribed in a special issue of *Collapse*, the journal that has been supporting Speculative Realism since the beginning and that is still following its developments. This is a quote from the introduction by the editor Robin Mackay:

Rather than announcing the advent of a new theoretical ‘doctrine’ or ‘school’, the event conjoined four ambitious philosophical projects – all of which boldly problematise the subjectivistic and anthropocentric foundations of much of “continental philosophy” while differing significantly in their respective strategies for superseding them. It is precisely this uniqueness of each participant that allowed a fruitful discussion to emerge. Alongside the articulation of various challenges to certain idealistic premises, a determination of the obstacles that any contemporary realism must surmount was equally in effect. Accordingly, some of the key issues under scrutiny included the status of science and epistemology in contemporary philosophy, the ontologi-

cal constitution of thought, and the nature of subject-independent objects.<sup>1</sup>

First of all we have to notice that Speculative Realism is not a doctrine, nor a school, nor a movement, but an “umbrella term”<sup>2</sup> gathering together heterogeneous thinkers who share nothing but a common enemy: correlationism. This name was given by Meillassoux to indicate every philosophy that since Kant has considered that knowledge must be entangled within the relation between human subject and object: the first organizes the given impressions in order to represent the latter. For Correlationism we cannot know things as they are in themselves, in their autonomous being, but we have to limit knowledge to things as they are for us: we cannot access reality beyond our experience of it. In other words, thanks to a priori structures, it is possible to organize sense data in coherent representations, but it is not possible to know if the objects determining our impression are actually like they are given to us. After Kant, philosophy stopped questioning about the metaphysical reason for the adequacy of knowledge and started to be interested in finding the best conventional rules for representing phenomena. Thus the only feature shared by Brassier, Grant,

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<sup>1</sup> Brassier, Grant, Harman, Meillassoux, “Speculative Realism”, in *Collapse III: Unknown Deleuze*, Robin Mackay editor, Urbanomic, London 2007, p. 307.

<sup>2</sup> Graham Harman used this expression in the introduction of *Speculative Turn* (Briant, Harman, Srnicek editors, Re.Press, Victoria 2011).

Harman and Meillassoux's speculation is the effort to overcome correlationism in order to access the subject independent reality of things in themselves, beyond representation, beyond the way they are given within the relation with human subjects. This does not mean to go back to a pre-critical metaphysical thinking, rather the project aims to develop a new metaphysics embracing the rational anti-dogmatic achievements of criticism. In this paper I will outline the different strategies proposed by the Goldsmiths' workshop's participants, then I will offer an overview of the more recent developments of Speculative realism by introducing more recent tendencies like *Object Oriented Ontology* and *Accelerationism*.

## 2. Quentin Meillassoux: After Finitude

Quentin Meillassoux's *Après la finitude*, translated in English by Ray Brassier as *After finitude*<sup>3</sup> provoked the wave of anti-correlationist awareness that brought about the meeting of the Goldsmiths. The book presents a brilliant rationalistic demonstration of the absolute contingency of reality which is attained by overcoming correlationism from the inside. Contingency is assumed to be an absolute feature of any possible fact that can be affirmed independently of experience. Moreover, it al-

lows to dismiss the metaphysical belief in the necessity of this world's order and in God as the reason for the world being like this rather than otherwise. To reach this absolute and subject independent truth about any virtually possible fact, Meillassoux starts questioning correlationism and its anti-dogmatic achievements. Since correlationist philosophers have to admit that the correlation could be destroyed and that there is no way of demonstrating the necessity of a specific a priori organization, Meillassoux claims that the correlation must be assumed as contingent. This implies that it is not possible to prove the necessity of the causal connection that we apply to link the impressions in order to predict future effects. Thus, from a correlationist point of view, it is not possible to prove the necessity of natural laws, like Hume already knew. The question, then, becomes: why has nobody claimed that the laws are contingent, although nobody succeeded in demonstrating their necessity? It is because we experience the stability of the laws of physics, because we see that the same causes are regularly followed by the same effects. Accordingly, we have the tendency to believe that laws cannot change and that there is reason making them to be thus rather than otherwise. If laws were contingent, in fact, we would expect to see them change frequently, thus the evidence of their stability is assumed to prove their necessity and to support the idea of a transcendent reason for the order of the world. But, Meillassoux claims, there is a mistake in this reasoning which consists in thinking that contingent laws must change frequently. Refer-

<sup>3</sup> Q. Meillassoux, *After Finitude. Essay on the necessity of contingency*, Continuum, London 2008.

ring to the set theory, in fact, he explains that the mistake derives from an erroneous application of the probability calculus to a non-totalizable set, like the set of all the imaginable mathematical functions describing possible laws of physics. Actually, we are allowed to apply probability only to totalizable sets, like the set of the six sides of a dice. If a dice fell always on the same of its six sides, we are driven to think that there is a trick, a reason for the same number to be drawn at every throw. But it is not possible to calculate the probability of something included in a non-totalizable set, like the set of the rationally acceptable physical laws: we should not be surprised if a hypothetical dice with a non-totalizable number of faces falls always on the same side. In this way, the observed stability of laws does not exclude their contingency: the fact that they do not change frequently does not imply their necessity. Thus Meillassoux can declare that, although we do not observe them changing, natural laws are contingent: the fact that we cannot prove their necessity is not due to the limitation of our understanding regarding the metaphysical reason for their stability, but to their absolute contingency, to the actual absence of a reason for them to be in a certain way or otherwise. Contingency being the only rational necessity that we must acknowledge to laws, we have to state that they can change at any time but also that they do not have to change. This means that we do not need a God to be the origin of the order of the world because the world we make experience of is just one of the virtually infinite possible that can be actualized in

an absolutely contingent way: everything can happen at any time, even nothing. Since the laws of this and all the other possible worlds can be exactly mathematically formalized, reality is absolutely contingent but totally rational. This implies that we can mathematically describe all the virtually possible facts even if nobody is there to perceive them.

### 3. Iain Hamilton Grant: Philosophy of Nature after Shelling

Iain Hamilton Grant's subject independent reality has almost nothing in common with Meillassoux's, as every speculative realist elaborated his anti-correlationist strategy from a very different starting point. Meillassoux's references are Descartes, Hume, Kant and Badiou, by contrast Grant's work is based on Shelling, Plato and Deleuze and it aims to create a new realist philosophy of nature inspired by Idealism. In *Philosophy of nature after Shelling*<sup>4</sup>, Schelling is presented as the philosopher who first understood nature as having its own history that extends far deeper into the past than was ever before acknowledged, while even now producing forms in excess of what human understanding might make of them. Dispensing with the sharp separation between organic and inorganic, Schelling unveiled in nature a material vitalism that rescues matter from the category

<sup>4</sup> I.H.Grant, *Philosophy of Nature after Shelling*, London: Continuum 2008.

of the inert and mechanical to which Kant and Fichte had relegated it. For Grant, Ideas pertain to nature and must be considered as actualities rather than mental subjective principles: they are the natural tendencies driving the flux of becoming whose thought and subject are nothing but products. Since there is only one process always becoming according to immanent nature's ideas, thinking must be acknowledged as a natural production taking part into the production. That is the reason why Deleuze is considered by Grant one of the few contemporary philosophers who developed Schelling's philosophy of nature. To explain natural production, Grant introduces a special sort of causality, that cannot be equated to a teleological one, nor to an efficient cause. The "becoming of being", in fact, is the becoming that being undergoes precisely because becoming is dependent on an end that it cannot attain, this end is the Idea, whose function is similar to that of the attractors of dynamical systems. Grant's philosophy of nature is neither "pulled" by ends nor "pushed" by beginnings, so that the becoming of being must be considered as the *being of becoming*. Grant's surprising move is that he not only pits Schelling against both Kant and Aristotle, but he does so in the name of Plato. His evidence is a commentary on Plato's *Ti-maeus* written by a very young Schelling. Central to the text is the idea that the world had not only primal matter at its base, but *matter in movement*, which indicates the existence of a *world soul*. Indeed, the entire earth can be understood as arising out of and through the force of its own inner magnetism. What Schelling offers, and what Grant devel-

ops, is not simply a speculative physics but a specifically *Platonic* physics that endeavors to understand that which is darkest and most obscure: matter itself as the last instance of the real. For Grant reality is nature as condition for production of everything, thought included, for this reason nature always exceeds our knowledge. The thinking subject is just a product of the nature and he is part of the process of becoming of everything, thus concepts are considered to be determined by nature's ideas rather than by subjective a-priori structures.

#### 4. Ray Brassier : Nihil Unbound

**T**his inversion of the position of the transcendental, that becomes the real's determinant for the concept, is shared by Ray Brassier's transcendental realism that aims to explain how concepts differentiate from the real and how it is possible to know the real despite its being the non-conceptualizable condition of conceptualization. In other words, the question is: how is it possible to think what cannot be an object of thought, the last instance of the real as non-objectifiable condition of objectification? How is it possible to think the immanent determinant of the correlation allowing the determination of objects in thought? As Brassier explains in *Nihil Unbound*,<sup>5</sup> the question can be answered only by a radicalization of nihil-

<sup>5</sup> R. Brassier, *Unbound. Enlightenment and Extinction*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2007.

ism, which to him is the highest point attained by the rationalistic project of Enlightenment.

Nihilism is not just a skeptical attitude toward values, but the idea that truth does not correspond to the meaning that humans pretend to find in the world. Nihilism leads to assume the indifference of the reality to any subjective need and pushes reason to follow its own interests. In another words, a continuation must be given to nihilism in order to accomplish the program of disenchantment which is the authentic rational aim accompanying the understanding of the absolute independency of the real from any relation to human subjects. That implies to reshape the image of man built by philosophy within the frame of a meaningful world. Thus, following Wilfrid Sellars, Brassier claims that philosophy should stop to contribute only to the construction of the manifest image of man to take into account the scientific image, where human cognition can be analyzed like an object independent of the pursuit of meaning.

Only this analysis would allow to understand how cognition actually works and how it is determined by the absolute indifference of the real. But what is the real as subject independent? To answer this question Brassier follows François Laruelle's *Non-philosophy* which defines the real as what is situated outside the circle of philosophical decision, that establishes the relation between subjective conditioning and conditioned objects. Thus, the real is the non-determined allowing every determination, the non-conceptualizable allowing any conceptualization. Since it is situated beyond the circle of determination, the real cannot be determined like a being by the

subject and it must be conceived as *being-nothing*. *Being-nothing*, as the last instance of the real, is the zero degree of being which does not correspond to a negative non-being opposed to a positive being, but it is the immanent condition of being from which any determined being differentiate, without the former differentiates from the latter in retour. It is what Laruelle calls "non-dialectical unilateral determination in the last instance". Then, thinking cannot objectify the real, so it cannot actually "know" it, but it can recognize that objects in thought are effectuated in the same way as objects differentiate from the real as being-nothing. In other words, thought effectuates the objectification of objects without differentiating from these objects, it is like the zero degree of objectification of objects in thought.

Therefore, it is not possible to represent the real by objectifying it, but it is possible to think according to the real: that means to imitate it in effectuating determinations without differentiating from said determinations; it means to be the immanent non-determined condition of determination. Thus, thinking can grasp the real only thinking according to it, recognizing itself essentially as being-nothing, as the zero degree of being. Thus, thinking according to the real consists in recognizing that the will to know is actually a will to nothing, the will of equating the real as being-nothing: what Freud called *Death drive*. That's why in *Nihil unbound*, Brassier claims that "Thinking has interests that do not coincide with those of the living, indeed they can

and have been pitted against the latter”<sup>6</sup> and that “Philosophers would do well to desist from issuing any further injunctions about the need to re-establish the meaningfulness of existence, the purposefulness of life, or mend the shattered concord between man and nature. Philosophy should be more than a sop to the pathetic twinge of human self-esteem”<sup>7</sup>. Because he states that traditional projections looking for a meaningful interpretation of the world should be dismissed as well as what Sellars defined “Folk Psychology”, Brassier is an allied of eliminativism, a reductionist position claiming that the manifest image of man can be explained analyzing the functioning of the brain and that many complex effects can be accounted for considering simpler and lower levels of material organization. In other words, cognition must be explained as determined by the real in a non-dialectical way as differentiating unilaterally from being-nothing.

### 5. Graham Harman : Guerrilla Metaphysics

Characterizing Brassier’s speculative strategy, eliminativism and reductionism are refused by Graham Harman, whose *Object Oriented Philosophy* (OOP) affirms that no entity can be explained by reducing it to its simplest parts because any object has a specific character

that can be understood only by considering it as a special whole, as a specific being. In Harman’s ontology, which is populated only by objects and where everything is an object, any object has the same rights as any other and the same degree of reality: an atom, a cat, a stone, a mailbox, a tree, Santa Claus, a cloud, 10 Euros and Mona Lisa. In Harman’s ontology all the objects, inorganic, organic, big, small, visible, invisible, simple, composed, concrete, abstract, living or dead, are on an equal footing. Not only does Harman refuse the scientific idea that objects can be reduced to the simpler objects composing them, like it happens in physics, but he also refuses to consider objects as they appear to human subjects, or as they are given within their relation to human subjects, like it happens in phenomenology. Realism, here, means to understand the specific way of being of any object independently from its composition and from any relation that can be established with human subjects and any other non-human object. From this point of view, Harman considers that the first object oriented philosopher was Heidegger, as it would be clear from his interpretation of the famous tool analysis of *Being and Time*. Despite the fact that the German philosopher was mostly interested in the *Dasein*’s existential condition, he stated that objects are different from the relations they can enter in: objects are in themselves what withdraw from all relations. This splits between the object and its relations, or between the object as it appears in any interaction (with humans and non humans) and the object as it is in its secret inaccessible inti-

<sup>6</sup> Brassier, *op. cit.*, p. XI.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

macy, is the first fundamental trait of the actual way of being of objects<sup>8</sup>. But for Harman there is another fundamental rift separating the object as a unity, as an intentional object in Husserl's sense, from the multiplicity of its traits and qualities. Because any object results divided between its public and private life and between its unity and multiplicity, Harman speaks of a quadruple philosophy, that has the merit of avoiding the dualistic partition of classical metaphysics. Traditionally, in fact, there is a separation between a world of transcendent models enjoying a full reality, and a world of appearances enjoying a lower degree of being. On the contrary, for Harman any object is as real as any other and the difference it is not between an authentic world and a simulacral one, but between any object and itself, between its public and its private life, between its multiplicity and its unity. This ontological frame given, what has to be explained is the way in which objects can interact despite the fact that they always withdraw from any relation. In other words the question is: how can objects touch without touching? *Guerrilla Metaphysics*<sup>9</sup> deals with this problem and with another not less difficult question: how can an object unify the multiplicity of its traits? The answer provided by Harman

to both the questions is "vicarious causation". This is a special cause that allows the communication between entities which are not directly communicating: it is a mediated causality that, like God in Occasionalism, makes two objects change together as one determined the change of the other without any actual interaction between them. "Vicarious causation" is the answer to both the questions because the way in which an object enters into relation with another is not basically different from the way in which an object relates to the multiplicity of its parts in order to unify them. If there is nothing but objects, then we must consider that the multiplicity of traits and qualities of an object are nothing but objects that are vicariously bounded together to make a new object, whose inaccessible core withdraws. Thus, vicarious causation explains how the four poles of an object can cross, it explains how an object enters into a relation with other objects, including the objects which are its parts. As a consequence, any object must be conceived as a multiplicity of objects vicariously bounded together to merge in a new object showing its own style or special character as a unity. Vicarious causation can be understood as the mediation allowing objects to fusion in a new object, but how does it happen? It happens within the phenomena that Harman calls "allure", when an object perceives another object not just as a variable surface of multiple traits and qualities, but as a unity possessing special notes: objects merge together by means of notes, interacting as sensuous intentional objects. It is just overcoming the disturbing noise of

<sup>8</sup> Harman deals with the issue concerning Heidegger's approach to objects in his doctoral dissertation published in 2002 as *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court)

<sup>9</sup> G. Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: phenomenology and the carpentry of things*, Open Court, Chicago 2005.



the multiplicity of traits, which are immediately perceived when an object encounters another object, that the two can access their unified being and merge together. This the way in which two object can vicariously interact without touching: their cores withdraw but their notes allow them to touch without touching. Anyway, since vicarious causation allows an object to bound other objects as its parts, we must conclude that objects always communicate on the interior of another object, even when we do not consider the product. For example, when I perceive an object, I encounter immediately the noise of the multiplicity of its surface qualities, but when allure happens, then I perceive the object as a special unity, as an intentional or sensuous object and I recognize it as a unity whose intimacy withdraws. Then, if I start thinking of what happened I realize that the object and me have entered into a relation producing another object: perception. Thus we can say that any object interacts with any other object inside a third object. In fact, as there is nothing but objects, relations must be considered objects too: the relation of two sensuous objects produces a third object, thus objects always interact inside other objects. Harman's reality is made of objects which are always inside other objects, and, even if the interior of an object always withdraws from any relation, we are always inside objects. As a consequence, in Harman's reality there is no transcendence but a certain metaphysics is required to explain the vicarious causation allowing objects to touch without touching. It is also clear that from Harman's stand-

point human access to objects does not enjoy any privilege since vicarious causation intervenes mediating between every object.

## 6. Other realisms: Object Oriented Ontology

It is evident that the four described ways of accessing the great outdoor are very different and they support heterogeneous conceptions of what the real is. Because of this variety of strategies and solutions, it is clear that Speculative realism cannot be identified as a coherent movement or as a school, despite all the involved personalities share the same enemy: correlationism. Since the workshop at the Goldsmiths, this already heterogeneous "speculative turn"<sup>10</sup> has been rapidly spreading all over the world and today it can pride itself of a surprising variety of contributions and developments, as well as of the involvement of an increasing number of thinkers. The debate has been increasing by the means of new medium, at least for philosophical discussions, like blogs, internet websites and non academic journals. A lot of people all over the world started posting their comments and suggestions, sometimes offering clever and original remarks, sometimes producing a sort of vulgarization

<sup>10</sup> *Speculative Turn* is the title of book edited by Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman that in 2011 try to make a map of the different positions raised after the workshop "Speculative Realism", sharing the anti-correlationist inspiration and developing original standpoints.

of the original ideas. That's why Brassier refuses to recognize the existence of an international and spread *Speculative Realism Movement*.

The 'speculative realist movement' exists only in the imaginations of a group of bloggers promoting an agenda for which I have no sympathy whatsoever: actor-network theory spiced with pan-psychist metaphysics and morsels of process philosophy. I don't believe the internet is an appropriate medium for serious philosophical debate; nor do I believe it is acceptable to try to concoct a philosophical movement online by using blogs to exploit the misguided enthusiasm of impressionable graduate students. I agree with Deleuze's remark that ultimately the most basic task of philosophy is to impede stupidity, so I see little philosophical merit in a 'movement' whose most signal achievement thus far is to have generated an online orgy of stupidity.<sup>11</sup>

It is certainly true that today is difficult to say what *Speculative realism* is since the already heterogeneous anti-correlationism of the beginning has been differentiating and it has taken new forms developing in a variety of directions. What is sure is that we are experiencing a major event in the history of philosophy because of the non-academic internet based diffusion and because of the revolutionary anti-correlationist will: the concrete consequences can only be evaluated in the future.

Amongst the more recent developments demanding a place under the umbrella of

<sup>11</sup> Ray Brassier interviewed by Marcin Rychter in *Kronos*, March 4, 2011. <http://www.kronos.org.pl/index.php?23151,896> (visited on March 11, 2014)

Speculative Realism, *Object Oriented Ontology* (OOO) is one of the most solid and followed philosophical tendencies sharing the principles of Harman's *Object Oriented Philosophy*. OOO is a compact movement based on some precise theoretical assumptions: ontology is made of nothing but all possible objects; all objects are on an equal footing; objects exist independently of human perception; objects are not exhausted by their different relations. Since the publication of *Tool being*<sup>12</sup>, a number of theorists working in a variety of disciplines have adapted Harman's ideas, including philosophy professor Levi Bryant, literature and ecology scholar Timothy Morton, video game designer Ian Bogost and French writer Tristan Garcia. To give an example of an object oriented approach different from Harman's, we will outline the principles of Briant's *Onticology*<sup>13</sup>. The first principle is that "there is no difference that does not make a difference"<sup>14</sup>, it means that any object is a difference in being. The second is called *Principle of the Inhuman* and asserts that the concept of difference producing difference is not restricted to human, since difference is independent of knowledge and conscious-

<sup>12</sup> G. Harman, *Tool-being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of objects*, Open Court, Chicago 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Levy Briant's main book for understanding *Onticology* is *The democracy of objects*, available to download from the *Open Humanities Press* web site ([openhumanitiespress.org/democracy-of-objects.html](http://openhumanitiespress.org/democracy-of-objects.html)). He also writes a blog called *Larval subjects* (<http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com>) where he discuss the mains concepts of his philosophy and other topics related to OOO and Speculative Realisme.

<sup>14</sup> *The Speculative Turn*, cit., p. 263.

ness. The third states that “if a difference is made, then the being is”<sup>15</sup>, which means that to be means to be a difference, thus, there are objects (differences) or there is nothing. For Briant all beings are real in the same sense — including fictions, signs, animals, and plants— as they are all differences. Moreover, all objects are themselves composed of differences. Referring to its own ontology, Bryant has also proposed the concept of “wilderness ontology”, in order to indicate that agency is shared by all objects and not only by humans, that there is no ontological hierarchy nor any bifurcation between nature and culture.

### 7. Reza Negarestani and Accelerationism

The interest in agency, the refusal to make distinctions between concrete and abstract objects, and the militant anti-reductionism make of OOO one of the targets of Brassier’s criticism. To him, in fact, the goal is to pursue the Enlightenment’s disenchantment of the world, following contemporary scientific achievements especially in the field of cognition. Thus, for him the object oriented approach is just an indiscriminate extension of *folk psychology* (in Sellars’s sense) on entities that do not deserve to be considered real since they derived from false subjective beliefs and narrations. The reductionist credo as-

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

sumed by Brassier, in fact, implies the elimination of all the non objective beliefs based on the human need of providing a sense for his existence in the world, productions that are not determined according to the real in the interest of rationality, but according to meaningful narrations. This rationalistic pursuit of the properness of reason beyond humanistic perspectives, has been recently embraced by the Iranian philosopher Reza Negarestani. Hosted on the Urbanomic website, his blog *Deracinating effect*<sup>16</sup> gathers together the last talks and public interventions on the autonomy of reason and the process of its own becoming. Following rational achievements of Enlightenment, it would be time to turn reason against humanism in order to acknowledge the process of thinking itself merely to recreate the notion of “human”. This rationalistic turn in Negarestani’s thought comes with his forthcoming theoretical fiction novel *The Mortiloquist*<sup>17</sup>, where “the history of philosophy is, barbarically and problematically, revealed to be a differential form of arborescent emptiness which is in the process of blackening its vitalistic twists”<sup>18</sup>. This novel follows his first philosophical science-fiction novel, *Cyclonopedia*<sup>19</sup>, which is partially inspired by

<sup>16</sup> <http://blog.urbanomic.com/cyclon/> (08/03/2014)

<sup>17</sup> R. Negarestani, *The Mortiloquist*, Urbanomic, London 2014.

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.urbanomic.com/pub\\_mortiloquist.php](http://www.urbanomic.com/pub_mortiloquist.php) (08/03/2014)

<sup>19</sup> R. Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with anonymous materials*, Re.press, Victoria 2008.

Nick Land's *Geocosmic Theory of Trauma*<sup>20</sup> and aims to explain capitalism through the reality of the traumas bringing about the dynamic of terrestrial economy. The latter would have been modeled according to the relation between the Earth and the Sun, the excessive energy of which demands the planet to manage the surplus that will eventually consume it and its living inhabitants to death. As a part of this solar economy, capitalism appears as a *thanatropic* machine that unlocks the earth's resources, especially fossil fuels, to make them available for dissolution. Therefore capitalism can be seen as a process of acceleration of the consumption of the Earth by the Sun. Negarestani's proposal consists in suggesting that this model must be revised since the Sun is not the absolute (i.e. the origin and the end of life), but the relation between the Earth and the Sun is part of a larger universal frame. In other words, we have to open the perspective that has been transcendently conditioned by the relation between the Earth and the Sun in order to be able to think the reality of universal economy and to access the great outside. Terrestrial economy should be open to the cosmic economy of trauma to liberate thought from the slavery of solar economy's transcendental frame and to understand its actual reality and interests. That would allow to overcome geocentric and anthropocentric points of view and to take in account

<sup>20</sup> N. Land, *Fanged Noumena. Collecting writings 1987 – 2007*. Brassier and Mackay editors, Urbanomic, London 2011.

the reality of trauma as the subject independent determinant of subjectivity.

Negarestani and Brassier, whose interests toward a realist explanation of the autonomy of rationality converge, are also involved in what Benjamin Noys called *Accelerationism*<sup>21</sup> to criticize Nick Land's deleuzoguattarian approach of capitalism. *Accelerationism* is today one of most discussed and productive branches which pride themselves of some sort of participation in the anti-correlationist philosophical turn. A manifesto of Accelerationism has recently been published by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams<sup>22</sup> and a big symposium has been held in Berlin last December. The movement has the realistic aim to analyze capitalism as an autonomous entity, as a subject independent system whose ends are not necessarily humans' ends. This point of departure can be found in Land's writings which claim that matter is the last instance of the real and that it must be conceived as production of production: so capitalism is part of this original flux. The problem is that the functional dynamics of capitalism consist in *reterritorializing* what it has *deterritorialized*, so that it slows down the intensification process that should be liberated. In order intensify the process, that means to think according to the absolutely deterritorialized

<sup>21</sup> B. Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*, Edimburg University press, Edimburg 2010.

<sup>22</sup> N. Srnicek and A. Williams, "Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics", in *Dark Trajectories: politics of the outside*, J. Johnson editor, [name], Hong Kong 2013.

matter which constitutes the last instance of the real, Land claims that it is necessary accelerate Capitalism beyond its limits. The fact is that speeding capitalism in this way implies to attain death: matter as the absolutely deterritorialized zero degree of being. That's why Land conceives capitalism like a force whose purpose lies beyond the interest of humanity and, to him, to approach capitalism in a realist way consists of understanding its autonomous drive independently of humans' interests: the continuation or intensification of the process demands the elimination of humanity as a substrate for the process. Because in Land's theory, matter is the last instance of real as the limit of being or "zero degree", because matter is what determines everything as production of production, even thought, and because to think according to the real as matter's pure intensity implies death, it is now clear why Brassier is interested in Accelerationism and why he usually contributes to the discussion. Moreover, it is clear that Negarestani's theoretical approach aims to take further Land's solar-economical conclusion to open capitalism to the great outside of the universe.

Talking about Accelerationism, it is not possible to forget Snirneck and Williams' *Accelerate Manifesto*. Starting from Land's positions, these young philosophers are creating an original criticism of capitalism by accelerating the process that has been blocked by neo-liberalism. Rather than denying the possibility of a future for humanity, it would be necessary to liberate capitalism's creative forces and to allow a new future to come. Their starting point is that to-

day nobody is able to offer a solution to the crisis which is annihilating our society since the situation demands a realist analysis of the system as it is in itself: that would allow to acknowledge the underlying forces driving its becoming and the reason for the present stagnation. For Snirneck and Williams, in fact, Land's analysis is not totally correct because the speed of capitalism alone seems not to be enough to provoke the transition to another organization if the process keeps the same rules. Their *accelerationist* suggestion asserts that an experimentation of new rules of developments is needed in order to make the becoming become. Capitalism, as Marx already noticed, cannot be considered the agent of its own acceleration, but it must be overcome by producing a radical change of the constraints of the present conception of value. This can be attained only by pushing forward technological advancement in order to solve social conflicts by eliminating the necessity of labor: the paradox to be solved consists in the fact that everybody wants to work less but, even if we have the technology to accomplish this dream, we are all working more. What prevents us from solving the problem is the fact that capitalism constrained technology directing it towards narrow ends rather than employing it to liberate humanity from labor, which would be the cause of social differences and abuses. The goal of accelerationism, in its will to free all the power of technological and scientific advances, consists in unleashing latent productive forces in order to launch them towards post-capitalism, towards a new possible future bringing about a new, more

equal end free society. As we read on the Manifesto:

We want to accelerate the process of technological evolution. But what we are arguing for is not techno-utopianism. Never believe that technology will be sufficient to save us. Necessary, yes, but never sufficient without socio-political action. Whereas the techno-utopians argue for acceleration on the basis that it will automatically overcome social conflict, our position is that technology should be accelerated precisely because it is needed in order to win social conflict<sup>23</sup>.

That project would need experimenting towards the future, considering the possible reality which is outside the narrow perspective of present capitalism. It would need a social reorganization able to pursue Enlightenment's will for social self-mastery to be achieved by rational programming. In other words, it is a matter of pushing reason beyond the limits that present capitalism imposes as a transcendental condition in order to reach the Outside, a reality which is not conditioned by the present market's value restrictions.

Accelerationism has been criticized, especially by Benjamin Noys, as it is nothing new but merely a prosecution of neoliberal politics. Anyway, it has been able to catalyze a growing interest and an expanding international debate, it meets a largely spread desire to renovate political thinking beyond the limitations of present criticism. Because it allows to discuss an effective application in

<sup>23</sup> Srnicek and Williams, *Accelerate Manifesto*, cit., p. 146.

politics, this branch of Speculative realism is today the most alive and productive in many different domains like politics, aesthetics, art and economy.

## 8. Nuovo Realismo

Before concluding, we will comment on Maurizio Ferraris' *Nuovo Realismo* which is trying to enter the international debate. It seems to us that this Italian tendency cannot be included in Speculative Realism since it does not share the only common feature to the variety of the described positions: anti-correlationism. In fact Ferraris does not intend to access a reality which is beyond the phenomenal appearance which is given within the subject-object relation, but he affirms that the objects that we perceive exist and that they are immediately the real. His enemy is not correlationism – stating that the subject can only know the phenomenal world of experience by organizing senses data coming from an unknown thing in itself that could possibly be totally different from the way it is given to us – but a theory that would claim that objects exist only in the mind rather than outside the subject. The problem is that nobody ever affirmed such a theory. Neither Descartes, nor Kant, and not even Richard Rorty have ever claimed that there is nothing outside the mind, but just that we apply some ideas or a-priori structures in order to build a coherent representation of the perceived world. As everybody knows, in fact, Descartes' *cogito* is an experience of

thought that aims to eliminate any doubt about the existence of the *res extensa*. Moreover the French metaphysician's goal consisted in elaborating a method that allows the knowledge of things in an objective way, by the means of mathematics: God being the guarantor of the adequacy between mathematical ideas and the world. Descartes never states, as Ferraris seems to claim, that external reality is nothing but a mathematical construction which has no actuality outside the mind. There is difference, in fact, between using subjective schemas to organize the impression in a coherent representation and to create a mental world independently of the given impressions. Speculative realism's antagonist is the first way of thinking: the goal consists in understanding if it is possible to know things in themselves independently of the way they are given to our a-priori schemas. Nuovo Realismo's antagonist would be the second theory, that he thinks to find in Descartes or Kant and his realist statement consists in claiming that objects exist outside the mind and the real is what we perceive rather than our mental representation of it. If for speculative realists Kant must be overcome because he limited knowledge to the constitutive relation between a given phenomena and a subject by claiming that we cannot access things in themselves, for Ferraris Kant must be criticized because it would consist in stating that phenomena are not the real but subjective representations of it. So, according to Ferraris the problem of the possible difference between appearances and things in themselves (which is the reason why speculative realists

want to access what is beyond impressions) would not subsist. In other words, Speculative realism aims to access the great outdoor as the real which does not correspond to the phenomenal world which is given to the senses and organized by a conscience, on the contrary Ferraris seems to state that objects, as we perceive them, are immediately the real rather than a subjective perception of it. To Speculative realism, Nuovo realismo would look like a naive realist position unable to go beyond the relation between subject and object, for Ferraris everything is given within the relation between a subject and its environment and we do not need more "speculation". Thus, we would say that Nuovo realism can be considered as a reaction to certain extreme postmodern positions, but it is not sharing the speculative aim of accessing the real as the dimension which is hidden beyond our relation to the sensible world.

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## What Documents Cannot Do

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In his 2009 book *Documentalità* (translated into English in 2012 under the title *Documentality*), Maurizio Ferraris makes great claims for the efficacy of documents to explain social reality. In the coming pages, I mean to cast doubt on that efficacy, indicating why I think that documents do not create social objects; that, at most, documents corroborate some social facts; and that the theory of documentality offers a misleading account of the relations between writing and social life.

The key claim of the documental theory is that every social object is constituted by an inscribed act: Ferraris presents the formula “(Social) Object = Inscribed Act” more than thirty times in his book-length exposition of the theory. By an “inscribed act” he means a public execution of a piece of writing in such a form as to be registered and subsequently consulted by more than one person, and in such a way as to be able to ascertain the configuration of social facts arising out of the performance in question. Against this key claim, it may be well to begin by considering some underlying theses that Ferraris’ theory appears to share with the other major contender in contemporary theory of social reality, namely John Searle’s

theory that a certain physical object counts as a social object in a certain context as a result of collective intentionality within that context. This theory was set out mainly in the first half of his 1995 book *The Construction of Social Reality* and revised so as to emphasise the notion of collective intentionality in *Making the Social World* (2010).

Among the presuppositions that Ferraris’ and Searle’s theories share there is the thought that social objects stand in need of explanation in terms of something that is not a social object, indeed, that is not an object at all but, interestingly enough, in both cases, an act, whether of writing or of collective intending. Perhaps there are two facets to this shared presupposition that may be distinguished. One is that there are social objects. And the other is that such social objects as there are need to be explained in terms of something that can be identified even if we do not know what social objects there are.

The first of these points seems to be almost banal: if there are such objects as – to cite some examples that recur both in Ferraris and in Searle – money, marriages, university degrees and national borders, they are paradigm cases of social objects. Given that we recognise money, marriages, university degrees and national borders, it seems that we recognise some social objects. But it is easy to feel that we are already in the territory of what Gilbert Ryle had in mind when he was deliberately abusive about what he supposed was the Cartesian “myth of the ghost in the machine”. That is to say, the recognition that “money”, “marriages”, “uni-

versity degrees” and “national borders” are all nouns does not of itself mean that what they denote are *objects*. Though the €10 note in my wallet is undoubtedly an object, the money that it is does not seem to me to be an object. Likewise, whether I am married or not at the moment of writing these words does not seem to me to depend on whether a certain object exists or not. That I am the holder of a certain number of degrees (of various degrees) does not derive from or reduce to there being some objects that are my degrees. And, if I have to present certain documents in passing from, say, Ventimiglia to Menton, that is neither because there are objects such as France and Italy, nor because there is an object that is the France-Italy frontier.

It may well be that some of the things that a theory of social reality should take account of are objects, and hence, in some sense, social objects; yet it does not seem obvious that the things that are cited as the paradigmatic cases of what needs to be explained by a theory of social reality are really objects at all. To take the instances that we have borrowed from Ferraris and Searle, some first approximations to what is in play might sound rather as follows.

My €10 note is a piece of paper that has, at least for the time being, certain powers, such as that of being exchangeable for other €10 notes, of being exchangeable for about three thousand Hungarian Forint, of being exchangeable for a packet-of-cigarettes-and-a-€5 note, of being exchangeable for about half of a paperback copy of Ferraris’ *Documentality* (but not in the sense of some set of two

hundred pages of it). And so on. Though I do not subscribe to any of the more or less fancy “ontologies of powers” that have been coming onto the market of late, my impression is that the attribution to an object of a power, such as redness (the propensity to look red in normal conditions) or weight (the tendency to turn the scales to a certain degree) to a tomato, is less problematic than the conjuring of new objects (chromatic objects? gravitational objects?). Likewise, I recognise that being exchangeable is a power that has to be multiply relativised in ways to some of which we shall return, but of which an account can be given in a theory of economic activity that does not ultimately require any objects over and above pieces of paper (some, but not all, of which are banknotes), commodities (whatever they might be) and economic agents (of probably more than one sort).

Again, as regards marriage, the base or explanatory category here seems to be that of rights and duties that have been matured either by explicit promising or swearing, as in a wedding ceremony, or by certain persons’ acting towards each other in certain ways over a certain period of time. Of course, quite how this plays out will depend very much on what the ultimate nature of rights and duties turns out to be. But it would be very odd indeed if rights and duties were such as to be able to bring into existence new objects: even though denominations like “husband” and “wife” do denote objects, the objects they denote are persons with reciprocal rights and duties.

My being a Bachelor of Arts, a Master of Arts and a *Doctor Philosophiæ* does not depend on the existence of university degrees as social objects. Rather, these qualifications are the result, respectively: of my having written certain things on certain pieces of paper in a certain examination hall, which were regarded with leniency by my teachers; of my having continued in existence for three years from B.A. graduation without infringing certain rules of my university (I have been told – probably unreliably – that if, in the specified period, I had carried a bow and arrows on King’s Parade, Cambridge, I would have been excluded as a *Magister*); and of my having written other things in a stack of paper, which were again regarded with leniency by my examiners. The result of all this scribbling and hanging around was that the university emitted certain pieces of paper that have, again, some powers. These are not quite those of my €10 banknote; for instance, I cannot transfer my qualifications to others in exchange for money or commodities. But I can report my possession of them on my *curriculum vitæ*; and, if need be, I can flourish them in the face of anyone who cares to take notice of them. If someone, who has not done things at least superficially similar to the sort of writing exercises I have gestured at, nor received the requisite approbation for them, claims to have a given degree, that person is guilty of fraud (and I am rather aware that the “M.A.” that I am entitled to put after my name is regarded as in odour of fraud by graduates of many universities). The fraud lies not in the non-existence of a social ob-

ject but in the non-performance of a certain task or due process. Thus, if someone buys a degree certificate – and such pieces of paper are indeed on sale – her attempt to use it as an academic qualification ought to fail, because the institutions that engage in this traffic are not universities, whatever they might call themselves. Naturally, there may appear to be some sort of circularity in the legitimacy of certain sorts of accreditation and the activities that take place in certain environments (lecture rooms, examination halls and so on), but it does not seem that that circularity is vicious nor that it would be made any more virtuous by the interposition of a social object.

A similar sort of circularity may invest – and perhaps more viciously – the matter of national borders. While the universitiness of some institutions can be established by looking at what the people involved in them do (reading, writing, learning, teaching, examining, researching), the statehood of, say, France seems to amount to nothing more than the stipulation that, within a certain territory, a certain writ runs: France is French because the French say it is (and, at least for the time being, the Germans and others allow them to say so). As we shall see in a little more detail in discussing some specifics of Ferraris’ proposal, a theory of social reality that posits a series of social objects arising out of documents, such as treaties and the like, will have difficulty in saying what makes such documents valid. For the present purpose, however, the thing to notice is that the Frenchness of France does not need an extra object to account for the behaviour

both of the French border police and of those who wish to cross the border. It is debatable to what extent and with what rigour a state is permitted to patrol its own borders against anything other than attempted armed invasion by another state (and hence whether or not there should be any function like that of the border police, which is not candidly military). Yet the custom (and I use the word advisedly) has grown up that even those who do have the right to pass from Ventimiglia to Menton have to be able to prove that they have that right every time they come a certain part of the road that leads from the one town to the other by being in a position to produce a passport or an identity card that the border police find convincing. And those to whom such a right has not – whether rightly or wrongly – been recognised by the French state find themselves faced with at least the threat of force against them to prevent their passage beyond a certain part of the road. Unlike my €10 note but like a degree certificate, a passport or an identity card is not transferable; and, like a marriage certificate, it is merely proof of a social fact – for instance EU citizenship – that seems to me to be capable of subsisting even in the absence of the document. For instance, a UK citizen who has not applied for a passport may have no way of proving that status: and, an instance within the instance, Queen Elizabeth II does not have a passport, but seems to be allowed to pass (relatively) unhindered on her foreign travels. The custom of passport control is in no way explained by the existence of social objects, such as states or borders; these latter are ra-

ther functions of an administrative system operating on a certain territory. And a function is not an object, even when it is backed by the threat of force.

Even if these are but first approximations, it seems to me that they suggest grounds for hesitancy before accepting the existence of social objects as explanatory of social facts. This hesitancy is perhaps reinforced when we come to consider how the two leading theories of social objects seek to define the objects in question by appeal to acts, in Ferraris' case to acts of writing and in Searle's to acts of collective intending, and both are fairly emphatic that these acts make up, constitute or are identical with the objects that are the *explananda* of the theories (as well as being the *explanantia* of what money, marriages, degrees and borders are). In one sense, it seems as if these objects have been introduced only to be eliminated by acts: ontology becomes – what shall we call it? – praxiology. But, in another, it may be cause for puzzlement that any act can be identical with any object, any more than an event can be identical with a state or a change with a function.

This latter may seem a finicky worry, but it points to a serious problem about what these theories are for. If someone thinks that social ontology is worth doing, then he is likely to think that he is called on – in the going jargon – to quantify over objects to whose existence he is thereby committed, and also that these objects stand in need of identity criteria, which can only be supplied by reference to acts. But this all seems a long way round. For it is not at all clear that an

ontology – a theory of objects – is going to get us very far in understanding social facts. If the first approximations suggested above are anywhere near right, then we need some economic theory to understand money, an account of interpersonal rights and duties to understand marriage, a description of how academic institutions work to understand degrees, and a genealogy of statehood to understand national borders. What is not at all clear is that these species of enquiry will, sooner or later, call on us to start identifying objects of sorts that are, in one way or another, of a wholly different sort from things like bits of paper and persons. And, even if we did find ourselves called on so to do, I think that, in terms of the Quinean distinction that is often blurred, we would be engaging in *ideology*. But that is another story.

Despite their convergence on the theses that there are social objects and that these objects can be identified by acts of certain sorts, Ferraris' and Searle's theories present themselves as rivals for the role of explaining social reality. Because it seems to me that these shared theses are far from obviously true and certainly not applicable in as many cases as Ferraris and Searle want to apply them, I suggest that explanations of social reality can probably do without such a proliferation of objects.

Ferraris has himself devoted some time and ingenuity to arguing that Searle's account is flawed as an explanation of social reality, so we may be brief here. As already hinted, Searle's basic formula is that a physical object X counts as a social object Y in a given context C in virtue of the imposition

of a Y-function on X by an act of collective intentionality. And the equally basic objection to this is that the appeal to collective intentionality is explanation *obscurum per obscurior*. For instance, though I know about some of the powers of my €10 note, about some of my duties as a husband, about how little my degrees are worth, and about what documents to produce if I want to pass (relatively) unhindered from Ventimiglia to Menton, I am deeply in the dark about what "collective intentionality" might be, and about when or where it was enacted in any of these cases. Even if I have some inklings about what intending is, and also about why it is not the sort of thing that social facts can be based on, such collective intendings as there may be found (for instance in the coordination of a football team or a group of musicians – Searle's own examples) seem to be derivative of antecedent social facts about aims and projects shared by the participants. In this respect, collective intending is as useless as the not entirely dissimilar notion of a social contract: it presupposes what it is meant to explain. Likewise with "counting as", "context", "imposing" and "Y-function": none of these notions looks elementary enough to help explain any social facts, still less to conjure into being any social objects.

At first blush, then, Ferraris' theory enjoys some distinct advantages over Searle's. In its paradigm cases, the privileged objects of the documental theory are pretty readily identifiable: the presence or absence of some writing in a given language on a given physical support is a matter about which only

cavillers could invent problems. Whether or not we want to reify such things as languages, the difference between a text in English and a text in French will quickly force itself on a monoglot Englishman or a monoglot Frenchman; and the presence or absence of a text on pieces of paper, tablets of stone or hard-disc drives is, on the whole, not open to doubt and is, at least in principle, consultable by more than one person and, hence, suitably public and social.

Nevertheless, there remain some underlying problems, of which we may consider three, two of which are damaging to Ferraris' central contention about paradigmatic cases of social objects as identical with inscribed acts, and the third of which concerns his approach to non-paradigmatic cases of documentality. I take it that these three problems are jointly fatal to the documental proposal as the explanation of social reality. Even if the problems are fatal to the theory, they may leave standing one way of talking about such things as money, marriage, university degrees and national borders a products of literate and bureaucratised societies, which are a relative rarity in the history of humanity, even though readers of *Philosophical Readings* surely live in one. In a similar way, I think that Ferraris' criticisms of Searle's theory leave us free, if we feel so inclined, to talk of a certain physical object counting as a social object in a certain context. That is to say, there is no real harm in talking *as if* social objects were brought into being by acts of inscribing or of collective intentionality, and indeed, many of the phenomena that Ferraris and Searle link to-

gether in expounding their theories would be hard to see as connected without these ways of talking. But it is well to be aware that the objects they invoke are not really there, and their alleged objecthood is better parsed in Rylean fashion by appeal to categories such as powers, rights and duties, accreditations and customs.

The two problems I wish to raise for the characteristic and core thesis of the documental theory are intertwined and may be just two sides of the same coin. One, which I shall rather arbitrarily call the Regress Problem and which I shall consider first, concerns the priority both causal and conceptual of social facts over documents. The other, which I shall call the Validation Problem, concerns the difficulty for the theory of recognising that some apparent inscribed acts do not constitute social objects.

What I am calling the Regress Problem arises in the following way. On Ferraris' view, the *explananda* of a theory of social reality are objects like those we have already cited as the paradigm cases: money, marriages, degrees and borders. To explain the arising of these objects and to identify the objects that arise, Ferraris makes appeal to the acts by which they are instituted. "Act" here may waver slightly between an event or action of inscribing (the issuing of a note by the central bank, the signing of the marriage register, the award ceremony in a university or the stipulation of an international treaty) and the enduring particular that issues from such an event or action (the banknote, the marriage certificate, the degree diploma or the text of the treaty). But this wavering is

not a cause for particular concern, rather as talk of an “Act of Parliament” may refer to the completion of a voting procedure or to the statute that is then to be found in law books. That is to say, we are unlikely to be misled by this categorial slide because we can distinguish fairly easily between the event or action and the document. And, in turn, the documents may be considered either as tokens (as in the case of the bank-note: reproduction is forgery and threatens debasement of the currency) or as types (as in the other three cases we have been considering: such registrations need to be copiable for the purposes for which they are kept). The move then is to say that the social object in each case (the money, the marriage, the degree or the border) can be picked out by appeal to the document that is, in some sense, its vehicle.

As already noted, it is a salient virtue of such documents that they are readily identifiable and can be appealed to when we wish to determine the contours of social reality. If such an appeal fails and no document can be identified, then, on Ferraris’ view, there is no social object and no social fact. Where there are facts and objects that are not identified by some inscribed act, they must be brute facts or natural objects and, hence, not social in Ferraris’ terms. That is to say, on the documental theory, behind every social fact there must be an inscribed act on pain of an explanatory failure.

Though he nowhere makes it explicit, Ferraris is thus committed to the view that in any explanatory sequence of arbitrary length of social facts or objects and inscribed acts,

we have an explanation of the facts and objects only when the final term of the sequence is an inscribed act. To take a simple case, suppose we identify the social object that is a marriage by reference to the register that the spouses signed on their wedding day and we want an explanation of that. Ferraris might allow that, for sure, we can explain its being a marriage by reference to social facts such as the eligibility of the partners, the authority of the presiding officer and the regularity of the registration. But, then, he would say that these social facts must in turn be explained by the documents that constitute that eligibility (e.g. certifications that both partners are of a suitable age, unmarried, of sound mind and so on), that authority (e.g. a declaration that the registrar is authorised to officiate), and that regularity (e.g. a law determining the observance of certain procedures).

At this point, we might wonder why a sequence (Doc) *socialfact-inscribedact-socialfact-inscribedact* is more convincing or explanatory than a sequence (Soc) *inscribedact-socialfact-inscribedact-socialfact*, where any given term is explained by the term to its left, and the final term to the right is the ultimate explanation of the sequence. If a (Doc) sequence is the basic form of theses in the theory of social reality, then inscribed acts are always required at the end of any explanatory sequence, and every (Soc) sequence is partial or incomplete as an explanation of social reality.

Let us note one feature of Ferraris’ commitment to (Doc) over (Soc). This is that, if there is no society without social facts, there

is no society without inscribed acts. In the paradigm cases of the documental theory, the inscribed acts require writing. Hence, there is no society without writing. But there are, as a matter of undeniable anthropological fact, many societies without writing. Hence, the preference for (Doc) over (Soc) does not capture the essence of social reality. If some sequence (Soc) turns out to be an adequate or complete account of some slice of social reality, as it must be given that there are many societies without writing, then the documental theory applies at best to some of the practices of some societies that do use writing, and in particular to the bureaucratic practices of complex literate societies.

What the Regress Problem brings to light about the documental theory is that the preference for (Doc) over (Soc) leads to thesis that there can be no social facts of the paradigm sorts without writing. This may be true as a matter of practicality: some complex social facts may be hard to police in absence of written documents. But practicality and policing are not the objective of a theory of social reality or of social ontology: the objective should be to discern what social facts there are.

In at least three of the four paradigm cases we have been considering, relevant social facts can easily obtain even in the absence of writing. Many societies without writing have developed means for obviating the problems of barter and have thus, to some extent, invented money and attribute to certain objects some subset of the powers that I attribute to my €10 banknote. Almost

all societies, including those without writing, recognise arrangements that it is perfectly proper to call marriages because certain reciprocal rights and duties are recognised within family groups. And much social living – including nomadic living – involves the delimitation from time to time of spaces into which outsiders may enter only on certain conditions. The case of university degrees is, of course, one in which the social facts in question do make pretty essential reference to writing and are, so far forth, pretty unthinkable in a society without writing. But one might nevertheless see that the institutions in question are evolutions of the ways that, even in societies without writing, certain sorts of expertise (such as those of the “medicine man”) confer rights and duties that may be exclusive to those who have matured them.

If the Regress Problem really is a problem for the documental theory, as I think it is, then one might reasonably infer that sequences (Soc) are better candidates for explaining some of the features of societies that use inscribed acts for the practical purposes of policing particularly complex or evolved social facts. In favour of preferring sequences (Soc), we may also cite the way that inscribing acts is itself a species of social fact, and hence cannot figure in the explanation of the genus of which it is a species.

This last feature of sequences (Soc) provides a passage to the Validity Problem, which I have announced as something like the flip side of the Regress Problem. If the Regress Problem for the theory of documentality boils down to the observation that a



sequence (Doc) has as its final term an inscribed act that is itself a social fact, and hence every sequence (Doc) is really a sequence (Soc) after all, then the Validity Problem boils down to the observation that social facts about inscribed acts are needed to distinguish between valid acts and invalid acts.

Although there are some passages in Ferraris' exposition of his theory in which he recognises the need to be able to distinguish between valid and invalid documents, the trend of his thought is, as we have seen, to say that the distinction can be made by appeal to some other inscribed act that validates valid documents and hence underpins the social objects that are identified by means of them. Of course, there will be cases in which some other piece of paper can be called in aid to establish the legitimacy of an inscribed act whose validity has been called into doubt. If the Regress Problem is a problem for valid documents, it should be clear how things stand with invalid ones: their invalidity derives from the lack of social facts apt to legitimate them.

Rather than reconsider the paradigm cases of inscribed acts that, for Ferraris, constitute social objects, we may describe briefly how things stand with what I think may be a paradigm case of an invalid inscribed act: the so-called *Constitutum Constantini*. Though there is some room for uncertainty about where and when this document was drawn up, copies were in circulation, both in France and at Rome, in the second half of the eighth century C.E., being included in a collection of Papal decretals in

the ninth century and in Gratian's *Concordia discordantium canonum* of about 1150 (I, xcvi, 14). What the *Constitutum* inscribes is the donation by the Emperor Constantine of temporal power over the Western Empire to the then pontiff Sylvester and in perpetuity to the Roman Church. In this, it corroborates and is corroborated by fifth-century accounts attributing to St Sylvester a part in the conversion of Constantine by means, among other things, of curing him of leprosy. Though some voices, such as that of Dante (*Inferno*, XIX, 115-7), had been raised against the effects of what is inscribed in the *Constitutum*, its validity was taken for granted over five or six centuries. But I would be very surprised if Maurizio Ferraris did not agree with me in saying that the *Constitutum* does not establish the temporal power of the Roman Church over Western Europe. While this is not a problem for me, for the documental theory it would appear to be one because we have what looked to everyone like an inscribed act, but no social fact.

The point of the Validity Problem for the theory of documentality is that that theory seems to have difficulty accounting for what was wrong with the *Constitutum*. What seems to be the difficulty? In one sense, it ought to be obvious that, if the *Constitutum* was not written by Constantine, and so is a forgery, then the inscribed act that it purports to be is not valid. But how can the documental theory account for this?

For Ferraris, the long temporal gap between the supposed donation in the fourth century and the earliest manuscripts in circu-

lation might hold the key: if the documental tradition does not stretch back to Constantine, then there was no act of inscribing (in the sense of an event of writing) to set up the inscribed act (in the sense of an enduring particular). But a gap of this sort is not so very surprising with a technology of paper and ink in which a text could only survive (as a type) over centuries by being copied onto ever-new physical supports. From where we are, we cannot verify the absence of intermediates between the fourth century and the eighth. So how can we tell that the text we have before us is not an effect of an act of Constantine's?

Consider the position in the early fifteenth century. We have a powerful institution, the Roman Catholic Church asserting its temporal authority over large swathes of Western Europe. This assertion is backed up by a document that has been reproduced for hundreds of years and incorporated into canon law. This document says that the Emperor Constantine transferred his authority to the Pope. It would seem, then, that the document could be challenged only by another document. For instance, if it were in outright conflict with what we find in Eusebius of Cæsarea's *Vita Constantini*, that might be grounds for doubt; but we have reason for thinking that Eusebius was not as well informed about Constantine's doings as he presents himself as being. So given that the *Constitutum* presents itself as being an act inscribed by Constantine and has the support of so many institutions and authorities, the temporal power of the Church was for

centuries a pretty solid social object (if you like to talk that way).

So far documentality. But this seems back-to-front.

Nevertheless, beginning with Nicholas of Cusa's rather casual assertion in 1433 that the *Constitutum* was apocryphal (De concordantia catholica, III, 2) and Lorenzo Valla's blistering attack De falso credita et ementita Constantini donatione (1440), the document itself came to be discredited.

In some crucial phases of his highly elaborate argumentation, Valla proceeds more or less as follows. The alleged social fact of Constantine's donating the Western Empire to the Pope was impossible; the *Constitutum* inscribes his performing that donation; therefore the *Constitutum* is a forgery. The precise nature of the impossibilities that Valla exposes need not detain us here (though it is stirring reading that I highly recommend), but given that we know something about social facts, we can know something about a document that purports to represent one. If a certain social fact is impossible, then an inscribed act that would constitute it is invalid. If someone thinks that Valla's procedure as I have caricatured it is in some way circular, for instance because it seeks to show that the Emperor could not have donated the Western Empire on the grounds that the *Constitutum* says that he did, I would repeat my recommendation to read the *De falso credita et ementita donatione* and recall that we can often tell that a text is not telling the truth because the things it tells are impossible (flying horses, invisible men, time travel and so on).

As with the Regress Problem, the Validity Problem arises out of the way that documental theory seems to repose a certain faith in the genuineness of documents as such. Of course, without some such faith, it would be very hard to manage many of our more complex social affairs. But a document is not made valid only by other documents and is not made invalid by the absence of validating documentation. Rather, its standing depends on social facts about its being drawn up: if Constantine had donated the Western Empire to Sylvester, then that interaction would have been what would have made the *Constitutum* valid, just as being actually issued by a central bank is what makes my €10 note genuine, being conducted by a mayor is what makes some marriages binding, being earned in a reputable university is what makes a degree certificate worth hanging on the wall, and being established by inter-governmental agreement is what fixes where a border lies.

If the Regress Problem concerns in the first instance the paradigm social objects that documental theory considers and the Validity Problem is best exemplified by paradigm non-objects, the third problem for the theory that I wish briskly to raise concerns the treatment of the less-than-paradigmatic social objects that Ferraris wishes his theory to cover. These are cases in which we have a social fact or social object but we have nothing written in any language on any physical support. Among these might be – Ferraris' own examples – appointments, lunch invitations, bets and threats. These are clearly cases where there is something social insofar

as they involve at least two persons: I cannot make an appointment with myself, invite myself to lunch, make a bet with myself or threaten myself. Though they may be written down, they need not be and are in force irrespective of whether they are or not.

Rigorous application of the documental theory would seem to dictate that here we do not, after all, have anything social because there is no inscribed act. If that were the position, the documental theory would collapse: if a theory dictates that an appointment, an invitation, a bet or a threat that is not written down is not a social arrangement, then the theory is simply false. And it is simply false because, even if these arrangements are not paradigmatic for the documental theory, they are certainly social, even paradigmatically social. And I would add that, if such arrangements are paradigmatically social but are not paradigmatically documental, then the claim that the documental gets to the essence of the social looks to be on very thin ice indeed.

Quite reasonably, Ferraris has to allow that un-inscribed appointments, invitations, bets and threats are social, but has to accommodate them to the documental theory.

Adopting – or perhaps adapting – some terminology invented by Jacques Derrida in his book *On Grammatology* (1967), Ferraris proposes that what we have in such cases are phenomena of “archiwriting”. Thus the social fact or object of an appointment, an invitation, a bet or a threat is constituted by there being traces in the participants to these events such that all of those involved recognise their bindingness. These traces are

traces of archiwriting in way not entirely dissimilar to the way that the trace of the letters I am now typing are traces of writing, even though for the time being, those letters are just configurations of bits inside my computer, on whose screen certain configurations of pixels appear. Yet these letters have two characteristics that are worth attending to. One is that, in the combination I am seeking to impose on them, the text that they make up is in a certain language, which is my idiolect of English and may be more or less understandable by other readers of any of the many varieties of English that infest the globe. The other is that the support in which they are currently imprisoned may be accessed in various ways and the writing may be fully actualised, for instance by being printed on paper or disseminated to other computers.

As we have noted, it is a strength of the documental theory that it emphasises the stability, shareability and verifiability of the documents that constitute social facts. But the appeal to Derridean archiwriting throws this strength away. For Derrida, archiwriting need not be in any language, such as French or English, and may be essentially private, residing only in the mind or brain of a single individual. I do not know how seriously Derrida himself took this proposal, or whether he meant the various things he said about it to be taken seriously by others. But, for myself, I find it hard to take at all seriously because it is highly implausible to suppose that anything that answers to his description can be called in aid to explain the

social facts that are non-paradigmatic for the documental theory.

If archiwriting is not in any language, then the content of a trace of it is not responsible to any rules of meaning. Indeed, it is quite mysterious how such a thing could have meaning at all. And if it can be private, then it cannot be used to explain anything essentially public or social. Indeed, it is quite mysterious what difference its presence or absence would make. In these respects, archiwriting cannot explain any social facts. To avoid the falsity of the documental theory in the face very many day-to-day social facts that do not involve paradigmatic documents, Ferraris appeals to the notion of archiwriting, and thus consigns his theory to complete explanatory failure.

If my friend – perhaps Ferraris himself – wants to say that I should be at a certain restaurant at a certain hour because our appointment for lunch was constituted by a document in archiwriting inscribed on his brain and mine (and *mutatis mutandis* in the other non-paradigmatic cases for the documental theory), I might think that his way of talking is a bit contorted and unenlightening. But it is only if he persists in talking this way in the philosophy room, or publishing books and contributing to numbers of *Philosophical Readings* to promote this way of talking in others, that I might begin to protest. As I have.

## Knowledge and Different Levels of Reality

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### 1. Introduction

Usually science talks about a world that contradicts our common sense or our natural interpretations: Earth's decentralization inverts our relation with stars, objects lose their dimension of solidity to be crushed in energy fields, living beings are not traced back to a repetitive genealogy but to a changing one, the dimensional ellipsis allowed by mathematics annihilates the ternary basis of experience, time itself seems to rest on a space. How did we get to this point and why? How does the reality in which we live (and that science deconstructs in a counter-intuitive way) emerge<sup>1</sup>? What is its meaning? Do real and apparent predicates, as Galileo wanted, exist or do we have primary and secondary qualities as suggested by Locke?

In order to discuss epistemology, it is fundamental to know the epistemic apparatus of the human being in its basic coordinates, so as to investigate the stability of knowledge, which today seems to be anything but stable. Every event, in order to be understood, needs

<sup>1</sup> Wolpert L. (1992), *The Unnatural Nature of Science*, Cambridge – London, Harvard University Press.

to be transformed in its kinetic dimension, but the evaluation of the movement requires a still background, as it depends on a premise of stability. Therefore, the epistemological foundations are the prerequisites to grasp an event, they represent its *cliché*. Thus, should we be pleased with an instrumental view of epistemology? The world appears to us as a group of predicates that we acquire through our sense organs: the texture of a piece of furniture, the taste of a strawberry, the colour of a flower, the smell of mowed grass. It seems like that, but we know that the perception of predicates does not belong exclusively to the object – for example not everyone agrees on the predicates of a particular event and different species always notice different predicates when exposed to the same phenomenon. On the other hand a predicate is not an invention of the organs through which we interact with reality, if it is true that it is possible to easily dwell in the world thanks to the semiology of the predicates, obtaining confirmations to our needs. Moreover we experience both synchronic and diachronic relationships between predicates; we can infer norms that, even while not being necessarily stable, can give us a good forecasting probability. Often acquired correlations offer us the possibility to favour and foresee the occurrence of a phenomenon. If predicates are neither exclusively of the world nor the result of a pure invention of our sense organs we can say, with approximation, that they are the rising outcome of the interaction between our peculiarities – how we face the world – and some general and specific qualities of the real. Therefore, this emergence, our way of “seeing” reality, is

not an expression of the world in itself, but of our particular dialogue with the world.

Why do we dialogue with the world? For a very simple reason: in order to live we need answers, we need to interiorise order so as to stabilise our own improbability. Living beings are thermodynamically unstable systems, a dissipative structure – to put it in Prigogine's words<sup>2</sup> – whose temporary resistance in the complexity of the general non-equilibrium is due to their opening, to their interaction with the world. The comings and goings through a cell membrane, that of an intestine or of woody foliage, or that of blood vascularization are an emergence of the world, whose dialogue is capable of delimiting an environment, a domain of metabolic validity, through the edges of the interchange.

Living beings are not autarchic: they need to dialogue if they want to preserve the internal order that characterizes them and information is the most precious resource to this purpose. On the other side, information is not in the world, it is not an objective reality, whether obvious or cryptic, or simply accessible. Information lies in the *dialogue* with the world, in the point where a particular question intersects a field of possibility. The answers do not come from our exposure to the world, as this would mean that the answers are in the world. They do not emerge from projective or creative construction either, as this would mean that the answers are simply ours. The answers are the result of a precise

<sup>2</sup> Kondepudi D., Prigogine I. (1998), *Modern Thermodynamics. From Heat Engines to Dissipative Structures*, New York, Wiley.

question, they are a reassembly of the worlds around a flow of key words. Therefore, the dialogue has an ecosystemical structure: there the living dwells, there it finds its real nourishment, that is, information. On the other hand, information is not something released from the operative content of the inquiring being; in other worlds, there is always need of a scale or a gradient of information for the circumstantial and causal correlates required to emerge. The operative space of the epistemic entity represents the fitness of the inquirer, whose fortune does not depend on a generic or absolute presentation of the real, but on a precise catalogue of risks and opportunities. In other words, the inquirer lives at a precise level of reality, given by a specific organization of the real, where the organization itself produces binding effects and emergences, which are qualities that cannot be subsumed from other organizational fields. Therefore, common sense is a way to live reality. It is neither a projection or an invention, nor is it the only possible reality.

## 2. Questioning the World to Obtain Fitness

Charles Darwin showed us that reproductive success is the key to understanding the shape,<sup>3</sup> the *hic et nunc* of the *natura naturata*, because only

<sup>3</sup> Darwin C. [1859] (2003), *On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection, Or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, Peterborough, Broadview Press.

those who are able to replicate themselves with success are now here to show off their characteristics. However, reproductive success, able to gain a perfect coherence between shape and function, an organism and its environment, ecological niche and behavioural traits, anatomy and physiology – a coherence that, first of all, is congruity and adherence to a style, an equilibrium between needs of efficacy and efficiency – has precise requests for the world. Acquired information allows for the maintenance of an internal order of the living: this negentropy is existence, an expression of a *here and now*, replication and evolution.

Can the energy of which a living being feeds on be reduced to an epistemic function? The questions deal with the events that cross the specific order of that given living being, and therefore they ask for basic epistemic correlates, that is, a totally peculiar dialogue with the world. Thus, we can consider the epistemic apparatus of a species as a field of stability that allows us to capture only the events of the world that are important under the profile of fitness. It is the field of dialogue that defines the epistemic apparatus. Therefore, its partiality should not be surprising for us – the field of dialogue reflects the subjectivity of the question, the specific election of the events to record, the type of information that we are looking for – but this does not justify falls into epistemic relativism, which is the total disarticulation of the functional result of the consistency of the world. If in an elongative phenomenon we are prone to read the entity which is in movement in respect to the background –

and so we say that it is the lion that comes closer and not the savannah that moves back – that preconceived interpretation is not entirely true; hence the illusion that the moon moves in the sky and not the clouds, as Eibl Eibesfeldt said.<sup>4</sup> Still, in the context where we dwell, it is highly probable and moreover it has an adaptive meaning which is not indifferent.

The epistemic apparatus calibrated by natural selection does not follow a necessity of an *absolute* knowledge of reality, but of species-specific action towards reality on the basis of strongly characterized exigencies. Therefore, the epistemic apparatus does not reflect reality but the need and the checkmate position established to obtain the breeding success of the subject. Nevertheless, the epistemic apparatus is calibrated on the resistance of the real. As the wings of a bird reflect upward currents, the fins and the shape of a fish are the mirror of fluids viscosity, while the gills witness the presence of dissolved oxygen in the water. In this way the epistemic apparatuses are the result of the peculiar needs of adaptation of a species in its interaction with the external reality.

Therefore, epistemic apparatuses are not simple ways of access to the real that, like glasses, owe their functionality to their transparency and to their capacity of objectively reflecting reality. They are rather instruments that act on the world, as a wing does with a particular function correlated to

<sup>4</sup> Eibl Eibesfeldt I. (1971) *Love and Hate: On the Natural History of Basic Behaviour Patterns*, Munich, Piper & Co.

the substrate it has to deal with. However, even if compared to a particular predicate of resistance – not all the resistances of the real act as selectors – the epistemic apparatus reflects the damages made by processes of negation or constraints given by reality. Thus the epistemic apparatuses follow the needs of selection: *a*) the particular needs of information which can be referred to *that* living being, in his dwelling within a well structured “living environment” – inhabiting rainforest trees has different informative urgencies compared to moving in the open space of the savannah – and “lifestyle” (to be an alert predator is different from feeding on fruits and berries); *b*) the consistency of the counterpart that the subject needs to face up. The world the subject dwells in has relevance because it is made of discrete and solid entities and not because it is built of energy fields. That world is characterized by “common norms” – such as gravity, the surface-volume relationship, the common movement of parts – therefore, it is probable that more species face it with the same epistemic strategies. Yet, that world consist of a “plurality of dialogic fields”, so that reality is more like a field of virtuality to be realized rather than an object to be approached.

Thus, it is necessary to recognize not the fallacy of the senses, but the meaning of the phylogenetic dialogue. The processes of cutting, connecting, attributing, ordering and asking, which constitute the occurrence of a phenomenon and its exit from the realm of the virtual, need to be traced back to that adaptive ontics that is established on the partiality of reality. Both the sensory access (the

phenomenal virtuality) and the intersection with the event (the actualization of the phenomenon) can lay on a contextual pillow, so to speak, insofar as they partialize reality. If we think in a creationistic way, we will inevitably tend to discern the *how* from the *what* of knowing, falling in the inevitable dichotomy between inductive and deductive regimes and in its aporetic deviation.

In my opinion, this dualism is the result of an anthropocentric reading of the epistemic approach and the heritage of a not yet accepted evolutionist vision of the cognitive process. On the other side, if we recognize in knowing not only the partiality of the intersection with the real, which derives from the phylogenetic specialization, but also the internalization of predicates themselves (which are responsible for that partiality, exactly as gills reflect the hydric environment of a fish), we will realize that the “how of knowing” is the result of a previous internalization, even though it is not realized through an evolutionary individual process of the “what” of knowing. Therefore, knowing implies an epistemic apparatus “able to” or “called to” make the context of the living being’s life partial or usable – this happens if it’s clear that: *a*) it is impossible to interact with the world if we are lacking questions and theories; *b*) the emerging interaction leads, in turn, to questions and theories of a different order. The how and the object of knowledge are only apparently two separate realities, because each individual that is called to the epistemic act, in his first intersection with the world, is already provided with an inherited phylogenetic apparatus, a



how that results from a previous selective exposition to the context, which is the object of knowing, in its predicates of resistance and influence.

Thus, the world of knowing has already interiorized some predicates of the object, those implicated in the adaptive process, so that the how reflects the thing. However, it reflects the thing not in its being as-it-is, but in its influential predicates under the adaptive profile, inevitably building a phenomenal partiality. Therefore, the how is an a-priori thing, redefined on the basis of the adaptive meaning of some of its predicates, exactly as respiration only captures the oxygen component of the air. Thus, the first organizational dimension of the epistemic apparatus can be traced back to phylogenesis: to a process of partial or distorted configuration of knowing. Therefore the how of knowing is not an a-priori that transcends the object of knowing, but the result of a selective dialectic between the object itself and the ontic style of the knower, a process that improves the capacity of partializing a thing on the basis of relevant predicates, interiorizing the predicates as a key to the corresponding keyhole. So the epistemic apparatus is the result of a dialectical function that intersects the objective of the *taxon* in phylogenetics and the resistances-influences that are virtually present in the context, displayed in precise predicates. Ultimately the epistemic apparatus is a solving organ, called to solve the problematic contents that the subjects of a certain species will face in their lives.

### 3. Levels of Reality as an Organization of the Real

Therefore, dialogue is a way to organize reality, and epistemology is the positioning on a level of reality in order to get useful information. This means that it is not an approximation but an emergence, a construction that is not arbitrary or paradigmatic, a way to eliminate the background noise and make specific contents emerge. Mental categories and sense organs are cabled together to organize a level of reality that is consistent under an adaptive profile, meaning that it needs to sustain that particular species in its enduring desire to keep a highly improbable internal organization. The order, or better, the predictability of a description-explication depends on the scale of observation, which is the level on which our epistemic apparatuses lay on. As Zbilut and Giuliani already wrote “The universe can be seen as a painting with different relative levels of apparent determinism and noise depending on the scale of observation”.<sup>5</sup> Basically, that scale-dependence tells us that by modifying our access, for example through a technological apparatus, placing ourselves at a different level of reality, we will be facing a different organization of reality and this will require us to modify the descriptive-explicative structure.

<sup>5</sup> Giuliani A., Zbilut J. P. (2009), *L'ordine della complessità*, Milan, Jaca Book, p. 72.

To organize reality does not mean to make it up, but to extract some scale emergences from a “field of definite and resistant possibilities”. In this sense, I regard Maurizio Ferraris’ concept of the “resistance of the real”<sup>6</sup> as particularly adequate. Moreover, this makes us understand an important epistemological principle: that is, the fact that there are many ways to read reality, but only one way through which the real falsifies our assertions. This means that the instrument is not an amplification of the phylogenetic endowment but a transformation, which is capable of modifying the scale of access and, in turn, the gradient of determinism and noise that we encounter as well as the type of information we can obtain. Additionally this means that:

1) even though the real exists, there is no privileged level of reality capable of containing the others;

2) it is not possible to simultaneously access various levels of reality;

3) the human being is not allowed to reduce reality to a formal scheme.

I agree with Hilary Putnam and his “common sense realism”, in claiming that what exist is independent from its knowability and that there can be many correct descriptions of reality.<sup>7</sup> On the other side, if reality is organized under binding structures,

<sup>6</sup> Ferraris M. (2012), “Esistere è resistere”, in M. De Caro, M. Ferraris (edited by), *Bentornata realtà. Il nuovo realismo in discussione*, Turin, Einaudi, pp. 139-165.

<sup>7</sup> Putnam H. (1992), *Renewing Philosophy*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, p. 9.

each endowed with particular resistances, the impossibility of arriving to a unique and objective knowledge of the real is evident: it is only possible to increase the informative space. These diverse organizations of the real, each incomplete from an explanatory point of view if analysed at the level of components – to refer to Terrence Deacon’s hypothesis – can be defined as “levels of reality”.<sup>8</sup>

Each level of reality cannot be explained but through its own centrifugation: hence the explicative non-self-sufficiency of any epistemic level. The organization which a level of reality comes from depends on the potentiality of the real and on the type of interrogation that is predisposed. In that sense, in order to find an absolute conception of the real we could define it not as a specific status but as a space of virtuality inside which different levels of reality are admissible. The level of reality brings to light some phenomenal predicates, which do not need to be regarded as projective entities even though they are emergent ones.

Therefore, epistemology is not “making up a context”, but a particular intersection with reality that happens on the basis of a temporary dwelling in reality. In order to act on a particular context it is necessary to define some gradients of correlation and therefore emphasise some aspects over others. Assuming a positional scale, a new order emerges. This order is not arbitrary or in-

<sup>8</sup> Deacon T. W. (2001), *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter*, New York, Norton & Company.

vented and nevertheless it does not depend on the order of magnitude on which the observation-dwelling is positioned. This hunger for well-defined answers makes a dialogue or an informative exchange emerge, electing a specific field of interface that actualizes one among the multiple possibilities of reality, forming an organization inside the field of expressiveness. The subject is located in the dimension of a species and an individual because of this positioning of the interface, which allows him or her to observe exclusively the events that have some relevance to his or her problem.

On the other hand, it is wrong to believe that only the experiential level or the one of direct observation – common sense, that is, phylogenetic epistemology – has a right to define reality, as is often supported by common sense realists. A scientific theory has the same right over direct experience in the description of reality, the same possibility of making predicates emerge that tell us something more regarding the field of virtuality of the real, the same right to face the fields of resistance of the real. Moving away from phylogenetic epistemology, through anthropodecentrative mechanisms – and the counter-intuitive character of the science talks about this centrifugal process – new phenomenal predicates and new resistances of the real will emerge. Every time the questioner hybridises her hereditary endowments with an instrument (which leads to a particular kind of knowledge, and opens new existential dimensions thanks to the animal epiphany) she modifies her dialogic structure with reality. Detaching herself from

common sense, the questioner receives a diverse organization or a scale gradient, originating not a construction but a new level of reality.

The concept of level of reality reminds me of a passage of Aristotle which is referred to the theories of Speusippus who: “imagines more levels of reality starting from the One, and he imagines principles for each level of reality”.<sup>9</sup> The concept of multiplicity of the principles implies a positional choice on the part of the questioner. Following that indication, in a dialogic conception of the descriptive-explicative experience, the phenomenal predicates do not depend only on the intersection between the properties of the observer and those of the observed, but they also depend on the level of reality where the observer is located.

We can synthesise what we have said so far in 3 points:

- 1) not only does the observer adhere to reality, but the observer himself was also constructed on the basis of the consistence of the real;
- 2) the level of reality depends on the level of virtuality of the real and on the characteristics of the observer;
- 3) the level of reality depends on the type of questions that the observer asks the field of virtuality of the real in a given moment.

We recognize and access a statute of reality through the partiality of its appearance, its

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Berti E. (2010), *Sumphilosophein. La vita nell'accademia di Platone*, Rome, Laterza, p. 106.

giving itself to us in a certain way. Therefore, we intersect predicates of resistance or of influence with our specifying form of being, but also in this limitation of access, what we define a phenomenon or a phenomenal predicate is an organization of the real, a possible expression of the real. The truth/falsity of a statement depends on its interrogative structure, in other words it depends on how I intersect reality, on the level at which I pose the question, that is, “what I am interested in” and “how I ask the question for it”. If, for whatever reason, the interrogation does not intersect any specific resistances, these do not emerge: our epistemic apparatus is not structured to make the Copernican universe emerge because the type of interrogation that could make it emerge is not pertinent to the “epistemic positioning” of the species. It is necessary to hybridize that epistemic apparatus to make new interrogative structures emerge, which means that it is necessary to start new dialogues, and this happens every time the human being builds some anthropodecentering mechanisms.

On the other side, it is undeniable that so as to question reality it is indispensable to locate ourselves on a precise level, to establish some parameters of noise and determinism, that is, to assume a scale gradient that makes specific corresponding parts emerge. The anthropodecenterative mechanism – for example to observe the sky through binoculars – does not make a unique structure of the real emerge, but it makes new organizations emerge, helping us in making new resistances emerge and to enlarge our observa-

tional scope over reality. Therefore, theories are not approximations but specific interrogations that allow for the emergence of new resistances and thus the acquisition of more information on the real – and, therefore, the formulation of new questions. Thus, the predictability of a theory is connected to the congruence of the interrogative structure in respect to the type of phenomenon that we want to investigate, so that the level of predictability is attributable to the space of probability in which we dwell. Each interrogative structure has to intersect some resistances and not others; it depends on the type of scale positioning in which the interrogation is located, that is, the capacity of making only *some* events emerge and ordering them.

Hence, common sense is just one among the various possible organizations of the real, which is capable of giving to our phylogenetic trajectory a supporting field on which to formulate the questions that are useful to us. This means that common sense is not the “reality” but a presentation of it, that is, a level of reality – one that has intersected the inquiries of the species – but, even better, it is not a projection or an arbitrary construction and it is not an approximation. We could say that the level of reality occupied by the experience of common sense represents a little observatory on reality that has been useful-indispensable to solve the difficulties of our species-specific fitness. Therefore, even if the phenomenal predicates belong securely to the observed object, they are not constructed, since they have acted on the epistemic apparatus to adjust the “expe-

riential how". However, their phenomenal particularity emerges from the way in which we question reality, that is, from the horizon and the depth of our observatory.

#### 4. Towards a Dialogic Epistemology

Secondly, it is necessary to see the epistemic hereditary apparatus not as a finished or "almost-finished" instrument, meaning that we forecast an already given or reachable condition of congruity or perfection, but as a multiplier of epistemic apparatuses. The EVO of the epistemic apparatus is functional to the ontogenetic DEVO, which can be seen as a generator of new structures of knowledge on the basis of a re-adjustment or transformation of past knowledge and simultaneously a re-definition of the domains of validity of past knowledge itself.<sup>10</sup>

Whilst knowing, the being bends its epistemic apparatus' new predicates and thus modifies the horizon of its intersecting-questioning the world. Thus, the here and now of the knowing subject is the dimensional result – each dimension represents the evolutionary virtual to build new fields of organization of reality – of the previous processes of phylogenetic and ontogenetic knowledge. From this we can understand that knowing entails the involvement of various dimensions of the being, which are

diachronically recursive, leading to an explication of the phenomenon that, in the here and now of the subject, is the result of the diverse evolutionary declinations of the epistemic apparatus in its previous cognitive acts. We can say that the interrogation – which is the structure of dialogue with the real located on a precise level – does not only give answers such as true or false, but it also retro-acts on the epistemic system by modifying it. Therefore it is not possible to know without modifying our own epistemic apparatuses. The dualism between knowing subject and known object and the unidirectionality of the act are just apparent. Thus, scientific theories are not separated or extraneous entities to the inherited phylogenetic epistemic apparatus: they derive from it, even though not directly. The hybridization with an instrument generates a new residence of the living and thus a new level of reality through which it is possible to dialogue-interrogate, but this dwelling is still rooted in common sense.

We are now beginning to understand that the dichotomy and the opposition between common sense realism and scientific realism is only apparent. A scientific theory is nothing more than an anthropodecentrative process that does not at all deny the precedence of experience but simply gives it a domain of validity. Interrogations proposed at a given level of reality produce responsive surpluses which evoke new emergences and are at the basis of the need to activate new levels of reality. Therefore, progression is given by the recurring effect, in the sense of declination, of the interrogation itself. By

<sup>10</sup> Carroll S. B. (2005), *Endless Forms Most Beautiful: The New Science of Evo Devo*, New York, Norton & Company.

the term “declination” I mean an introjection of the known object that modifies the successive “how” of knowledge. At the end, even phylogenesis, in its diverse aspects of functional correlation, is nothing more than a process of introjection of possible predicates of the real.

On the other side, reality always presents an edge of novelty to each living being – an accident in respect to the interrogative species-specific standards – so that we can talk about a “principle of singularity of the real”: each living being needs to re-configure its own epistemic apparatus. This makes us overcome the static conception of *Umwelt* proposed by von Uexküll,<sup>11</sup> non only in the monodological sense expressed by Heidegger, but in a non-evolutionary or non-closure sense within phylogenetic epistemology. The “apparatuses of conception” of the world are evolutionary entities, and inevitably every living being needs to exit from the bubble in order to face the principle of singularity. The evolution of phylogenetic epistemology interiorises the act of knowing itself, so that common sense is an entity which presents edges of stability and areas of declination. It is obvious that the transformation of these apparatuses is affected by the individual experiences of the subject – which obviously are limited – and

<sup>11</sup> Von Uexküll J. (1957), “A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds” in *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept*, Claire H. Schiller (edited by), New York, International Universities Press, pp. 5–80.

by the translations that the group (population or species) interiorises into a cultural canon. In this case the information does not pass through genetic mechanisms, but through an externalization of the information inside the processes of socialization, first of all the parental process. Moreover, nowadays people discuss if the experience of the individual can, in such a way, be epigenetically interiorised also in the genetic field.

What we observe in the human being is an exaggeration of the process of externalization through instruments of sedimentation of information: rituals, costumes, writings, disciplines, just to cite some. But there is more. The human being has hybridised his own epistemic apparatus with external entities – heterospecific and instrumental – and this has amplified the evolutionary process of the apparatus of phytogenic heritage, throughout a process that is not ascribable to ontogenesis, since it is highly anthropocentric. That’s the reason why I referred to that event as ontopoiesis. The *techne* is not only a simple operative apparatus, a secondary entity that is at the service of the human, because it operates a metamorphosis of interface: first of all the *techne* is a way to start new dialogue with the world and a way to formulate new questions. As a consequence it is more correct to talk about techno-science, admitting an internal recursivity.

Through the techno-scientific activity new levels of reality emerge for the human being, who can then operate new surveys on the resistances of the reality. Basically, this is an enlargement of the horizon of informative

access, that allows him to identify a plurality of domains of validity. Using the hybridative operation permitted by techno-science, the human being makes a sort of survey on reality, investigating new levels of reality and looking for the relative resistances. If asaying a major number of resistances means to increase our knowledge of the real, it is obvious that the techno-scientific activity helps us enhance our interrogations. However, I think the physicalist claim over a privileged interface of interrogation of the real is wrong.

If it is true that the phenomenal qualities, given specific partiality of access, can transform themselves if declinative or hybridative apparatuses are used, it is also evident that only a scale operation has been realised, making new coordinates of order and noise emerge. Therefore, is there a way or a direction to follow in research? I think there is and the way, which is suggested to me from Bachelard<sup>12</sup> to Piaget,<sup>13</sup> is that of travelling through different levels of reality, exploring in each level the resistance of the real. Thus, lifts are nothing more than hybridative processes with non-human realities, such as the *techne* that allows an anthropodecentralization from anthropocentric epistemology. How can we call this activity if not techno-science?

Knowing means hybridizing our own epistemic apparatuses. Insisting on subtract-

<sup>12</sup> Bachelard G. [1932] 2002, *The Formation of the Scientific Mind*. Manchester, Clinamen Press.

<sup>13</sup> Piaget J. (1954), *The Construction of Reality in the Child*, New York, Routledge.

ing the *episteme* from this introjective flow is an otiose and diverted operation, in the false view that the entity that intersects the world has been created with the particular aim it has *here and now*. Along this line we would be led to believe that human epistemology has been structured with the aim of conceiving abstract theories on the universe or of dealing with the imperceptible atomic world. We arrived to formulate those theories not in a solipsistic way and remaining inside our epistemic apparatuses, but using external contributes that, as crutches, modified our access to reality.

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## The Anthropocentrism of Anti-Realism

.....  
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 .....

“When he woke up,  
 The dinosaur was still there.”  
 Augusto Monterroso

### 1.

**A**n aspect which has been largely overlooked within the contemporary debate over realism and anti-realism is the role of the ‘human’ that these contrasting theories presuppose. My thesis is that metaphysical anti-realism, specifically the one dealing with material reality (I am not speaking, for instance, of the one concerning social objects), is an anthropocentric approach to reality, notwithstanding all the reasonings that can be used in order to maintain it. By the term ‘anthropocentrism’, I am referring to the philosophical concept that considers humans to be the main beings in the universe. Specifically, anthropocentrism is expressed by the theory arguing that the species *Homo sapiens* has an ontological pre-eminence over reality<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the attendees who participated in the “Welcome Antispeciesism” debate that took place in December 2012 at the “Mangiacarte” bookshop in Catania, and to those who took part in the debate named “Being animals: a comparison between philosophy and psychology”, that took place in January 2013 at the “Enzo Tortora” association in

### 2.

In order to immediately show the roots of my thesis, let me speak in general terms: along with the philosophical literature concerning the theme, anti-realism can be defined as the theory stating that one or more classes of objects depend on us. On the contrary, realism affirms that one or more classes of objects do not depend on us<sup>2</sup>. At least from a postmodern perspective, paradoxically, anti-realism has been approved for its emancipatory merits<sup>3</sup>: against totalitarianisms, hermeneutics allows us to deconstruct the imposition of other people’s truths. This fallacy of reality’s denial – as if it were an added value supporting our species’ political emancipation – has recently been analyzed and contested by Maurizio Ferraris with his theoretical proposal called ‘New Realism’<sup>4</sup>: here Ferraris af-

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Milan, where for the first time I informally presented the theories discussed here. I also thank Maurizio Ferraris for the discussions concerning realism and anti-realism and for having lead me to this philosophical debate. One first version of this essay has appeared in Italian as the final chapter of L. Caffo, *Zampe come gambe: la questione dei diritti animali*, goWare, Pisa 2013

<sup>2</sup> Miller, Alexander, “Realism”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2012 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/realism/>>.

<sup>3</sup> A paradigmatic case is represented by Gianni Vattimo – Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *A Farewell to Truth*, Columbia University Press, New York 2011

<sup>4</sup> Ferraris, Maurizio, *Manifesto of New Realism*, SUNY, New York 2014. I think it is also worth to analyze Ferraris, Maurizio, “La presa della battaglia.

firms that, if there necessarily has to be something that allows us to protect ourselves from totalitarianism, this has to be reality itself, compared to which falsifications appear as they are, and not just as possible interpretations. Back to anthropocentrism and considering this short digression, it should be clear why I am trying to support this argument: Anti-realism sees reality not so much as non-existent, but rather as human-dependent. You may think of the ‘conceptual dependence’ typical of modern philosophy, which led it to be ‘entrapped’ in the sceptical impasse badly solved by Kant’s ‘representational dependence’ (which was a source of serious problems).

### 3.

**I**t takes a lot of cockiness to state that the external world depends completely on us humans; this boldness is represented by the very anthropocentrism that I am going to discuss. Let us start with dinosaurs. The connection between dinosaurs and anti-realistic anthropocentrism is properly explained by Diego Marconi in his ‘Minimal Realism’<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, dinosaurs have lived between the Late Triassic (which began approximately 251 million years ago) and the Late Cretaceous (sixty-five million years ago). Moreover, as far as we know, the first human beings –

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Otto punti per una discussione”, in *Alfabeta2*, 24: 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Marconi, Diego, “Realismo minimale”, in M. De Caro, M. Ferraris, *Bentornata Realtà: il nuovo realismo in discussione*, Einaudi, Torino 2012.

along with their ‘representational schemes’ – have appeared on Earth just in the last two hundred fifty thousand years (according to other interpretations the amount of time is twice this one, but this is of little importance in regard to my discussion). Supposing that the entire world is dependent on our representational schemes, it will appear clear that when dinosaurs existed, they didn’t exist, since the minds that would have made them exist hadn’t appeared yet: it is an obvious and quite ridiculous paradox. However, the most evident fact is that anti-realism also has the presumption of connecting the existence of certain animals – other living subjects – to the human minds that are able to conceive them, as it happens in this case.

### 4.

**T**hus, all this implies two options: either animals exist but only in relation to the human minds that conceive them, or if they do exist, they don’t have a world (Heidegger, who was, not by chance, an ‘unrestrained anti-realist’, asserted this ‘poverty in world’ of animals), since they are not in possession of the minds that make them exist. As if it were not enough, the anti-realist view is anthropocentric also because it doesn’t consider the fact that when a human being interacts with another animal (think of Derrida and his famous cat), they both interact with something that exists and is approachable by both of them, regardless of how this

something is perceived by their respective conceptual schemes<sup>6</sup>.

## 5.

Reality is human-dependent, interpretations replace facts, and these are human interpretations in any case ('human, all too human', as also Nietzsche doubted the external world). At this point, how could we match anti-realist tendencies and the philosophies that analyze the value of animality with the purpose of rehabilitating the non-human within contemporary ethics? As far as the 'classic' cases of contemporary animal ethics are concerned – I am thinking of Peter Singer or Tom Regan – there is no match, because the ontological theory underlying animal-oriented approaches is definitely a realist theory. But let us think just for a moment of Jacques Derrida and his philosophical positions: a) the assertion that 'there is nothing outside the text' in *Grammatology* and b) the almost animalist theory in his *The animal that Therefore I Am* (not to mention the seminars in his *The Beast and the Sovereign*, published posthumously). Within the same system, is it really possible to uphold a human constructivism (a document-related constructivism, in this case) of the world while stating that every animal has a world, and that, just as Derrida properly says, every animal life is an general singularity (Giorgio A-

<sup>6</sup> Think of Maurizio Ferraris' *slipper experiment*, also quoted in the above mentioned *Manifesto of New Realism*.

gamben will later call it 'quodlibet') which cannot be grasped by limiting descriptive categories? Of course it is not possible to do so, but it won't be clear until the issue 'anti-realism/anthropocentrism' is tackled head on.

## 6.

Let us get back to the question of dinosaurs since it will turn out to be useful for a parallelism. A well-known case of anti-realism is the one represented by Emanuele Severino, even though he thinks he is a realist (while it can be shown that he is not). He asserts that everything will exist forever and nothing can be nothingness; things merely appear and disappear from the 'sphere of appearance'<sup>7</sup>. If we try to imagine what Severino could tell us about the question of dinosaurs, one of his possible answers could be: how do we know that dinosaurs have not appeared in the 'sphere of appearance' just when their first remains appeared (meaning when we discovered them)? But, leaving poetic language aside, what Severino doesn't know is that the 'sphere of appearance' exactly coincides with epistemology. Remember the classic distinction between ontology (what there is) and epistemology (what we know about what

<sup>7</sup> Severino's theory has the purpose of contrasting Nihilism – defined as "the insanity of western world" – and is expressed in many of his works. Among the most representative, containing several formulations of this topic, one in particular has to be mentioned: Severino, Emanuele, *Essenza del nichilismo*, Adelphi, Milano 1995.

there is): it is obvious that Severino's statement is true in a certain sense, meaning that what we know about dinosaurs has actually arisen in the moment we found their remains; but the existence of dinosaurs is true, regardless of our knowledge of them. Let us now consider some more challenging parallels: the Holocaust, for instance, could have remained unknown, possibly (in fact, notwithstanding the huge amount of documents proving the opposite, some still negate such thing ever took place). If this were the case, following Severino, we could say that the Holocaust has never happened only because it never appeared in the sphere of appearance. This view leads to a form of negationism that can only be compared with Heidegger's, entailing the thought that crematoria in concentration camps were just 'traditional bread ovens' (according to the philosopher of Being and Time, being exists only when it shows up). Far from being recent, this problem forced Michael Dummett (a realist with a verificationist attitude towards the past)<sup>8</sup>, to withdraw many of his positions because of the ethical implication they lead to.

## 7.

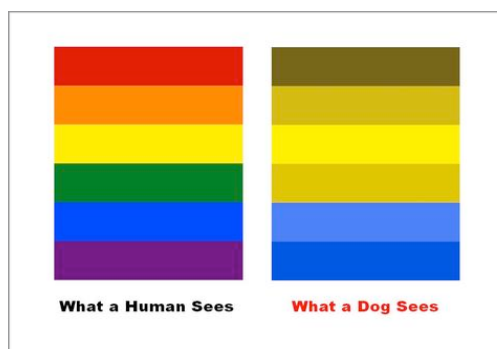
The seriousness of this parallelism is useful to highlight the following element: probably due to the dominant role human beings have played a-

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Dummett, Michael, *Truth and the Past*, Columbia University Press, New York 2003.

cross history, they are persuaded that their point of view is the only possible. For instance, according to Cartesian anti-realism, reality only deals with my own "I think": this is the very limit of anthropocentrism (it is by no chance that Descartes upheld the idea of animals as 'automatons'). Besides being subject to several counter-examples (some of them have been shown here), this position is simply false for two reasons: (1) animals too have an environment-world<sup>9</sup>; (2) every animal has a different perception of reality, which does not imply the complete denial of reality in itself but, on the contrary, means that there is something existing for all living beings that is then interpreted and perceived by them in different ways.

Considering the following picture:

<sup>9</sup> Contrary to Heidegger's definition of the animal as "poor in world" – in Heidegger, Martin, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2001, p. 250 – it is a fact that non-human forms of life contribute to the creation of their own environment (von Uexküll, Jakob, (1985). "Environment [Umwelt] and inner world of animals." in G. M. Burghardt (Ed.), *Foundations of Comparative Ethology* (pp. 222–245). New York, NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold. (Original work published 1909), § 16). See also Darwin, Charles, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms with Observation on their Habits*, Murray, London 1881 and Caffo, Leonardo, "In the Corridors of Animal Minds", in *Journal of Animal Ethics* 4 (1): 103–108.



Picture 1 – spectrography (dog vision compared to human vision)

By referring to the colors spectrum analysis, the picture shows the way a dog and a human perceive the world. It was Jacob von Uexküll, with his work *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, that called into question the anthropocentric prejudice, affirming that non-human animals live in our same sense-motor space; this is the reason why he introduced the concept of *Umwelt* (environment-world). This approach has the function of ‘decentralizing the perspective’, thus allowing animal studies to step out of the cage of speciesist prejudice (i.e. prejudice related to the belonging to a given species), therefore going beyond the comparative perspective ‘better/worse’. So as to make all this possible, it is necessary to assume a realist perspective: a falsification of anti-realism tout court turns out to be indispensable.

### 8.

Perhaps this misunderstanding is the cause of the numerous misinterpretations of postmodernism, which was pervaded by many sorts of reality inter-

preted by humans (as in Rorty) or even made by humans (as in Lyotard). This misunderstanding has to be clarified through the new reflections about realism in order to understand that a human’s point of view is neither the only possible nor the best one, compared to other living beings’ point of view. This plurality of gazes, visions and colours is only made possible by the fact that there is something that is observed and is waiting to be filled up with ‘sense’, as Markus Gabriel maintains<sup>10</sup>.

### 9.

One last objection<sup>11</sup> that could be raised at this point is the following one: the fact that animals have their own way of perceiving things is not sufficient to assert that this should lead to something similar to what is referred to as ‘world’ in the debate about realism. Thus let us try to understand how this concept (the concept of ‘world’) should be explained according to those who raise this objection. Of course, this is an extremely rich concept that, besides perception, includes aspects such as language in the Cartesian sense<sup>12</sup>, the theory of mind (pre-

<sup>10</sup> Gabriele, Markus, “The Meaning of “existence” and the contingency of sense”, in *Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism* IV (2013), pp. 74 - 83.

<sup>11</sup> I thank the first of the two anonymous referees for having exhorted me to express my answer to this objection in a clearer way.

<sup>12</sup> It is not only about communicating, but also about using language in different situations and in the

ferably of higher-order), the ability to establish complex relations with other individuals of the same species, etc. By analyzing the concept of 'world' after having employed von Uexküll's model, we may think we are facing a contradiction, since once again we are apparently trying to reshape the concept of world on the basis of what makes our own a 'world' deserving of being called so. However, if we thought so, we would be mistaken at least for two reasons: (1) von Uexküll himself sticks to an anthropocentric position considering our species as the only one able to access the environment of other forms of life; (2) however, it's my duty to take this objection into account because unless it is accurately solved, it will undermine the foundations of the animal-oriented intent which is the reason why I am writing these pages. Firstly, I have to address a conceptual issue: the belief that the 'world' is an exclusive domain of human beings. In order to avoid listing an endless number of cases, I am going to mention just two of them that will be counterbalanced by the studies about the 'marginal cases' within the species *Homo sapiens*. If we welcome the anthropocentric definition of 'world', we will be forced to include in animals such as certain primates (who are able, for instance, to use a language) and to leave out certain humans (who lack this ability): the cases of the male bonobo Kanzi and the female gorilla Koko are emblematic. These two animals have been able,

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most varied ways: these are all abilities that animals do not possess, according to Descartes.

although in different ways<sup>13</sup>, to acquire languages that are as complex as ours; they also reveal to have a high-ordered theory of mind as well as the ability of establishing complex relations with other individuals, whether or not they belong to their own species<sup>14</sup>. Thus, paradoxically, if we put Koko and Kanzi into the 'world' category, we should consequently leave some humans out of it – think for instance of people affected by autism: according to some theories, highly discussed in literature<sup>15</sup>, they lack a theory of mind that allows them to attribute mental states to other people, thus compromising their sociality. At this point, the question to be asked is if we really want to prevent certain human beings from having a world, only because we have decided – in theory and arbitrarily – what a world should be like by following the most

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<sup>13</sup> Koko has learned a variation of the American Sign Language (ASL), now called Gorilla Sign Language (GSL): sign languages are equivalent to any other human natural language. Kanzi expresses himself through the use of a complex lexical board that he himself has asked to enlarge, so as to increase his expressive power. See respectively Patterson, Francine, and Linden, Eugene, *The Education of Koko*. Holt Rinehart & Winston, California 1981 and Rumbaugh, Sue Savage and Lewin, Roger, *Kanzi: The Ape at the Brink of Human Mind*. Doubleday, London 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Koko has established a relation with a kitten, which is similar to our relations of domestication: Patterson, Francine, *Koko's kitten*, Scholastic Press, New York 1987.

<sup>15</sup> See the classic study published in *Cognition* in 1985: Baron-Cohen S, Leslie AM, Frith U, "Does the autistic child have a 'theory of mind'?", *Cognition* 2 (1: 1985): 37-46.

part of individuals belonging to our own species. In order to strictly weaken the aim of such an objection, it would be sufficient to formulate this thought: what would happen if cheetahs decided what can be considered 'world' by imposing the ability of running incredibly fast as a prerogative<sup>16</sup>? This question would be enough to understand that most of human mental constructions are plainly relative. So to sum up, even the world, as it is intended in most cases within ontological debates about Realism, seems to be a social object rather than a natural object.

#### 10.

**A** supplementary in-depth analysis should be carried out regarding the reason why a (non-anthropocentric) ethics opened to the non-human<sup>17</sup> should be preferred. If anthropocentrism

<sup>16</sup> The anthropocentric game of this objection could be played on *ad infinitum*: since cheetahs do not decide what the world is but we do, it seems like we have a world whereas animals have not. Once again we are using the human view of 'world' as a criterion to affirm that only the species *Homo sapiens* has a world, thus generating the same problem shown in the case of the use of a language, the existence of a mental life, etc.

<sup>17</sup> Also in this case I am thankful to the referees. As an explication, I refer the reader to a more accurate analysis in Caffo, Leonardo *Only for Them: A Manifesto for Animality through Philosophy and Politics*, with a foreword by M. Calarco and an afterword by M. Joy, Mimesis International, London 2014]

were not a philosophical issue, would one be interested in pointing out that metaphysical anti-realism involves anthropocentric views? Of course anthropocentrism has been considered to be a philosophical issue through the course of the history of thinking (think of Foucault, Deleuze, Agamben, Derrida, etc.). A list of authors is not sufficient, therefore I am going to explain the in-depth analysis at issue in two points of articulation:

a) The connection between anti-realism and anthropocentrism is an ethical issue in the sense of 'scientific ethics': it completely misrepresents the effectiveness of our ontological theories;

b) The connection between anti-realism and anthropocentrism is an ethical issue in the strict sense of the word: indeed it is possible to demonstrate the falseness of an ethics which is not opened to the non-human, not only because it doesn't allow us to consider the moral status of animals (direct approach), but because it represents a danger within the 'circle' of human morality as well (indirect approach);

Being nothing more than a mere corollary to the intent of these pages, my discussion about the points at issue will be concise. Starting with point (1): from a scientific point of view, there are ethical issues in not considering antirealism's anthropological drift; this should be a logical consequence of the concepts exposed here. Talking about reality only in the terms of a particular form of life (human life, in this case) would lead to a double mistake: the first one would be

surrendering to the above-mentioned fallacy between epistemology and ontology underlined by Ferraris; the second one would be confusing one single manner of ‘epistemologizing’ with the whole of ontology. This would be a sort of internal fallacy, even more serious than the one pointed out by Ferraris: a fallacy implying that anthropocentrism (in the sense of considering humans to be the centre of the world, also from a gnoseological point of view) compromises our philosophical results at a more general level – whereas, on the contrary, realism implies a non-anthropocentrism (although it is often left implicit). If we assume that reality exists, independently from the way it is interpreted by this or that hermeneutics, we are stating that different forms of life draw different worlds – but they do so on the basis of a common canvas, which is similar to Hilary Putnam’s ‘cookie cutter’ metaphor (a cookie cutter that can be used by non-human animals too). As far as point (2) is concerned, the discussion gets more complicated: in 1975, it was Peter Singer, in his *Animal Liberation*, that showed for the first time the problems caused by an anthropocentric ethics. Being a moral model limited to the species *Homo sapiens*, it is guilty of all the violence that non-human animals are subjected to: from dying in slaughterhouses to being exploited in circuses and zoos. As shown in the previous paragraph, feelings and abilities such as pain, cognition and language do not belong to humans only: these arguments have allowed us to extend moral consideration far beyond our own species, although it only happens in moral philo-

sophy. I do not have the space to demonstrate why a non-anthropocentric ethics, carrying out valid and well-grounded arguments, is better than an anthropocentric one. It is enough for me to assume here, along with contemporary literature, that ‘speciesist’ ethics are a source of problems, since they are limited to the moral circle of our own species. If that is true, another problem has to be ascribed to anti-realism in this sense, since it leads to consider human beings as the only form of life having a world. Based on this theory, ethics excludes human beings who lack a world of moral consideration, thus causing problems within our own species as well – think of people with autism: assuming that they are ‘poor in world’, they would be banished from morals just as it happens in the case of non-human animals<sup>18</sup>. I hope anti-realism is not willing to take such a risk.

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## Maps of the Shared World. From Descriptive Metaphysics to New Realism

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This paper has two sections. The first characterizes Strawson's descriptive metaphysics as a realist ontology. The second section characterizes New Realism as a metaphilosophical project that argues for the primacy of an ontological approach whose paradigm is descriptive metaphysics.

### I.1 Descriptive metaphysics

Strawson's *Individuals* (1959) is an attempt to discover the structure of the world starting by analyzing how our language works. What Strawson calls "the world" is our shared version of the world, that is, what beings like us ordinarily experience as *our* world. From this perspective, Strawson individuates the ordinary use of language as "the best, and indeed the only sure, way in philosophy" (1959, p. 9). He labels his metaphysics as "descriptive" since he aims to *describe* what the world is for beings provided with perceptual, cognitive and linguistic systems like ours, instead of forcing us to conceive of the world by revising

our basic ways of experiencing it, as a "revisionary" metaphysics would do.

Strawson, unlike Dummett (1991), is not arguing that a close examination of the actual use of words is the best, and indeed the only sure, *philosophy*. He does not try to reduce ontology to semantics. He just argues that semantics is our best *way to philosophy*, thereby leaving room for the possibility that an ontological investigation revises the semantic insights with which it started.

### I.2 Primary particulars: bodies and persons

Strawson's main linguistic way to ontology is the subject-predicate structure. He characterizes this structure as a sentence constituted by two linguistic expressions (S, P) that introduce two non-linguistic terms (S\*, P\*) into a proposition (which attributes P\* to S\*). He observes that in language there are special kinds of non-predicable expressions that normally work only as subjects, not as predicates (cf. 1959, p. 174). The basic non-predicable expressions are demonstratives and proper names. They introduces *particulars*, that is, entities that we can localize in the shared unified spatiotemporal framework of our experience: "particulars have their place in the spatio-temporal system, or, if they have no place of their own there, are identified by reference to other particulars which do have such a place" (1959, p. 233).

According to Strawson, the basic particulars are bodies and persons. *Bodies* are

“three-dimensional objects with some endurance through time” (1959, p. 39). *Persons* are special bodies to which we attribute not only spatiotemporal locations (and physical or phenomenal properties), but also experiences and mental states. In Strawson’s terms, what is in fact ascribed to persons consists of “actions and intentions (I am doing, did, shall do this); sensations (I am warm, in pain); thoughts and feelings (I think, wonder, want this, am angry, disappointed, contented); perceptions and memories (I see this, hear the other, remember that)” (1959, p. 89).

### I.3 The Framework and the Picture

**A**ccording to Strawson, particulars are what primarily exists, and they exist into our “single picture of the world”:

We can make it clear to each other what or which particular things our discourse is about because we can fit together each other’s reports and stories into *a single picture of the world*; and the *framework* of that *picture* is a unitary spatio-temporal framework, of one temporal and three spatial dimensions. Hence, as things are, particular-identification in general rests ultimately on the possibility of locating the particular things we speak of in a single unified spatio-temporal system. (1959, p. 38, my emphases)

I call ‘Picture’ what Strawson characterizes as our shared single picture of the world, and ‘Framework’ what he calls the unitary spatiotemporal framework of that picture. Particulars exist into the Picture and

within the Framework. Through the Framework we can know what there is into the Picture:

It cannot be denied that each of us is, at any moment, in possession of such a framework – a unified framework of knowledge of particulars, in which we ourselves and, usually, our immediate surroundings have their place, and of which each element is uniquely related to every other and hence to ourselves and our surroundings. It cannot be denied that this framework of knowledge supplies a uniquely efficient means of adding identified particulars to our stock. This framework we use for this purpose: not just occasionally and adventitiously, but always and essentially. (1959, pp. 38-39)

The Framework is the basic condition of the experience of the world on the part of a person. What makes a person a particular of a different kind with respect to mere bodies is having a perspective on the Picture from within the Framework. In other words, a body functioning as a perspective on the Picture from within the Framework is a person – or, at least, what Tim Crane calls “a minded creature.”

Among all the living things there are, we distinguish between those which are merely alive and those which have minds – thinking or conscious beings. A daffodil is merely an organic thing; a person has consciousness and the ability to think. What is the basis behind this distinction? What does it consist in? I shall claim that, in its broadest outline, the answer to the question is simple; the hard part is saying precisely what this answer amounts to. What the daffodil lacks and the ‘minded’ creature has is a *point of view on things* or (as I shall mostly say) a *perspective*. The minded creature is one *for which* things are a certain way: the way they are from that creature’s perspective. A lump of rock has no such per-

spective, the daffodil has no such perspective. We might express this by saying that a minded creature is *one which has a world*: its world. Its having a perspective consists in its having a world. Having a world is something different from there simply being a world. It is true of the rock or the daffodil that it is part of the world; but it is not true that they have a world. A creature with a perspective has a world. But to say that a creature with a perspective *has* a world is not to say that each creature with a perspective has a different world. Perspectives can be perspectives on one and the same world. (2001, p. 4)

Different persons have different perspectives on the same Picture through the same Framework. Although the Framework is the condition of the experience of a certain person, this Framework is not a private fact. The Framework is a unitary spatiotemporal structure that a person shares with all the other persons. Persons can share a single picture of the world, namely the Picture, since they share the Framework from within which, and through which, they have a perspective on what there is into the Picture. What is private is just the person's perspective on the Picture from within the Framework, not the Framework itself, let alone the Picture.

In this sense Strawson criticizes those philosophers who think that each person has her own private spatiotemporal system without acknowledging that all these allegedly private systems are nothing but perspectives on a "public point of reference", that is, the Framework as a shared spatiotemporal system:

A different, but not unrelated, error is made by those who, very well aware that here-and-now provides a point of reference, yet suppose that 'here' and 'now' and 'this' and all such utterance-centred words refer to something private and personal to each individual user of them. They see how for each person at any moment there is on this basis a single spatio-temporal network; but see also that, on this basis, there are as many networks, as many worlds, as there are persons. Such philosophers deprive themselves of a *public point of reference* by making the point of reference private. They are unable to admit that we are in the system because they think that the system is within us; or, rather, that each has his own system within him. This is not to say that the schemes they construct may not help us to understand our own. But it is with our own that we are concerned. So we shall not give up the platitude that 'here' and 'now' and 'this' and 'I' and 'you' are words of our common language, which each can use to indicate, or help to indicate, to another, who is with him, what he is talking about (1959, p. 30, my emphasis).

In a similar vein, Evans argues that the person has the general capacity of imposing a conception of public space, that is, a shared spatiotemporal system, upon her egocentric perspective: "A thought about a position in *egocentric* space (including the utterly non specific *here*) concerns a point or region of *public* space in virtue of the existence of certain indissolubly connected dispositions, on the part of the subject, [...] in virtue of his general capacity to impose a conception of public space upon egocentric space." (1980, p. 168)

Since persons are first of all bodies that have a place into the Picture and within the Framework, the perspective of a person on the Picture is a perspective not only through

the Framework but especially from within the Framework. A person does not experience the Picture through the Framework from outside, as a spectator can experience a real landscape through a window, or a painted landscape through the frame of a picture, or a filmed landscape through the screen. As Crane points out, the perspective “is a view from a certain place and certain time.” (2001, p. 6). The person experiences the Picture through the Framework because this very person is into the Picture and within the Framework. The perspective that constitutes a body as a person is essentially a perspective from inside.

#### I.4 Secondary particulars: events and higher order particulars

Events in turn are particulars, but they sharply differ from bodies with respect to their identification, that is, the epistemic state whereby a person experiences an entity as the entity it is. A person can wholly identify a body just by experiencing its *spatial parts or properties*, whereas the whole identification of an event also requires the experience of its *temporal parts or properties*. In other words, a body can be instantaneously experienced as a whole, whereas the experience of an event as a whole necessarily unfolds in time. For example the difference between a particular body like a tiger and a particular event like a flood is that “the flood is not wholly present throughout each moment of its existence – at each moment only a part of the flood is pre-

sent, not the whole flood – whereas the whole tiger is” (Crane 2001, p. 36).

According to Strawson, events are ontologically less basic than bodies since we can identify whatever body without referring to any event, whereas most events can be identified only by referring to the bodies involved in them. For example, “a death is necessarily the death of some creature” (1959, p. 46). Still, in some exceptional cases, the identification of events does not depend on the identification of bodies. Consider for example purely sensory events like flashes or noises: “That a flash or a bang occurred does not entail that anything flashed or banged. ‘Let there be light’ does not mean ‘Let something shine’” (1959, p. 46). But these are precisely exceptions. Whatever body can be identified without referring to events, whereas some (indeed, most) events need to be identified by referring to bodies. From Strawson’s perspective, this asymmetry seems sufficient to state the ontological primacy of bodies.

Besides bodies, persons, and events, there are *higher order particulars* as for example families, teams, and armies. Such things are not events or persons, neither are they material things like bodies because “one of the requirements for the identity of a material thing is that its existence, as well as being continuous in time, should be continuous in space” (1959, p. 37). Yet, in spite of lacking spatial continuity, things like families or teams are particulars since, at any moment of their existence, they can be singularly identified by making reference to more basic particulars whose existence is continuous in

both space and time. For example, a family can be identified by making reference to its members, a team by making reference to its players.

### 1.5 Properties

All particulars share the feature of being introduced into ordinary subject-predicate propositions by expressions (e.g. demonstratives, proper names, definite descriptions) that can only be used as subjects, not as predicates. We cannot say 'X is Socrates' unless X is another expression referring to Socrates; yet, in the latter case, we have no longer an ordinary subject-predicate proposition but an identity statement. An expression introducing a particular can, at most, contribute to the constitution of a predicate, but it cannot be a predicate on its own. For example, 'X is older than Socrates' is an ordinary subject-predicate proposition in which the expression 'Socrates' contributes to the constitution of the predicate ('is older than Socrates') that is attributed to that particular X. By contrast, 'X is Socrates' may only be a statement of identity in which the expression X introduces the same particular introduced by 'Socrates'.

Subject-predicate propositions normally needs genuine predicates, that is, expressions introducing *properties*. An expression introducing a certain property P allows us to construct several subject-predicate propositions sharing the form ' $x$  is P', in which the values

of the variable  $x$  introduce different particulars (e.g., 'Socrates is a philosopher,' 'Kant is a philosopher,' 'Wittgenstein is a philosopher').

Strawson conceives of the property as a *universal*, that is, "a principle of collection of like things" (1959, p. 226). In the domain of properties, philosophers usually distinguish between *monadic* (or intrinsic) properties, which are possessed by a certain entity on its own, and *relational* properties, which are possessed by a certain entity in virtue of its relations to other entities. Still, Strawson focuses on another distinction, that between *sortal* and *characterizing* properties (which can be traced back to Aristotle's distinction between secondary substances and mere properties). A *sortal* property provides us with a principle of collection of like particulars whereby we can identify a particular of this sort, whereas a *characterizing* property provides us with a principle of collection that only applies to already-identified particulars: "roughly, and with reservations, certain common nouns for particulars introduce sortal universals, while verbs and adjectives applicable to particulars introduce characterizing universals" (Strawson 1959, p. 168). For example, 'being yellow' is a characterizing property since we can group two yellow particulars only if we already know that they are two different particulars (and not, for example, two parts of the same particular). On the other hand, the sortal property 'being a star' not only enables us to group two particular stars but also helps us to identify each of them as the star it is.

### I.6 Individuals

In ordinary subject-predicate propositions, the subject introduces a particular and the predicate introduces a property, that is, a universal. More generally, Strawson calls *individuals* the entities that are introduced by subjects into genuine subject-predicate propositions. He treats individuals as the entities that genuinely exist in our world, since he considers the linguistic functioning of subjects as a clue of the existence of what they introduce. The subject is, indeed, a linguistic expression that has a certain degree of completeness. By introducing a term, the subject implicitly suggests the existence of such a term. By contrast, the predicate introduces a term without suggesting any existence at all. For example, in the sentence ‘The Sun is yellow,’ the subject ‘The Sun’ suggests that there is something identifiable as the Sun regardless of the following predicate, whilst the predicate ‘is yellow’ does not suggest any existence unless it is paired with a subject. The subject commits on its own to the existence of a certain entity, whilst the predicate commits to existence only if it specifies a feature of an entity whose existence has already been suggested by a subject. From this perspective, the subject has a semantic privilege, which Strawson traces back to an ontological privilege of the term, namely the *individual*, that the subject introduces into a proposition.

Since particulars play a key subject role in our subject-predicate propositions, they can be treated as the basic individuals of our world. Yet, in our language, also expressions

introducing universals can play the subject role. For example, we can say “red is my favorite color”, and we can even use the derived word “redness” so as to emphasize the fact that an expression introducing a property can play the subject role. Thus, universals seem to be in turn individuals, to the extent that they are introduced by expressions that can play the subject role in a subject-predicate proposition.

Still, Strawson doubts that universals are genuine individuals. Although the use of language is our best way to ontology, some linguistic expression can be ontologically misleading. Indeed, individuals are not only introduced by subjects, but also introduced within sentences *that cannot be satisfactorily paraphrased into sentences about particulars*. For example the putative individual introduced by the expression ‘anger’ does not seem to be a genuine individual, since a proposition that has ‘anger’ as subject can normally be satisfactorily paraphrased. As Strawson puts it: “the paraphrase of, say, ‘Anger impairs the judgment’ into ‘People are generally less capable of arriving at sound judgments when they are angry than when they are not’ seems natural and satisfying” (1959, p. 231).

As principles of collections of like things, universals are helpful cognitive devices that we share whereby linguistic predicates. Yet universals, unlike particulars, are not genuine individuals. In this sense, Strawson’s distinction between individuals and universals can ultimately be related to the Aristotelian distinction between substance and accidents (cf. Wiggins 2001). What substantially exists in our shared world are individuals. Particular

objects and particular events are individuals, whereas properties are just universals. Likewise facts or states, understood as connections in the space-time between individuals and properties (cf. Crane 2001, p. 39), are just ways in which we characterize the individuals that inhabit our world.

### I.7 Types

Strawson treats nominalism and platonism as opposing ontological exaggerations with respect to the issue of paraphrase. On the one hand, nominalism tries to paraphrase all sentences in sentences about particulars so as to show that particulars are the sole genuine individuals. On the other hand, platonism argues that sentences about universals cannot be paraphrased so as to show that universals are genuine individuals. So understood, nominalism and platonism are both wrong. Nominalism is wrong because there are genuine individuals, as for example words, that are not particulars. Platonism is wrong because those non-particular individuals are not universals. Rather, following Peirce (1931-1958, IV, § 537), Strawson characterizes them as *types*:

The suggestion that, for instance, sentences about words or sentences should be paraphrased into sentences about ‘inscriptions’, is apt, except in the bosom of the really fanatical nominalist, to produce nothing but nausea. In brief, some kinds of non-particulars seem better entrenched as individuals than others. Qualities (e.g. bravery), relations (e.g. fatherhood), states (e.g. anger), processes or activities (e.g. swimming), even species (e.g. man) seem relatively poorly

entrenched. Sentence-types and word-types seem well entrenched.” (1959, p. 231)

Furthermore, Strawson acknowledges that the domain of types does not reduce to the paradigmatic cases of words and sentences:

The general title of ‘types’, often, though rather waveringly, confined to words and sentences, may well be extended. I have in mind, for example: works of art, such as musical and literary compositions, and even, in a certain sense, paintings and works of sculpture; makes of thing, e.g. makes of motor-car, such as the 1957 Cadillac, of which there are many particular instances but which is itself a non-particular; and more generally other things of which the instances are made or produced to a certain design, and which, or some of which, bear what one is strongly inclined to call a proper name, e.g. flags such as the Union Jack. (1959, p. 231)

Types are not particulars, since they lack a distinctive spatiotemporal location, but, unlike universals, they tend to behave like particulars, especially under two decisive respects. First, in subject-predicate sentences types are normally introduced by subjects rather than by predicates. Second, types often have a proper name (in the case of artworks, a sort of proper name is supplied by titles, in the case of sentences by quotations). While universals are essentially principles of *collection* of like particulars, types are first of all principles of *construction* of like particulars called ‘tokens.’ The type can work as principle of collection only in virtue of its working as principle of construction of the collected things, namely its tokens. Furthermore, the type can work as a principle of construction in virtue of its being linked to a special particular, namely a model, which



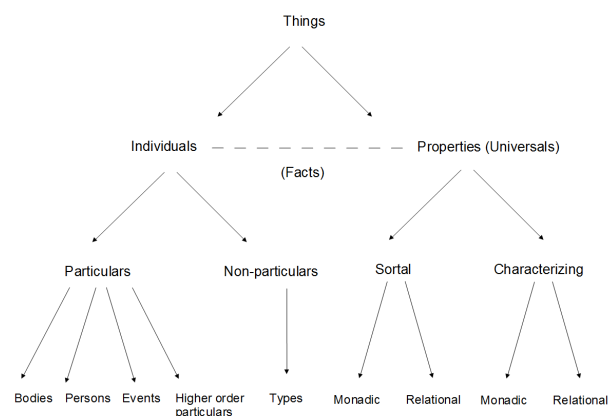
initiates a causal chain allowing for the construction of any other token. In Strawson's terms:

Indeed one might say that an appropriate model for non-particulars of these kinds is that of a *model particular* – a kind of prototype, or ideal example, itself particular, which serves as a rule or standard for the production of others. The Platonic model for non-particulars in general – an ideal form of which the instances are more or less exact or imperfect copies – is, in these cases, an appropriate model, though it becomes absurdly inappropriate if generalized to cover non-particulars at large. The non-particulars here in question are all such that their instances are artefacts. But the concepts concerned are not just rather broadly functional, like those of other artefacts such as tables and beds. Rather, to produce an instance, one must conform more or less closely to more or less exact specifications. Fully to describe a non-particular of this kind is to *specify* a particular, with a high degree of precision and internal elaboration. (1959, pp. 232-233)

In this sense, the type introduced, for example, by the film title *Wild Strawberries* ontologically differs from the sortal universal introduced by a word like “table”. All tokens of *Wild Strawberries* are causally linked to the first particular through which the type was created as a principle of token construction. By contrast, a variety of particular tables can be grouped under the sortal universal introduced by the word “table” even if those tables have unrelated histories of making. If we visited an alien planet where we discovered a particular X that looks like a table and is used by the aliens as we use our own tables, we would be inclined to say that X is a table. But if we found a particular Y that is indistinguishable from a screening of *Wild Strawberries*, and is used by the aliens as

we use our own screenings, we would not be inclined to say that Y is a screening of *Wild Strawberries*, since it does not derive from the same model. We would only acknowledge that Y is a screening, not a screening of *Wild Strawberries*. We would just admit that Y is the screening of an alien movie surprisingly similar to our *Wild Strawberries*. Ultimately, a type allows us to group only those particulars that were constructed by means of this very type. All particulars counting as tokens of a given type thus belong to the causal chain that originates from the particular through which the type itself was created. A type is a non-particular that is created by means of a particular, and that allows us not only to *group* particulars but first of all to *construct* them. In this sense the type plays not only an *epistemic* role but also an *ontological* one. That is why we treat types as genuine individuals.

## II.1 New Realism as a Metaphilosophy



**D**escriptive metaphysics describes the world that we share through our perceptual experience and that we express by means of our language. The in-

dividuals who primarily inhabit this world are the most relevant for our lives. At this point, one could argue that this world is just a shared appearance, maybe a shared illusion, and that we have to investigate what there is beyond such a shared appearance. Natural sciences do this sort of investigation. Yet, according to Strawson, natural sciences do not give us access to more fundamental individuals, but rather to “theoretical constructs” that allow us to better explain and understand what there is in our shared world.

This is the class of particulars which might be called ‘theoretical constructs’. Certain particles of physics might provide one set of examples. These are not in any sense private objects; but they are unobservable objects. We must regard it as in principle possible to make identifying references to such particulars, if not individually, at least in groups or collections; otherwise they forfeit their status as admitted particulars. Perhaps we do not often make such references in fact. These items play a role of their own in our intellectual economy, which it is not my concern to describe. But it is clear enough that in so far as we do make identifying references to particulars of this sort, we must ultimately identify them, or groups of them, by identifying reference to those grosser, observable bodies of which perhaps, like Locke, we think of them as the minute, unobservable constituents. (1959, p. 44)

Our world is not inhabited by such theoretical constructs. They just help us to better understand our world by suggesting what could be its “minute, unobservable constituents”. Nevertheless, our world remains a world of middle-sized individuals. There is no primacy of the components with respect to the composed wholes – thus, there is no

primacy of what Sellars (1963) calls “The scientific image of man-in-the-world” with respect to what he calls “The manifest image of man-in-the-world”. What matters for us is primarily what we share in our experience, and what we share in our experience are basically composed individuals. From this perspective, the physicist claim that reality is not the way in which it appears to us (cf. Rovelli 2014) can be rephrased as follows: the theoretical constructs of slightly weakened physics reveal that the minute, unobservable constituents of our *reality* have a distinctive structure that is not the same as the ontological structure of our *reality*.

## II.2 The philosopher as a cartographer

I see New Realism as a way of developing Strawson’s point by arguing that philosophy should not produce “theoretical constructs” about “minute, unobservable constituents” but rather appropriate descriptions and classifications of middle-sized individuals. In this sense New Realism introduces a sharp distinction between natural sciences and philosophy. They are both investigations, but they have different methods and different domains.

According to New Realism (Cf. Ferraris 2012), philosophy is not a research of what there is beyond the world that we experience, but rather a clarification of this very world. In this sense New Realism differs from those analytic metaphysics that follows natural sciences in the attempt to find the ul-

timate constituents of reality. Still, New Realism also differs from those continental or postmodernist accounts that deny the existence of a shared reality, or at least its relevance for philosophy, which according to them should rather concern more fundamental layers of being. Unlike these accounts, New Realism does not require that philosophy goes beyond the world that we share through our experience. Instead, philosophy should investigate precisely this world by providing us with categories that allow us to classify precisely what there is in this world.

To sum up, philosophy should look neither for minute constituents of middle-sized individuals nor for what stays beyond such individuals, but rather for insightful ways of categorizing and describing those very individuals. According to New Realism, this is the core task of philosophy, and its specificity with respect to other kinds of investigations that concern minute constituents or transcendent forms of being. Philosophy basically is an art of describing and classifying. A helpful insight in order to understand what philosophers do is the metaphor of the cartographer. Philosophers make maps of what there is. There are different levels of detail at which maps can be made, but even a very detailed map should be related to more general maps.

In this sense New Realism conceives of philosophy as an intrinsically systematic enterprise. Jaakko Hintikka (1987) claims that being systematic in contemporary philosophy is nothing but wishful thinking, but this claim seems to rely on a misunderstanding of what a systematic philosophy is. Being sys-

tematic does not mean that the philosopher should know anything about any domain. If you are constructing a map of a small village, you are not forced to know any map of any village. Yet you should know at least the maps of the region and the country within which this village is located. Symmetrically, if you aim at making maps of wide areas, or even of an entire planet, you are not forced to know any small area in this planet. In this sense it is false that being systematic requires the knowledge of any detail. It just requires the capacity of adopting the right point of view.

### II.3 A fifth way of doing philosophy

According to Diego Marconi (2014), in the contemporary debate there are four main ways of doing philosophy: 1) *traditionalism*, which tries to develop past philosophical theories; 2) *historiography*, which limits itself to investigate past philosophical theories; 3) *hermeneutics*, which focuses on the genealogy of ideas; 4) *analytic philosophy*, which focuses on problem solving and arguments. New Realism can be seen as the proposal of a fifth way of doing philosophy, which consists in providing good descriptions or maps of what there is. New Realism differs from analytic philosophy strictly understood since it aims not simply at solving problems by means of arguments. In order to make a map you do not necessarily need an argument.

The criteria whereby a philosophical work is assessed are, according to New Re-

alism, basically external criteria. As a map is assessed with respect to its capacity to provide us with an accurate and useful description of a certain area, so the philosophical work is assessed with respect to how our shared world is, and therefore with respect to our shared intuitions about it. By contrast, analytic philosophy mainly uses internal criteria, so that a good argument leads to a good philosophical work even if the conclusion does not comply with our shared experience of the world.

From the analytical perspective, what matters is primarily the argument. Intuitions only play a role in strengthening the premises of the argument. On the other hand, from the perspective of New Realism, what matters is primarily the perspicuity of the description; arguments are among the various tools that can be used in order to provide a perspicuous description. A cartographer is not interested in demonstrating that the region that she is mapping does not exist, or in showing that it just a collective illusion, or in finding an argument that proves that this region is made of more basic unobservable constituents. She just wants to make a good map of this region.

In conceiving of philosophy basically as an art of making maps of our shared world, New Realism makes room for disagreement. There can be clashes of intuitions with respect to what there is in our shared world, and especially with respect to which is the better way of describing and classifying what there is. In this sense arguments can play a crucial role also in the New Realist conception of philosophy, if they are under-

stood as technical tools in a broader frame of conceptual negotiation, which is aimed at solving possible clashes of intuitions (cf. Casati 2011).

#### II.4 The primacy of ontology

If philosophy basically is making maps of what there is, then there can be both philosophers who try to make maps of the entire world and philosophers who focus on specific regions of the world. In this sense, classic philosophy seems more inclined to produce maps of the entire world whereas contemporary philosophy often prefers to focus on maps of some regions. Yet the two kinds of investigation are intertwined. In making a map of a region we should work, more or less implicitly, within a certain framework set by a certain map of the world. On the other hand, we could discover that in order to take this region into account the general map to which we are referring should be amended or revised.

There can be progresses both in the construction of general maps and in that of regional maps. For example, Strawson's metaphysics provides us with a better general map than Aristotle's metaphysics by taking into account Newton's and Kant's point that space and time are not categories among others but the framework that grounds our shared experience of the world. Another relevant improvement in the philosophical mapping of our shared world is due to Roman Ingarden's ontological development of Husserl's phenomenology (cf. Thomasson

2005). Ingarden acknowledges that our shared world is made not only of natural objects and persons, but also of social objects that are created and kept into existence by practices involving persons themselves. While natural objects exist independently of persons, social objects depend on persons' intentions, interactions and norms. Nevertheless, also social objects have an objective existence since practices involves objective regularities.

Artifacts are a basic example of social objects, to the extent that, with respect to natural objects, things such as flags and churches have "different existence conditions (flags and churches depend for their existence on certain intentional acts; the purely physical arrangements of molecules making up cloth and buildings do not) and different essential properties (e.g. flags and churches have essential functional and normative properties governing their role in our cultural lives that their physical bases need not have)" (Thomasson 2005, p. 127). Still, in the social portion of our shared world there are not only concrete artifacts but also more abstract social objects as for example words, sentences, roles, laws, symphonies, algorithms, and fictional entities. As we have seen above, in Strawson's descriptive metaphysics such entities, which Ingarden conceives of as cultural or social object are classified as either higher level particulars or as types.

Classic philosophy made great efforts in order to describe and classify natural objects, but a lot of work is still to be done in order to describe and classify social objects, and also to put them into a general map of the

world, and to possibly modify this map in order to better fit them into it. According to New Realism the ontological mapping of the social realm is one of the main tasks for contemporary philosophy. The achievements of the so-called applied ontologies show that information technologies need philosophy rather than natural sciences in order to perform such mapping tasks (cf. Guarino 1995, Smith 2004). Furthermore, the ontological mapping of the social realm confers philosophy a distinctive public role to the extent that philosophers can provide a community with helpful maps of the social space in which this very community is grounded.

In that characterizing philosophy basically as a way of describing what there is, New Realism gives ontology a primacy with respect to other philosophical fields. Yet New Realism does not reduce philosophy to ontology. The idea is rather that a philosophical investigation in a certain field (e.g. ethics, aesthetics, mind, language, science) requires a preliminary ontological account of the relevant entities in that field, and a localization of these entities in the general map of our shared world. In this sense, New Realism conceives of philosophy as a basically unitary and systematic enterprise, in spite of the variety of fields in which the philosophical research is articulated – today more than ever. From the New Realist perspective, we can still see philosophy as a whole in spite of its multifarious fields of research.

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## Docu-mentality

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### 1. Introductory Remarks

**M**aurizio Ferraris first proposed to reconsider documentality as a philosophical matter, grounding it on Searle's social ontology.<sup>1</sup> Considering art as a form of communication and documentality is more interesting for the *pragmatics* of documentality, rather than for its *ontology*. I propose, therefore, to speak of *docu-mentality*, rather than of *document-ality*, as far as art is concerned, since art does not imply a direct reference to the ontology of documentality (to its 'alities'), but to the *mentality*<sup>2</sup> we display as we document something. Art is then, as I will try to show in the last paragraph of my paper, *a way to explore the pragmatics of documentality*.

<sup>1</sup> John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York, Free Press 1995).

<sup>2</sup> See Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1979). Pragmatics can be applied also to visual arts: see Louis Marin, *On Representation* (Stanford University Press 2002).

### 2. Documentality: Ontology or Philosophy of Experience?

**A**ccording to Maurizio Ferraris' recent account,<sup>3</sup> documentality surveys every social object capable of recording a fact or an event, according to an intersubjective understanding of its characteristic features. The characteristic features of documents could be, therefore, reduced to the ontological status of *recorded* things. Recording allows a thing to become a document, and has formal rather than material effects: recording is an activity that gives things their *shape*. Avoiding any metaphysical discussion about the relation between "form" and "matter" of documents, we could refer the fact that a document has a shape to the *intersubjective conditions* of recognition of its shape. Those conditions can be summed up in the idea of a *common sense* (*Gemeinsinn*), of which Immanuel Kant speaks in the Third Critique:<sup>4</sup> it is the *a priori* condition for understanding beauty. It is an exemplary condition: aesthetic judgement is based on no logical ground. The aesthetic judgement implies the existence of an ideal "community of taste" where we discuss

<sup>3</sup> Maurizio Ferraris, *Documentality. Why It Is Necessary to Leave Traces* (Fordham University Press 2012).

<sup>4</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. by P. Guyer (Cambridge University Press 2001). For the relation between aesthetics and communication in the Third Critique, see Emilio Garroni, *Ricognizione della semiotica* (Roma, Officine 1977).

about our standards of beauty. Artworks are then, among other beautiful things, *social objects*.

By referring to Searle, Ferraris' social ontology is more linguistic than aesthetic. Like speech, documentality implies some "games", in Wittgenstein's sense. But games imply no universally pre-established grammar. A theory of documentality grounded only on an ontological investigation might lead to an objective and logical universalism of the kind of pre-established grammars: documents are those objects, and only those objects, which share the following  $n$  properties, etc. On the contrary, a theory that leaves more room for investigating the pragmatics of documentality seeks the exemplary standards of documentality in *practices* rather than in *objects*. Unlike documentality, documentality should investigate the *dynamics* of documentality as *communication*.

We need not establish whether documentality is a sub-ontology of language, or an ontology *per se*, sharing with language some common features. Investigating the ontological status of documentality could actually meet an aporia: is there a distinction between the physical ground of documents and their social recognition? Evolutionary and cultural anthropologists introduce some distinctions between human and non-human communication, or between art and other communitarian activities. Michael Tomasello argues that humans develop communication together with a collective

representation of the world around them.<sup>5</sup> Ellen Dissanayake argues that art is a way humans have of "making special" specific cultural and social objects.<sup>6</sup> The turning point in the evolution of human communication is when humans become able to refer their mental representation to a *We-intention* rather than to an *I-intention*.

Tomasello describes communication as a ritual among individuals of the same species. Human and non-human communication are both rituals. Let us take two apes of the same species. One of them wants to involve the other in its hunting activity. It creates, then, a more or less complicated gesture in order to catch the attention of its fellow, and bring it to join the hunt. The second ape is able to answer that gesture by other gesticulations. Their communication becomes a ritual whose primary function is not inviting to hunting, but creating and preserving the relation between them. The ritual can be used, then, to go hunting, but also to start playing and so on. According to Tomasello, the real difference running between human and animal communication must be found in the capability humans have, and animals have not, to reshape and anticipate their fellows' mental representations. By understanding the gesture displayed by their fellows during rituals, animals are able to *reconstruct* the

<sup>5</sup> See Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2001); *Origins of Human Communication* (Cambridge, MIT Press 2008).

<sup>6</sup> See Ellen Dissanayake, *What Is Art For?* (Seattle, University of Washington Press 1988).



content of their fellows' mental representations: intentions, desires and so on. Since the early stages of their lives, instead, humans develop the capability of *anticipating* and thus *creatively reshaping* their fellows' representations. It is the case of children's games based on "pretending", where a child knows that the adult is aware that she (or he) is only pretending to do something, and not actually doing it. This fact shows the complexity of human mental structures, and their relation to creativity. It also shows why human language is much more developed than animal communication. This creative quality of the human mental activity is, as we shall see, what the Italian philosopher Emilio Garroni calls "metaoperativity".<sup>7</sup> Metaoperativity is the *species-specific feature* of human animals: in other words, it introduces a distinction between humans and other animals.

It is important to bear in mind that the passage from I-intention to We-intention must not be understood only as an evolution of mental structures. The mind surveys external prostheses as well as mental structures, since the mind exists as far as communication exists. To understand the interaction between inner structures and external prostheses of mind, we need therefore to refer to *experience*. My account of experience is Kantian: experience is not barely composed by sense data, but by sense data *as they are reorganized by imagination during a reflective activity*. Imagination is not fantasy, but the

<sup>7</sup> Garroni, *Ricognizione della semiotica*; Emilio Garroni, *Creatività* (Quodlibet, Macerata 2010).

faculty of schematism,<sup>8</sup> and is strongly related to language.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of Tomasello's investigations we can understand that there is no difference among humans and the other apes if we consider the possible biological reasons for gesture and mimic, and their primary function. The difference is rather *cultural*. Like other apes, humans are able to organize complex communication rituals with other fellow people. However, unlike the other apes, they are also able not to direct rituals to an immediate matter of state: an order, or an invitation, to be executed (or rejected). For humans, gesture and mimic become the practical referents of We-intentionality, rather than I-intentionality.

The reflective power of the mind and gestural, as well as mimic, practices are convergent conditions for the existence of the human language. Those two kinds of conditions remain relatively independent from one another: there is no determinism, neither in a mentalist nor in a material sense. Once gesture and mimic converge towards the emergence of an intersubjective representation of the world, human language and communication become possible. It is interesting to note that the difference between mind and communication has important cultural effects, namely, in the emergence of *art*. Some visual theorists argue that, in the

<sup>8</sup> See Maurizio Ferraris, *L'immaginazione* (Bologna, il Mulino 1996).

<sup>9</sup> See Garroni, *Ricognizione della semiotica*; Wolfram Högbe, *Kant und das Problem einer transzendentalen Semantik* (Freiburg-München, Alber 1974).

artistic practice, the relation between mind and communication is translated into that between *images* and *pictures*, or between mental representations of reality and concrete artworks.<sup>10</sup> The relation between mental representations and artworks has the power to refresh the relation between the mind, on one side, and communication and language, on the other.<sup>11</sup>

According to Emilio Garroni, *art* is precisely the activity through which humans exert the relation between reflective powers and representational practices, independently from any content art could convey: art is, so to speak, *communication for communication's sake*. Creativity is fundamental for art. Every human activity is concerned with creative skills. Art, however, is the *exhibition of sheer creativity*, free from any purpose of the action or thing realized. Art conveys, then, no information in the proper sense: art is concerned with the forms and media of communication as such, as well as with the ways creativity finds to invent new forms of connecting and interpreting data taken from experience. Communication is one fundamental aspect of the creative process, because, as we saw, mental activities are strongly related to the exchange of information through communication. In that sense,

<sup>10</sup> See Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images* (Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press 2011); W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago-London, Chicago University Press 2005).

<sup>11</sup> See Garroni, *Creatività*; Emilio Garroni, *Immagine, linguaggio, figura* (Roma-Bari, Laterza 2005).

we can say that art has a special place in documentality: it is, among other things, a special form of documentality, much more tied to its social and pragmatic conditions.

Let us restart from the definition Ferraris gives of documents: a document is every form of recording. That makes documentality not only a peculiar class of objects, but also a *technology*.<sup>12</sup> And it is not simply a technology: documentality is the most general definition of technology we might give. There is, then, a partial superposition between documentality and technicity. Documentality is concerned with the ways humans develop social practices, in order to transmit their beliefs. The practice of documentality requires a *technology*, to which establishing some *standards* is, therefore, necessary. Unlike linguistic pragmatics, which can be related to a pre-established grammar, the pragmatics of documentality is dynamic, and establishes its own standards in the course of its practice. The kind of pragmatics implied in documentality is different from linguistic, and especially textual, pragmatics: it is a *technological pragmatics*. It follows that its reference to general pre-established frameworks of rules is less strong than in the case of the pragmatics based on language and writing. A technological pragmatics tries to describe the *dynamic emergence* of the standards through which something is to be recognized as a document. Before the archaeologists decided that

<sup>12</sup> See Maurizio Ferraris, *Anima e iPad* (Parma, Guanda 2011).

ancient temples or ordinary pottery had to be considered as relevant for the reconstruction of a past age, nobody would have been authorized to consider them as documents. In my opinion, one task of art is to *explore how ordinary objects might become documents*. The transformation of an ordinary thing into a document is also relevant to understand how our mental representation and interpretation of the world evolve: it is *culture*, rather than ontology alone. For those reasons, I propose to consider documentality as the pragmatic counterpart of a more general ontology of document-ality.

### 3. Is Art a Document?

**A**rt is concerned with documentality as an *experience* rather than a bare *fact*. This means that we cannot follow Arthur C. Danto when he argues that we should philosophically consider artworks as ontological facts, and not consider their aesthetic properties.<sup>13</sup> The aesthetic properties actually define artworks as *experiences*, namely, as *aesthetic experiences*. There has been much criticism against the analytical philosophy of art, especially that inspired by Danto, for its refusal to consider art as an aesthetic experience.<sup>14</sup> In this paragraph I will follow Hans Robert Jauss' hypothesis that art is a very specific form of aesthetic

experience: artworks are *self-reflexive social performances*. Art shows us the value of sociality, and gives our social world a shape. Art is a way of collecting and elaborating shared cultural or social identities. Artworks are documents in that sense: they bear no specific information or content, but show us how we can use the media networks in order to produce communication and documents.

Jauss argues that aesthetic pleasure (*Genuss*) is "the use, or usefulness, of something".<sup>15</sup> The aesthetic pleasure must be distinguished from bare sense pleasure: "How do we distinguish aesthetic pleasure from sense pleasure in general?" wonders Jauss.<sup>16</sup> The intersubjective character of aesthetic pleasure distinguishes it from other kinds of pleasure, since the "use" (*Gebrauch*) Jauss has in mind is no private use of things, but a way of sharing things by using them. It is *frui* rather than *uti*: it is a use that makes the most peculiar characters of an object evident to all, and then available to all. Speaking of art as an aesthetic experience means, then, that the *pleasure* we take in it is one of its most characteristic features. Art, among other aesthetic experiences, has a specific role in emphasizing aesthetic pleasure: "*the attitude toward pleasure, which art engenders and makes available, is the aesthetic original experience: we cannot abstract from it.*"<sup>17</sup> If we translate the aesthetic discourse made by Jauss into the "language" of documentality,

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Coleman Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven-London, Yale University Press 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Paolo D'Angelo, *Estetica* (Roma-Bari, Laterza 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Kleine Apologie der ästhetischen Erfahrung* (Konstanz, Universitätsverlag 1972), p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

we can say that everything is, in principle, fit to become a document, because everything might become the artistic vehicle of something else. Or it might become a good medium of an artistic content, if we look at it from the point of view of communication. As “aesthetic” living creatures, argues Jauss, we must pay “*attention to general communication*”. For Jauss, who is Kantian in his aesthetic perspective, that means to recover the category of *Gemeinsinn* developed by Kant in the Third Critique, though in its empirical rather than in its transcendental formulation: aesthetic judgement is, therefore, the “*faculty of evaluating anything through which everyone is able to communicate her/his feeling to someone else*” as if a “universal compact” comprehending all humankind asked us to judge in that way aesthetic objects.<sup>18</sup>

Jauss’ theory of art as aesthetic experience is a theory of experience in the narrow sense of the term: artworks are not considered as objects barely available to the audience’s experience. The act of creating artworks is part of the overall process of the aesthetic experience: it is produced by the artist as she (or he) properly creates the artworks, and is reproduced by the audience, as they recreate an image of it in their mind, thus also recreating themselves by enjoying the experience they are doing. Beside *Katharsis*, the communicative function of art, Jauss considers, then, also *Poiesis* and *Aisthesis* – aesthetic creation and perception – as fundamental elements of aesthetic experience as such.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Without going into the depths of the theory, it is interesting to observe that Jauss is interested in artworks as processes, rather than as objects: they are works in the most active sense of the term.

As far as documentality is concerned, artworks are not the most refined documents we could find: tickets, or cards, are better ways of documenting reality, since they clearly indicate some data. Artworks, on the contrary, are interesting because they teach us *how* we should interpret the data contained in a document. The ambiguity of art is its very richness, if we consider it as a form of documentality to be experienced and investigated in its pragmatic, rather than ontological status. As Danto taught us,<sup>19</sup> it is very difficult to define the ontological status of artworks, because, as far as we consider them as a class of objects, they appear subject to historical changes: what an age considered as art is often not considered as art by the following ages, and vice versa. The class of artistic objects is weird. However, as long as we consider artworks as a way humans have to *leave a trace in the world*, their pragmatic status of documents can be better understood. Its dynamics also appears more clearly: although our way of understanding the documentality of art changes with time, its reference to the evolution of our communication is a guarantee of continuity. As Jauss argues: “humans are able to satisfy their general need to be familiar and at home

<sup>19</sup> Arthur Coleman Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York, Columbia University Press 1986); Danto, *What Art Is*.

in the world through the creation of art, as far as they remove *the reluctant extraneousness from the external world*".<sup>20</sup> This last sentence is literally a quotation from Hegel's aesthetics. The reference to Hegel and his aesthetics opens, however, a problem which is far from being solved in our theory of art as pragmatic documentality.

#### 4. Interpreting Artworks

I would like to conclude my paper with some short remarks about a difficulty emerged when I proposed to consider art as a practice of documentality. The difficulty does not contradict the theory under every aspect: it requires, however, further explanations and investigations.

Interpreting artistic documents is subject to time and historical change: we interpret artworks differently from age to age. Homer was considered by the early-18<sup>th</sup> century Classicism as a too primitive a poet, if compared to Hellenistic authors. Once the taste changed, between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and a Pre-Romantic mood emerged in art and culture, the prominence of Homer as the original poet of his homeland was rediscovered. His "primitiveness" was now considered as the expression of the naïve originality of the first Greek poet, who still spoke a language near to the mother-tongue of his people. Art changes also because artists cre-

ate different kinds of artworks according to their age: Duchamp's ready-mades would have been senseless only fifty years before, and paintings like Ingres' century were considered simply kitsch at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Hegel spoke of modern art – he actually spoke of "Romantic" or "Christian" art – as an art that lost its power of interpreting and expressing the *Zeitgeist* of its age.<sup>21</sup> There is no more beauty capable of expressing the *ethos* of an age through the fusion of the sensible with the ideal element. As Hegel argues, we, the moderns, live in the age of the "past character of art" (*Vergangenheitscharakter der Kunst*): art took with no remedy the character of something past. On one side, this fact provides a good element for our theory that art is an experience of documentality: something is a document when, by happening, it leaves a trace. On the other side, a question is still open: have we, properly speaking, criteria for establishing the *truthfulness* of artworks as documents? Or, to put it in more modern terms: where are we to find the link between our *pragmatics* of artistic documentality and its *semantics*?

<sup>20</sup> Jauss, *Kleine Apologie der ästhetischen Erfahrung*, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> The above mentioned works by Arthur C. Danto contributed to the renewal of the studies which see Hegel as an interpreter of modernist art: see Robert Pippin, *After the Beautiful. Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (Chicago-London, Chicago University Press 2014).

## The Artistic Disenfranchisement of Reality

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Speaking of his art, Robert Barry used to say: “We are not really destroying the object, but just expanding the definition, that’s all”. In fact, Barry’s expression effectively sums up the work of most philosophers concerned with the issue of defining the concepts of art and work of art. Between the lines of his sentence, and especially in the second half, Barry refers to what I call “the space between art and reality.” It is a particular idea: and yet it is exactly this space that both philosophers and artists refer to, when they work on the problems posed by the definition of art. To revise or expand the definition means precisely to reflect on the ways in which art belongs to reality.

In this context, I will argue that the work done by artists in the last century has led to a systematic attempt at an artistic disenfranchisement of reality. In other words, artists have tried to dismiss reality through art, expanding the domain of art to the point of making it ideally coincide with that of reality. Finally, I will argue that this attempt (which, as we shall see, had disastrous outcomes) was far deeper and more systematic

than the other, much more famous attempt: the philosophical disenfranchisement of art.

The latter was the topic of the eponymous 1986 essay by Arthur Danto, who is explicitly inspired by Hegel. As is well known, Hegel regards art as a step in the path of human reason, engaged in the process of formation of self-consciousness. In this progressive self-determination of conscious life, which corresponds to a gradual clarification of personal identity, reason goes through three stages: religion, art and philosophy. Art, religion and philosophy lead to the knowledge of the same truth from different points of view and with different degrees of perfection. Religion provides a representation of truth, while philosophy leads to a complete conceptual understanding of it.

In the space between religion and philosophy, Hegel puts art: unlike the first two, art expresses the awareness that the spirit has of itself and it does so neither through the representations of faith nor through the pure concepts of philosophy, but using objects that belong to the outside world and that have been created specifically to meet this purpose. To express ourselves in terms that are not properly Hegelian, but that certainly reflect Hegel’s influence, artworks embody reason in a material body, which is the *medium* of the work.

The perfect embodiment, the one in which reason unfolds without residues and in a total way, is the embodiment of reason in philosophy. Hence the well-known thesis by Hegel according to which art culminates in philosophy: that is, in fact, “the end of art.” The thesis brought forward by Hegel

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expresses a position that belongs together with the philosophy of art and the philosophy of history.

The version of the thesis of the end of art formulated by Danto, probably one of the best-known re-enactments of the Hegelian thesis, stands clearly in the footsteps of Hegel; however, it intends to move from the sphere of philosophy of history to that of descriptive metaphysics. Danto outlines conclusions similar to those reached by Hegel (philosophy disenfranchises art), but he does so by supporting his argument with an observation and a theoretical consideration. The observation is based on the historical and critical revision of the role played by Abstract Expressionism – that is, by the artistic movement that has carried out a radical paradigm shift within the modes of production of traditional arts.

Ever since Abstract Expressionism, and then in Pop Art, Fluxus, Conceptual Art and Minimalism, art (which has been excellently explained for centuries by the Vasari paradigm) has been completed, or more precisely, resolved in philosophy. The Dantian argument also provides for a reconsideration of the contributions that aesthetics has made to the understanding of art. Since he considers aesthetics as the science of sensory knowledge, Danto believes that it has little to say about artworks, objects that have a very important semantic component.

Both Hegel and Danto thus believe that philosophy has the possibility to disenfranchise art, taking the place of its practices and solving the needs that lead to artistic production in the most effective way. But while

Hegel casts his insight into the horizon of the philosophy of history, Danto believes to be in the exact historical moment in which it is possible to transform Hegel's prediction into the mere description of a state of affairs. I will not go into the details of the two versions of the disenfranchisement argument, which in my opinion show important differences; what I would rather draw the reader's attention to is the "other disenfranchisement," that operated by art over reality.

It is obviously redundant to point out that art and artworks are part of reality; however, in terms of epistemology, it is perhaps more interesting to dwell on one point: the open space inhabited by art is a particular space in which rules and semantics apply that ordinary reality cannot afford. More than the majority of human activities, artistic practice constantly plays with reality, expanding and shrinking the space in which to enforce the rules of ordinary reality. A not-too-hidden aspiration of contemporary art has been, so to speak, that to dismiss ordinary reality, consuming its borders, for the benefit of artistic reality. The more the boundaries of art expanded the more, ideally, the boundaries of the ordinary would withdraw, thus realizing the old romantic dream of transforming reality into art. The significance of artistic practice is therefore in many ways enclosed within the confines that art itself sets and that separate it from ordinary reality.

During the twentieth century, the disenfranchisement project reached a programmatic consistency: often artists have thus expanded the boundaries of art to the point of

making them coincide with reality. This has effectively led to the same risk noted by Luis Borges in *A Universal History of Infamy*, when reflecting on the titanic vocation that lies behind the desire of the total representation. If the Empire decides to create a perfect representation of the territory enclosed by its borders, making its cartographers draw a 1:1 map, the realization of the map – as well shown by Umberto Eco<sup>1</sup> – will come up against a double impossibility: the size of the map and its staticity. The map would be so extensive that – provided that it cannot be located in a different place from the Empire it represents – it would cover it. This fact should therefore be indicated on the map, in a virtually infinite process. In addition, the map would not be upgradeable: in the 1:1 map every variation of the Empire should be instantly shown on the map.

I think the example of Borges is useful to understand the problems posed by art in its relation with meta-conceptual issues. Provided that art is representation, rather than mimesis, what margin must the artists allow between art and ordinary reality for the latter not to dissolve in the former? In other words, what margin must they leave for art not to destitute reality, trying to impose itself as “*the reality*”?

This second type of disenfranchisement includes many artists and a few philosophers. Among the latter, the most significant is certainly Friedrich Nietzsche: in *The Birth of Tragedy* he explores the origins of the

choir, which is one of the distinctive elements of Attic tragedy. Nietzsche examines three hypotheses that literature, at that point in history, considered credible: according to the first, the choir had a so-called “political” function; for the second, however, it was a piece of reality put into the work. Finally, the third considered the choir as a boundary element, a kind of separator that stands between the work and the other-than-itself, i.e. the reality that the work is not.

Discussing these assumptions, Nietzsche focuses in particular on the second, made by August Wilhelm von Schlegel, who proposes a realist interpretation of the choir and considers it a piece of reality brought into the very heart of the tragedy. The choir would therefore be a kind of ideal spectator who has the function of representing the viewers who normally watch the tragedy. Nietzsche critiques this hypothesis by citing two arguments: the first is commonsensical, the second is substantial. The former sounds like this: not even the most daring of idealizations would lead to exchange the audience with the choir, as there is too much difference between reality and idealization. The theoretical argument, as it is formulated and for issues it tackles, deserves a few more words. The Schlegelian thesis in the words of Nietzsche sounds like this: “For we had always thought that the proper spectator, whoever he might be, must always remain conscious that he has a work of art in front of him, not an empirical reality; whereas, the tragic chorus of the Greeks is required to

<sup>1</sup> Eco: 1992.



recognize the shapes on the stage as living, existing people.”<sup>2</sup>

Nietzsche’s objection is clear: if the function of the chorus were to reproduce the mechanisms of “spectatorship” by bringing the audience into the tragedy, something in the construction of the artistic mechanism would not work. To use Nietzsche’s words: a spectator without a spectacle is an absurd notion. For the viewer to grasp the spectacle, she must be aware of the fact that what she is watching is, in fact, a spectacle. She must know that it is something *about* some aspect of reality, but not ordinary reality pure and simple.

Picasso remarked the same thing, in his own way, when he put a real label on a (drawn) bottle of Suze. An artist who creates a work with the express purpose of keeping the viewer unaware of the reality of the work ends up problematizing the basic relationship between the work and the spectator – which, as a rule, is the element that makes the enjoyment of art possible. Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, stressed the importance of cognitively grasping the difference between reality and fiction for the enjoyment of art to be determined in the manner appropriate to it. This point is very clear as for what concerns the emotions we experience in the artistic relation: “Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity:

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche: 2008, p. 27.

such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies”.<sup>3</sup>

For this relationship to exist and to be effective, so as to allow the enjoyment of art, it is a necessary condition that the viewer has some awareness of the object that is part of the relation. Otherwise it would be like a child who, riding a broom and pretending that it is a horse, thought to be riding a horse for real. The game would give way to misunderstanding. This means that, if the structure of the work does not incorporate or does not require the presence of a fictional marker, the artwork will be, all in all, a bad work. For this reason, Nietzsche shows to openly prefer the reading given by Friedrich Schiller in the *Bride of Messina*. Schiller understands the choir as a “living wall”, developing a theoretical hypothesis opposite to that of Schlegel. The choir is the fictional marker that allows one to mark with good evidence the distinction between the work, its semantic-epistemic dimension and ordinary reality (which is characterized by partly different logics and meanings).

In short, Nietzsche’s thesis is that the choir was introduced with the specific purpose of marking (and not deleting!) the distinction between art and reality. This marker also made it necessary to rethink the mimetic function of art, another aspect on which Nietzsche returns several times in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “Tragedy grew up out of this foundation and, for that very reason, has, from its inception, been spared the embar-

<sup>3</sup> *Poetics*: 48b 9-12.

raising business of counterfeiting reality. That is not to say, however, that it is a world arbitrarily fantasized somewhere between heaven and earth. It is much rather a world possessing the same reality and credibility as the world of Olympus, together with its inhabitants, had for the devout Greek".<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Nietzsche considers the reproduction of reality as something fundamentally embarrassing. This idea presents strong echoes of the concept of mimesis that was offered by Plato: mimesis can always hide deception, we run the risk of mistaking the real thing for the mimetic copy produced by the artist, unless the artist is not particularly careful to ensure that deception does not occur by taking the necessary precautions, so as to distinguish reality from the artwork.

In summary, therefore, we can put it this way: art has traditionally adopted, among its duties, that of representing reality. Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* puts us on track to specify the significance of artistic representation. One of the earliest forms of representation that we have knowledge of deals with the sacred: it is the idea that the tragic actor is the vehicle through which the divine is physically present, being incorporated in the actor. So the deity re-presents itself concretely in space and in time. A refinement and evolution of the practice of tragic theatre has allowed the parallel refinement of the concept and practice of representation: the god is not embedded in a living body, but rather the body of the actor refers to the

concept of divinity. And so representation, including the artistic one, creates a gap between reality and artistic fiction.

Precisely this point, caught with fine sensitivity by Nietzsche, is the one tackled by much of contemporary art, ever since Abstract Expressionism. It has been a gradual process, achieved by means of the changes introduced in artistic practice: from a refined and even mannerist use of representation, which reached its peak in Abstract Expressionism, a second stage was reached exemplified by post-historical arts (Pop art embodies the moment of transition from the first to the second phase). Through this passage, art has sought to disenfranchise reality, minimizing the space separating it from fiction and ultimately aiming to replace reality with art. All in all, it seems that art has created the perfect reversal of Plato's thought: the true reality is the one presented by art, which – after having nullified the representational component – has come to use very real and everyday objects in place of the artefacts created specially by the artists.

According to Plato, the craftsman – that is, by hypothesis, the manufacturer of beds – constructs beds that mimic the "idea of bed" and the artist, in turn, sketches something that looks like that idea. By contrast, *My Bed*, in the intentions of Tracy Emin, is a real bed that re-presents itself and the meanings embedded in the material object. The artefact, Tracy's bed, is taken and introduced in the context of art, in this case the museum, which is also a robust fictional marker. The fact that we find Emin's bed in a museum – the work was exhibited at the

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche: 2008, p. 28.

Tate Gallery in 1999 – has the effect of warning us that this is not just any bed.

In 1955 Robert Rauschenberg created the conditions for the bed-work of Emin to be possible: by hanging, literally, sheets, a blanket and a pillow on a canvas, he reassembled them in the guise of a bed, and then dirtied them with colour with the typical gesture of dripping. Rauschenberg's work is still somewhat linked to Abstract Expressionism, while anticipating Pop Art. The fictional marker in this case is embedded in the structure of the work: not only is the bed hung on a wall, but it is properly hung on a canvas, that is, a painting (so to speak). So it becomes a painting itself, and is fully brought back to the fictional space. However, Rauschenberg's idea implies that in the space of fiction, which is clear, the representation takes place through the mechanism of re-presentation of something that looks very much like the thing itself.

Ordinary reality signifies itself – this is the idea – more effectively through its representation than through its representations. This is what Emile De Antonio suggested to Andy Warhol when he asked him what he thought of two versions of a drawing of a Coca-Cola. The first was inspired by Abstract Expressionism, the second had instead a strong realistic character. De Antonio convincingly suggested that Warhol should draw the Coca-Cola realistically as it was the only way to genuinely grasp the reality of the sixties. Reality pure and simple is best rendered if it is re-presented rather than represented, that is, if the artist tries to cancel the difference between reality and fiction.

This is also the reason why *Brillo Box*, made perhaps a little more beautiful by Warhol, could be exhibited at the Stable Gallery in the famous 1964. However, while Andy Warhol and Pop Art in general were still sensitive to the aesthetic properties of the works, Tracy Emin utterly neglects them, leaving ordinary reality charged of as much reality as possible.

Now, it is important to ask two questions, the first of which brings us back to the dilemma that Plato expressed in the tenth book of the *Republic*. In those pages Plato argues that if the artist's goal is to obtain copies of ordinary reality, it would be more effective to use mirrors rather than brushes and words. Artists, for their part, seem to have followed him all too literally, since not only have they put aside their brushes, but they even started using real things, re-presenting reality as it is. Here are the questions: why regard the bed by Tracy Emin as art? And, besides, are we sure that this operation should be interpreted as a sign of a philosophical disenfranchisement of art (the same to which Hegel and Danto referred to, albeit with different emphases, when thinking about the fate of art)? I believe that the goal of post-historical arts is the revival of an old romantic goal, also picked up by Nietzsche: provided that art is infinitely richer in sense, meaning and, ultimately, being compared to ordinary reality, it would be reasonable to hope that reality ends up being completely at one with art.

The beds of Rauschenberg and Emin exemplify and pursue an old dream of the artists: to reduce the fictional space for the

benefit of art. That is, to bring ordinary reality completely back to art. This dream has its roots in the divine that Nietzsche saw as the origin of tragedy, or, to put it more secularly, in the will to power that belongs to anyone who has a strong creative instinct. The artist seemingly bends to reality by agreeing to re-present rather than imitate or represent it. However, he knows that in this game – that would have as a final result the artistic disenfranchisement of ordinary reality – he must always make sure to leave within the work, or within its space of existence, the fictional marker that avoids the ontological collapse between art and reality. Without the fictional marker – here lies the failure of the ontological project of post-historical arts – art would disappear, while reality would continue to exist as such.

Artists have used different strategies to hide the fictional marker: they've moved it, taking it away from the physical structure of the work and placing it on the outside, referring it back to the context. They have transformed it from physical marker into agentive marker, linked, for example, to the actions of performance artists. They have tried to hide it, making it visible only under certain conditions or at certain times of the life of the work. The point, though, is that no artist can delete it, because the fictional marker is a necessary condition for the work to exist. It is a necessary condition for the opening of the ontological space in which anything whatsoever may re-present or represent a different meaning, other than the usual one expressed by a given object. I think we can conclude that this project of disenfranchise-

ment has failed. If artists finally realized this, art would likely go back to doing what it does best: embodying meanings in objects capable of expressing them in exemplary ways.

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## Exploring Conceptual Art

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### 1. The Idealistic Obstinacy of Conceptual Art

Many philosophers and critics agree that Conceptual Art is distinguished not only to be a loose collection of various practices but especially for its significant contradictions that increase the theoretical controversy about it.

According to the theorist Donald Brook (1972) the phrase «Conceptual Art» has different senses and it is used with a general non-acceptance. His argument is based on the following premises: (i) this obscure label refers to many kinds of processes and objects; (ii) artists' justifications about them are vague; (iii) their writings, in many cases, are in gibberish. So defining Conceptual Art is a complex matter. Brook acknowledges that this difficulty is related to four uses of the phrase: to indicate a primacy of a conceptual approach to art in contrast to the perceptual one; to emphasise that Conceptual Art is art of ideas and not art of physical objects; to claim that it is also an artistic process based on a semantic paradox that changes art and points out the critical approach to its nature; to remark the restricted meta-activity character through which art became essentially a comment on itself.

The four uses of the phrase «Conceptual Art» singled by Brook reveal a high level of ambiguity due to its use. Nominally we could use the phrase to refer to an artistic movement or a general set of new experimental practices of the 60s that don't accept the traditional methods of art making. In the first meaning the phrase is differently coined and used by two artists<sup>1</sup>, and it is not completely working if referring to other kinds of artistic movements. Conceptual Art in this case would be the name of the artistic movement initially based upon the creative activities and the critical statements of many different artists, largely American<sup>2</sup>. In the second meaning instead, the phrase is used to describe a decisive tendency for the profound change of art due to the new experimental practices of the 60s that also established a large part of the successive artistic evolution until today.

The controversy about Conceptual Art is corroborated by this nominal ambiguity that reflects: the uncertain nature of Conceptual Art, its invisible boundaries but, at the same

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Flynt in his *Concept Art* (1961) speaks about an art whose material are «concepts»; Sol LeWitt in his *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* (1967) remarks the primacy of ideas in art.

<sup>2</sup> In this view the main American conceptual artists were Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, supported by the gallery director and intelligent divulger of their activities, Seth Siegelaub. Anyway, in a historical view, Sol LeWitt, Walter De Maria, Bruce Nauman, Hans Haacke, Robert Smithson, The Art & Language Group and many others are also considered as conceptualists.

time, its visible heritage from Modernism<sup>3</sup> and also its questionable philosophical references upon which are based many of its different practices.

Philosopher Richard Sclafani (1975) doesn't believe that the conceptual movement has any implications for art or for philosophy. He grouped the conceptual works in three categories: extra radical; quasi-philosophical (based on a self-referential character); and based on a language and thought model of reflection. A conceptual confusion is to the basis of the first group of works: it's not possible that if someone calls something «Art», then it is art. Surely, the success of a conceptual artwork – also the famous urinal exhibited by Duchamp – is strictly linked to the artistic community context. But the contextual statements are not sufficient so that something becomes art. It seems that for conceptualists it was impossible «to reject a claim of art status» (Sclafani 1975: 456). As Sclafani explains: «Not everyone can be an artist simply as he pleases, and not everything can be a work of art simply on anyone say's so. Without logical constraints on artmaking and arthood, the concepts 'artist' and 'work of art' are rendered vacuous» (ibidem). With the extra-radical artworks many conceptualists lose the Duchamp' lesson, since they claimed that it was essentially a contextual statement to confer arthood. The quasi-philosophical works – largely based on incursions in analytical philosophy – prove an unfavourable intellectual complexity, as a heritage of philosophical is-

<sup>3</sup> See Wood (2002).

issues implied in them. Lastly, the third group of works, in which language and thought are intriguing subjects to an obstinate model of reflection, increases confusion and nonsense. So Sclafani concludes that Conceptual Art is a nonsensical and confused kind of art.

Consequently, the risk to define Conceptual Art as not art or to assign it the «anti-art» label is very high.

Although it is also possible to define art according to an institutional framework<sup>4</sup>, a problem still remains: how can we determine the boundary between what is art and what is not? Philosopher George Dickie (1975) argues that this was possible using the phrase «anti-art», especially to refer to actions and statements of some artists: the performers. Actions and statements are not artefacts. Performers don't produce any material objects through their actions and declarations, so they make anti-art. As Dickie explains what performers do «is real anti-art: art because they use the framework of the artworld, anti because they do nothing with it». For this reasons they are «bureaucrats» because «they occupy a niche in an institutional structure but do nothing which is really productive» (Dickie 1975: 421). In his ontology of art Dickie doesn't include artists' actions and statements, and his theoretical perspective seems to be in accordance with the one of the dematerialisation of art – as described by

<sup>4</sup> The institutional framework – as it as theorised by Dickie at this stage of his research – consists in a core of: (1) creators; (2) presenters; (3) appreciators; (4) theorists, critics and philosophers of art; (5) exhibition machinery. See Dickie (1975).

many artists and theorists<sup>5</sup>. If this is correct then we could conclude that most of conceptual artworks are anti-art because they are dematerialised. Once again, also with these outlines of Dickie, the problem of a Conceptual Art definition emerges (especially if we accept the dematerialisation of art's topic).

According to philosopher Dale Jamieson (1986) literature about Conceptual Art is pervaded by an «endemic confusion». It seems that defining Conceptual Art may be possible only referring to the definitions of the conceptual artists or to the descriptions of critics. Both reveal a connection with the indeterminacy of a presumed conceptual framework and with the absurd target of the dematerialisation of art. About this second matter Jamieson argues that «the claim that conceptualists “eliminate” the art objects is nonsense» (Jamieson 1986: 118). Conceptual artworks are objects. Without them there would be no Conceptual Art. Moreover Jamieson faced also other questions concerning: the conceptual artworks classification – «why should earthworks be classed as conceptual piece?» (ibidem); the inadequate conception of the shift from object to concept (explained as criticism against economical market, commodities and so on and so forth); the use of word «conceptual» without reference to style, time relations etc. If the term is used to speak about the ontological and epistemological status of certain artworks, then we might differentiate them to the traditional ones. Focusing on the relation between concepts and their

manifestations – concepts are imperceptible, instead their manifestation are perceptible – Jamieson proposes to distinguish three kinds of Conceptual Art in which:

1. Art object is imperceptible but its existence is contingent on its perceptible expression.
2. Art object is imperceptible and it has no perceptible expression, but its existence is contingent on its apprehension by some audience.
3. Art object is imperceptible, it has no perceptible expression, and it doesn't need to be apprehended by an audience.

In his account Jamieson points out that in first kind of Conceptual Art, objects are material supports and documentations of ideas. In the second kind conceptual artworks are essentially thought as performances rather than objects. Finally, in the third kind they are similar to things yet not known that depend on some theory about them. About the second kind of conceptual works Jamieson notes that viewing the artwork as a performance implies any distinction between Conceptual Art and the traditional one. About the third kind of works Jamieson points out a theory-dependence of them: «[t]he point is that even in order to grasp what the artwork in question is, one needs some theory about the nature of conceptual artworks. Traditional artworks are much more autonomous with respect to theory» (Jamieson 1986: 122). Concluding his account Jamieson pronounces also a verdict: «conceptual art has little to offer to aesthetic theory» (ibidem). Except one, other kinds of Conceptual Art have been anticipated by phi-

<sup>5</sup> See Lippard, Chandler (1968).

losophers: the first by Collingwood and the second by Croce. However, the third seems to teach that «forgotten thoughts or things unknowable can be artworks» (ibidem).

These criticisms feed the controversy about Conceptual Art. At the same time they point out the idealistic trend that has characterised the first and radical productive period of Conceptual Art in which the main target was the dematerialisation of art object. The main directions of this trend are summarised in: a defence of mental processes considered conclusive to make art; an idiosyncratic attitude toward materials and objects; the inclination to the attainment of the dematerialisation of art. The latter becomes exactly the decisive topic to investigate Conceptual Art: is it really possible to eliminate physical objects in art? Of course, this is a fascinating proposal, an ambitious goal whose achievement would determine the definitive transformation of art. In practice, however, things went differently. In the second productive period of Conceptual Art – between the late 60s and the early 70s – we can record a change: artists return intentionally to objects and materials. For this reason now I would focus on this change of direction, which I think is to the basis of the evolution of art in the last fifty years. Perhaps this is a risky way to approach Conceptual Art, but I would like to show that we might start our philosophical investigations on art examining what at first was not considered relevant by conceptualists: exactly matters and objects, that never really disappeared. This change of direction allows us to focus on the strict adherence to the reality that characterises the contemporary evolution of art.

## 2. Artworks as Conductors of Ideas

Since the 60s many conceptualists have aimed to the dematerialisation of art objects essentially to defend first a not commercial and anti-market art making and second a political approach integrated in their productive activities. However, with a complete elimination of the objects none of the two aims would be satisfied. Let's consider the first productive period of Conceptual Art: obsolescence is not eminently only about physical objects, but mainly to visual representations. To challenge capitalist market integrated in the artworld means questioning the traditional methods for making images. These latter are the real targets of many conceptualists that introduce new ways to elaborate representation reducing saliency of visual shapes. Conceptualists adopt an articulated reductionist process to make art. So, on the one hand images become visual recordings like documents and on the other hand making art means using directly human bodies, various materials and objects. At the same time, these latter become essential to explicit, to advertise and to share socially the conceptual content of the artworks. In the following I would consider the impact of the reductionism introduced through Conceptual Art<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> In 1972 Italian philosopher Ermanno Migliorini considers – in a phenomenological view – what he defines the «Conceptualist Paradigm», as characterised exactly by a double reductionism: aesthetical (to the *áisthesis*) and artistic (to the *póiesis*). The first reductionist process is the principal aim of



Contrary to what is usually believed, physical objects are still essential for conceptualists. They make art using ordinary or natural objects, human bodies in action or mere materials exhibited in some places. So, a conceptual artwork, rather than being thought as an idea, should be recognised immediately as a material presence; as a matter presented in a certain place. Surely, also paintings and sculptures were considered as material presences, but they are used in function to elaborate a visual image and to depict something that is not really present to us, but only duplicated and postponed by such materials. In a different way, conceptual artworks are essentially materials used to exhibit really, and first of all, themselves without constrictive connections with the elaboration of a visual image that depicts a real or an imaginary entity. Being objects, bodies and materials presented in a place, conceptual artworks are available to us, to our perception – about this specific point I agree with philosopher Alva Noë that «perceptual presence is availability», it's a question of style to access the world through our sensorimotor understanding (Noë 2012: 19-24). The availability of materials, bodies and objects is decisive to our interaction and comprehension of conceptual artworks since they are in our own plane of reality – differently to objects, bodies or materials represented by images. Of course, there

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Minimal Art, the second one of Conceptual Art. In their relation, artistic and aesthetical reductionism express – Migliorini notes – a shift towards the significant matter of the value of art. See Migliorini 1972.

are also conceptual artworks that are based on visual postponements: video- and photo- recordings in particular – and, in a certain way, also texts that postpones objects, bodies and performances through documentary traces. But unlike traditional artworks, videos and photos used by conceptualists have no perfunctory or visual relevance exactly because are mere recordings that transmit conceptual content much more quickly than traditional works. This content is essentially a set of coordinates – information or instructions – that allows us to meet a photo- or a video- subject as if it was present to us through the picture, although it is *only present through it*. So objects, space, human bodies, natural environments etc. recorded by videos and photos could be understood according to the «presence-as-absence structure of pictures» (Noë 2012: 85), acknowledging however an increased content accessibility. A conceptual artwork should be recognised as a material presence that transmits, in a clear and accessible way, ideas.

To understand a conceptual artwork not only the knowledge of the art history, but first of all the knowledge of our real world is requested, its objects and subjects and their spatial and temporal coordinates to explain their relations. When we see the real chair – the material one – exhibited in Kosuth's piece *One and Three Chairs* (1965) we immediately acknowledge an ordinary object belonging to our world, its ambient position and its new value as artwork since it is exhibited into an institutional place. Moreover the photo and the dictionary definition of «chair» emphasise the connection between concept and object.

These acknowledgments are relevant for at least two reasons. On the one hand, through the description of the materials exhibited we can access to the idea of a deconstruction from the 'chair-object' to the 'chair-concept' transmitted through this work. On the other hand, also if we did not accept that it was an artwork, then probably we'll have to deal with the issues of the nature of art and of the closely relation between the work and the institutional framework that guarantees it to be such. Moreover, in the same moment in which one says: «this is not an artwork, but only a chair», he claim both his skeptical reasons against the work and also his exigency to put in question and discuss the concepts of «art», «artworks», «artist» and «aesthetical experience». This is because through their works conceptualists challenge our traditional belief about art. More precisely, in the words of the philosopher Elisabeth Schellekens, «[f]irst and foremost, Conceptual Art challenges our intuition concerning the limits of what may count as art and what it is an artist do» (Schellekens 2007).

But why objects, materials and documentation – their material presence – should be so relevant? Many conceptualists claim the primacy of ideas intentionally corroborating their inaccessibility and so risking their private closing in their minds. Although conceptualists insist that the transmission of ideas can easily be obtained through their statements or actions, their 'permanent conduction' – what I mean as the opportunity to share and understand an idea over time, in the course of history – is possible only through a material object physically put into middle position be-

tween artist and viewers. This is the basic rule to share art in our society. And this is also a direction that seems implicated in the words of a radical conceptualist as LeWitt – even though with many theoretical complications. In his *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1969) he writes: «(10) Ideas alone can be works of art; they are in a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical» (LeWitt in Alberro, Stimson 1999: 107). Of course, an idea is conceivable as an abstract object, but to grasp it as embedded into an artwork – or to find out a piece's creative process – it is necessary its transmission through a physical object. LeWitt than also writes: «(13) A work of art may be understood as a conductor from the artist's mind to the viewers. But it may never reach the viewer, or it may never leave the artist's mind.» (ibidem). The term «conductor» reveals the artist's choose to transmit the idea through the artwork. Nevertheless if LeWitt is right, the idea (that moreover he means as an abstract object different to the concept<sup>7</sup>) is a secret content present only into the artist's mind and not exactly expressed through the artwork. Unexpectedly, this is the typical situation in which we are approaching traditional art. With paintings and sculptures we partially know which is the subject and never which is the idea that the artist would like to transmit through his work. Barely we fail to

<sup>7</sup> In the ninth sentence LeWitt writes: «The concept and idea are different. The former implies a general direction while the latter is the components. Ideas implement the concept.» (LeWitt in Alberro, Stimson 1999: 106).

recognize the referents of visual representations. So, why should we claim an Idea Art or a Conceptual Art, if we don't have any opportunity to access its conceptual contents? It seems we are at a blind spot.

I think that an alternative to this impasse is possible. Since in traditional artworks ideas are exactly inaccessible – essentially because they are masked by images, as if they were artist's secrets – we may suppose that historical conceptualists reducing the significance of images and its visual saliency aimed to explicit and transmit immediately accessible ideas over time through their works. I guess this was possible whether this communicative transmission is supported by a material trace that makes it recoverable. This basic material trace has no formal relevance because it is formally reduced. The reductionism is implicit in the conceptualists' approach to art so that the phrase «less is more»<sup>8</sup> indicates a methodological rule to make a conceptual artwork. The more the work's external form is reduced – in terms of a 'short form' – the greater the emergence of ideas will be. In this view a conceptual artwork is a reduction to: an ordinary or a natural object, a human body engaged in performance, a video-, photo- and textual- documentation that explicit its conceptual content. For this reasons, I'm inclined to think that we might grasp the conceptual content directly going back from the material object to the idea. And the second evolutionary

<sup>8</sup> This phrase was originally adopted by the German-American architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) reflecting about a minimalist approach to design and architectural works.

phase of Conceptual Art, between the late 60s and the early 70s, it's a confirmation of this direction: it was exactly the period in which artists reconsider the significance of the objects<sup>9</sup>. In other words, after a first radical experimental period in which artists claim the primacy of ideas putting out the objects, in a second time they reconsider the latter, making art according to a new materialisation model based on the reductionism.

This awareness of the material relevance to transmit ideas is also a consequence of the incoherent theoretical anti-object claim, never fully satisfied neither in the first period of Conceptual Art. Such a methodological tension into artistic processes is verifiable investigating several conceptual artworks belonging to both periods that exhibit this immediate accessibility to ideas.

In 1969 artist Robert Barry dispersed a litre of Argon gas in the atmosphere working on the Santa Monica Sea. Surely, the Argon gas is imperceptible. However, the act of dispersion in that specific natural environment is possible according to its contextual materials and the use of a glass cruet originally containing the gas successively dispersed. I don't say that the cruet has the same value of the act of dispersing Argon gas in the atmosphere. But I would say that the objects – and the environmental context too – are essential to Barry's aims. Neither the documentation nor the photos can be considered of secondarily importance. Without them, today we would not have historical memory of *Inert Gas Se-*

<sup>9</sup> See Smith 1999.

ries: *Argon [from measured volume to indefinite expansion]* – Barry's artwork. Documentation is essential because allows the transmission of essential coordinates to understand the idea – and, in many cases, also the artistic agency at the origin of a conceptual artwork.

Now, let's consider the transparency of other artistic pieces belonging to the conceptual framework. *Spill (Scatter Piece)* (1966) is an artwork by Carl Andre based on the gesture of toppling from a canvas bag 800 plastic blocks on the floor. After the fall, the blocks create a totally random structure added on the floor's surface. «Combination» and «randomness» are two concepts immediately accessible examining the blocks of plastic and recognising their position on the floor. *The Nominal Three (to William of Ockam)* (1963) is an artwork by Dan Flavin. Composed by some fluorescent tubes, allows to see a reduction. Three, two and one neon on the wall in an ambient illuminated by their white light. The methodological principle of Ockam's Razor – referring to parsimony and economy in order to avoid to multiply elements if it is not necessary – results as a reduction of the same tubular neon – from three to one. We can access to the idea through the description of the material objects. And this means to start our investigations by focusing first and foremost on objects and materials. With the words of the curator and theorist Germano Celant we could say about Flavin's works that «[t]he news, then is the light, not its image. The only purpose is to put the spectator before object light – commonly considered as an instrument – in order to give him a chance to grasp it directly. [...] The problem is no longer the

mediation of light, the problem of the lamp or of the source, but the use of light, and it is not merely an artistic problem, but a concrete, vital matter influencing our grasp of reality» (Celant 1969: 54-5). Also human beings engaged in several performances – like objects and materials – influenced our re-action and our approach to reality. The experience of performance influences our grasp of reality as a consequence of the reductionism adopted by conceptualists.

### 3. To Explicit Ideas through Body Presence

**A** man is closed in a room with a coyote: something dangerous will happen to him? This is not the incipit of a novel but a short description and a legitimate question about a real event: one week's performance of German artist Joseph Beuys in René Block Gallery in New York, in 1974. Posing some questions about this artwork and describing it, we will also take its main concept: a wild coyote encounters a human being closed with him in a room. The animal symbolises the United States of America, the German artist Europe. The encounter is first between man and animal and secondly – let's say, according to a symbolic project plane – between United States and Europe. So *I Like America and America Likes Me* is a transparent artwork: first we can immediately access to the ideas about a relational instability and the risks connected to the encounter between a man and an animal, and secondly we'll be able to face also the sym-

bolic plane about the Germany/U.S.A. relationship implicated in the artwork. So first we meet the two livings presented in the gallery and then the mythologies and the reflections about political, cultural dialectical and hierarchical implications between different societies in the world. Without excluding Beuys's energetic conception of a «group soul of all forms of life» – an «essential part of his concept of reality» (Tisdall 2008: 11) – it is the presence of the livings and the objects in the Block Gallery to afford Beuys' creative process, his critical statements about society (consider the pile of *The Wall Street Journal* present in the gallery) and his remarks about natural connections between higher and lower forms of life.

I think that a phenomenon in particular was relevant for our philosophical investigations of conceptual artworks and their relation with reality, the phenomenon of presence. Presence of several objects, materials and bodies implies, first of all, a reflection on our sensitive approach to them. Experience of a human being in front of us is profoundly different to make experience of a picture of it. The presence of the former implies our direct approach with it, since it's not postponed by an image. It is no present as absent and our perception is engaged by profiles that change when we approach it and move around it, in accordance to the environmental availability (cfr. Noë 2012).

The real presence of a body, especially in the case of performance, might be also shocking. Surely we could think that Marina Abramović' *The Artist is Present* (2010) was also an artwork about something that we

could not immediately see and we could grasp only through an interpretative process. Nevertheless, is the same presence of Abramović, his bodily presence, to be decisive first to our aesthetical re-action and secondly to our thought about her work. Who participated this performance experienced a human being that silently looked at another one; a real person sitting on a chair not an image of it. Why did many people, once seated in front of Abramović, start crying? I would say because her bodily presence has a greater impact on them, on their sensitivity and perception, indeed different from the presence of a painting of it. It is really difficult to establish a comparison between a performance and a traditional artwork. In this regard, philosopher Arthur Danto remarks: «the practice of no other art requires the sacrifices that performance exacts. [...] It crosses boundaries most art does not approach, though it has occurred to me that some of the strong depictions of physical suffering painted for purposes of strengthening faith in the Counter-Reformation in Rome, have something like that effect. [...] The body itself renders pointless the effort to try to depict it naturalistically: this is what bodies are.» (Danto 2010: 32). One of Abramović' ideas concern exactly the bodily presence in a specific space and time according to a certain state of mind to the basis to experience it during a performance: how is it possible to transmit that? The same presence of the body and its availability to the viewer's perception in a place allow to grasp these concepts.

Conceptual artworks are more accessible than traditional ones, since they are conceiv-

able as ‘transparent material presences’. Transparency of their contents is due to the presence of ordinary and natural objects, of human beings (in some cases, also animals) engaged in several performances that we immediately recognise. The role of documentation as material traced is therefore evident: without video or photo recordings we would not have neither the coordinates to access to the concept of a work nor historical memory of them.

Conceptual content embedded in an artwork is secreted in traditional art, not in Conceptual Art. Conceptualists claim the primacy of ideas and of the cognitive approach to art through the disappearance of objects but, on the contrary, they laid the foundation of bringing back art to the ordinary – corroborating original Duchamp’s intuition. Only with a varieties of objects and materials presented in several places artists can transmit ideas and share them socially with the viewers. To explicit ideas is one of the basic methodological rules of conceptualism that is based on a new model of materialisation to make art. Thus, no wonder then that conceptual artist John Baldessari, during a conversation with the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, has stated about his studio (a kind of archive): «it’s small for me. Conceptual artists aren’t supposed to need space!» (Baldessari, Obrist 2009: 35).

#### 4. Conceptualism and New Materialisation in Art

Investigating art we might consider conceptualism as a methodological trend inherited by Conceptual Art and widely shared by contemporary artists. However, on the subject of conceptualism in art there isn’t a peaceful and unique theoretical conception. In this regard I would like to present some remarks about conceptualism in order to consider its strict connection with a new model of materialisation and some consequences of its impact on art.

According to art historian Paul Wood in contemporary art there isn’t the same critical spirit of historical Conceptual Art. Original intents of conceptualists would have been contradicted. Their creative model was based on a radical criticism against capitalism’s rules and an analytical approach towards mind and body. In the actual artistic scene things are not the same. Wood writes that «[t]he analytical strand of Conceptual art, linked as it was to a left-wing class politics, was eclipsed by a burgeoning of performance-related activities (often accompanied by video technologies or installations) and frequently underwritten by a politics of identity. This shift lies behind the emergence of a notion of ‘conceptualism’ that has come into currency to describe the range of object-, video-, performance- and installation-based activities that currently hold sway across the international art scene. ‘Conceptualism’ in this sense is effectively a synonym for ‘postmodernism’.» (Wood 2002: 75).

I don’t completely agree with these remarks. Accepting that the claims of original

conceptualists since the 60s are based on an idealistic obstinacy – as we saw, largely criticized by many philosophers and theorists – we might acknowledge also their utopian view concerning the dematerialisation and the contrast to the capitalist market as essential reasons to support their postmodernist approach to art. In a different perspective, we could say that between the late 60s and the early 70s, exactly with the return to the objects, conceptualists succeed to increase their critical attitudes towards many social, cultural and political issues. So, if this perspective is correct than we could think also that conceptualism was synonym of postmodernism only in the first ‘hyperbolic idealistic phase’ of Conceptual Art in which artists insisted on the dematerialisation of the art objects. More precisely, conceptual artworks can be conceived as postmodernist in two senses: because they were made chronologically after the modernist paradigm or because they are results of the primacy of ideas and of a constructivist approach, both typical of the postmodernist paradigm. Returning to the objects conceptualists inspire newly a reflection about our real world, our ordinary and natural objects, the limits and the opportunity to approach and acknowledge them. I propose a different use of the term «conceptualism». I would use it to refer to the art adherence to ordinary and reality. So in this perspective, through conceptualism a revival of art based on a new materialisation model that characterized the artistic scene since the 60s until today begins.

In 1969 curator and art historian Harald Szeemann explores this innovative scene with a great exhibition at the Bern Kunsthalle titled

*Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form. Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information.* With the exhibition Szeemann was able to point out and remark the features of this new artistic horizon. An artistic object is the secondary product of mental processes. At the same time, materials and objects (formally reduced) reveal the ideas and the agency transmitted by the artists. What does this mean? I would say that it is possible to go back from physical object to understand ideas and agency transmitted by an artist. In this regard, Szeemann acknowledges the two essential art traits that persist also today: (i) the primacy of the creative process and the agency of the artist both coinciding with the formal reduction of the works; (ii) the adaptation of the creative regulatory framework necessary to elaborate an artwork to the exhibition space. In other words, for Szeemann it was clear that acknowledging an object means immediately individuating the process through which it was elaborated, reduced or only placed. Furthermore, the artistic process necessary to make an artwork is adapted to the social, exhibition and relational space in which the work will be placed. Although characterised by stylistic irrelevance, a mere object or a simple material connotes itself, denotes attitudes and transmits ideas. Therefore, the return to the simplicity of the materials – as Szeemann correctly remarked yet – is the guarantee of a direct and immediate access to the work and to its content. Szeemann was again right when he said that through these practices artists help to make

the public more aware of both the processes and the materials presented<sup>10</sup>.

Now let's consider many works we could meet in our contemporary artworld: how has art changed after conceptualism? In 2003 Colombian artist Doris Salcedo installed 1550 wooden chairs stacked in the empty space between two buildings, in Yemeniciler Caddesi No.66 in Istanbul. In 2005 during her exhibition at Castello di Rivoli in Turin, Salcedo reworked one of the institution's major rooms by extending the majestic vaulted brick ceiling. In order to access to Salcedo's ideas – but also to explain *Untitled* (2003) and *Abyss* (2005) – it is sufficient to describe first their constituent materials and objects, their position and their relations with environments and ambient. In the first case it is the idea of «precariousness» to be accessible to us; in the second work it is instead the one of «obstruction».

Conceptualism is implemented in parallel by a new materialisation in art that requests, first of all, a reflection about our sensitive approach to external world. This is essentially an aesthetical approach based on our direct experience of material elements, variances and invariances of physical objects and

<sup>10</sup> In 1969 during a television interview, Szeemann explains clearly that it is not possible to understand the works of the artists active in those years in terms of a movement or a 'school'. He opts instead for the recognition of a trend shared by performers and artists, summarizing it in the following key elements: the reaction to the geometrical inclination typical of the artistic production of the 60s; the resumption of the Duchamp's practice of ready-made, of the pollockian gesture and of actions and happenings.

environments. In many cases it means to grasp not only a conceptual disagreement but also a physical friction. Both confirm a new art role: through it we could explore and reconsider not only imaginary worlds but also reality. So this means to explore directly its «limits» and «possibilities», acknowledging external world essentially as «unamendable» – as maintained by philosopher Maurizio Ferraris in his remarks concerning a positive evaluation about the emergence of thought and sense from reality (cfr. Ferraris 2013). Clearly, I'm not saying that our sensitive approach to reality is the principal and the only aim of all conceptualists and neither of all contemporary artists in general. Rather that it become of primary importance through the establishment of conceptualism since the 70s.

Whether we want to trace some general features of conceptualism we could list at least the following methodological rules adopted by many artists: (a) to involve intentionally the viewers making ideas accessible through the reductionism adopted in art making; (b) to engage viewers in terms of a fully multi-sensory experience through performances, relational and participative events modifying ambient and environments; (c) to raise questions about the nature and the knowledge of art; (d) to encourage explorations of reality and its social, natural, political implications. As a consequence we could think about a conceptual form of art in two different ways. First an art that allows us to go back to the object in direction to appreciate a project, an idea or directly a reflection about the nature of art. Further-



more, a conceptual form of art allows also to explore our reality and its social, natural possibilities and complexity; the relational and spatial coordinates between objects and subjects present in our external world. In this second sense art strictly concerns a thought about reality – and this is a second way in which we could think about art after conceptualism.

As I tried to show, between the 60s and the 70s of the last century, art through conceptualism and a new model of materialisation has encouraged our explorations and remarks about reality and its social, relational, political, participative and moral implications. Of course art still remains connected with fiction and its visual views. Abstraction, representation, narrative implications and visual deformations still are relevant topics still. Today, however, after the achievement of conceptualism, through art we can explore also new fields concerning our reality: popular culture, quotidian objects, politics, globalism, audience, institutional machinery, gender's questions and many others<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> The list proposed by the critics Eleanor Heartney in her catalogue concerning the relations between art and toady emphasises exactly this combination between historical fictional fields and new realistic areas connected with contemporary art. See Heartney (2013).

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## Whitehead e il Nuovo Realismo: Per una filosofia del concreto, tra senso comune e scienze

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### 1. Introduzione

Nel 1945 veniva pubblicata per la prima volta in Italia un'opera di Whitehead: *La scienza e il mondo moderno*. In quell'occasione Antonio Banfi, nella *Prefazione*, introduceva l'autore con una certa audacia, dovuta alla profonda distanza che separava le tesi di Whitehead dalle tendenze filosofiche del tempo. Scrive Banfi:

Il realismo, affermano i nostri idealisti, è un indirizzo superato, un residuo di una mentalità invecchiata che si può di massima eliminare senza darsi la pena di conoscere e discutere nei particolari. E il naturalismo che lo accompagna, proseguono i nostri spiritualisti, figli illegittimi dell'idealismo, o anime belle di professione, è dottrina *formaliter* perversa.<sup>1</sup>

Il dibattito odierno, intensificatosi in Italia negli ultimi tre anni, in seguito alla pubblicazione del manifesto del nuovo realismo (*La Repubblica*, 8 agosto 2011), denota un radica-

<sup>1</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *La scienza e il mondo moderno* (Milano: Bompiani, 1945/Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001), 7.

le, decisivo, cambiamento di prospettiva che vede tornare il realismo come interlocutore valido nel panorama filosofico contemporaneo. Con *realismo* non si deve innanzitutto intendere – puntualizza lo stesso Ferraris – una teoria specifica, riconducibile ad un autore determinato, ma piuttosto va compreso come «la fotografia di uno stato di cose».<sup>2</sup> Uno «stato di cose» tanto diffuso che è difficile non prendere posizione a riguardo, come è continuamente evidenziato dalla varietà degli interlocutori e dalla vivacità delle discussioni nel merito. Si tratta di uno «spettro che si aggira»,<sup>3</sup> o – direbbe Whitehead – di una «nuova colorazione» che ha acquistato il pensiero contemporaneo in tempi recenti. Da notare infatti che le dimensioni del fenomeno sono tutt'altro che locali: da Markus Gabriel a Quentin Meillassoux, da Graham Harman alla rivista americana *Speculations*,<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Maurizio Ferraris, *Manifesto del nuovo realismo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2012), X.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> I nomi elencati da un lato non esauriscono la vastità delle proposte nel merito (si vedano, tra gli altri, anche le teorie di Putnam, Eco o Searle), dall'altro non devono essere intesi come espressioni particolari di un'unica posizione filosofica monolitica. Infatti, non solo le tesi e argomenti utilizzati divergono, ma anche l'idea stessa di realismo. Ad esempio, si consideri come alcuni dei nomi elencati siano riconducibili a posizioni prettamente speculative (Meillassoux, Harman), sebbene il carattere speculativo non possa essere attribuito al nuovo realismo *tout court*. Sulla pluralità delle prospettive, si vedano Mario De Caro e Maurizio Ferraris (a cura di), *Bentornata Realtà. Il nuovo realismo in discussione* (Torino: Einaudi, 2012), ma anche Andrea Lavazza e Vittorio Posenti (a cura di), *Perché essere realisti. Una sfida filo-*

questa tendenza è in piena estensione. E trova felice espressione nelle parole di Whitehead stesso che, riferendosi al suo tempo,<sup>5</sup> diceva:

Forse la mia metafora di una nuova colorazione è un po' eccessiva. Ciò che intendo affermare è un semplice cambiamento di sfumatura, ma un cambiamento che comporta assoluta diversità. Ciò è esattamente reso dalla frase di una lettera di quel meraviglioso genio che fu William James. Mentre stava terminando il suo grande trattato sui *Principi*

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*sofica* (Milano: Mimesis, 2013). Per quanto riguarda il realismo speculativo, si vedano invece, in particolare modo, Quentin Meillassoux, *Dopo la finitudine. Saggio sulla necessità della contingenza* (Milano: Mimesis, 2012), e Levy Briant, Nick Srnicek e Graham Harman (a cura di), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re-press, 2011), oltre alla rivista citata. A proposito di quest'ultimo volume citato, va inoltre segnalato l'utilizzo del pensiero di Whitehead, per la formulazione della prospettiva filosofica formulata. Ciononostante, il presente saggio si discosta dall'interpretazione dell'autore offerta in questo testo.

<sup>5</sup> "New realism" è il nome che viene attribuito anche alla tendenza filosofica di stampo anglo-americano, sorta all'inizio del XX secolo. Infatti, in seguito alla confutazione dell'idealismo di Moore, in ambito anglosassone prende piede la corrente realista, all'interno della quale si distinguono due indirizzi principali, contrapposti tra loro: in Inghilterra il cosiddetto "neorealismo", tra i cui esponenti si ricordi: W.P. Montague, R.B. Perry, E.B. Holt, T.P. Nunn, S. Alexander; negli Stati Uniti il "realismo critico", che vede tra le sue voci principali A.O. Lovejoy, J.B. Pratt, G. Santayana, e successivamente R.W. Sellars. Whitehead, pur proclamandosi realista, non aderì mai a nessuno di questi indirizzi.

di *Psicologia*, ebbe a scrivere: «Debbo forgiare ogni idea al cospetto di fatti irriducibili e ostinati».<sup>6</sup>

Così, Whitehead riconosce e afferma, tanto nei movimenti di pensiero a lui coevi quanto nella sua impresa filosofica, la centralità di quei «fatti irriducibili e ostinati» che oggi sono nuovamente al centro dell'attenzione. Allora, se pure sono considerevoli le differenze storico-critiche che separano le due tendenze – la prima, concepita come superamento dell'idealismo; la seconda, come superamento del postmodernismo –, entrambe colgono e rispondono alla medesima istanza. Per questo, un confronto tra le due non solo è possibile, ma risulta proficuo per comprendere ancora di più il mutamento attuale, mettere in luce le sue implicazioni e ampliarne le prospettive. Nello specifico, il presente articolo si concentra sul realismo di Whitehead, nel dialogo con la proposta del nuovo realismo presentata e sostenuta da Maurizio Ferraris.

La prima parte è dedicata alle assonanze che ricorrono nella concezione della filosofia che entrambi promuovono, la seconda alla comune insistenza sull'inemendabilità del reale, pur nella divergenza della descrizione della stessa realtà, e la terza introduce il realismo organico whiteheadiano. A partire dalla fallacia della concretizzazione mal posta e della centralità dell'esperienza percettiva, si vedrà infatti come Whitehead si distanzia dal

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<sup>6</sup> Whitehead, *La scienza e il mondo moderno*, 19.

nuovo realismo, arrivando alla formulazione di un «realismo organico».<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Il ruolo di una filosofia realista

**I**l realismo elaborato da Ferraris deve essere inteso – afferma l'autore stesso – nel senso di «un'estetica come teoria della sensibilità, una ontologia naturale come teoria della inemendabilità e infine una ontologia sociale come teoria della documentalità».<sup>8</sup> Prima ancora di affrontare queste tesi però, bisogna notare che nella loro posizione e difesa è implicata una concezione della filosofia, e del suo ruolo, anch'essa peculiare e caratterizzante. Il mio confronto con Whitehead si innesta proprio a partire da questo aspetto metodologico. Sinteticamente, si può infatti rilevare una prossimità degli autori nel loro modo di intendere la filosofia come crocevia, o meglio ponte, tra senso comune e scienze. Afferma a questo proposito Ferraris:

Se [...] nella mia proposta di nuovo realismo insisto così tanto sulla differenza tra ontologia (quello che c'è) ed epistemologia (quello che sappiamo) è proprio perché mi oppongo frontalmente a questo collasso. Dunque, niente «ritorno al positivismo» (non siamo mica nell'Ottocento!). Piuttosto, contro il positivismo che esalta la scienza e contro il postmoderno che la riduce a una faccenda di interessi, propongo un rilancio della filosofia come ponte tra il mondo del senso comune, dei valori

morali e delle opinioni (una realtà con cui facciamo i conti tutti i giorni, che lo vogliamo, o meno) e il mondo della scienza (altra realtà con cui facciamo i conti tutti i giorni, o almeno quando stiamo male e andiamo dal medico) e del sapere in generale (perché non c'è solo la fisica, ci sono anche il diritto, la storia, l'economia).<sup>9</sup>

In quest'ottica, la filosofia rappresenta un vero e proprio *medium* che, senza squalificare il senso comune e senza identificarsi con una scienza particolare, o un sapere generale, è in grado di ricongiungere il mondo morale, scientifico e culturale, mettendo questi ambienti realmente nella condizione di dialogare. Di conseguenza, da un lato la filosofia attua la scelta inusuale di orientarsi verso il senso comune, laddove, fin dalla sua nascita socratica (se da questo punto possiamo intendere la sua comparsa), si è sempre distinta dalla δόξα in forza di una criticità (κρίνομαι) e peculiarità del discorso che le ha permesso di raggiungere, o perlomeno di ambire, nel corso dei secoli, al livello di ἐπιστήμη. Dall'altro, essa non disdegna le scienze e anzi le riconosce in quanto fonti di sapere valide e fruibili, senza, per questo, rispecchiarsi nelle loro stesse strutture o fini specifici. In questo modo, Ferraris parla di una filosofia che sia in grado di «saldare il sapere e le credenze»,<sup>10</sup> una filosofia non più solamente decostruttiva, ma ricostruttiva.

La funzione della filosofia è caratterizzata similmente anche da Whitehead: essa è critica e ricostruttiva, aperta e rispettosa nei con-

<sup>7</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Il processo e la realtà. Saggio di cosmologia* (Milano: Bompiani, 1965), 309.

<sup>8</sup> Ferraris, *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*, X-XI.

<sup>9</sup> *Ivi*, 59.

<sup>10</sup> *Ivi*, 60.

fronti sia del senso comune che delle scienze. Per l'autore infatti, dopo «gli eccessi dell'idealismo», è opportuno che la filosofia da un lato ritorni al «punto di vista del profano», dall'altro assuma – nei confronti delle scienze – quella funzione che unica può assolvere: «la funzione di critica delle astrazioni». <sup>11</sup> In caso contrario, il venire meno di tale «coordinante filosofica» <sup>12</sup> coinciderebbe con il decadimento della civiltà. <sup>13</sup>

Più nello specifico, rispetto al senso comune Whitehead critica gli sviluppi della filosofia moderna, poiché l'hanno resa assolutamente incapace di leggere quell'esperienza di cui il senso comune stesso è portavoce e da cui la riflessione filosofica prende le mosse. Afferma l'autore:

Tutta la filosofia moderna gira intorno alla difficoltà di descrivere il mondo in termini di soggetto e predicato, sostanza e qualità, particolare e universale. Il risultato fa sempre violenza a quell'esperienza immediata che noi esprimiamo

<sup>11</sup> Whitehead, *La scienza e il mondo moderno*, 79.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Avventure di Idee* (Milano: Bompiani, 1961), 131.

<sup>13</sup> Si veda a questo proposito l'osservazione, estremamente attuale di Whitehead, che connette essenzialmente il progresso di una società al ruolo della filosofia. Cfr. Whitehead, *La scienza e il mondo moderno*, 73: «Pensare senza astrazione non potete, così è di estrema importanza essere vigilanti nella revisione critica dei vostri modi di astrazione. È qui che la filosofia trova il suo posto, essenziale al sano progresso della società. Essa ha la funzione di critica delle astrazioni. Una civiltà che non può sfuggire al dominio delle sue astrazioni correnti è condannata alla sterilità dopo un brevissimo periodo di progresso».

nelle nostre azioni, speranze, simpatie e intenti, e di cui godiamo nonostante la mancanza di espressioni per la sua analisi verbale.

Ci troviamo in un mondo ronzante, in mezzo a una democrazia di creature come noi; mentre, sotto un aspetto o un altro, la filosofia ortodossa sa solo introdurci tra sostanze solitarie, viventi ognuna una esperienza illusoria: «O Bottom, sei cambiato! Che vedo addosso a te?». Il tentativo di interpretare l'esperienza in accordo con l'irresistibile indicazione del senso comune deve riportarci a qualche riformulazione del realismo platonico, modificato in modo da evitare le trappole che le investigazioni filosofiche del diciassettesimo e diciottesimo secolo hanno aperto. <sup>14</sup>

In altri termini, per Whitehead, innanzitutto a causa dei paradigmi adottati (soggetto-predicato, sostanza-qualità, particolare-universale), e in secondo luogo per via di una deliberata indifferenza nei confronti dell'esperienza, la filosofia moderna è giunta ad una riformulazione della realtà nel segno dell'illusorietà e della solitudine (come impossibilità di comunicazione). Il senso comune allora, si offre come un'«irresistibile indicazione» per una descrizione fedele di quell'«esperienza immediata» sempre affermata dal nostro agire.

Rispetto alle scienze invece, la posizione che la filosofia deve assumere, secondo Whitehead, è più articolata e complessa, per la concezione che l'autore ha di entrambe. La filosofia infatti non è equiparabile a una scienza, né aspira ad essere meta-scientifica; il suo procedere è diametralmente opposto a quello di qualsiasi scienza. Ogni scienza è

<sup>14</sup> Whitehead, *Il processo e la realtà*, 131-132.

per l'autore un sistema di astrazioni, mentre la filosofia critica, coordina e spiega tali astrazioni, riconnettendole al campo dell'esperienza percettiva. Con ciò, Whitehead non intende affatto svalutare le pratiche scientifiche, né inficiare i loro risultati. Piuttosto, egli vuole rimarcare la differenza che sussiste tra il piano della scienza e l'esperienza, sottolineare la differenza tra gli strumenti impiegati per offrire una spiegazione da un lato, e ciò che si vuole spiegare dall'altro. Di conseguenza, alle scienze è accordato un potere conoscitivo nella misura in cui le astrazioni che esse adottano siano fondate.<sup>15</sup> D'altro canto, la filosofia avrà un compito sia critico che ricostruttivo nei loro confronti. Critico, nella misura in cui riporta e confronta tali astrazioni con il *concretum* dell'esperienza,<sup>16</sup> e ricostruttivo in quanto a lei sola spetta l'armonizzazione di questi generi di saperi diversi. Lontano dunque da ogni positivismo, Whitehead afferma che:

La filosofia non è una scienza particolare munita di un piccolo sistema di astrazioni che essa elabora, perfezionandole e migliorandole. È uno studio

<sup>15</sup> Dice Whitehead a questo proposito: «se le astrazioni sono ben fondate, vale a dire se non sono astratte da tutto quanto è importante nell'esperienza, il pensiero scientifico che si limita ad esse perverrà ad una molteplicità di importanti verità relative alla nostra esperienza della natura»; Whitehead, *La scienza e il mondo moderno*, 73 (traduzione italiana parzialmente modificata).

<sup>16</sup> Sulla dialettica astratto/concreto, si veda la seconda parte del presente intervento, in particolare l'analisi della fallacia della concretizzazione malposta.

generale delle scienze ed ha per scopo principale di mettere le scienze in armonia fra loro e di completarle. La filosofia, per fare ciò, utilizza non solo la testimonianza delle scienze prese separatamente, ma anche un proprio riferimento all'esperienza concreta. Confronta le scienze coi fatti concreti.<sup>17</sup>

Per armonizzare e completare le scienze, la filosofia le confronta con i «fatti concreti», e ciò non rappresenta agli occhi di Whitehead un compito solamente critico, da parte della filosofia. Se le scienze consistono in sistemi di astrazioni, e se – come afferma l'autore – l'unico modo di comprendere un'astrazione è connetterla al *concretum* da cui è tratta, la filosofia operando tale confronto assume un ruolo non solo critico, ma al contempo esplicativo. «L'*elucidazione dell'esperienza immediata* – dice Whitehead – è *l'unica giustificazione* di qualsiasi pensiero; e il punto di partenza del pensiero è l'osservazione analitica dei componenti di questa esperienza».<sup>18</sup> La filosofia non *critica* semplicemente le astrazioni, ma le *spiega* mediante la presentazione di quegli elementi concreti da cui esse dipendono. Conseguentemente, vi è non solo una distinzione, ma anche una certa complementarità tra scienza e filosofia: «un sistema filosofico dovrebbe presentare una dilucidazione di quel fatto concreto da cui le scienze astraggono. Le scienze poi dovrebbero trovare i propri principi nei *fatti concreti* che un sistema filosofico presenta».<sup>19</sup> Ma cosa intendere per *fatti concreti*? Prima di ri-

<sup>17</sup> Whitehead, *La scienza e il mondo moderno*, 79.

<sup>18</sup> Whitehead, *Il processo e la realtà*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Whitehead, *Avventure di idee*, 190.

spondere a questa domanda, indagata nella seconda sezione dell'articolo, indichiamo l'ultima affinità metodologica tra la filosofia secondo il nuovo realismo di Ferraris e quella secondo Whitehead.

Nel panorama attuale, il nuovo realismo si distingue, di contro al pensiero debole e a certe tendenze postmoderne,<sup>20</sup> per il rilancio di una filosofia critica, illuminista ed emancipatrice, che non abbia paura di seguire il principio di Rousseau fatto proprio da Kant: «Svegliati! Esci dall'infanzia».<sup>21</sup> In quest'ottica, il sapere non è più una forma di asservimento, vincolata a logiche di potere e operante come volontà di potenza, che – nel migliore dei casi – sarebbe controbilanciata da un dubbio sistematico che si trasforma in critica corrosiva. Piuttosto, la filosofia torna ad essere espressione di quella istanza di verità che sola può condurre l'uomo fuori dall'infanzia: dalla cecità dell'ignoranza e dalla sottomissione incondizionata a chi, di volta in volta, è detentore del potere. Anche in questo caso, Whitehead si avvicina alla medesima concezione, bene espressa dal noto esempio della fallacia del dizionario perfetto. Dice l'autore nelle pagine finali de *I modi del pensiero*:

L'Errore del dizionario perfetto divide i filosofi in due scuole, la «Scuola critica» che rifiuta la filosofia speculativa e la «Scuola speculativa» che la

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. Ferraris, *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*, 87-112.

<sup>21</sup> I. Kant, *Risposte alla domanda: che cos'è l'Illuminismo?* (1784), in *Scritti politici e di filosofia della storia e del diritto*, UTET, Torino 1963, citato in Ferraris, *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*, 13.

include. La scuola critica si limita a una analisi delle parole entro i confini del dizionario. La scuola speculativa fa appello alla intuizione diretta, e si sforza di indicare i significati mediante un ulteriore appello alle situazioni che promuovono tali specifiche intuizioni. Essa quindi amplia il dizionario. La divergenza tra le due scuole è il contrasto tra sicurezza e avventura.<sup>22</sup>

Whitehead presenta in questo passaggio un'alternativa radicale. Da un lato, troviamo la scuola critica, che poggia sulla credenza che «l'umanità possedga consapevolmente tutte le idee fondamentali che sono applicabili all'esperienza» e che «il linguaggio umano, nelle parole singole o nelle frasi, esprime esplicitamente queste idee».<sup>23</sup> Per questa scuola, il lavoro del filosofo si limita all'analisi dei termini interni al dizionario, senza poterne giudicare l'adeguatezza o bontà, anzi: non può nemmeno porsi una simile domanda, dal momento che il dizionario perfetto è il suo unico strumento e campo di indagine. Così, da questo punto di vista, ogni possibilità di critica ed emancipazione è preclusa in partenza: impossibile è uscire dall'egemonia di chi ha scritto il dizionario, che da risorsa sussidiaria diviene l'unico orizzonte della ricerca filosofica. Auto-limitazione dunque della filosofia all'accettazione di un sistema preordinato, che impedisce ogni «tentativo di allargare la comprensione dell'ambito di applicazione di ogni nozione che entra nel nostro pensiero

<sup>22</sup> Whitehead, *I modi del pensiero* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1972), 235-36.

<sup>23</sup> *Ivi*, 235.



corrente».<sup>24</sup> Diametralmente opposta a questa scuola è quella speculativa,<sup>25</sup> che si avvale del dizionario: non per restare all'interno dei suoi confini, ma per indagare ciò che è “oltre il testo” mediante «un continuo assalto ai confini del finito»<sup>26</sup> che consente anche – in seconda battuta – di poter tornare al dizionario per ampliarlo. Ritorna ancora, a questo proposito, un elemento già comparso nella presente analisi della concezione della filosofia; si tratta dell'«oltre il testo», o dei «fatti concreti»; in altri termini: ritorna ancora l'appello ad una realtà irriducibile, cardine ineliminabile per entrambe le filosofie qui prese in esame. Cosa intendere dunque con tali nozioni di fatto concreto e realtà, al cuore di queste filosofie realiste, emancipatrici, critiche ed avventurose?

### 3. L'inemendabilità del reale: la fallacia dell'essere-sapere e della concretizzazione malposta

Similmente a come ho proceduto nella prima sezione, per quanto concerne la nozione di realtà è considerata prima la visione di Ferraris, e poi il pensiero di

<sup>24</sup> *Ivi*, 234.

<sup>25</sup> Sulla particolare accezione dei termini “speculativo” e “filosofia speculativa” di Whitehead, innovativi e in discontinuità con la tradizione metafisica classica, si veda in particolar modo la raccolta di saggi edita da Faber e Henning. Cfr. Roland Faber e Brian Henning (a cura di), *Beyond Metaphysics?: Explorations in Alfred North Whitehead's Late Thought* (New York/Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Whitehead, *I modi del pensiero*, 236.

Whitehead. Scrive quest'ultimo nel *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*:

L'acqua bagna e il fuoco scotta sia che io lo sappia sia che io non lo sappia, indipendentemente da linguaggi e da categorie. A un certo punto c'è qualcosa che ci resiste. È appunto quello che chiamo “inemendabilità”, il carattere saliente del reale. Che può essere certo una limitazione ma che, al tempo stesso, ci fornisce proprio quel punto d'appoggio che permette di distinguere il sogno dalla realtà e la scienza dalla magia.<sup>27</sup>

Inemendabile, ossia incorreggibile, questo è il carattere della realtà. «L'acqua bagna e il fuoco scotta», c'è un livello della realtà che non può essere corretto, modificato, bypassato. In questo senso si può affermare un *prius* ontologico alla realtà, intesa come qualcosa che appunto *resiste*: resiste a ogni mia interpretazione, è al di là di ogni mia possibile interpretazione, e *insiste*: è al di qua di ogni possibile azione o presa di consapevolezza.

Certamente, da un punto di vista storico-critico, questo rappresenta un'inversione rispetto alla rivoluzione copernicana operata da Kant, nel cui solco è fiorita tutta la filosofia successiva, in particolare il cosiddetto costruzionismo.<sup>28</sup> Per Ferraris, infatti, Kant rappresenta uno snodo fondamentale per comprendere la prima di quelle che lui identifica come le tre fallacie del postmoderno: la

<sup>27</sup> Ferraris *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*, 30.

<sup>28</sup> *Ivi*, 35-39.

fallacia dell'essere-sapere, dell'accertare-accettare e del sapere-potere.<sup>29</sup>

Con la fallacia dell'essere-sapere Ferraris si riferisce al collasso dell'ontologia sull'epistemologia. Più nello specifico, l'autore mette in luce come Kant fondi l'esperienza mediante la scienza, per evitare quell'incertezza dei sensi che Cartesio aveva condannato, e adotti un'epistemologia *a priori* (quella matematica) per fondare l'ontologia. «Ma il prezzo pagato è che non c'è più alcuna differenza tra il fatto che ci sia un oggetto X e il fatto che noi *conosciamo* l'oggetto X». <sup>30</sup> Successivamente poi – secondo l'autore – «radicalizzando Kant, i costruzionisti confonderanno senza residui (cioè abolendo anche il noumeno) l'ontologia con l'epistemologia, quello che c'è (e non dipende da schemi concettuali) e quello che sappiamo (e dipende da schemi concettuali)». <sup>31</sup> Il nuovo realismo di Ferraris richiama dunque l'attenzione su questa differenza, distinguendo e descrivendo il piano epistemologico da quello ontologico. Il primo avrà degli oggetti emendabili, passibili di correzione e si occuperà di un mondo interno (agli schemi concettuali). E a questo piano si riferisce l'ambito della scienza. L'ontologia ha invece, come detto precedentemente, per oggetto l'inemendabile, un mondo *esterno* in quanto esterno agli schemi concettuali, e a questo piano afferisce

<sup>29</sup> Per una sintetica esposizione delle tre fallacie, cfr. *ivi*, 29-32.

<sup>30</sup> *Ivi*, 37.

<sup>31</sup> *Ivi*, 38.

l'esperienza, nella sua irriducibilità e indipendenza dalla scienza.<sup>32</sup>

Anche Whitehead, in modo differente, si muove in direzione contraria rispetto alla rivoluzione copernicana di Kant. Anzi, in entrambi i casi si può parlare, come ebbe a dire un autore fondamentale per Whitehead, Samuel Alexander, di una vera e propria svolta copernicana, più che di un ribaltamento del copernicanesimo. Tolomeo infatti – afferma provocatoriamente Alexander in *Ptolemaic and Copernican Views of the Place of Mind in the Universe*<sup>33</sup> – ponendo la terra al centro del sistema solare, elaborò la sua teoria assecondando l'impressione sensibile per cui il sole e i pianeti girano intorno alla terra, e in questo senso all'osservatore. In tal modo, il geocentrismo tolemaico accorda al soggetto una preminenza assoluta, mentre è con Copernico che questa tendenza viene definitivamente superata, poiché la pretesa e assoluta centralità dell'uomo (e dunque della terra) rispetto all'universo viene sconfessata: i pianeti continuano a muoversi intorno al sole, che l'uomo se ne accorga o meno. Così Whitehead, come Ferraris, inverte la rotta rispetto a Kant, ma non si limita a distinguere il piano ontologico da quello epistemologico. Una volta posta questa distinzione, egli tenta di mostrare il modo in cui l'epistemologia si innesta sull'ontologia, che pure resta irriducibile al piano epistemologico. In altri termi-

<sup>32</sup> Cfr. *ivi*, 45-61.

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. S. Alexander, "Ptolemaic and Copernican Views of the Place of Mind in the Universe", *The Hibbert Journal*, VIII (1909): 47-66.

ni, Whitehead esplicita il suo tentativo come segue:

La filosofia dell'organismo è l'inversione della filosofia kantiana. La critica della ragione pura descrive il processo mediante il quale i dati soggettivi si trasformano nell'apparenza di un mondo oggettivo. La filosofia dell'organismo cerca di descrivere come i dati oggettivi si trasformino nella soddisfazione soggettiva, e come l'ordine dei dati oggettivi conferisca intensità alla soddisfazione soggettiva. Per Kant il mondo emerge dal soggetto; per la filosofia dell'organismo, il soggetto emerge dal mondo – un “supergetto” piuttosto che un “soggetto”.<sup>34</sup>

Anche in questo caso, senza scendere nella specifico della complessa terminologia di Whitehead, mi limito a rinvenire in queste righe la stessa preminenza dell'ambito ontologico su quello epistemologico, lo stesso accento sulla realtà, sul dato oggettivo, tanto inemendabile da offrirsi come naturale punto di partenza per la ricomprensione stessa della soggettività.

Prima allora di vedere come questa insistenza risponda efficacemente alla fallacia moderna di essere e sapere, è necessario chiarire in che modo, a sua volta, Whitehead concepisca il piano dell'ontologia. Per farlo, anche in questo caso è utile servirsi di un'altra fallacia, quella che Whitehead identifica come la «fallacia della concretizzazione mal posta».<sup>35</sup> Essa consiste, dice l'autore, in:

Un errore, ma è un errore semplicemente accidentale. Quello di scambiare, per equivoco, l'astratto per il concreto. È un esempio di ciò che io chiamerei «il sofisma della concretizzazione male impostata». Questo sofisma ha prodotto grandi confusioni in filosofia. Non è necessario che l'intelligenza caschi in questa trappola, benché in questo caso vi sia stata una gran tendenza a caderci.<sup>36</sup>

Più esattamente, possiamo dire che per Whitehead, di fronte all'esperienza concreta, «per equivoco» noi scambiamo i nostri schemi concettuali, i nostri enti del pensiero, con l'esperienza stessa. Si adombra dunque, in questa fallacia della concretizzazione mal posta, quella stessa fallacia dell'essere-sapere, al centro del pensiero di Ferraris. Rispetto a ciò di cui facciamo esperienza, noi dimentichiamo i concetti o le ipotesi che abbiamo formulato per coglierla, dimentichiamo cioè che li abbiamo posti noi in quanto strumenti per la comprensione dell'esperienza, e così finiamo per invertire il rapporto tra sapere ed essere, tra astratto e concreto, sostituendo da un lato ogni statuto di autonomia all'esperienza, e rischiando dall'altro di pervenire a conclusioni senza fondamento, in quanto poggiate su concetti epistemologici, indicati surrettiziamente come “reali”.<sup>37</sup> La variazione lessicale (sapere-

<sup>34</sup> Whitehead, *Il processo e la realtà*, 199.

<sup>35</sup> Whitehead, *La scienza e il mondo moderno*, 68.

<sup>36</sup> *Ivi*, 72.

<sup>37</sup> Per un quadro più complessivo di questo problema, è necessario tenere presente anche le seguenti considerazioni dell'autore. La prima (a), mediante l'esempio dell'elettrone, esemplifica cosa Whitehead intenda per astratto. La seconda (b) invece puntualizza come lo scopo della scienza sia, in ultima analisi, quello di rendere ragione dell'esperienza percet-

essere, astratto-concreto) non è però arbitraria, anzi: la sua pregnanza filosofica condurrà Whitehead a delle tesi sì realiste, ma ampiamente differenti da quelle presentate finora, rispetto al nuovo realismo. Per introdurci ad esse, ci chiediamo nuovamente: cosa dobbiamo intendere per fatto concreto, per realtà?

Se Ferraris pone una differenza tra oggetto sociale e oggetto naturale, dove quest'ultimo assomma in sé i caratteri della realtà inemendabile, per Whitehead il «fatto concreto» è piuttosto descritto nei termini di evento. E questa ipotesi emerge nel suo percorso filosofico come l'adeguata conclusione da un lato delle sue indagini dei campi dell'esperienza, dall'altro della critica alla tradizione di stampo aristotelico. Il suo punto di partenza è infatti il piano dell'esperienza percettiva, di contro al sapere astratto delle scienze, in modo analogo a

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tiva. In questo senso, è a quest'ultima che spetta l'ultima parola, non alla scienza. (a) Dice Whitehead ne *Il concetto della natura*: «Essere un'astrazione non significa per un ente non esser nulla. Significa semplicemente che la sua esistenza è solo un fattore di un più concreto elemento della natura. Così un elettrone è astratto perché non si può toglier via l'intera struttura degli eventi e tuttavia conservare l'esistenza dell'elettrone»; Alfred North Whitehead, *Il concetto della natura* (Torino: Einaudi, 1948), 153. (b) O ancora, secondo l'autore, come è detto ne *I fini dell'educazione e altri saggi*, «lo scopo della scienza è quindi duplice: 1) la produzione di una teoria che si accordi con l'esperienza; 2) la spiegazione dei concetti del senso comune intorno alla natura, almeno nelle loro linee fondamentali»; Alfred North Whitehead, *I fini dell'educazione e altri saggi* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia 1959), 181.

come Ferraris contrappone, distinguendo ontologia ed epistemologia, l'esperienza dalla scienza. È in questo senso, per questa centralità data all'esperienza percettiva che, come ha indicato Luca Vanzago, il realismo di Whitehead è un «realismo percettivo, né empirismo puro né realismo puro»,<sup>38</sup> e si fonda su una concezione di esperienza relazionale ed evenemenziale allo stesso tempo.<sup>39</sup> Ci chiediamo però: ma come Whitehead giunge dal campo dell'esperienza percettiva e dalla critica alla filosofia aristotelica alla descrizione dei «fatti concreti» nei termini di *eventi*?

Whitehead parla di astratto e concreto (e non di sapere ed essere), di esperienza ed evento (e non di realtà e oggetto), perché secondo lui l'assunzione di questi termini tradizionali equivale ad un mero retaggio metafisico, che ci impedisce di lasciare emergere i caratteri *concreti* dell'esperienza, dell'ontologia che in essa si rivela. In particolare, dal suo punto di vista parlare di «realtà», «cosa», «oggetto», già ci conduce, senza che ce ne accorgiamo, a concepire e ridurre l'esperienza ad una *sostanza*. Proprio a questo proposito, Whitehead evidenzia la pesan-

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<sup>38</sup> Luca Vanzago, *I modi del tempo* (Milano: Mimesis, 2001), 269.

<sup>39</sup> A questo proposito, afferma ancora Whitehead, ne *Il processo e la realtà*: «Il principio che io adotto è che la coscienza presuppone l'esperienza, e non l'esperienza la coscienza. Essa è un elemento speciale nelle forme soggettive di certi sentimenti. Così un'entità attuale può, o no, essere cosciente di qualche parte della sua esperienza. La sua esperienza è la sua costituzione formale, inclusa la sua coscienza, se vi è»; Whitehead, *Il processo e la realtà*, 137.

te eredità del binomio aristotelico di sostanza-attributo, che egli ritiene assolutamente inadeguato a descrivere l'esperienza per come viene effettivamente esperita. Il paradigma di soggetto-predicato infatti, nonché la categoria di sostanza, non è altro che un mero «postulato arbitrario di pensiero».<sup>40</sup> Invece, se noi ci riferiamo all'ambito del naturale (a cui Whitehead dedica l'intera trattazione de *Il concetto di natura* del 1920), o meglio dell'esperienza complessivamente considerata,<sup>41</sup> dobbiamo ammettere che non percepiamo mai qualcosa di autonomo, fisso e immutabile come una sostanza, a cui vengano poi attribuiti in modo accidentale delle proprietà o qualità. Piuttosto, la natura, il piano dell'esperienza, si presenta come un fatto totale, complesso e inesauribile, con la presenza di diversi fattori (e non predicati) in esso. In altri termini ancora, non abbiamo mai conoscenza della natura come di una somma di sostanze separate, ma piuttosto, come anticipato, dobbiamo parlare di eventi, che Whitehead definisce come *unità minime di esperienza*,<sup>42</sup> in cui ogni fattore presente è

parte integrante e determinante di quella unità.

Successivamente, per Whitehead questo stesso presupposto dell'essere come sostanza ha permeato l'avanzamento scientifico, andando a costituire quello che lui chiama il *materialismo scientifico*. Con «materialismo scientifico» l'autore intende quella tendenza moderna che «presuppone la realtà di una materia bruta, o corpo irreducibile, sparsa per tutto lo spazio in un flusso configurativo. Per se stessa, una tale materia è senza valore, senza significato, senza scopo. Essa agisce secondo una norma imposta da relazioni esteriori che non provengono dalla natura del suo essere».<sup>43</sup> Di contro, nella sua prospettiva ciò che è irriducibile non è una materia bruta, priva di ogni caratterizzazione, a cui l'esperienza aggiungerebbe poi dei caratteri inessenziali. Tali affermazioni sono semplicemente l'ennesima conseguenza di uno schema di pensiero millenario, che secondo Whitehead ci fa rimanere in quella fallacia del sapere/essere, e della concretizzazione malposta ora affrontate. Per l'autore invece, dobbiamo rivolgerci alla stessa esperienza percettiva perché questo collasso non si compia. È proprio l'esperienza percettiva

<sup>40</sup> Whitehead, *Il concetto di natura*, 40. Mi riferisco in questo caso, per via della traduzione italiana, all'edizione originale inglese.

<sup>41</sup> Questi due termini possono essere considerati in ottica whiteheadiana come sinonimi.

<sup>42</sup> Gli eventi sono, per usare i termini di Whitehead ne *Il processo e la realtà*, «gocce di esperienza, complesse e interdipendenti»; *ivi*, 70. Un evento è infatti l'«ultima sostanza della natura» (Whitehead, *Il concetto della natura*, 18), non nel senso dell'*upocheimenon* aristotelico, ma in quanto «fattore unitario, che ritiene in se stesso il divenire della natura» (*ivi*, 70). Non solo, ogni evento è in relazione

con gli altri e con la totalità degli eventi. Infatti, come spiega Victor Lowe, questo «essere in relazione [come *relatedness*] non accade semplicemente, ma è lo scheletro di un processo di divenire attivo che [...] rappresenta allo stesso tempo un'unità complessa e l'emergenza di nuovi elementi in divenire»; Victor Lowe, *Understanding Whitehead* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), 225.

<sup>43</sup> Whitehead, *La scienza e il mondo moderno*, 35-36.

che, nel suo accadere, si rivela come *relazione irriducibile*. La conoscenza si innesta poi, in un secondo momento, su questa relazione esperienziale. In altri termini, ciò che è inemendabile è proprio la relazione percettiva che costituisce l'esperienza, e non la conoscenza che ne abbiamo. Quello che non si può cancellare né correggere è che noi facciamo esperienza di qualcosa, e non di nulla. Di conseguenza, Whitehead opta per una filosofia realista, che è però, allo stesso tempo, una filosofia dell'esperienza e della relazione. L'attrito del reale si rivela in questa relazione. Senza di essa non potremmo distinguere un fatto dall'interpretazione, e in ultima analisi anche la tesi dell'inemendabilità della realtà rimarrebbe, a sua volta, solo una tra le possibili interpretazioni, ancora in cerca di giustificazione. Così, a partire dalla rilevanza accordata all'esperienza percettiva come evento di una relazione, il filosofo inglese perviene all'elaborazione non solo di un realismo "minimo", ma – come egli stesso lo definisce – di un realismo organico. Vediamo ora nell'ultima parte, quali sono le principali caratteristiche di tale indirizzo di pensiero.

#### 4. Il realismo whiteheadiano: per una filosofia dell'organismo

Come accennato nelle ultime righe, per Whitehead non si può sostenere il realismo che dall'interno del campo dell'esperienza, percettivamente intesa. Ad essa bisogna dunque tornare, ed interrogarla criticamente, sbarazzandosi di

quegli strumenti concettuali che hanno lentamente preso il suo posto, venendo affermati come massimamente concreti. Egli parte dunque da questa indagine dell'esperienza, re-interpretandola radicalmente e ridefinendone i confini. Ma come questo si concilia con una filosofia realista? Per comprenderlo, è utile seguire la nozione di dato, per come viene presentata da Whitehead, poiché per lui

La base di ogni filosofia realistica è che nella percezione c'è una rivelazione di dati oggettivati, che sono notoriamente in comunione con l'esperienza immediata per la quale essi sono dati. Questa "comunione" è una comunione di attività comune che ha una implicazione reciproca. Questa premessa è asserita come un fatto primario assunto implicitamente in ogni dettaglio della nostra organizzazione della vita.<sup>44</sup>

##### a) *Dato ed esperienza: Cartesio e il principio soggettivistico riformato*

Ma che cos'è un dato? Per rispondere a questa domanda, e alla luce delle critiche precedentemente esposte nei confronti della tradizione, secondo Whitehead bisogna ritornare a Cartesio. Nonostante questo aspetto non sia stato messo in rilievo dagli studi critici in merito, Whitehead – al pari di Husserl – ritorna deliberatamente a Cartesio perché ritiene, per ragioni differenti dal filo-

<sup>44</sup> Whitehead, *Il processo e la realtà*, 183.

sofo tedesco, che l'autore delle *Meditazioni metafisiche* abbia posto le basi di una nuova filosofia, senza però avvedersi fino in fondo della scoperta fatta, e dunque fraintendendola, in ultima analisi. Vediamo allora, innanzitutto, qual è la ragione per cui egli guarda a Cartesio e in che misura se ne distanzia. Scrive Whitehead ne *Il processo e la realtà*:

Nella filosofia dell'organismo l'occasione percipiente [il soggetto] è il suo proprio criterio della realtà. Se nella sua conoscenza compaiono altre entità reali, questo può accadere soltanto perché esse si conformano al suo criterio della realtà. Ci può essere evidenza di un mondo di entità reali solo se l'entità reale immediata le mostra come essenziali alla propria composizione. La nozione cartesiana di un'esperienza non essenziale del mondo esterno è completamente estranea alla filosofia organica. Questo è il punto radicale della divergenza ed è la ragione per cui la filosofia organica deve abbandonare qualsiasi approccio alla nozione della realtà come sostanza-qualità.<sup>45</sup>

Così facendo, Whitehead si pone nel solco della modernità, ereditando a pieno quello che lui definisce il «principio soggettivistico». Nella sua filosofia però, tale principio viene modificato, e appare solamente nei termini di un «principio soggettivistico riformato». Con tale espressione Whitehead intende affermare che «senza le esperienze dei soggetti non c'è nulla, nulla, nulla, il pu-

<sup>45</sup> *Ivi*, 295.

ro niente»,<sup>46</sup> ma in tali esperienze il dato è incluso, anzi è dato come punto da cui solamente possa emergere il soggetto. L'errore di Cartesio infatti, secondo Whitehead, consiste nel non aver compreso come il suo stesso principio soggettivistico (che per maggior chiarezza potrebbe essere ridefinito come principio percettivo-esperienziale) implichi l'abbandono del presupposto di soggetto-predicato, e conduca ad una esposizione ai dati come parte integrante dell'esperienza, come necessari per la relazione percettiva da cui l'esperienza stessa è costituita. Tale miopia invece, tale mancato riconoscimento, ha condotto a quello che Santayana chiama il «solipsismo del momento presente», morbo che affligge non solo la filosofia, ma secondo Whitehead l'intera società moderna. In altri termini, agli occhi dell'autore «con l'avvento del soggettivismo cartesiano, la categoria di sostanza-qualità ha perduto ogni pretesa alla supremazia metafisica; e, con questa rinuncia alla sostanza-qualità, possiamo rifiutare la nozione di sostanze individuali, ognuna con il suo mondo privato di qualità e sensazioni».<sup>47</sup>

b) *Per una nuova definizione di dato: un realismo "sentimentale"*.

Ma come questa propensione soggettivistica, ora indicata, può coniugarsi con il «realismo»? Come già è stato accennato nel paragrafo precedente, tutto dipende dalla con-

<sup>46</sup> *Ivi*, 355.

<sup>47</sup> *Ivi*, 323.

cezione del dato che si ha. Ed ecco dunque che ritorna il problema affrontato nella seconda sezione: l'assunzione del concetto di sostanza. Afferma a questo proposito l'autore:

Le filosofie della sostanza presuppongono un soggetto che tardi incontra un dato, e solo allora reagisce al dato. La filosofia dell'organismo presuppone un dato che si incontra con sentimenti, e raggiunge progressivamente l'unità di un soggetto. Ma in questa dottrina "supergetto" sarebbe un termine più appropriato che "soggetto". (PR: 311-12)

Il dato è allora il punto irriducibile, da cui l'esperienza comincia. E in questo senso, Whitehead rilegge anche il termine "oggetto": non più sostanza, ma potenziale componente di un sentimento: «la parola oggetto significa così un'entità che è una potenzialità di essere un componente del sentimento». <sup>48</sup>

Si comprende allora sia cosa è un "dato", non sostanza ma dinamica e potenziale componente di un sentimento, sia quale è il carattere dell'esperienza a cui prima accennavamo. L'esperienza è irriducibile ma mai neutra, è un processo di sentimenti (*feelings*), che sono per Whitehead delle "prensioni" (da *prehendo*) positive, ossia degli afferramenti o coglimenti (non intellettuali), che caratterizzano ogni singola fase del processo dell'*entità attuale* (che per Whitehead è

<sup>48</sup> *Ivi*, 199. Continua poi l'autore: «Colui che sente è l'unità emergente dai propri sentimenti; e i sentimenti sono i dettagli del processo mediatore fra queste unità e i suoi numerosi dati. I dati sono le potenzialità del sentimento; cioè essi sono oggetti»; *idem*.

sinonimo di soggetto esperienziale). Possiamo ora capire meglio cosa intende Whitehead quando dice, contrapponendosi a Kant, che:

Per Kant il processo grazie al quale si dà esperienza è un processo dalla soggettività all'oggettività apparente. La filosofia dell'organismo inverte questa analisi, e spiega il processo come procedente dall'oggettività alla soggettività, cioè dall'oggettività, per cui il mondo esterno è un dato, alla soggettività, per cui c'è un'esperienza individuale. <sup>49</sup>

Il pensiero whiteheadiano si rivela così peculiare, perché difendendo strenuamente il realismo, al contempo ridefinisce cosa sia l'esperienza percettiva, e riconcepisce la soggettività in senso "ultramoderno", non decostruendola ma ricostruendola a partire dai suoi sentimenti, che traggono la loro origine, in quanto provocati, dai dati.

### c) *Per un realismo organico*

Dopo avere introdotto questi caratteri, ci si può finalmente accostare al concetto di realismo organico, in forza del quale Whitehead presenta il suo pensiero come *filosofia dell'organismo*. Tale formulazione trova spazio a partire da *La scienza e il mondo moderno* (1925) con la seguente motivazione:

Per ciò che riguarda l'esposto di queste conferenze, potrete alla fine essere idealisti o realisti. Il mio scopo è di mostrare che è necessaria una nuova tappa di realismo provvisorio, un realismo nel quale il

<sup>49</sup> *Ivi*, 312-313.



sistema scientifico dovrà essere rimanipolato e basato sul concetto finale dell'organismo.<sup>50</sup>

La ragione di tale scelta, ancora una volta, è connessa al carattere dell'esperienza, per come è stata presentata negli ultimi punti, e all'abbandono del concetto di sostanza. Dice ancora ne *Il processo e la realtà*: «Nel linguaggio della fisica, il cambiamento dal materialismo al “realismo organico” – come si potrebbe chiamare questo nuovo punto di vista – consiste nella sostituzione della nozione di materia statica con la nozione di energia fluente».<sup>51</sup> In questo senso, il realismo di Whitehead è organico: la realtà, quella realtà che resiste, non è una sostanza, una materia statica, ma si presenta come unità di energia fluente. In altri termini, afferma Whitehead, la sua filosofia si poggia sul concetto di organismo perché l'organico è l'«espressione completa del carattere di un fenomeno reale».<sup>52</sup> E il suo primissimo scopo, di contro al «solipsismo del momento presente», sarà quello di «chiarire la nozione di “essere presente in un'altra entità”»,<sup>53</sup> decisiva per comprendere l'organismo.

Per concludere, dopo aver mostrato le affinità, metodologiche e non, tra il nuovo realismo di Ferraris e il realismo di Whitehead, è stato necessario approfondire come, secondo il filosofo britannico, l'unica via per evitare la fallacia di sapere-essere sia quella di una riscoperta radicale dell'esperienza percettiva. Un'indagine dell'esperienza che, critica nei

confronti dei postulati di pensiero in uso, sappia rendere quella stessa esperienza per come accade, senza ridurre ciò che in essa si presenta, e resiste, a mera sostanza o materia bruta. Così facendo, ho mostrato come Whitehead si faccia promotore di un realismo del tutto peculiare: un realismo relazionale.

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<sup>50</sup> Whitehead, *La scienza e il mondo moderno*, 85.

<sup>51</sup> Whitehead, *Il processo e la realtà*, 591.

<sup>52</sup> *Ivi*, 57.

<sup>53</sup> *Ivi*, 133.

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## New Realism as a Frame of Reference

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### 1.

There is a slogan printed on certain fashionable notebooks that says «Facts are the enemy of truth»: a quotation by Cervantes, used as a result of a very efficacious brand management. These are white notebooks of various formats, fitting any pocket, selling catchy phrases: in short, there is nothing new about them.

Now, I do not know whether 2011 will be remembered for the death of Postmodernism followed by the birth of New Realism, which has certainly been (for better or worse) the most debated subject of the past few years, and not a mere marketing operation as some had us believe.<sup>1</sup> The debate opened by Maurizio Ferraris went beyond all expectations: after all, the success of a media event can well be the outcome of

<sup>1</sup> You can see the debate here: inspired by the article <http://nuovorealismo.wordpress.com/rassegna/2011-2/>, Maurizio Ferraris, “Manifesto del Nuovo Realismo”, *La Repubblica*, (2011). The following year a book was published: Maurizio Ferraris, *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*, (Laterza, 2012). See also: Mario De Caro, Maurizio Ferraris (ed.), *Bentornata realtà* (Einaudi, 2012). For a punctual reconstruction of the media debate see: Raffaella Scarpa, *Il caso nuovo realismo. La lingua del dibattito filosofico contemporaneo* (Mimesis, 2013).

mere chance – otherwise we would have a secure formula for success in our hands. The book *Il pensiero debole* also had an unpredicted success. These two events were destined to intertwine.

New realism is strongly critical of weak thought, which is partly a form of self-criticism, as Ferraris has been protagonist in both movements. At the centre of the discussion we find the theme of truth, or rather, the presumed relativism of every truth. Now, it would be daring to call this a new topic. The beginning of philosophy itself coincides with the affirmation of something absolutely *stable*, capable of escaping the annihilating power of the becoming of things. This, at any rate, is what we are told about the history of philosophy.

The concept of *epistémè* that emerged in ancient Greece was characterised by absolute stability: its atemporality, in contrast to the temporality of the world, was interpreted as an attempt by the western metaphysical tradition to protect truth from the process of becoming.

The unconditional affirmation of truth reflects the redeeming power of the divine and the perfection of art itself, with a significant consequence: the truth of philosophy is not affirmed by faith or by some kind of vocation, but is assumed according to the sense of necessity expressed by the *logos*.

One may say that a history lasting more than two millennia must have some kind of foundation; and yet in this case, ironically, it does not work this way. The end is tragic: it was the necessity of the *logos* itself that guided us to the epilogue that brought to the

breaking and dissolution of truth – an exemplary case of euthanasia indeed.

## 2.

**A**bsolute truth was meant to give mankind shelter from the ever-transforming and ever-destroying process of becoming; the same redeeming power today is ascribed to technology. Man wants to live and therefore searches for an escape from his mortality, in order to transcend his being-time. To grasp the truth implies the *stable* affirmation of the self, precisely that which *stays* still, that is not in becoming or remains “above” becoming: *epi-steme*. Truth cannot be in time, since if that were the case it would be subject to becoming-other; but truth cannot become-other than itself, otherwise it would not be what it is. Truth must therefore be identical to itself. Hence the strength of identity theory that “presumes”, or rather, finds in its own premises the need of truth.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, weak thought inherits from Nietzsche the dissolution of truth (metaphysics), presenting itself as a practice rather than a new theory. Otherwise, the critique to the identity theory would be transformed into a new identity theory: the affirmation of the identity of difference. Is negating every absolute truth a truth in itself? If not, why should we take this affirmation into consideration? In

<sup>2</sup> See Emanuele Severino, *Nuovo realismo, vecchio dibattito. Tutto già conosciuto da millenni*, *Corriere della Sera*, (2011).

this case the only truth would be that there are no absolute truths.

## 3.

**I**dentify theory is taken to entail a certain form of violence: in fact, we read that the affirmation of truth, of our identity, can only lead us to clash against the other. If we possess the truth and someone else does not think the same way as we do, he/she cannot but be mistaken. Therefore mediation is not possible. On the contrary, by negating the existence of absolute truths, we should learn to understand and to welcome the other, since we all participate in the game of truth that nobody definitively possesses. And yet, this would still imply the assumption of truth as a paradigm.

Weak thought surely appears more democratic, but the price to pay is still high if, in order to be more democratic, we have to do away with truth. It is a heavy loss, one that brings all of our assertions onto the same level: each of our values, each of our conquests of rights and civilisation could easily turn into its very opposite. If there is no right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, good and evil, true and false, then on what basis do we construct our civilisation? If everything is relative, then we cannot adopt the idea that universal rights exists, despise the evil of wars or reject death penalty. Even by adopting *one* thesis, without additional clarifications, in any case we would have lost something crucial. The gain of this “relativity” represents a meagre (albeit democratic) consolation, not

devoid of consequences on the ethical and aesthetic levels, as well as on the epistemological and metaphysical levels. Our actions, in fact, can never be better or worse than another, not even in the most extreme cases.

Reality, at this point, cannot but appear subjective, or rather subject to our will of power. The “strongest” writes the truth of history. Since truth *per se* does not exist, the strongest imposes his/her own truth to the weaker.<sup>3</sup> Popper explained that democracy does not consist simply of a decision taken by a majority, but it includes the possibility that today’s minority can become tomorrow’s majority. In this way we can avoid the paradox by which a majority can suspend democracy itself. This implies a certain suspicion towards truth: democracy embodies the *doubt* that the majority represents the truth and for this reason it should always be self-correcting. It has been said that truth is precisely this: the perhaps infinite possibility of self-correction *towards* truth itself. In fact, if error exists, then its opposite must necessarily exist too. But does this imply being in truth or a possibility to arrive to truth?

#### 4.

**A**s a theory, new realism sets itself against assertions such as “everything is interpretation”, considered as emblematic of postmodernism. If *facts* no

<sup>3</sup> The above thesis is developed by E. Severino in: Emanuele Severino, *La guerra*, (Rizzoli 1992).

longer exist, but there are only *interpretations*, then by the same principle we could negate everything, even concentration camps, the existence of which would be nothing but the product of our own interpretation of history.<sup>4</sup>

The anomaly is that nobody, or almost nobody, seems to bring forward this “relativistic” stance as their own. Yet, anyone who studied philosophy during the past twenty years will remember the subjectivist models typical of postmodern culture that today appear to be supported by no one. At the end of the 1980s, to call oneself a “realist” was equivalent to admitting to having a poor grasp of philosophy: a realist was seen as a simpleton who still believed that truths exist, that there is an external world and that things appear as they are, showing a lack of understanding of both philosophy after Nietzsche and contemporary philosophy in general.

Basically, realism stood for commonsense and not for philosophy. During those years, when a master such as Paolo Bozzi professed his realist “faith”, he clearly placed himself among a minority in respect to the prevailing fashions, both in philosophy and in psychology, for which the world was a subjective construction and the result of an interpretation. One might object that what was being denied was not the fact or the existence of an external world, but rather a uni-

<sup>4</sup> See Ferraris, *Manifesto del Nuovo Realismo*, (2011); See Maurizio Ferraris, *Perseverare è diabolico*, *Alfa-beta2*, (2011).

vocal interpretation of that fact and that world.<sup>5</sup>

This position is shared by a substantial majority of the semioticians, in opposition to those concerned with the philosophy of perception, for whom not everything is “language”. The word “dog” does not bite: the world remains a ground of confrontation where our interpretations collapse. This world is a first shared frame of reference allowing for the coordination of our language and actions. We understand one another precisely because not everything is interpretation, otherwise the others and the world would remain something mysterious, even beyond philosophy. One could object that not everyone who engages with philosophy of perception subscribes to this position. To put it simply: we should be able to share a world, a reality that does not depend on us. If the world were solely “my world”, the other would remain something inscrutable for me.

Without a shared system of reference we would not be able to understand one another and we would be in the same situation as that famously described by Wittgenstein: “If a lion could talk we could not understand him”. A shared reality is the condition for different forms of life to be able to interact: no life system is closed and impermeable to its environment. And yet constructivism and cognitivism remain the paradigms of psychology. -Isms and fashions? Of course. But

<sup>5</sup> See Pier Aldo Rovatti, *Inattualità del Pensiero Debole* (Forum, 2011).

they also include very different theoretical positions: there are those who believe that perception is direct, and those who on the contrary consider it to be dependent on superior activities such as thought, conceptual schemes and language. This theoretical difference grounds the point of view of those that think of the external world as “a matter of fact” and those that see it as a result of the construction of our conscience, our conceptual schemes, and more generally, of language.<sup>6</sup>

If we consider the relationship between the concept and the perceived as constitutive of perception, the world becomes a subjective representation. This is the presupposition that leads to doubting our perceptions. The appearance of the thing becomes the *result* of a concept. We perceive a cube only insofar as we *know* what a cube is: if we did not know the *definition* of it, we could not classify that object as *a* cube. The thing is what it is because it possesses a specific unity and identity based on the concept that identifies it. A geometrical entity lends itself to this kind of argument. Nevertheless, how many times in our life have we prepared a coffee without knowing how many sides a coffee-maker has?

<sup>6</sup> See Diego Marconi, *Il postmoderno ucciso dalle sue caricature*, *la Repubblica* (2011).

## 5.

**B**ack to our “debate” between new realism and postmodernity, one can notice a singular event: both of these philosophical traditions have been blaming each other for paving the way to totalitarianism. In the name of absolute truth one can declare wars, while in the name of negation one can negate concentration camps, understood as nothing but another way of interpreting history. This runs the risk of confusing the reader.

It can be argued that commonsense is more attuned to the relativist side, since philosophy continues to appear as the battlefield of endless controversies described by Kant. Are those who consider the postmodern condition insurmountable right? Should we bid truth farewell in order to embrace a progressive retreat into the infinite hermeneutics of the fact?

Art, the mirror of our time, has become completely subjective: in fact, it is believed that anything can become art. And yet, we can call ourselves postmodern, but we cannot expect to escape the art market. Contemporary art – subjective as it may be – possesses an objective value that is not intrinsic: it is worth as much as it is paid for. Art does not unveil the truth, but expresses its being as becoming: the passage from the thing to the work of art is without foundation, therefore anything can become art, even an artist’s shit. If everything is relative and if it is only a matter of taste, then how can the skills of a chef determine the prestige of a restaurant? The same thing is true for a

graphic designer or an architect: on what basis and what parameters do we appreciate their work? How do we evaluate something in a society where everything appears fluid? If everything were subjective, artists would not need any technique, nor any specialised language.

There seems to be some sense both in the affirmation of truth and in its negation. But here we are not trying to make opposites meet, nor are we attempting to find a new synthesis; we rather wish to re-think the sense of relativity itself. Relativity, as a matter of fact, does not necessarily bring us to the conclusion that everything is relative, and therefore that there is no such thing as absolute truth. “Truth” can be seen as an expression of the absolute or of totality, but here we are speaking of truth as always referring to a specific problem and limited to a specific frame of reference. This does not imply a constructivist approach, since the affirmation of a relatively stable part of the process is part of an autopoietic frame of reference *proper* of a given form of life, in a given environment. In this sense, there is no contradiction between “truth” and “process” .

Every form of life determines a system of relations, a structure in which to act, communicate, think. The emergent structures are something similar to “Kanizsa’s triangle”: a form emerges – which, according to the analysis of the distal stimulation (the physical stimulation) should not exist – the presence of which, from a phenomenological point of view, is undeniable, repeatable and shareable among subjects. In other words, it

is objective. Certain elements determine the emergence of a *complex* structure, one that cannot be reduced to its own underlying parts. The structure of truth is no exception. For example, we could say that there is no such thing as justice in an absolute sense, but given a specific situation and a specific context – representing the implicit frame of reference of our actions – we can still decide whether a decision is more or less just, and we can do this in a *non-*arbitrary way. The non-arbitrariness is offered by the “context”: the setting in which we act. This is true for every aspect: metaphysical, ontological, epistemological, ethical-normative and aesthetic.

## 6.

We continually evaluate works of art through the prism of a community or a narrative (art history, the artistic language), which determine paradigms and structures: these parameters mark the system of reference by which we judge an artwork. There is a margin of uncertainty, but still some artworks are good while others aren't. What are the *criteria* by which we evaluate them? We implicitly assume a frame of reference in order to express an opinion on an artwork: the art does not change, what changes is the frame of reference in which it is placed.

This becomes manifest in game-playing. In football, as in any other sport, given the rules we can judge the skills of a player, express an opinion on the game as a whole or

on a single action; at the end of the game we can elaborate a report for every single player or for the entire team, etc. On what basis could we do this, if there were no rules to structure the game and give value to a result rather than another? Let us try with another area of interest, like culinary art: in this case, too, given a shared and sufficiently stable value system, such as our body, we can recognise when a dish has been well prepared, independently from our personal *taste*. High cuisine can fail to meet our taste, but we would not judge it as unsuccessful for this reason: this fact is transcultural and intersubjective, so much so that we can learn, study and appreciate food, stories and traditions belonging to different populations.

We judge on the basis of frames of reference that we can assume, adopt or reject. Culinary art possesses its own rules, it is a craft that can be learned. The process of learning implies the adoption of certain *rules* that allow for something to be realised in a certain manner and not in another; it prescribes how to use colours in painting, or that pasta should be cooked in a certain manner, in order to obtain a specific result. In art as well as in sport, *training* takes us into the field of play which makes things, actions and works differently valuable and open to conjecture. Artworks, moreover, are successful when they harbour the rules of their own interpretation.

By reasoning within a specific context, defined by a specific purpose, the truth or falsity of certain assertions can be determined. Every assertion can be relativised, but such *relativity* is the premise both of the



affirmation of truth and of its negation in a wider context. In this sense, the relativity given by an implicit frame of reference in our discourse is the premise of the affirmation of truth and *not* its negation.

This concept can be clarified starting from the first implicit frame of reference constituted by our body in relation to the external world. Let us try to consider from this relativistic perspective the traditional oppositions, apparently impossible to resolve: truth and non-truth, appearance and reality, identity and difference, weak thought and strong thought, etc. Such dichotomies imply a “black and white” world, easier to grasp and express logically, but they do not account for the qualitative nature of phenomena – colours and shades. Traditional metaphysical thought simplifies the word in order to express its essence: from the complexity of natural phenomena, fixed realities emerge that cannot be reduced to any underlying system. “Nature” is the result of a conceptual creation, it is an idea that derives from an implicit frame of reference: our body. The bodily schema brings to light our first ecological coordinates.

From a certain point of view, there is an element of extraneousness from nature, since I am myself and my body, and not that other thing which is the external world; but we should not interpret this dichotomically. The appearance of something can be considered in terms of truth within a given perspective

frame of reference: perception.<sup>7</sup> In the analysis of this topic we will consider those scholars that somehow appear “heretical” in respect to the Husserlian phenomenological tradition: Metzger and Koffka. The latter shows how things do not fill our spacio-temporal environment: there is something between things and beyond them.” In order to have a convenient term for this, we shall call it the framework, so that, disregarding the great variety of things, we can divide the behavioural environment into things and framework”.<sup>8</sup> Koffka specifies both the sense of the notion of “frame of reference” within phenomenology of perception and the meaning of the relationship between subject, the thing and the external world.

To clarify the sense of the object and the external world within phenomenology of perception, we can take a further conceptual step, building on Metzger’s notion of “the encountered” : in this sense perception is unamendable, not susceptible to modifications that are dependent on voluntary and intentional subjective acts. In describing the characteristics of *the encountered*, in opposition to the merely *represented*,<sup>9</sup> Metzger invites us to accept “immediate data” the way

<sup>7</sup> In the following analysis I will resume and develop the notion of frame of reference as expressed in my book: Luca Taddio, *Fenomenologia eretica* (Mimesis, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> See Kurt Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, (Routledge, 1935) p.72. See also: James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Houghton Mifflin, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> See Wolfgang Metzger, *Psychologie* (Steinkopff, 1941)

it is; in spite of its non-habitual, unattended, illogical or senseless appearance [...]” . It corresponds to what we have experience of: the external world, the objects that we touch, the beings that act in it, but also the events that take shape in front of us. This is the phenomenal world, namely, a complex reality the description of which cannot be entirely reduced to the physical level.

In the descriptive practice of phenomenology of perception, natural language appears suitable to grasp the sense of the phenomenal appearance of the world. Abstract and formal language distances us from the intuitive and sensible aspect of things, the sense and expressive richness of which are perhaps rendered in poetry and literary prose. Perception has a certain inherent *vagueness* that, compared to formal languages, natural language expresses with rigorous and rationale, where expressions such as “few” and “many” , “light” and “dark” , “heavy” and “light” , “cold” and “warm” and so forth, possess a precise conformity to our way of practicing the world, of living and expressing it. Phenomenology, therefore, brings us constantly back to our *beginning*: it is capable of incessantly renewing the sense origin of the thing. Immediate experience is our first frame of reference: it guides us through the world and determines the sense of our actions. We think of this beginning as a relation to a given ecological system that determines a form of life. What should be clarified is not the evolutionary premise, but the notion of “immediate experience” as the basis of our being individuals,

relatively autonomous in respect to a system integrated in the surrounding environment.

Metzger further clarifies the phenomenological meaning of a frame of reference, when he asserts that: 1) “Every single object is found inside a determined relationship with a ‘frame of reference’, understood as the environment in which the object is and moves, and which determines its location, direction and measure” . The identification-localisation of each part and the measurement of the world are based on the stability of the perceptive frame of reference, not vice versa. This determines the meaning of the frames of reference. 2) We can conceive of a frame of reference as a determined structure, relatively stable and defined, and not as a sort of container that can be filled in different ways “In order to form frames of reference and their particular structure, the organism possesses specific conditions and limits that vary along with the sensory field and the type of content.”<sup>10</sup>

Therefore a frame of reference is not fixed *a priori*: order and stability are determined by the existing global conditions. Every relationship within the frame of reference conditions and structures it, but at the same time it becomes the condition for that possibility to occur. For example, every figure determines its background, but at the same time the background itself grants the condition of possibility for that figure to subsist: the background is not such without the figure. The figure determines its being a

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 174-175.

shape in the relation between internal and external: it acts by its very nature like a reversible force-field. The meaning of *Gestalt* in this sense is intimately related to the notion of a frame of reference as its field of action. This force-field resembles the relationship among magnets and iron filing: a force acts upon it and an orderly and regular action field comes to be structured.

## 7.

Perception guides our behaviour in the surrounding environment. This – as I have said – represents our first frame of reference. Perception does not possess the rigour demanded by philosophical thought. Compared to commonsense, the degree of certainty aspired to by philosophical analysis is aimed at eliminating all doubts, with the objective of establishing incontrovertible knowledge, safe from scepticism. On what basis do we choose one parameter of certainty over another? We could answer through Wittgenstein that “The truth of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference”<sup>11</sup> The notion of frame of reference is fundamental not only from a linguistic point of view - in *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein affirms that “The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which

<sup>11</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Blackwell, 1969) § 83

we interpret an unknown language.”<sup>12</sup> - but also from a perceptive point of view.

The incommensurability between language and world is more apparent than real, since every truth implies and presupposes a frame of reference. Here is a new assignment for philosophy: to show the implicit frame of reference in the sciences and in every theory of knowledge. The possibility of doubting the external world follows the same logic: it lies within two conflicting frames of reference (the logic one and the perceptive one). Wittgenstein’s idea is that the doubt lies only on that which is doubtless. Doubt can manifest itself only inside a language game, in a common and shared frame of reference. This thesis is not limited to asserting that our language’s coordinates, such as grammar, are anchored to a set of contingent propositions that we are not allowed to doubt; instead it implies that these propositions belong to a grammar of language, since they are the condition of its application to the world: “The truth of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference”<sup>13</sup>.

We should therefore recognise the logical (grammatical) function of propositions that describe our language as a shared image of the world, that is, the background on which truth and falsity are compared. “A doubt about existence only works in a language-game”; in order to doubt the existence of something “we still need an object that ex-

<sup>12</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Blackwell, 1953) § 206.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, § 83.

ists".<sup>14</sup> This means that "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything" and that "the game of doubting itself presupposes certainty".<sup>15</sup> All of our speculations are oriented so as to keep some thoughts free from doubt: "the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn".<sup>16</sup> But how does the trick work here? Once immediate experience determines our first spacial and temporal frame of reference and at the same time the semantic field of doubt, it also determines the degree of coherence of the false world. When we doubt we do not hold the same frame of reference.

In short: *logos* is functional to a frame of reference; the logical value of doubt conforms to the experience that presupposes it; *logos* does not grant knowledge *per se*; the phenomenological frame of reference determines the degree of reality and sense in the doubt.

Perception, which *per se* is not reducible to anything else, is a prime datum and constitutes an autonomous frame of reference. Our action in relation to the thing focuses our attention on its possible aspects and uses, but its appearance is also the prerequisite for its being an inter-subjectively shareable object. On this basis the others - who with us make use of the "public-ity" of the observed

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, § 24 e § 56. See also: Luigi Perissinotto, *Logica e immagine del mondo* (Guerini, 1991), 113.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, § 115.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, § 341. (emphasis added)

object - can request additional specifications in respect to that "healthy vagueness" that distinguishes our perceptive experience of the thing. This is how perception constitutes a shared frame of reference. The modes of appearing of phenomenal reality constitute our "faith" in the existence of an external world. What we share with the others is the appearance of the thing that allows us to pinpoint language to the world.

Let us consider our experience as such: by staying inside this frame of reference, we do not perceive any contraposition between the physical foundation and the appearance of observed thing. More so, we are inside a game of exclusion: we see aspects of the object, and the matter we touch is nothing but a sub-set of the larger one given to us by phenomena. Our experience is not presented abstractly in different degrees of complexity nor in layers, but it has *prospective* degrees

and layers of complexity: in order to see the materiality of a painting we need to stand a few centimetres away from the painting, and this is not the ideal distance for observation. There is a correct distance we need to respect in order to see it and appreciate it: neither too close nor too far away.

## 8.

**V**isual perception is by definition something which can be shown; it circumscribes the meaning of visual perception. If someone asserts to see something that he/she cannot point at, an anomaly is created that can be clarified

through linguistic interaction: through a complex back-and-forth between language and the world and between us and the others. To point the finger in a direction, according to the critics of ostension, is an inaccurate gesture since it does not indicate the designed object, but the series of phenomena that make it up. Hypothetically, the spectator could ask what we are pointing at: form, colour, dimensions? Nevertheless, this critique does not take in consideration the ecological frame of reference of the subject (rather than satisfying a gnoseologic need, pointing at something has practical purposes of communicative economy), nor the modes of appearance of the phenomenon: in direct observation “no object appears as a sum or cluster of properties: the object appears as a unity”.<sup>17</sup>

The theory of perception is tied to the topic of the body, as the body already is perception: we are our own body and it is not a thing for us, but that which the thing is given to. The body is not something internal or external, but it is the implicit frame of reference that defines in and out, right and left, high and low; from it, concepts acquire a sense for us. The body determines a frame of reference, ours, that intertwines with things and people that - like us - create actions, spaces and times around existence.<sup>18</sup>

In order to establish the truth of a description we must specify the frame of refer-

ence in which it is inscribed: if we speak of something as real, referring to what we experience directly, the description will be correct or incorrect depending on the adopted frame of reference. Such relativism is the very basis for every objectification of reality. If we confuse what we know about something with what appears directly, the description of the appearance of a thing in the external world will be invalidated by the stimulus error as described by Köhler.<sup>19</sup> *The negation of a proposition within a larger or different frame of reference does not negate the truth of that proposition, since it remains true within its initial frame of reference.* The proposition should be judged within the same frame of reference, which should not be adopted uncritically, but should be specified and delimited.

A phenomenon which is experienced *iuxta propria principia* shows how, on this basis, the subjective and objective poles of the appearance of the thing are the result of the frame of reference implicit in the description of the problem, depending on the use we want to make of it.<sup>20</sup> The problem contributes to the determination of the right frame of reference: it is a function of the problem itself. Starting from the phenomenal structure of the thing the pole can be “subjective” or “objective” according to the assumed frame of reference: the definition of a polarity in absolute terms makes the other one

<sup>17</sup> See Paolo Bozzi, *Scritti sul realismo*, in L. Taddio (ed.) (Mimesis, 2013), 80.

<sup>18</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Gallimard, 1945), 277.

<sup>19</sup> See. Wolfgang Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology* (Liveright, 1929).

<sup>20</sup> Here a form of “neutral monism” is implicit, as it was already present in Mach and James.

aporetic. The sceptic doubt is no exception and is configured as creating absolutes out of a frame of reference; the hyperbolic doubt arises when two different frames of reference are conflicting, the transcendental experience of the evil daemon represents the metaphysics underlying immediate experience. The sense of the doubt can be re-established by coordinating correctly the logical and aesthetic orders in respect to the doubted thing.

In the IV book of *De rerum Natura* Lucretius describes a horse that stops in the middle of a river; the knight looks at the legs of the horse and, after a while, the water appears still while he feels as if himself and the horse were “running away”. This phenomenon takes the name of “illusion of movement”. Anybody riding the horse and looking at the water after a while would have the impression of being on a boat cutting through the water: the water becomes the frame of reference and you feel the movement. The same thing happens at the train station: when a train on another track is leaving, we have the impression of moving in the opposite direction. Lucretius, incidentally, reveals to be an extraordinary observer. It is true because it is there. This is the encountered and unamendable world, and it is true today as it was in the first century B.C.: today, just like then, we rediscover the same facts.

In antiquity the capacity to observe seems to have been intact, while our sad pragmatism today forces us to pay attention to certain aspects rather than others, to neglect the objects in their phenomenological fullness in

order to positively speculate on something useful to us, on which we can act in order to obtain certain goals. For this reason Merleau-Ponty thought that painters could teach philosophers: for the former, the centrality of *logos* gives way to the gaze and the silent observation of things. Through perception we give voice back to the expressive form of the world, which - through language - contemporaneously links conceptual and phenomenal frames of reference together. *Every proposition entails an implicit frame of reference which determines the series of one's own measures of judgement.* Should we retrieve our question on truth at this point? We could say that the task of a proposed new realism is also the task of a new phenomenology: to capture the frames of reference immanent in our form of life.

### Interview with Tristan Garcia

Translated from the French By Sarah De Sanctis

1) The words « realism » and « anti-realism » are ancient words, almost as old as the history of Western philosophy itself. Yet these are empty concepts if they are not contextualized: one has to specify the classes of objects to which these words refer. So, can you explain on what basis you use different approaches depending on the class of objects under consideration?

Realism is not primarily defined by a content, but rather by an attitude. Realism is not the recognition of reality: it is the idea that any object determines its understanding and not the other way round (i.e. that the understanding determines the object). If by "understanding" we simply mean the fact of relating to something, we can say that a realist spirit is one that believes that everything he thinks of depends on what he thinks (i.e. the object of his thought is what the thought of the object depends on): a realist and Cantorian mathematician believes that her demonstration follows the object of her demonstration, while the anti-realist mathematician thinks that the object of the demonstration is constructed by the demonstration itself (and there are a thousand ways not to be realist in philosophy of mathematics). Regarding perception, the realist believes that what he sees (the object of his seeing) determines what he sees; the anti-realist believes that his seeing determines what he

sees. They both refer to the same relation, but in opposite directions.

Therefore, realism – in theory of knowledge, but also in ethics or politics – does not essentially proceed from the real; realism is rather the attitude of the spirit which finds its strength in the recognition of a superior strength. The realist recognizes in what he sees a greater strength than his own seeing; she recognizes in what she judges a greater strength than her own judgement. The realist admits that everything he can understand proceeds from what he understands (the object of his understanding): he celebrates the superior power of the perceived over the perceiver.

Thus, there may be as many realisms as the possible objects of perception or thought: everything that we relate to can give rise to a realism, provided that what one relates to outweighs those who relate to it. There is thus, I believe, a realism of matter (Engels' Anti-Dühring), a realism of Evolution (evolutionary psychology), a realism of society (Durkheim's "social realism", according to which society is independent of the individuals who compose it and conceive of it), a realism of culture, a realism of History, a realism of the everyday and the ordinary; there is even a realism of the possible.

This could also be a definition of Speculative Realism: that is, a realist attitude applied not to the real, but to the possible. Realistically relating to the possible means believing that the possible object has greater strength than understanding and than the conception of the possible object. It therefore means

judging that the possible is not an extension of our human cognitive apparatus or of what actually exists, but that the possible accessed by thought exists independently of thought's ability to conceive of it. There are certainly as many realisms as the possible determinations of everything that is: perhaps the realism of the possible is the widest in scope.

**3) Relativism has often been treated as an extreme and necessary outcome of antirealism. Is that so? And, if not, what is the difference between relativism and antirealism?**

If realism is the idea that the object determines its understanding, and if anti-realism is the idea that the understanding of the object determines the object, it could be argued that both are in some way relativisms: realism makes the understander of an object relative to the object; anti-realism makes the object relative to whoever understands it as an object. Of course, we usually mean by relativism an anti-realist position, which makes the object depend on its understanding, and not vice versa.

The anti-realist relativism consists in specifying the conditions under which an object is always understood, namely, what it should be related to in order to be determined. Outside of those conditions, a relativist does not assert that the object does not exist, but that it is not what it is. A work of art out of context, a rule or moral law out of the culture that has enacted it, a historic-specific behaviour out of its time: they all exist, but

ist, but they are no longer what they are. Understood in another context, in another culture, in another era, they are a different object. The relativist antirealist is one who states that the singular being of any object depends on certain conditions of its understanding; if these conditions are changed, the object is changed at the same time. When Nelson Goodman says that an object is a work of art under the terms of its presentation and its exposition, he makes a good example of aesthetic relativism. If the being of an object depends on the conditions of its understanding, the challenge for thought becomes to discover the conditions that, when changed, change the understanding of an object to the point of altering its identity. What are the conditions that make something what it is and that, upon changing, will make the object into something else?

Following the answer I have given, it seems to me that there are different degrees of determination of relativism. When expressing the dependence of any proposition, any truth, any value vis-à-vis a cultural, historical or social position, relativism affirms the triumph of the particular over the singular and the universal: there is nothing universal, nothing is singular because everything that is thought, said or perceived is particularized by the conditions of its perception, its conception, its enunciation. This first relativism is particularist. It says that everything that makes an object particular determines it to the point that, if the conditions of its particularity change, its uniqueness will also change: it is no longer what it is.



Obviously, the very statement of this relativism is either universal or particular. In the first case, the particularity itself is particular. We could then say that this relativism is not completely false, but that it is only true for those who give it a form of truth: it embodies this strange and fascinating thought that will only begin to be true when one wants to take it for true. In the second case, the particularity is universal: even those who believe they escaped it are stuck in it. What I think depends on my social status, my education, my gender, my historical situation, my language, the grammar of my language, the configuration of my body, the part of the light spectrum I see, the part of the sound spectrum I hear, my belonging to the human race ... If I were poorer or richer, if I had not done the same studies, I were a woman and not a man, if I were not standing on two legs, if I saw what a cat sees, if I heard what a dolphin hears, all objects in the world which I relate to would be different, and everything I take to be true might become false. Obviously, particularism then appears to be a necessary exception to its own rule: even if I were radically different, it would still be true that everything I know and perceive depends on my particularities. Nothing is universal, except for the negation of the universal itself.

Once we accept this formula, it becomes necessary to consider a second kind of relativism, one with more important consequences, that no longer has to do with the particularity of the conditions of access to an object, but the universal conditions of the relation of any subject with any object. This

universal rather than particularistic relativism becomes a statement on knowledge which postulates that there is no object without a subject of this object (that is, without a conscience, without a cognitive apparatus that identifies it, recognizes it, names it and attributes qualities to it). Any object is under the condition of that which it is the object of. Since this relativism is universal, it is necessary that the subject of the relation can relate to itself as to an object among others: the object does not come first, since it is determined by the subject who understands it, but the latter may become at any time a relative object him or herself (a relativist sociologist transforms his sociology into an object of study, the moralist who says «Truth on this side of the Pyrenees, error on the other side » passes to the other side of the mountains... ).

What is left ? What is left is the relation. And universal relativism always ends up turning into relational universality.

The dependence of the object on the subject is nothing but a special case of dependence of the object on another object. In this latter form of relativism, any entity in general is what it is only insofar as it is connected to another entity. In relation to a given object or class of objects, I am like this; but in relation to another object or to any other class of objects, I am like that. All changes, even my maxims on the variation of all things. The subject of universal relativism is ready to submit her relativism to relativity. What remains is the relation: in relation to itself, relativism is true; in relation to its refutation, it is wrong. Relational

relativism does not say that everything is relative, but that everything is related. It argues that there is no support for these relations outside of these relations themselves, and that what is related is an effect of the relations themselves.

When it is perfectly consequent, then I think that any relativism, step by step, leads not to the idea that everything is relative (this is simply a possible content of relativism), but that there is nothing in reality but relations, and relations of relations.

**3) Relativism is particularly hard to refute in ethics. What can be the consequences of adopting a realist perspective, from this point of view?**

There is an ethical promise in any relativism, without which it would not be attractive: the promise to treat equally everything I can get in relation with, and to respect the uniqueness of every object perceived or thought. Relativism, especially moral and political, promises to adapt its understanding of a phenomenon to what the phenomenon is, rather than adapting the phenomenon to the understanding we want to have of it. This is a very worthy ideal: to treat equally the other and the same, to find an equal footing to account for everything that occurs.

I think the Achilles' heel of relativism, when it is expressed in ethics, is always the confusion it ends up making between equality and equivalence. Initially, a relativist position is appealing to the democratic spirit

because it promises equal dignity to every position, every belief, every thought, every perception of an object: everything that is something is something equally. The great ontological strength of relativism is to suggest that everything which we can get in relation with (by perceiving, imagining, thinking it) is something. And no thing is more or less than another. Relativism, being a kind of realism of the relations, regards everything that enters into a relation as equally real: what is not in relation to anything is nothing.

But if we reverse the proposition, a relation is never a relation with nothing. And as it is a relation, it cannot be a relation with everything because in that way there would not be the everything that comes into relation with it. The relation thus ensures that everything that appears is neither nothing nor everything. It is something. It is something more or something less, but it is never more or less anything, it is equally something.

But by relating equal possibilities, relational relativism makes them equivalent, and therefore replaceable by one another. The relativist therefore thinks that what is equal is replaceable by anything, because anything else is worth it. What is unique thus becomes common. Equality is supposed to ensure the uniqueness of each entity. But equivalence transforms this singularity into a non singular character: nothing is more common than being singular ... In the eyes of the relativist, everything is equally singular, so nothing is. Wanting to establish the uniqueness of every possibility, the rela-

tional relativist ultimately makes any possibility replaceable by another: instead of an irreducible singularity, she produces a common and exchangeable singularity, she founds universal equivalence, which allows her to say that anything goes, in a certain sense.

Thus the relational relativist is unable to fulfil her ethical promise: it is precisely in the name of singularity that she destroys it. And this is, I think, the weakness of relativism, its counter-productive character: pretending to respect the singularity of everyone, it assimilates everyone to anyone. It absolutizes the relation and makes the terms of the relation replaceable. The relativist remains the same, regardless of the position she faces; and she loses what she claims to make us gain: the recognition of the uniqueness of each thing.

I believe that the most effective way to challenge relativism is to separate equality and equivalence, to think that what is equal is not equivalent, so that equality is never achieved by relation. One has to think that the singularity of a thing, that which makes it what it is, is certainly not its relation with other things; on the contrary, one thing is something quite apart from its relation with other things. When this is something, nothing else is. There is always only one thing at a time. As the thing is what can be neither more nor less, equality is achieved in solitude: things are never equal, they are equal because each is only the exclusion of others. When things are equal, they are not together: they are absolutely not equivalent, since we can not compare them and, a fortiori, we cannot substitute one for the other.

Equality is distributive and exclusive; equivalence is collective and common. Relativism, which is a realism of relations, treats its entities as if they were equal and therefore equivalent. Instead, I argue in *Form and Object* that everything is equal in the precise sense that anything is something, and there is no order or relation of things, so that nothing is comparable. Each entity has its own luck. Everything is equal, nothing is equivalent: this is the only magic formula that enables one to avoid a relativism that threatens both anti-realism and realism.

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## Interview with Lee Braver

1) The words “realism” and “anti-realism” are ancient words, almost as old as the history of Western philosophy itself. Yet these are empty concepts if they are not contextualized: one has to specify the classes of objects to which these words refer. So, can you explain on what basis you use different approaches depending on the class of objects under consideration?

Yes, they are somewhat tricky terms which have meant different things at different times. In my first book, *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Northwestern University Press, 2007), I constructed a matrix of six ideas, derived largely from analytic philosophers,

to capture the various aspects of realism. These were: mind-independence, correspondence theory of truth, commitment to a single description of reality, truth bivalence, the subject's passive copying of reality in knowing it, and the unchanging structure of the subject's mind. Anti-realism consists in the denial of some sub-set of these. I then plotted a number of continental figures onto this matrix to see which ideas each took up and how they adapted them. This provided a fine-grained analysis of each thinker's position that plotted how they related to each other with some precision.

I think this approach is important because, while the independence of reality from the mind is perhaps the central idea of realism, many other notions naturally accrue to it. Anti-realism is similarly complex, for one may reject some of these theses but accept others, or alter them significantly.

Another way to specify the movement is, as you note, by denoting particular subject matters one is realist or anti-realist about. One might, for example, be a realist about the past but an anti-realist about math if one thinks that the past exists independently of us whereas math is just a set of practices we have created that doesn't track a separate realm of entities. Traditionally, most continental philosophers have been global anti-realists in my opinion, meaning that they have not made this kind of limited application; analytic philosophers are more prone to do so.

**2) Relativism has often been treated as an extreme and necessary outcome of antirealism. Is that so? And, if not, what is the difference between relativism and antirealism?**

Realism generally prevents relativism. If the good is determined by a set of objects or properties that don't change, then values cannot differ. Of course this solution leads to problems of its own. For instance, what does it mean to say that there is a *thing* that is goodness? How can an object be a value? Doesn't this conflate ought and is? Wouldn't such objects be what Mackie calls "metaphysically queer?" Also, there's no guarantee that these external anchors of value cannot change and if they do, then a realist ethics would be relativist as good and bad would change with them.

Furthermore, there is the problem of connecting such abstract, transcendent objects to daily life. Human actions are good by participating in or corresponding to the Good on this theory, but this participation or instantiation muddies and compromises the purity of the Good in itself. If it must be integrated, necessarily partially and imperfectly, into behaviour, then interpretation enters: one must figure out how the transcendent Good applies to one's present situation and, since this cannot be done perfectly, it opens the backdoor to relativism. There are many ways to approximate the Good, none of which may be the clear winner.

Ironically, it is the very separation from us, which is supposed to ensure its objectivity, that lets in relativism. It's like with stereos. They strive for fidelity, but to what? The only way to hear music is in specific situations through particular equipment, each of which affects the sound. There is no music-in-itself, at least none that we can access; we can only hear music as played through particular equipment in specific places. Hence, music can sound better and worse, but not right or wrong. These qualities cannot get purchase on the various instantiations of music.

**3) Relativism is particularly hard to refute in ethics. What can be the consequences of adopting a realist perspective, from this point of view?**

Plato would be an excellent example of an ethical realist: good things and actions are good by virtue of the Forms, which exist entirely independently of us. This move confers objectivity onto ethical judgments and prevents relativism since the Good never changes.

To be an anti-realist about ethics, on the other hand, is to claim that there is no set of objects or properties external to us and independent of our judgments and practices that determines right and wrong answers about what is right and wrong. Goodness, on this view, depends upon us.

Now, relativism follows from anti-realism if we can legitimately vary in our evaluative

practices. For instance, I think that Nietzsche is a value anti-realist—"Whatever has *value* in our world now does not have value in itself, according to its nature—nature is always value-less, but has been *given* value at some time, as a present—and it was *we* who gave and bestowed it" (*Gay Science* §301)—and he is also an ethical relativist, at least most of the time, because we who value are constantly changing—"we ourselves keep growing, keep changing, we shed our old bark, we shed our skins every spring" (*ibid.* §371). Since values come from us and we change, values change, hence what is good will differ depending on various factors, in particular the psychological make-up of the valuer. Kant, on the other hand, is able to preserve a universal ethics by keeping all reason the same, hence the importance of the 6<sup>th</sup> thesis of my matrix: the unchanging subject. (Just to confuse matters, there is a reading of Nietzsche according to which he bases values on life which has some unchanging characteristics, making ethics non-relativistic. Deleuze and Heidegger give versions of this reading).

Therefore, relativism is not a necessary outcome of anti-realism; it depends on other facets of one's commitments. This is why we must recognize the nuances of the topic.

**4) Why is it that new realism is essentially continental? Is it true that, as Quentin Meillassoux put it, "in analytic philosophy there is so much realism that they can't be amazed by the capacity of realism"?**

**And, if it is true, what distinguishes analytic realism from continental realism?**

It's not true, as is sometimes stated, that analytic philosophy simply is realist whereas continental philosophy is anti-realist (this is not what Meillassoux is saying here). There have been many quite prominent anti-realists in analytic philosophy: Putnam in his middle period, Goodman, Dummett, later Wittgenstein on some readings (including mine), Davidson on some readings. However, realism is far more prevalent in analytic philosophy, to the point of being the default position, I think. Continental philosophy, in my opinion, has been largely anti-realist, which does indeed make realism more exotic for continental thinkers rather than the humdrum self-evident position it holds for many analytics.

Analytic philosophy inherited, primarily from Russell and Moore, a strong sense of common sense. They are the ones holding onto plain, simple truths unlike those wacky continentals who cultivate the absurd. In Russell's day that position was held primarily by Hegel and the British Idealists, but others have held it since then—Heidegger and Derrida perhaps most prominently. Continental philosophers have, I think, drawn more surprising and counter-intuitive implications from realism whereas analytic thinkers often use it as a bulwark to defend more common sense ideas. This has led some, such as Searle, to portray the division as one between those committed to truth, justice, and civilization versus those

who want to tear down everything good and righteous in this world.

**5) What is, in your opinion, the (possible or yet-to-come) relationship between speculative realism and aesthetics, understood both as a theory of perception – à la Baumgarten – and as a philosophy of art?**

Well, speculative realism is committed to the existence of a reality wholly independent of us. This does not commit one to its unintelligibility à la Kant, but it does commit one to the *possibility* that it operates according to rules that we cannot fathom, that simply don't fit into human-shaped heads. This is called "non-epistemic truth" in analytic philosophy—the idea is that truth has nothing to do with our epistemic practices, i.e., what we find intelligible; it is denied by people like Rorty and Dummett. Now if this is a genuine possibility then we have to ask how we can approach or describe this unknowable, insensible world. I believe, and am currently exploring the idea in what I am calling "transgressive realism," that art may be better at intimating the unintelligible than science or philosophy. Heidegger, for example, in his later work, was very interested in what surpasses our ability to grasp, and he frequently says that assertions are worse at indicating it than poetry.

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## Interview with Graham Harman

1) The words ‘realism’ and ‘anti-realism’ are ancient words, almost as old as the history of Western philosophy itself. Yet these are empty concepts if they are not contextualized: one has to specify the classes of objects to which these words refer. So, can you explain on what basis you use different approaches depending on the class of objects under consideration?

“Realism” obviously has different senses in philosophy, politics, mathematics, the art of the novel, and in other areas. But we all more or less know what it means in philosophy—the commitment to a world existing independently from the mind.

That’s only a rough approximation, of course. One of the chief merits of Lee Braver’s candidly anti-realist masterpiece *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Realism* is that Braver carefully distinguishes between six possible meanings of realism and their six possible anti-realist counterparts (R1-R6 and A1-A6, respectively). This gives Braver a neat technical shorthand that allows him to say things like “Philosopher X combines R1 realism of the external world with A3 and A5 antirealist positions on related issues,” and so forth.

However, Braver neglects a key *seventh* realist thesis that in my review of the book I called R7, with a counterpart antirealist A7. Thesis R7 would run as follows: “the hu-

man-world relation is no different in kind from any other relation.” And this to me is the key. A good example of an R7 philosopher would be Alfred North Whitehead, who does not treat the human-world relation as different in ontological kind from that of raindrops and a wooden roof. There is at best a difference in degree between these kinds of relations. With Kant, however, it is quite different. Even if we might read Kant as an R1 realist who believes very strongly in the independence of the thing-in-itself from the mind (which is how I read him) he still definitely counts as an A7 philosopher for whom the human-world relation is special, since it mediates all our talk of all other relations. Whitehead lets us talk straight-away about raindrops striking wood, whereas Kant would say even this talk is mediated by the twelve categories of the understanding as well as space and time, none of them necessarily applicable beyond the realm of appearance.

The fact that the human-world relation is not special also has consequences for the scope of our knowledge. I see all relation as a matter of translation. There is no possible direct access to reality that gives us that reality in the flesh, without relation or mediation. This holds for human knowledge, animal awareness, plant life, and even inanimate collision. The human mind has no especial entanglement in error and no special capacity for direct contact with the real. This is the point where I seem to disagree with my colleagues Maurizio Ferraris and Markus Gabriel, not to mention Quentin Meillassoux, all of whom seem to hold that realism

also marks an end to the relativity of perspectives. For me, by contrast, realism entails the very opposite: the *impossibility* of ever gaining direct knowledge of the world. In analytic philosophy, I believe Nancy Cartwright has said something similar: that she's an ontological realist but a theory anti-realist, or something along those lines. That's more or less my position as well.

**2) Relativism has often been treated as an extreme and necessary outcome of antirealism. Is that so? And, if not, what is the difference between relativism and antirealism?**

Allow me to approach this question from the opposite end instead: anti-relativism has often been treated as a necessary consequence of realism! Many people are moved to pursue a realist ontology precisely because what they worry about most is relativism. Personally, I'm a lot more worried by idealism than by relativism. A certain plurality of perspectives is inevitable. Indeed, realism requires this if we allow that the real can never be equalled or exhausted by any particular perspective.

One of my most observant readers, Joseph Goodson of Michigan, has noted the following difference between my position and postmodern relativism. The relativists are all hung up on the incommensurability of perspectives *with each other*, while for me this is uninteresting, and the real problem is the incommensurability of any perspective *with the real*. It's less a matter of the conflict

between perspectives than the internal conflict *within* a perspective to measure up to a real that eludes it.

**3) Relativism is particularly hard to refute in ethics. What can be the consequences of adopting a realist perspective, from this point of view?**

One frequent assumption about realist ethics is that it would require the same objective rules to be followed by everyone, rules somehow grounded in the nature of reality itself— an “ought” grounded in an “is.” This follows the same assumption found elsewhere in philosophy: namely, that realism does not just mean the existence of a world outside the mind, but also the ability of the mind to *know* it.

But this is a counter-philosophical attitude from the start. Philosophy is *philosophia*, or love of wisdom rather than wisdom itself. Note that Socrates is never able to give us a definition of friendship, justice, virtue, or love, however much he searches for one. Socrates is not a knower, and we do not escape sophistry through knowledge claims.

So in a sense, I conclude the opposite of what your question might have suspected. For me, a realist ethics entails the *failure* of objective rules of behavior. Any ethical rule can be no more than a rough approximation of the reality it attempts to address. Such approximation is necessary for social existence— we can't necessarily affirm a wildcat



planet of ethical freelancers who invent their own standards at every moment. Nonetheless, each of us has broken basic ethical rules at various times (not too brazenly, one hopes) precisely because ethics often requires this. It is easy to imagine moments when stating a cold, hard truth would amount to needless cruelty, for instance. For any ethical rule, we can probably dream up an exceptional situation that would strongly encourage its violation.

In fact, this to me is the key fact of ethics: everyone seems to be allowed certain ethical exceptions on a fairly constant basis. There is my colleague who regularly speaks of dirty jokes in class streams, and this in culturally conservative Egypt. If you or I were to do it, we would quickly be terminated, since there would no doubt be a certain ugly edge to it. But my colleague is able to pull off the “crazy uncle” persona that allows him to get away with this pretty regularly despite a number of close calls. Women generally get away with certain sorts of things that men generally do not, and certainly vice versa. It is by no means the case that we treat everyone the same. And while this may sometimes be the result of “hypocrisy” or a “double standard,” the most interesting cases are those in which it may be a double standard but not mere hypocrisy. Though the surface value of two actions may be equivalent, their underlying character may be completely different in the two cases, based on who carries them out.

**4) Why is it that new realism is essentially continental? Is it true that, as Quentin Meillassoux put it, “in analytic philosophy there is so much realism that they can’t be amazed by the capacity of realism”? And, if it is true, what distinguishes analytic realism from continental realism?**

In the first place, Meillassoux’s statement is basically correct. Realism has always been a live option for analytic philosophy, whereas in the continental tradition one has always risked becoming a laughingstock even by *posing the question* of realism vs. antirealism. Thanks to the phenomenological tradition (which I love for other reasons, unlike Meillassoux) we have been trained to treat the problem of realism as a pseudo-problem. After all, thought is “always already outside itself in intending an object.” However, we can also intend hallucinatory or otherwise delusional objects, which does not make them “real” in any defensible sense of the term.

Husserl is a full-blown idealist, though also an object-oriented realist—the first to merit that description in the history of philosophy. There were other philosophers such as Kasimir Twardowski (Husserl’s true predecessor in the Brentano School) who insisted on a doubling, with an object outside the mind and a content inside the mind. We are quick to see that Husserl got rid of the “outside the mind” part but rarely notice that he *preserved* Twardowski’s dualism, while ingeniously imploding both terms into the phenomenal realm. The British Empiricist tradition disdained objects

cist tradition disdained objects and analyzed them away as “bundles of qualities,” but for Husserl the object remains somewhat constant, robust enough to withstand numerous changes in qualities. The object comes first, and its adumbrations swirl atop its surface. Rather than objects being bundles of qualities, it is qualities that become the slaves of objects—consider Merleau-Ponty’s remarks about how the black of a pen’s ink and the black of an executioner’s hood are utterly different even if they are exactly the same in objective hue. The object bends its qualities to do its bidding.

But we need more than Husserl, who remains an idealist. This is why I cannot remain a phenomenologist. I’ve tried to read Heidegger as a realist through the tool-analysis, though there are problems with considering Heidegger a realist in the bona fide sense. First, it’s all about the Dasein-Sein correlate for him. Like Kant, in whose cold shadow he works, Heidegger places the human-world relation in a position of superiority to all others; any discussion of object-object relations would make sense, for Heidegger as for Kant, only if we consider how it is mediated by the categories or horizon of human reality. And this is not yet realism. Second, there is the problem that Heidegger’s “real” (much like Lacan’s, or that of Parmenides or the early Levinas) is generally treated as a lump-real not articulated into parts until we encounter it. We see this in the early Heidegger with his frequent misunderstanding of the being/beings duality not just as absence/presence (which is

justified) but also as one/many (which is not).

As for realism in analytic philosophy, it tends to involve too much science-worship for my tastes. Consider Kripke’s brilliant *Naming and Necessity*, a book I adore until it turns out that what is rigidly designated by the word “gold” is its number of protons! Moreover, “Nixon” turns out to be a man produced by two specific parents, which I don’t believe is even true in terms of genetics (though extremely unlikely, the same Nixon DNA might have been generated by two totally different parents than the ones he had). There’s the lingering notion in most analytic realism that some privileged layer explains the reality that can’t quite be found in mid- or large-sized entities, accompanied by the parallel notion that the natural sciences are doing such a good job with that privileged ultimate layer that we simply ought to limp along like servants and explain why Master Science is so successful. Continental philosophy has the opposite problem of excessive *contempt* for the natural sciences (we are only now beginning to pull out of this prejudice). But given the remarkable prestige of the sciences these days and the widespread contempt for the humanities, there is little intellectual thrust to be gained by ratifying the present-day worship of natural science. (I’m speaking here of intellectual circles, of course, since I’m well aware of the ongoing stream of news stories about how science knowledge in the general public is at an all-time low, etc. etc.)

**5) What is, in your opinion, the (possible or yet-to-come) relationship between speculative realism and aesthetics, understood both as a theory of perception – à la Baumgarten – and as a philosophy of art?**

The original four Speculative Realists as a whole were just ranked in October 2013 as the #81 most powerful force in the contemporary art (see [http://artreview.com/power\\_100/](http://artreview.com/power_100/)).

For my own part, I've written one article entitled "Aesthetics as First Philosophy," and another called "The Third Table" that proposes the arts as a model for the next four centuries of philosophies, much as the natural sciences or deductive geometry were taken as models during the past four centuries.

For me, philosophy is all about the tensions between two types of objects (the real and the sensual) and their two types of qualities (also the real and the sensual). This leads to four basic tensions in the cosmos that I have identified in *The Quadruple Object* and elsewhere as time, space, essence, and eidos. I've also tried to show that aesthetics results from just such a tension, again placing aesthetics at the center of philosophy.

Even Meillassoux, who rates mathematics rather than aesthetics as the highest discipline, has written a brilliant book on Mallarmé. I do think Meillassoux will have problems extending the marvelous use of his mathematical method (707 as Mallarmé's secret number) into other authors, painters, and musicians.

The one type of Speculative Realism that is bound to have difficulty with aesthetics is the nihilistic, science-worshipping kind of Speculative Realism. In a sense, aesthetics is the very opposite of an angry scream against the futility of existence, and thus any philosophy that asserts such futility is to display a deft touch in the unlikely event that it ever turns to Wordsworth, Cézanne, or Schönberg.

## Abstracts and Indexing

**Author:** Maurizio Ferraris

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**Title:** *Why Matters Matter*

**Abstract:** Immanuel Kant said that the character of art consists in making people think. But what thoughts are aroused by works such as Brillo Box or Duchamp's urinal? The aim of the present essay is to analyse art, and conceptual art in particular, in the light of new realism and documentality, arguing for the contemporary prevalence of works of aura over works of art and for the mainly legal nature of conceptual art. The rejection of beauty, I will claim, is due to the separation of art from matter and perception, and of aesthetics from its original meaning of *aisthesis*.

**Keywords:** work of art, work of aura, aesthetics, perception, matter, realism

**Location:** *Philosophical Readings*, VI.2 (2014), pp. 4-25.

**Author:** Anna Longo

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**Title:** *Speculative Realism and Other Heresies*

**Abstract:** This paper is a presentation of Speculative Realism that provides a brief summary of the most important protagonist's positions: Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Graham Harman and Iain Hamilton Grant. It includes a short history of this tendency starting from the Goldsmith workshop in April 2007 and mentioning more recent strategies and approaches such as Object Oriented Ontology and Accelerationism. At the end, Italian Nuovo Realismo will be taken into account in order to understand if it

shares the metaphysical assumptions of Speculative realism or if it is metaphysical assumptions or if it is another kind of realism.

**Keywords:** work of art, work of aura, aesthetics, perception, matter, realism

**Location:** *Philosophical Readings*, VI.2 (2014), pp. 26-40.

**Author:** Richard Davies

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**Title:** *What Documents Cannot Do*

**Abstract:** Contrary to the key claim of the documental theory that social reality can be explained in terms of the formula "(Social) Object = Inscribed Act", it is argued that the invocation of *objects* constitutes an unnecessary detour and that the instances of social reality that the theory takes as paradigmatic are better thought of in terms of other categories. The formula itself leaves unexplained how an inscribed act can produce a social fact of any sort, both because the act of inscription is itself social and because it leaves unclear how to account for the validity or invalidity of such documents. Documental theory fails completely to account for the fact that very many societies do not have the institution of writing that is required for the theory. In appealing to Derrida's notion of "archiwriting", Ferraris' version of documentality abandons the theory's main strength: that of allowing public verifiability of the documents that provide corroboration for some complex social institutions.

**Keywords:** Social object; inscribed act; explanatory regress; validity of documents

**Location:** *Philosophical Readings*, VI.2 (2014), pp. 41-52.

**Author:** Roberto Marchesini

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**Title:** *Knowledge and Different Levels of Reality*

**Abstract:** Usually science talks about a world that contradicts our common sense or our natural interpretations: Earth's decentralization inverts our relation with stars, objects lose their dimension of solidity to be crushed in energy fields, living beings are not traced back to a repetitive genealogy but to a changing one, the dimensional ellipsis allowed by mathematics annihilates the ternary basis of experience, time itself seems to rest on a space. How did we get to this point and why? The thesis expressed in this essay is that in order to discuss epistemology it is fundamental to know the epistemic apparatus of the human being in its basic coordinates, so as to investigate the stability of knowledge, which today seems to be anything but stable.

**Keywords:** animal, knowledge, reality, human being, realism

**Location:** *Philosophical Readings*, VI.2 (2014), pp. 53-64.

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**Title:** *The Anthropocentrism of Anti-realism*

**Abstract:** The purpose of my paper is to discuss the issue of metaphysical anti-realism and its 'anthropocentrism', that is, the view according to which the species *Homo sapiens* is endowed with ontological pre-eminence over reality. The standard theory proposed by anti-realism suggests that one or more classes of objects depend on humans. This the-

ory is contested by the fact – properly analyzed by Jacob von Uexküll (von Uexküll 1985) – that other animals perceive the same objects as we do and get acquainted with them. The idea underlying anti-realism is that our way of perceiving reality is not only the best one, but also the only way possible. This incorrect belief is contested by modern science which shows how animals play the same role as humans in shaping the world (Darwin 1881), and furthermore, it represents a dangerous ethical drift that has to be firmly rejected, as I am going to affirm in the paper to follow.

**Keywords:** Realism, Anthropocentrism, Anti-realism, Ontology, Metaphysics

**Location:** *Philosophical Readings*, VI.2 (2014), pp. 65-73.

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**Title:** *Maps of the Shared World. From Descriptive Metaphysics to New Realism*

**Abstract:** The main aim of this paper is to characterize Maurizio Ferraris' New Realism as a metaphilosophical account that develops Peter Strawson's project of a descriptive metaphysics. The paper consists of two sections. The former outlines Strawson's descriptive metaphysics by highlighting its realist commitments. The latter characterizes New Realism as a way of turning Strawson's metaphysics into a metaphilosophy. New Realism moves from Strawson's metaphysical description of the world we share through our experience to the metaphilosophical claim that philosophy should primarily consist in this kind of description.

**Keywords:** descriptive metaphysics, shared world, realism

**Location:** *Philosophical Readings*, VI.2 (2014), pp. 74-86.

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**Title:** *Docu-mentality*

**Abstract:** In the present paper I propose to consider art as a specific form of documentality, much different from ordinary documentality, usually made of objects like cards, tickets, maps and so on. Before considering documentality, we need to reconsider our theory of human communication. Following Searle’s theory of social reality, art communication can be based on social ontology, which depends, in turn, on collective or intersubjective intentionality. I will not argue that art finds that intersubjective intentionality. I will attempt to show that some artworks, for instance pottery or architecture when they become archaeological documents, are able to show some characteristic features of documentality as an *activity*.

**Keywords:** realism, social reality, ontology, intentionality

**Location:** *Philosophical Readings*, VI.2 (2014), pp. 87-93.

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**Title:** *The Artistic Disenfranchisement of Reality*

**Abstract:** The aim of the paper is to show that the work done by artists in the last century has led to a systematic attempt at an artistic disenfranchisement

of reality. In other words, artists have tried to dismiss reality through art, expanding the domain of art to the point of making it ideally coincide with that of reality. Finally, I will argue that this attempt (which had disastrous outcomes) was far deeper and more systematic than the other, much more famous attempt: the philosophical disenfranchisement of art.

**Keywords:** Hegel, Danto, Nietzsche, Art, Disenfranchisement

**Location:** *Philosophical Readings*, VI.2 (2014), pp. 115-130.

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**Title:** *Exploring Conceptual Art*

**Abstract:** In a historical view, art has always offered different ways to distract us from reality. In this paper I will argue that art allows us to explore and discuss reality, its natural and social possibilities and complexity, as a consequence of its profound change since the 60s due to the establishment of Conceptual Art. My main arguments are the following ones. First I illustrate some philosophical and theoretical criticisms about Conceptual Art that emphasise its idealistic obstinacy based on the target of the dematerialisation of art object. Second I focus on the reductionism adopted by conceptualists trying to show that its main consequence is the increased accessibility of ideas transmitted through the conceptual artworks. Third I present some remarks about the presence of human bodies and their transparency as conceptual artworks – supposing that human bodies like objects and materials that become artworks could be considered as conductors of ideas. Fourth I introduce some conclusive notes about conceptualism and the new materialisation in art.

**Keywords:** Conceptual Art, Realist Approach to

Art, Dematerialisation of Art Object, Conceptualism, Idea Art

**Location:** *Philosophical Readings*, VI.2 (2014), pp. 94-100.

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**Title:** *Whitehead e il Nuovo Realismo: Per una filosofia del concreto, tra senso comune e scienze*

**Abstract:** The present paper aims at comparing Maurizio Ferraris's new realism and Alfred North Whitehead's realism. To reach this goal, the paper is divided into three parts. The first one focuses on their similar conceptions of philosophy, its task and boundaries; the second one addresses the issue of *unamendability* in their thoughts. Finally, after explaining the fallacy of misplaced concreteness and the pivotal role of perceptual experience in Whitehead's philosophy, the third part presents his 'organic realism', which gives further contribution to the current debate.

**Keywords:** New Realism, Ferraris, Whitehead, Unamendability, Fallacy of Being-Knowledge, Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness, Perceptual Experience, Organic Realism

**Location:** *Philosophical Readings*, VI.2 (2014), pp. 101-114.

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**Title:** *New Realism as a Frame of Reference*

**Abstract:** The thesis expressed in this essay is opposed to the relativistic subjectivism typical of post-

modern culture, affirming that in aesthetics, as well as in ethics, given a reference system there are cores of objectivity within which are inscribed truths of reason and truths *de facto*. The realism proposed here takes the form of an anti-subjectivistic philosophical theory which takes as its basis the reality of the external world: it is the result of the realist tradition born from the philosophy and psychology of perception represented by James J. Gibson and, even more incisively, from Gestalt tradition that begins with Gaetano Kanizsa and culminates in the work of Paolo Bozzi. The beginning of knowledge lies in the appearance of immediate experience. This relatively stable level of reality is the object of my reflections, whose limit has led me towards a new realism.

**Keywords:** *Gestalt*, perception, reality, frame of reference, Paolo Bozzi

**Location:** *Philosophical Readings*, VI.2 (2014), pp. 115-142.