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Matter is an obstacle, a burden, an alterity that occupies me, the medium of frustration but also of pleasure. Matter is both envelope and core, inescapable. I can’t understand why matter requires a “materialism” to plead its case. The more fragile hypotheses, in need of advocates, are the subject, the person, consciousness, imagination.

Consciousness doesn’t ask for anything more than the freedom to choose when to work with matter, and when to work against it. Imagination wants to dominate matter, and without guilt. In fact, it is redundant to speak of imagination or mind “wanting” to dominate matter. As soon as you speak of “mind,” you already name a contempt for matter. You are saying: “matter has no claims on me, things have no claims on me, no ethical claims.”

The questionnaire identifies a double movement of contemporary thought, two directions, one opposed to the other, and yet in league. Some thinkers stress the ways that humans are like things, others stress the ways that things are like humans. The first tendency is guided by the death instincts, the desire to dial down all tensions. The second tendency is anthropomorphizing. The two tendencies work together to deprivilege the subject of consciousness, the alleged source of creativity in thought and in making, a source ungraspable but marked by first person pronouns. Both tendencies deplore the arrogance of the modern mind that believes it can build the reality it needs.

Within art criticism or art history, the materialist plea is pedestrian and literal-minded. Materialism makes a virtue of acknowledging the completely obvious: the environmental and somatic limits on thought and imagination. Such literalism punctures pretention, exposes mystification, and denaturalizes conventions. But these are situational uses. Speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, neuroaesthetics, the doctrine of the life or agency of things, are only ways of talking, discourse tactics. They are fictions safely embedded within larger unspeakable confidences in the subject-of-consciousness.

Matter and thing are passwords to a realism targeting hidden irrealisms. But matter and thing are themselves not equally real. It is notable that natural scientists recognize matter but not things. The thing is not a natural “unit” of reality. The thing is a device that helps consciousness grasp matter. Matter only comes into focus through things. The thing, because it shares properties of closure with the person, stands out against a ground of non-things, including formless matter. The autonomy of the thing is borrowed from the person.

Modern critical thought is shaped as a protest against the scientific picture of the world. Non-scientists cherish the thing precisely because the physical sciences do not recognize it. Materialism and “thing theory” are supposed to restore realism, but because the thing is already an anthropomorphism, and because its discursive function is to resist absorption into the scientific world-picture, it soon takes on unrealistic and unlikely properties. Things are “alive,” matter is “vibrant.”
The thing is invented by the transfiguring imagination as its own internal horizon. Art re-creates the world as a field of interactions between people and things, re-staging the convertibility of objects and persons in fields of affect and desire. In dance, theater, and film, people become things and vice versa. In poetry and art, meanwhile, things and people become representations of things and people; the representations become things again. Persons and things are reappearing inside art as fictions of themselves. The “self,” or “self as consciousness,” is an aspect of the fiction of personhood encountered in art; “self,” too, is a “content” before it is an origin-point. But consciousness is a privileged content because it is recursive. The self is the staging of thought thinking its own origin. The non-identity of consciousness—its difference from itself—distinguishes it from the thing. Consciousness presents the thing, inside art and generally in fictions, as its own other. The thing is created as the place within a fiction where the conversions and substitutions performed by consciousness as a way of connecting with other consciousnesses arrive at a point of rest.

The thing appears inside art—or as art—both in its opacity and in its apparent lifelikeness. The thing is only half there. It speaks to us, but it doesn’t listen. The effect of simultaneous familiarity and unavailability accounts for the prestige of things, their power to shape the virtual spaces that host them. But not only virtual spaces: exported from fictions into life, the thing retains the quality of semi-availability it acquired inside the fiction. By applying pressure to space, it recreates pockets of the real world as fictions. Artists exploit this power, creating things as the “innermost” of the artwork, and then taking that irreducibility as the model of the next work.

Things drive signification. Metonymy defers understanding by displacing meaning sideways from thing to thing, from thing to person, from person to thing. The plots of fables, folk tales, romances, satires, and realist novels are carried by weapons, chalices, gems, articles of furniture or clothing. Such fantastical meaning-generating strategies must remain subroutines, framed. Irrealisms, once “sprung” from a nested hierarchy of fictions and asked to serve in reality as realisms, are implausible, unconvincing. Object-oriented ontology is such an irrealism that has been repositioned as a realism. It doesn’t ring true as a conviction.

The thing comes into focus as a challenge to the imagination only inside a constellation of signs and non-signs constructed by an imagination. The thing is always already anthropomorphic, in the sense that it customizes for human apprehension something that is outside the human. When things resist interpretation, and block mind-to-mind exchanges, and by virtue of their obduracy keep plots moving, they serve as reminders of what stands outside of culture. They point to the limits of culture’s reach. That is exactly the recognition that speculative realism aims at.

Speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, and neuroaesthetics overrate matter in order to correct for careless anthropocentrisms. But at the same time they underrate the human. The materialisms invoked by the questionnaire extend
a long-standing critique of humanism, or the willingness to be guided by an invented, self-serving model of personhood. The problem with humanism, however, is not that its model of personhood is unrealistic. Models are supposed to differ from reality. The problem with humanism is rather that it “does not set the humanitas of man high enough.”