

MATERIALISM AND CONTEMPORARY ART'S PAROLE

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In speaking of new materialism in relation to contemporary art, I'm going to look at the idea of art as an *object*, as having materiality, in relation to the idea that the aesthetic is a privileged site within which materialism – or object oriented ontology – may be apprehended or understood.

I'll focus on Timothy Morton's ideas around the role of the aesthetic in relation to causality itself, and I'll relate this to contemporary art via a characterisation of contemporary art as post conceptual art, via the notion of the de-materialisation of the art object in Lucy Lippard's 1997 essay, *Escape Attempts*. Finally, I'll discuss my own project in relation to these themes.

The principles of new materialism, or object oriented ontology, hold broad applications. In Timothy Morton's book, *Realist Magic, Objects, Ontology, Causality*, he describes the nature of causality within the world itself as aesthetic, which makes art – for him - intrinsic to new thinking around causality:

The reason why art is important is that it's an exploration of causality, which as we know since post-Newtonian physics involves a lot more than just little metal balls clunking one another ... entities interact in a sensual ether that is (at least to some extent) nonlocal and nontemporal. That's how objects can influence one another despite the fact that they are enclosed from all forms of access... So when old fashioned art criticism speaks of timeless beauty, it is saying something quite profound about the nature of causation, not about spuriously universal human values.¹

For Morton, aesthetics is vital to an understanding of the world as object-oriented, wherein everything – including us – is an object impacting other objects, rather than an understanding of the world from a human-centric view. Morton links the idea of 'art' with 'aesthetics'; in reality, the term 'aesthetics' has multiple definitions, varying from the study of beauty in art or nature, the actual experience of beauty, the philosophy of taste, and theories or philosophies of art. It's a vague term, but Morton conflates its varied meanings into one, with the result that a view of causality as *sensual* necessarily links it, for him, to an idea of aesthetics as the study of art, or to an idea of what art is, or should be.

Morton states that the idea that causality is aesthetic is good news for art students, since:

¹ Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic, Objects, Ontology, Causality*, Open Humanities Press 2013, 20
(<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/p/pod/dod-idx/realist-magic-objects-ontology-causality.pdf?c=ohp;idno=13106496.0001.001>)

Causality floats in front of objects, figuratively speaking. It doesn't lie underneath them like some grey machinery. Another way of saying this is that causality must belong to the aesthetic dimension. To study the aesthetic dimension, then, is to study causality.²

Within this view, reality is not a construct; rather, reality is *real*, because it is: '...encrypted against access by any object, including a probing human mind'.

So an effort to view the world as operating aesthetically means we escape the sense of subjective views leading to the idea that reality is an illusion. The way things appear to us impacts us, and is seen to have the potential to act on and change the world; there is thus great agency for aesthetics as appearance here, and the link Morton makes between the terms 'art' and 'aesthetics' implies that art itself has a major role to play in an object-oriented view of things. However he goes on:

The trouble is, when you only have the meshwork, the mask, without the possibility that there's something real underneath it, then you have no play, no pretense, no illusion, no display, no magic. You know it's an illusion—so it isn't an illusion. You know there is no essence—this becomes the essence, a shadowy, inverted form of the very essentialism you are trying to escape. This is the trouble with performance art, or at least the manifestoes of conceptual art. By undoing the difference between art and nonart, by self-consciously getting rid of self-consciousness and professional artists, conceptual art ignores the Rift between essence and appearance, reducing the ontological to the merely ontic. An overall atmosphere of jaded cynicism hangs over it.³

It seems here that performance art and conceptual art – at least in their pure manifesto form - are not valid forms of art in relation to the idea of causality as aesthetic. By introducing the idea of anti-art, or by questioning the nature of the art object, these movements remove art's *aesthetic* element, Morton's sense of things becoming *as* objects. They question the essence of art: to Morton, their resulting lack of essence *becomes* their essence and results in a state wherein nothing is 'real'.

The introduction of non-art into art – or a questioning of art's essence – in fact extends further historically than the relatively recent events of performance or conceptual art; indeed all modernist art may be characterised, in one way or another, as a striving towards that which is not 'art', whether or not such striving occurs in relation to, or results in the output of, concrete objects. Morton's identification of object oriented ontology with the field of art via a notion of aesthetics as *appearance* is problematic here; while Morton may prefer certain types of art over non-object or anti-art art, such movements – arguably, the very drive of the ontological project of modernist art –

² Morton, 30

³ Morton, 75

cannot be removed from art history, and their impact on the development of Western art towards the contemporary cannot be undone.

Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, originally published in 1973, is an anthology of texts documenting the conceptual art movement. The book was reissued in 1997 with a new introduction by Lippard called *Escape Attempts*, wherein she reflects on the nature of the art of that time 25 years earlier. While not an artist herself, Lippard was closely associated with the conceptual art movement, participating within it as a curator, writer and art critic: her experimental style of curating and writing could in itself be viewed as art-like.

Escape Attempts' picture of conceptual art is very detailed: while Lippard was located within the New York conceptual art scene, she writes of the internationalism of the movement, occurring as it did seemingly spontaneously and concurrently over a broad sweep of cities globally. The essay refers to the many and varied forms conceptual art took, such as mail art, earthworks, performance art, happenings, actions and even minimalism, while pointing to Sol LeWitt's distinction between conceptual art with a 'small c' and conceptual art with a 'capital C'; Lippard describes 'capital C' conceptual art as, '...work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or "dematerialized"'.⁴

In *Escape Attempts*, Lippard quotes Sol LeWitt from 1969:

Ideas alone can be works of art; they are a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical...the words of one artist to another may induce an idea chain, if they share the same concept.

John Baldessari:

I was beginning to suspect that information could be interesting in its own right and need not be visual...

And Joseph Beuys:

To be a teacher is my greatest work of art. The rest is the waste product, a demonstration...Objects aren't very important for me anymore.

Similar quotes from a variety of artists may be found from this time: artists whose work we may understand visually today desired in their words an escape from the image and the object.

⁴ Lucy Lippard, *Escape Attempts*, from *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (California: University of California Press 1997), pvii

The dematerialised nature of conceptual art is described by Lippard as an attempt to escape what she calls the 'frame-and-pedestal' syndrome of art, and it was anti- art-as-commodity; in 1968 Lippard and John Chandler wrote of 'ultra- conceptual art' as evolving from art as idea and art as action. Conceptual art's dematerialized form made it an inexpensive and unintimidating medium, which Lippard identifies as having been more accessible to women than previous art movements, encouraging women to 'move through this crack in the art world's walls'.

Lippard writes that while conceptual art may now appear timid and disconnected when compared to the political activism of the time, the conceptual artists themselves looked and sounded like radicals. Even if the art was apolitical, its presentation, the form (or lack of a form) it took was radical: it was usually the *form* of conceptual art that was political, rather than its content. There existed a desire to attack notions of originality, individual style and genius, 'the most cherished aspects of patriarchal, ruling-class art' Lippard writes.

The sentiments Lippard and others express, and her memories and accounts of conceptual art as a movement seem far removed from the 'atmosphere of jaded cynicism' Morton claims hangs over conceptual art. Nonetheless, Lippard is realistic about the actual outcomes of this period:

However rebellious the escape attempts, most of the work remained art-referential, and neither economic nor esthetic ties to the art world were fully severed (though at times we liked to think they were hanging by a thread).⁵

Even as early as 1973, Lippard wrote in the 'Postface' of the original publication of *Six Years*:

Hopes that "conceptual art" would be able to avoid the general commercialization, the destructively "progressive" approach of modernism were for the most part unfounded.⁶

She describes how in 1969, artists believed nobody would want to pay money for objects such as 'a Xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived, a group of photographs documenting an ephemeral situation or condition, a project for work never to be completed, words spoken but not recorded'. However only three years later, 'major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe; they are represented by...the world's most prestigious galleries'.

Nonetheless, for Lippard and other conceptual artists, the hope remains that (quote) 'the most exciting "art" might still be buried in social energies not yet recognized as art'; in 1997, reflecting on the time of conceptual art, Lippard hopes that even while art's escape was temporary, that the

⁵ Lippard, pxvii

⁶ Lippard, xxi

spirit of the art remains, waiting to be tapped into by artists of the future. She ends her essay with the sentence:

Art was recaptured and sent back to its white cell, but parole is always a possibility.⁷

Here again, the actual and original sentiment of conceptual artists is at odds with Moreton's views on conceptual art: where he views the art as object as intrinsic to a more radical or open view of the world, Lippard and other conceptualists viewed it as a kind of cell; two quite opposite views of art's potential as an object to act positively in the world.

So which one is it? Where does the art belong? Is the object a cell which holds the transformative power of art prisoner, or is the materiality of art a force with which we may apprehend objects' impact in the world, in their becoming; a way of apprehending reality itself?

It depends what art is: in Morton's argument, he refers in a positive sense to the emotional reactions to be had to paintings by Turner and the optical effects of Bridget Riley's paintings – artists from two quite different periods of British art. In Lippard's case, she restricts her argument to the era and artists of the conceptual movement, a short movement which seemed new, where there was a feeling that artists were coming close to doing something more radical with art in the world than had been possible before. Morton's argument concerning the power of objects as strictly aesthetic is informed by a sense of art as something essential and unchanging over time, wherein paintings by Riley or Turner hold equal power as objects. For Lippard however, the novelty and promise of art as a concept rather than an object inadvertently and unavoidably places it within the larger framework of the progressive ideals of modernist art, where an ideal future point exists in which art becomes its purest and least corrupted self.

Whichever view one takes, it is the realm of contemporary art in which we participate as artists today; a large, almost undefinable realm wherein most if not all mediums or styles of art apply – 'art' as a concept exists either within an object or without one, and every medium, from painting to performance, is valid.

Nonetheless, and despite this openness, some theorists do attempt a definition of contemporary art. One such theorist is Peter Osborne whose book, *Anywhere or Not at all – Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, was published in 2013.

⁷ Lippard, xxii

Osborne's final definition – or philosophy – of contemporary art is far-reaching and detailed. Although he declares an intention to create a 'meaningful' discourse for the contemporary rather than embrace the entirety and variety of forms that come under its banner, his extensive text does not result in an identifiable statement or definition. Osborne believes contemporary art needs to be defined historically rather than aesthetically; as a result of this, he describes contemporary art as a post-conceptual art.

For Osborne, contemporary art should not be defined in terms of aesthetics, since conceptual art proved that art was a concept, something that existed outside aesthetics. However for Osborne, conceptual art's failure to fully escape the aesthetic realm proves also that the aesthetic is an inescapable aspect of art: for Osborne, conceptual art's 'failure' is in fact its success. In this view, contemporary art is less a prison of objects or the aesthetic than proof of their inescapability, confirming a place for the aesthetic within contemporary art's very *definition*.

The writers discussed so far – Osborne, Lippard and Morton – are not, as far as I'm aware, practicing artists, despite Lippard's art-like style of curating and writing. It's one thing to write about art, to say what it is or what it should be; it's quite another thing to have to *make* art, or to be an artist, or to know what to do as art, especially in relation to the legacy of conceptual art. From my position as a contemporary practitioner, the dilemma of a contemporary art practice involves questions such as: what to make as art? What medium to employ? Should any medium be employed at all? What form can a radical art practice take, when all forms are permitted? In Warhol's words, 'What can we do for Art?'

A sense or definitions of art as expression, as the communication of ideas or as aesthetic experience or affect are inadequate, neither convincing, compelling or significant enough to warrant the value with which we endow the field of contemporary art. As an art student, personally discovering a view of the Western art tradition as the development of the art object through modernist self-questioning was important, a view of art compelling enough to lead me to engage with its discourse and become an artist. The discovery explained to me why some things are art and some aren't, even when they looked the same: the puzzling things that were art – maybe a blank canvas or a rock on the gallery floor – were important because they were a part of art's ontological development. While it didn't help me to know what to make as a contemporary artist, this realisation helped me understand modern western art as a history, within which it seemed important to situate my own practice.

As an artist, I've attempted to deal with Warhol's question – 'What can we do for Art?' – in different ways. The most recent iteration of my work is my end of art project, which involves saying 'the end

of art' while maintaining a practice as an artist. The end of art is something I feel, and to say it allows me to engage with art as theory or philosophy in line with contemporary art's heritage in conceptual art and modernism's general drive towards the end. For me, contemporary art as a post-conceptual art is a post-object art: maintaining an art practice in the face of this statement lets me point to the seemingly inevitable expectation and paradox that an art practice involves objects or aesthetics in some form.

To end, I'll briefly describe my own view of contemporary art's relevance to new materialist thought in relation to speculative realism, without disavowing the anti-art drive of modernism or the dematerialized nature of performance or conceptual art, as Morton's thesis tends to.

If we consider the tradition of western art in its development towards the contemporary through the self-referential, self-critical, and ontological process of modernism, it becomes clear that the subject of this tradition is 'art' itself. This tradition's relentless pursuit of art's purity as a concept and its drive to discover that which is essential to art as an object leads to the end of this subject, or the end of art. We can align the subject of this historical, ontological tradition – that is, the concept 'art' – with the human subject in the history of philosophy. In this respect, recent attempts to step outside *ourself/ves*, or outside a privileging of the human subject's viewpoint and apprehend a more 'real' reality, rendering the subject contingent, hold a link to a sense of contemporary art as the end of the subject 'art', a stepping outside of definitions of art. Here, it is as a model of western thought that the value of art resides, and contemporary art – as the embodiment of the end of art in the entirety of its forms and non-forms – is most successfully theorised in its relation to the contingent nature of the concept 'art'.