Hadjidjanos, Spiros & Graham Harman,
"Spiros Hadjijjanos in Conversation with
Graham Harman," in Network Time,
(Ghent, Belgium: Art Paper Editions, 2014.)
Pages 12-23.
These objects can be verified in no way at all, whether by science or by tangible effects in human sphere.3

GH

This zone is not spatial. For me, "space" is neither a container (as per Newton and Clarke) nor a system of relations (as per Leibniz), but the tension between relation and non-relation. But not everything is locked in such tension at all times. Objects can also be dormant, meaning that they are not currently in relation with anything and might never be. Admittedly, for me all objects are composite, which means that they are generated by relations between their pieces, but this does not mean that the objects themselves need to be in relation with anything.

SH

I am particularly interested in spatial arrangements. You have written that to occupy a spatial position is to take up relations! Would you say that 'relations' presuppose that you are spatially defined?

GH

Yes. To be in relations is automatically to be spatial, since to relate means to make partial contact with other entities while simultaneously withdrawing from them. Not all relations are located in what we call physical space. There is a broader sense of space that encompasses all relations, physical or otherwise.

SH

In our short discussion in Berlin you mentioned that every relation is itself an object, something that appears frequently in your texts. How do you think the idea of the relation as an object can be manifested? I have been thinking about this for a long time.

GH

It was important to free my concept of objects from the traditional concepts of substance, to which I am indebted, but which have certain obvious flaws. Realist philosophers of substance have tended to prefer natural and/or simple entities over artificial and/or compound ones. In the case of Leibniz, even the eternity of objects was taken to be important, something Aristotle had already gotten rid of after the pre-Socratic dogma that the cosmic ultimates must be indestructible.

All that something needs to count as an object, for me, is that it cannot be exhaustively reduced either to its internal components or to its outward effects. And this entails that if two things come genuinely into relation, this relation must itself be an object. If the relation is genuine, that it cannot simply be an aggregate made up of its relata, or an event made up of the effects it has here and now.

An example will be helpful. I was recently married. As anyone knows who has been married, there is a pressing reality to the marriage itself that is not reducible to the two individuals. The marriage itself acts as a separate force affecting the actions of both people. In this sense, "our marriage" is not simply a bulk nickname for me and my wife considered as separate individuals. The marriage is not reducible downward
to two people or to the historic chain of events and documents that
causally gave rise to it. It has a reality over and above those elements.

But neither is the marriage reducible to its concrete effects. Outsiders
can't understand what it's like, but neither do my wife and I really un-
derstand what it's like. The marriage has an unfathomable reality that
has new consequences at all times. It is more than a list of everything
that has happened to both of us since our wedding day.

In this sense, the marriage is different from the people and documents
who compose it, and different from its manifestations so far, and even
different from all the manifestations it might someday have or might
possibly have had. Thus, the marriage is an object. And the same holds
true for any genuine relation. I say genuine relation because we can al-
ways list an arbitrary aggregate of things together without their having
any joint objecthood outside my naming of them at the moment.

Interviewing Quentin Meillassoux in your book Quentin
Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making, you refer to "sur-
prise" as one of the greatest cognitive tools that humans
have. To Claude Shannon, the amount of information
conveyed is a measure of "surprise" and is closely related
to the chance of an occurrence of a particular event – the
less probable an event the more surprising it is. In this
sense, the more new information an artwork vis-à-vis
the art historical context has, the more surprising it
is. Could a direct focus on the creation of "surprising"
events constitute a method for innovation?

Yes, it could. But I don't relate surprise to probability, and neither does
Meillassoux. For Meillassoux, the really surprising events are neither
probable nor improbable. As long as we can calculate the probability
(or lack thereof) of an event, we are in the realm of the potential.

By contrast, the virtual for Meillassoux is the realm of events that
cannot be called either probable or improbable, since they partake
of Cantor's transfinite realm: the emergence of life from matter,
thought from life, and justice from thought by way of the God who
does not exist and has never existed but might exist in the future.

In my own case, by contrast, even probable events can be made surpris-
ing. Obviously, you can make an artistic masterpiece out of entirely
probable subject matter. Surprise is not a matter of surprise, but of
creating a wedge between objects and their qualities. In everyday life we
have a tendency to treat objects as being just what British Empiricism
says they are: bundles of qualities. But for me both philosophy and art
are about creating rifts between objects and their qualities. There really
is something there that's deeper than "bundles." In that sense I am
a sworn anti-empiricist, despite the current good press surrounding
the term "empiricism" (which perhaps even exceeds the good press
of another currently popular term I dislike: "pragmatism").
But yes, I think the creation of surprises is the intellectual method par excellence.

SH
Let's talk about Speculative Realism. Speculative Realists aim to open the door of a reality that exists outside of human perception which idealism has closed to the world-for-itself. I feel that Speculative Realism is not specific knowledge but an amazing toolbox for creativity. Can you comment on that?

GH
Even those who wrongly treat Speculative Realism as just smoke and mirrors, or as the purveying of trivialities already known, eventually have to concede the fact that the term has caught on like wildfire in the humanities. Why has this happened?

We should first consider the chief enemy of all Speculative Realism: "correlationism." This is Meillassoux's term for the basic dogma of all continental and much analytic philosophy that we cannot think of humans without world or the world without humans, but only of a pristordial correlation or rapport between the two. Realism was not even taken seriously as an option in continental philosophy until the early twenty-first century. Instead, it was a simple background assumption among continuents that realism vs. anti-realism was a "pseudo-problem" unworthy of serious debate. That view is widespread even today, and not just among crusty old-timers. For example, even as bright and progressive a figure as Adrian Johnston views the Speculative Realist critique of correlationism as a "tempest in a teacup," with realism for Johnston being something to be settled only on the level of detailed scientific practice rather than philosophical speculation itself.

But I doubt that artists will take much inspiration from the notion that realism is a tempest in a teacup. So far they have responded emphatically to Speculative Realism itself rather than to the critiques of it. I think this results, paradoxically, from the fact that art is in some way more realist than the sciences themselves. That is to say, the sciences are happy to replace electrons or neon atoms with lists of discursively expressible properties of these things. In other words, the sciences are under disciplinary pressure to treat objects precisely as bundles of qualities and nothing more. By contrast, the arts are under professional pressure to do exactly the opposite. We know full well that, except in highly contrived special cases, we cannot reduce a painting or sculpture to the atoms of which they are constructed. The reality of an artwork is not the feeble reality of the sciences, too easily translatable into knowledge about that reality.

SH
How do you think Speculative Realism could be implemented in the arts?

GH
It's already happening. Here you'll need to ask the artists, because I have no desire to legislate how others use my ideas. But I do think we need to distinguish between different forms of
Speculative Realism. Here I will say frankly that Ray Brassier’s sort of Speculative Realism, which takes a more eliminativist, scientific line, is unlikely to be of much use to the arts at all—despite Robin Mackay’s energetic entrepreneurial efforts to claim otherwise. From that direction I see a completely misguided effort to move towards an “art without humans.” But this is impossible, and all it can ultimately mean is an art that points towards situations that people find especially ominous: noise, nihilism, screams in the darkness, and other tokens of the purported worthlessness of the human species. The problem with the human-world correlate (a.k.a. “correlationism,” our great shared enemy) is not just the human side, as if the “world” side were unproblematic. The problem is treating human and world as the two central terms of reality. But that doesn’t mean you can take humans out of art, any more than you can take humans out of politics—or out of basketball, for that matter. An “art without humans” is about as meaningful as the call for a “basketball without humans.” It’s not an anti-correlationist move at all, but simply an old-fashioned scientistic one, lifting inanimate human nature above all else and eliminating humans in favor of it. I find this to be the least promising strand of Speculative Realism.

So let’s admit that it’s not so much “Speculative Realism” that is influencing the arts as Object-Oriented Philosophy. The reason artists like Object-Oriented Philosophy is because it actually respects artists! After 400 years of science worship and mathematics worship in philosophy, Object Oriented Ontology treats art as something of cognitive value, and not simply as a mood stimulant or a vehicle for the expression of one’s own psychological, ontological, or scientific prejudices.

Referring to the power of a “brand,” you wrote that if the decision were yours alone, a Speculative Realist logo would be designed for projection on PowerPoint screens. How do you imagine this logo? Would it share elements with the 2007 Speculative Realism workshop poster at Goldsmiths?

I am not literally interested in creating a logo, and have taken no steps towards doing so. The point of those remarks was to express my frustration with the way that others in the group were trying to distance themselves from the name “Speculative Realism.”

The history is as follows. Ray Brassier, who has now rejected the name “Speculative Realism” in somewhat violent fashion, was nonetheless the originator of the group and of the name itself. His point was a good one: there’s strength in numbers; we all have something in common, yet we are laboring in obscurity. He and Alberto Toscano arranged the 2007 Goldsmiths workshop, and obviously it proved to be a huge success. Everyone benefited—those who now disown the name.

As I see it, that’s not the way the game is played. When you sign up for a club you stick with it, and you don’t insist too fiercely on your own unique irreducibility to the rest of the group. That is best done on an
issue-by-issue basis, not by claiming root incommensurability between oneself and everyone else.

Brassier’s whole concept of Speculative Realism was as nothing else than a “brand,” and it succeeded precisely as a brand. It was an easy way to identify a loose group of thinkers who, even now, have some important things in common, and which was simple and catchy enough to be remembered by those who heard it just like Impressionism, Fauvism, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, German Idealism, Actor-Network Theory, and other intellectual brands. But in the year 2013 our anticapitalism has become so pious that we love to accuse each other of using curse words such as “brand” and “speculation.” Yet precisely for that reason, the favorite metaphors of capitalism gain a new contrarian force, and hence anyone interested in the craft of writing cannot avoid experimenting with them.

As I’ve pointed out in a recent article, there’s nothing the four original Speculative Realists can do to remove each other’s names from their eventual obituaries, so why be so finicky about the term? “Speculative Realism” oversimplified all of us—as all group names do—but also gave us the visibility that, frankly, we had earned.

SH  You are posting on your blog almost on daily basis. How does this affect what we read in your books?

GH  Blogging can have the same beneficial effects as sports writing, which I did for a time in graduate school. It forces you to keep writing on deadline, and in a punchy and accessible manner. Sports writing is perhaps the best thing that ever happened to me, since it was my first experience of needing to write in large quantities in an invigorating, non-academic way.

I first started blogging in January 2009, and found it exhilarating. But I soon found it exhausting to engage in so many back-and-forth exchanges with commenters, even with the constructive commenters. And as is well known, there is an unusually large amount of low-quality human interaction in the blogosphere as well.

So, things evolved towards the current state of my blog, where it’s more of an intellectual snack bar: featuring links, ad-hoc comments, and an occasional meaty post. I can’t do what Levi Bryant does and engage in constant lengthy dialogues with people on my blog, because I find it physically and mentally exhausting, and it would severely cut into the productivity of my own writing. It seems to work well for Levi, but I prefer to use the blog for links and off-the-cuff observations, saving my best work for books, articles, and lectures.