

BORDERLANDS OF MATERIALITY

New Realism, or: The desire for clear categories

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At one point, everything seemed to be in flux, in a state of dissolution, of continuous transformation. The grand narratives had splintered into countless fragments. The author had been superseded by the simulation. Facades were *supposed* to look cobbled together. Las Vegas seemed more important than Washington, maybe even more important than New York. And the Red Square in Moscow was just the place Mathias Rust had landed his tiny plane. But times have changed. Things have weight again. Putin's Russia is crawling with tanks. Bursting bubbles have thrown people out onto the street, and the grit from the street is working its way into their souls. Even James Bond now stumbles, falls, and suffers. And the world itself is under threat again: the climate is changing, and we are to blame. The Anthropocene has dawned, and traces that once were signs to be read have become real, dangerous particles in the air we breathe.

What good is deconstruction for us today, those postmodern shenanigans that granted us the liberty of interpreting and defining the world as it appears to each and every one of us? This study will approach this question from different directions, situating each perspective in its particular dynamics of development. This is necessary because, while "modernism" does exhibit a few stable, definitive features, it is embedded and structured in different ways in different contexts. I plan to briefly sketch out two lines of inquiry: one from the perspective of the cultural sciences, focusing on developments in the fields of architecture and the arts, and one from the perspective of the social sciences, examining social relations. Later, via the turn to postmodern deconstructionism, I will identify the turn to materiality, and position the specific reaction undertaken by New Realism against an approach fed by the social sciences and phenomenology.

One of modernism's most significant tendencies is a perpetuation of a theme from the Enlightenment: in modernism, the focus is on *universality*. This emphasis on the universal is explicitly picked up by Rem Koolhaas in the motto for this year's Architecture Biennale: *Absorbing Modernity 1914–2014* and *Fundamentals*.¹ In the realm of architecture, the impulse to universalize is reflected in things like building codes, the preference for materials like metal and glass, any number of standardization processes, and a series of various function-oriented design typologies. This kind of universalization within architecture is mirrored by similar tendencies in science and culture: the standardization of scientific methodologies and publication norms, for example; the expansion of bureaucratization and monetization; the internet and its various uses; and new international regulations and institutions, which range from the League of Nations to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a sub-organization of the United Nations.

But there are also differences. Consider architecture first: its orientation toward a specific purpose leads to materials playing a subordinate role to *function*. As Susanne Hauser argues, materials within modern architecture only have ephemeral significance, while before modernism they signified the monumental.² Temples and gates, halls and houses—they needed to be lasting, to broadcast their grandeur and permanence. They needed to be filled by the spirit prevailing within, a spirit that would either persist through time, or gradually fade and wear with the material itself. Through all this, however, they always needed to exude a trace of the authentic—a unique aura, in Walter Benjamin's sense. Now, however, if the purpose of a factory, a storage facility, or a shopping center is fulfilled or becomes obsolete, its architecture will also become superfluous, and must be cleared away to make room for new architecture that serves new purposes. The material continues to play a role,

but one less characterized by a particular aesthetic ideal than by its suitability for a particular function.³ Art as a discipline also confronts the monumental and permanent with the fleeting event. Material, substance, and body enter into the event, are transformed, and become part of the performance. Here, too, the material is subordinated to the idea and considered transitory; it can change or simply disappear. The attempt, the experiment, the performance are—at least in theory, if not necessarily in the economy of the art market—more important than the product.

Next we'll consider the social sciences, whose approach is also characterized by the idea of the universal. Societies can be compared to one another because they all consist of actors relying on different forms of rationality in their actions and decisions. Feelings and bodies are relegated to a different sphere—to psychiatrists' offices, or to prisons and labor camps. Rationality can be predicted, controlled, and used productively. Controlling society and steering it down the desired track becomes the goal of the "useful" side of the social sciences. The individual body in its individuality becomes unimportant. Only ideas matter—be they ideas of race and purity, or of productivity and division of labor.

So much for modernity. Yet today's debates about architecture reveal more than just a developmental trend and an emphasis on the universal. The material has resurfaced again—the material as such, or as something in its own right, or at least in the specific way in which it manifests itself and is perceived. This emphasis on materiality is not stated explicitly in Rem Koolhaas' statement, but it is visible elsewhere. In the context of this year's Biennale, it factors prominently into the materially faithful 1:1 replica of the Chancellor's Bungalow inside the German Pavilion (which the Nazis renovated in monumentally unmodern fashion). Why this emphasis on concrete substance and materiality? Here we return to the introductory paragraph. Postmodernism approached the world as an object of interpretation, deconstruction, and fragmentation. The concrete was irrelevant, it was argued—all that mattered was the relation between the signifier and the signified, the relation of *différance*.⁴ Speech and writing are pivotal points of argumentation. Economy, production, and social inequality were also considered only as constructs undergoing constant, perhaps even arbitrary, transformation—and the same even applied for truth itself. For this reason, postmodernism is often criticized as apolitical, fragmentary, and dissociated from real or important problems. In the most harmless of cases, it can be accused of producing idle chatter, but it can also be understood as ideology production and deliberate deception.

Clean, distinct, eternal

New Realism's answer to postmodernism is clear: away with it! At least rid it from the arena in which actual, concrete things are discussed. Let it return, that is, to the playground of more or less aesthetic debates over the possibilities and limits of knowledge. Maurizio Ferraris wrote a manifesto on this.⁵ Manifestoes are, of course, a genre of their own. In a manifesto, one takes a position and marks it clearly to gain recognition in the vast marketplace of ideas. Thus, the spectrum of accusations against postmodernism encompasses everything listed above, ranging from claims of irrelevance all the way to active deception. Ferraris writes:

Recent years have indeed taught us a bitter truth. That is, that interpretation has attained primacy over the facts and that myth has successfully overcome objectivity.⁶

Truth is no longer the object of interest, but rather myth—this is Ferraris' core criticism of postmodernism. And this myth is then exploited in populist terms. This accusation makes particular sense when considered in the political climate of Berlusconi's Italy. But what is open to question, however, is the degree to which postmodernism and deconstruction are to blame for this state of affairs. Ferraris concedes that the best postmodernists pursued a project of emancipation—precisely by *not* producing new myths.⁷ Nevertheless, he stands by his accusation, seeing the repercussions of an anti-Enlightenment romanticism that reached its highpoint in Nietzsche's critique of positivism and the statement that "facts are just what there aren't, there are only interpretations."⁸ Ferraris starts by declaring an end to the linguistic turn. He positions a "New Realism" as its counterpoint, founded on a return from language to experience and perception. At the same time, he demands that the role of epistemology be limited, and urges a return to ontology—advocating a theory of Being in place of a theory of knowledge. Perception and Being take center stage. One might suspect that Ferraris is calling for a return to phenomenology, possibly a blend of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception and Heidegger's ontology. But this is not at all the case; Ferraris is on a different page altogether. For Ferraris, the categories of perception and experience are simply terms that describe unscientific access to the real world (whereas in phenomenology, they are also the founding principles of science). Water makes things wet, argues Ferraris, no matter how you choose to understand the concept of "water." He then takes it a step further—to ontology. Water is H₂O, *independently* of the origins of chemistry.⁹ This is the world: it was always thus and always shall be, regardless of the philosophical or conceptual efforts undertaken to grasp it. This is true Being, independent and therefore extrinsic to us: the eternal world of objectivity.

Herein lies the crux of his position. He distinguishes between the inner world, i.e. the world of subjectivity and interpretation (which is, to a certain unspecified degree, also divided, i.e. social), and an outer world of objectivity and materiality. Dreams and myth are separate from reality and truth. As opposed to a position along the lines of Descartes and Kant that finds truth *in cogito*, or in categories established *a priori*, for Ferraris, truth and reality lie in the inevitability and *immutability* of the objective world and its autonomous laws. Plain and simple. And the various examples he marshals to substantiate his position are just as simple: water makes things wet, fire burns, a shoe is a shoe—regardless of one’s opinion on the matter. This is as plain as day—as obvious as the difference between subjectivity and objectivity.

Before the story gets complicated, however, first a few words about the specific role of materiality in New Realism. Material is unambiguously lumped together with objectivity. And the material absorbs certain aspects of what is typically relegated to the realm of subjectivity. For Ferraris, language too has a material side, which he calls “documentality.” Documentality ranges from written contracts, to bytes stored on a hard drive, to human neurons that store physical records of memories. Documentality is a matter of pure, material objectivity. The way Ferraris describes it, it is no relational phenomenon, i.e. one that first arises through a network, a contact (with other things), or a use. It is what it is. Static and immutable—this is precisely what constitutes the true objectivity of documentality.¹⁰ Yet language is not entirely subsumed into this materiality; it also shapes the sphere in which inscriptions are made, a sphere that is the basis of social constructs, the aforementioned contracts, memories, and similar things. Outside of this sphere, constructionist arguments are not valid. Within this sphere, they are still anchored to material, and limited in their scope.

This is how Ferraris separates spheres of influence and creates the basis for his “Treatise on Eternal Peace” between constructionist and realist perspectives.¹¹ The objective world is purified of construction, deconstruction, and subjectivity. It is independent and unalterable. The subjective and constructed world is contracted, its scope is greatly limited, and it remains dependent upon the objective world.¹² The subjective world retains its own domain and its own objects of consideration. It should concern itself with this and *only* this—then we shall have our eternal peace. The border is a very clear line.

Painful, hybrid, changeable

But the answer posited by New Realism is not the only possible response to postmodernism. The material turn (and the spatial turn before it) in the social sciences has a different history, its own history. Until the 1990s, material, things, and built space didn’t stand very high on the list of things to analyze for the “political” camp of the postwar years. When the former doyen of urban sociology in Germany, Hartmut Häußermann, declared in his urban sociology lectures that the way something was built didn’t matter—all that mattered were the actors and the way the thing was used—it was a challenge. A challenge, however, that fell on deaf ears amidst the new generation of students, a generation raised with a justifiable and specifically German aversion to anything invoking blood and soil, space and bodies. The emphasis on stones and bones reeked of the reactionary, and was positioned as the opposite of considerations that held discrimination, inequality, and persecution as social constructions. Criticizing categories of race and gender were two of the major emancipatory projects. From this perspective, the emphasis on space, the body, and materiality suggested uncanny similarities to Heidegger—or worse.

Still, the empirical world speaks its own language. The unease generated by a shiny new world of consumption, a world in which every available cranny of the urban environment has been subjected to promotional, consumerist design, has cast attention on the social controls embedded in the materiality of the built world. How does the sensual design of our tangible environment

influence our perception and our behavior? Where does control begin, and where does it end? How important is a wall, a display, a lighting scheme? The materiality of the world penetrates our senses, our being, and our thinking—either unconsciously or not. Yet the question of consciousness is not the crucial question here. The primary question concerns the creation of effects, atmospheres, and shells—the question of efficiency and its limits. Here, the distinction between subject and object is not in the foreground. A clear division may be easier to manage, yet one social and theoretical fact cannot be dodged: the world has become plural. This situation has been a long time in coming, but postmodernism exposed it more so than any movement before. There is no longer any single theory to explain everything. There is a multiplicity of options, reasons and motivations, limitations and obstacles. Whoever wants to grasp the world cannot retreat behind this multiplicity and its corresponding multiplicity of relations and hybrid mixtures—that road leads back to the illusion of a simpler world.

This is also demonstrated in the different domains in which materiality has become increasingly relevant. In feminist research, bodies and sex have entered into a dynamic dialogue with gender; since the 1980s, science and technology studies have examined hybrid networks in which both things and concepts intermingle. Geography (primarily in the English-speaking world), and urban studies to a certain extent, have become realms for testing new theories and adapting theories from other disciplines; economics examines material flows; the phenomenology of the body coupled with sensuality and materiality is gaining popularity; and arts and culture have seen a shift in focus from signs to dirt and bodies, from the clean look of the digital to the weathered effect of analog production. As the last example proves, the new, the postmodern, is not rejected outright, at least not always and everywhere. New and old, digital and analog intersect, intermingle, and generate each other reciprocally.

On the theoretical level, this can be grasped through the concept or the experience of absence. Absence is a foundational concept of deconstructionism for Derrida: the sign reveals the absence of the signified. Writing is characterized by a relationship of absence.¹³ In this view, our rational access to the world is entangled in a relationship that is not material, but rather one defined by pure relationality and imagination. Absence and the trace are the fulcrums where the long lever of deconstruction sets to work turning the world upside down. However, absence is also the element that characterizes ruins—concrete sites of decay.¹⁴ What was once there is gone today—weathered, covered with mold, plants, and wildlife, cut through with rust and dangerous and foul-smelling chemical processes. Absence shows itself here in an uncontrollable and dynamic *mélange*, in which every component influences and alters the others. The result is not always beautiful; it can be dangerous and even painful, but it also represents a playground for experimenters, a niche for the deviant, a retreat for the excluded. And thus does the corporeal, the material, enter into the experience of absence itself, into its particular presence. In order to experience something as absent, this absence must be rooted in the corporeality of the one experiencing it. The stronger the root, the deeper is it anchored in one’s being, and the stronger the experience of absence.¹⁵ This is exemplified by the gravitational force that can be unleashed by a visit to a loved one’s grave—a force so great that a mourner risks being torn away by an undertow of grief and dragging pain. The disappearance of a building from one’s childhood might be entirely incidental, attract scant attention—but it can also open up an abyss and cause experiences from one’s past to resurface. The spirits called forth are undoubtedly located in our embodied experiences, experiences imprinted within us to a greater or lesser degree, and in our very relationship to the world. It is once again the mixture of what is, or what *was*, corporeal, material—that which has left behind traces in us—and the lack, the very absence of this confrontation. The resistance of things we might sense is simply not there. The border between the objective and subjective is a blurry, liminal zone: the realm of contact, encounter, friction, and exchange.

Movement and sense

To pursue this metaphor further: the event does not stop at the border between the objective and the subjective; it crosses over and creates hybrid mixtures. For this very reason, such mixtures are threatening and should best be contained. Migrants, goods, emissions, animals, materials—all traverse steadily back and forth, deep into other territories. Everything is in movement. This doesn't mean that all these movements and hybrid mixtures are necessarily fine and good things. It only means that they exist, and that the *mélange* in which we live, write, plan, and build is complex and full of surprises—painful and pleasant surprises, beautiful and ugly surprises, productive and destructive surprises. If we want to be realistic, we must accept these hybrids and the challenges they pose. It can be helpful to create distinctions in order to impose some order on the complexity. In any case, it is necessary to grasp things and materials *as such*, and not only as figments of the imagination. Catchwords like Ferraris'—friction, affordance,¹⁶ resistance—can be supplemented with others like turbulence, migration, and decay. What is crucial is that the sanctity of the separation, like that between subject and object, is only seen as an aid, a crutch, or a cracked magnifying glass that reveals some things but obscures others—making one thing possible, but complicating something else. The theoretical or material crutch should not determine what is and is not important; instead, it should reveal itself by confronting the problem at hand and everything and everyone involved—be they humans or things, social contracts or natural laws, new or old, individuals or groups. Such processes have a sense. This sense is not found only in an idea. However, it is also not found in a mere thing, or in a collection of neurons. This sense is a direction, a movement tending toward a complex *mélange*—like the hands of a clock freed from their orbit. In this context, the orientation toward materiality makes sense. The materials used for the replica of the Chancellor's Bungalow within the German Pavilion, materials that convey the same impression as the original building materials, allow for a collision of different experiential spaces, and interrupt the sense of movement that otherwise carries the visitors through the pavilion. It is thus less about authenticity, or the aura of an original in contrast to stale reproductions, and more so about the way corporeal or bodily experience unfolds in the movement across space—about the encounters, frictions, horizons, and turbulences it bears in its wake.

1 "Participating countries will engage a single theme—Absorbing Modernity: 1914–2014—and will show, each in their own way, the process of the erasure of national characteristics in favor of the almost universal adoption of a single modern language and a single repertoire of typologies." Rem Koolhaas, "Fundamentals," *La Biennale di Venezia*, accessed April 17, 2014, www.labiennale.org/en/architecture/exhibition/koolhaas.

2 Susanne Hauser, "Ephemeres und Monumentales. Versuch über Materialität und Architektur im 20. Jahrhundert," *Wolkenkuckucksheim*, accessed March 29, 2014, www.tu-cottbus.de/theoriederarchitektur/Wolke/deu/Themen/011/Hauser/Hauser.htm.

3 In this respect, glass plays a unique role as a building material. Transparent to light, glass functions to produce both visibility and effects like smoothness and reflection, thus alternating between transparency and power, openness and repulsion.

4 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge Classics, 2001). First French edition, 1967.

5 Maurizio Ferraris, *Manifest des neuen Realismus* (Frankfurt/Main: 2014). An English translation will be published under the title: Ferraris, *Manifesto of New Realism*, trans. Sarah De Sanctis (New York: SUNY Press, forthcoming). First Italian edition, 2011.

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6 *Ibid.*, 16. Our own translation from the German.

7 Ferraris goes even further, writing that these greats (especially Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault) later recognized and struggled against the mistakes and/or undesired effects of their work. Foucault's last lecture series, for example, was entitled "The Courage of Truth." *Ibid.*, 79–81.

8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner, trans. Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 139.

9 Ferraris, *Manifest*, 30.

10 Maurizio Ferraris, "Documentality," lecture at the Italian Academy (2006): 11, academiccommons.columbia.edu/download/fedora_content/download/ac:130534/CONTENT/paper_fa06_Ferraris.pdf. He also presents a nation's identity as a material phenomenon located in documents: "It should be clear then, that the identity of Poland is not founded on its molecules. The identity of Poland is founded on treaties, written records, formal agreements, which all have the interesting feature of having signatures at the bottom of their pages" (*ibid.*, 8). Thus, he believes a country's identity is not contained in its territory, geography, or the people living there (not to mention their attitudes, emotions, or convictions).

11 Ferraris, *Manifest*, 66.

12 Even the intentionality, the basic categories, and the assumptions of Husserl's phenomenology are attributed to the objective sphere in the final instance. It is simply an increasingly complex mathematical equation that ultimately generates intentionality. *Ibid.*, 65–66.

13 Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena. And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). First French edition, 1967.

14 Caitlin DeSilvey, "Observed Decay: Telling Stories with Mutable Things," *Journal of Material Culture* 11 (2006): 318–338. Tim Edensor, "Waste Matter: The Debris of Industrial Ruins and the Disorder of the Material World," *Journal of Material Culture* 10 (2005): 311–332.

15 Lars Frers, "The Matter of Absence," *Cultural Geographies* 20 (2013): 431–445.

16 The term "affordance" coined by the American cognitive psychologist James Gibson refers to the "action possibilities" of objects, i.e. an object's useful properties. James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979).