

A CONVERSATION
ABOUT A TALK
THAT NEVER HAPPENED

DIEDRICH
DIEDERICHSEN

In the framework of Resonance, an exhibition of the Goethe-Institut New York curated by Rivet and work by Agency, Faivovich & Goldberg and weareQQ, Diederich Diederichsen was invited to deliver a talk that would tackle some issues of object-oriented thinking within the arts, as well as considering the potential for resonance among entities relevant to contemporary practice (human, non-human, animate or inanimate).

Because of Hurricane Sandy, Diederichsen's talk had to be cancelled, but this change of plans led to a conversation between Diederichsen and the curators, Rivet (Sarah Demeuse and Manuela Moscoso), about the topics he had planned to bring forward. What follows is a dialogue primarily based on Diederichsen's original presentation. This booklet, produced with the swift collaboration of design studio Project Projects, will participate, in lieu of the talk, as an additional voice among the artworks on display at the Goethe-Institut Wyoming Building in New York City for the remainder of the exhibition.

RIVET (early summer 2012, in Berlin): *Because of your expertise in contemporary practice and your consideration of art and objecthood, as well as your research into a larger cultural framework that delicately reckons with philosophy as well as with mass phenomena, we're keen on hearing more from you about the current move towards object-oriented thinking. Over the last two years, we've focused on recent propositions by theoreticians such as Isabelle Stengers, Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, and Levi Bryant, all of whom aim at annulling the strong distinction between subjects (human and animate) and objects (non-human and often inanimate). We believe there may be something to their approach, especially when considering the field of artistic practice and knowledge production. Where do you see the relevance or potential of more object-centered thinking when analyzing contemporary art phenomena? How would you approach "objects" in a more expanded sense?*

DIEDERICHSEN (late fall 2012, from Berlin to New York): I like to start with the idea that objects store the time that was necessary for their production. Think of all kinds of objects. In order to conceive this parallel, one has to think about how things make other things over time. One also has to consider whether there are things that can regain the time that was spent making them by some kind of unmaking or *reading out*.¹ The energy economy illustrates this last consideration. That is, over a gigantic time span, the pressure of earth masses produces so-called natural resources like oil. After the application of human and machine labor upon the crude oil, you can fill your car and then exponentially accelerate your speed, as measured against your walking speed. As such, oil and other energy resources function like media of art and semio-production. Like them, energy resources give back what has been invested in them; enormous pressure turns into multi-purpose energetic force in a transformed way.

¹ "Reading out" is a literal translation of the German *auslesen*. Diederichsen uses it to refer to the ability of an entity to be exported and morphed into other media. (Editor's note)

In short, time spent by tectonic forces returns as a component of industrial and post-industrial traffic and movement production.

The so-called Labor Theory of Value as developed by Adam Smith and David Ricardo (and, of course, criticized and reformulated by Karl Marx) compares time units with units of value, on the one hand, and with units of advantage, or “usages,” on the other. In Marx’s version it is important that abstract labor, and not actual labor, generates value. For him, it is the abstraction from all actual labor processes in the generation of exchange value that generates value within the capitalist system. An average of socially necessary labor is the measure and, because only humans can be paid less than the equivalent of what they have produced, the proportion of living labor equals the degree of surplus value that can be generated.

So, in other words, could we say that all human- and non-human-made objects can store time and regain time, but that there are fundamental distinctions between human and non-human labor that we should take into account? In this sense, could your reading be expanded to include other “makers,” possibly closer to what Bruno Latour would call “actants,” whose effects come about through assemblages with others rather than through a singular entity “making” a particular something that is completely independent from it?

In the spirit of object-oriented philosophy, let’s apply the theory of labor to other entities. Why shouldn’t we describe the production of geological matter as an investment of time by one “actant” (heavy stones, for example) into a production, which eventually produces oil or an earthquake? Here, of course, the investments of time are very large and verge on the border of incomparability. Similarly, the life span of the involved “actants” is much longer than those of human laborers. It may even be pointless to talk of “life spans,” since the entities in question don’t know death; they only experience transformation. One could easily counter

this idea by pointing out that it leads to a complete dissolution of the category of labor, especially in the Marxist sense. Here, all kinds of forces constantly work on countless other forces. Nevertheless, non-human work, as a concept, is attractive. And this for two reasons: one is due to the history of non-human labor in the Visual Arts; the other is because a focus on objects will redefine or specify my vantage point as an observer of processes. I’m interested in this singling out of distinctive objects that would allow one to follow them back through various stages of their production to their past (even if an absolute point of origin is as indefinable as in the chain of production of art objects and art skills).

And what about the particularities of “making” in the arts? Would it follow the same general pattern?

Again, let’s start by imagining an object, beyond its concrete physical existence, as the more or less durable recording or storage of all those processes in time that were required for its production. When Robert Morris made a technical recording of the sound of making an object and then incorporated the recording into it, he limited himself to the acoustic traces of the manual production of a wooden box (*Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961). The time someone spent learning the skills of the craft necessary to make it is equally part of the time crystallized in a given object. An object therefore not only “contains” the time it took to produce, but also the time it took to produce the producers (i.e., through education, training, cultural construction, and so forth). And, if we want to be precise, the work also contains the time it took to produce the institutions that produced these producers.

Can you specify this aspect a bit more, and elaborate on the types of making and storage principles you see at work in contemporary art?

The arts know four primary methods of making objects in this sense. The first would be the technical recording of a practice, such as music or dance, that is not itself

object-oriented. Here, a sound or image recording stands in as the object-like product of a time-based artistic activity. Beyond solely being contained in the object, that activity may even be (though not without some degradation) reproduced or parts may be read out from it. It has long been possible to further process, montage, and layer these recordings—actions that would mean crossing back to the side of the sculptural operation, whose temporal dimension, as a time of montaging and layering, doesn't lend itself to being read out.

In the second method, the object is the end and product of a purposive activity that, unlike the sound recording or the video documentary, cannot be brought back to life once production is complete—think, for instance, of a sculpture. Writing musical scores is an activity of this sort as well. The score's own temporal dimension will not be read out; instead, it is the temporal dimension of a performance implementing the instructions of the score that may be read out using the first method. One may, for instance, spend a lifetime working on a ten-second composition.

A third (and the least object-like) method is the product of artistic learning processes in living people such as musicians or actors and depends on body memory, memorization, mastery of techniques, symbols, thought styles, etc. This method represents a sort of living abstraction. That is, acquired knowledge abridges previously time-consuming activities, but only after the individual has invested time into learning, which has allowed him or her to abstract from the time-consuming activity. Only institutions that disseminate knowledge and skills can turn such an activity into something stable and object-like and ensure that it will be passed on.

There is another, fourth form of producing an object that contains works of art and/or the time required for their production: the juridical form. Here, one defines the time (or part of the time) the work requires as the object of an agreement and as an action regulated by law or stipulation. Moreover, one also defines by way of an agreement and a legally binding obligation the future time and fate of the work, no

matter how the recording of past time was initially made. Indeed, even living people and fragile situational constellations involving humans and other participants may be contractually defined, represented, and *determined* in forms that are fairly object-like. Users of this means of production in contemporary art have ranged from Yves Klein to Tino Sehgal.

Your focus on making inevitably leads to the question of exchange, and begs us to consider the notion of the commodity.

All four types of objects or aggregations of past time and labor time share the ontological and material basis which makes it possible for the time spent on their production to become compatible with the commodity form. All four types of transformed time may in turn be exchanged for money, which may subsequently indeed be said to read out time. It is well known that time can be bought, particularly the time of others, while we can only buy our own time indirectly. Only money (and, with a great deal of constructive effort, exchange) will make the storage medium return what was put into it—time. This is how the concept of storage makes sense.

Time bought but not adequately remunerated is a familiar part of everyday life in capitalism. In fact, without this use of people selling their time, surplus value would not come into existence. Due to the dominance of exchange value over use value under capitalism, certain methods of transferring, aggregating, and storing time are superior to others in the eyes of exchange-value pragmatists, who prefer those methods that abstract the differences between the objects. Exchange-value pragmatism by and large tends toward abstraction, and has not only generated money but also container ships and the white cube. While both represent lesser stages of abstraction than money, they do point in the same direction.

And how do you see this abstraction of time taking place in the white cube?

Objects made according to the second method, i.e., spatially extended things of all sorts, may be symbolically stacked on the inside of the white cube, just as the containers of the container ship allow for its contents to be stacked. In both cases, the contents enter the same currency. Thanks to the extended model of the objectivization of time in art production, which turns the past and future time stipulated in juridical objects into stackable art, an expansion of the commercial exploitation of artistic production appears on the horizon. Those who spend the money in the private-sector economy of the visual arts have gradually learned to recognize and appreciate non-object-like “objects” as suitable and exchangeable storage media of living labor time. For their part, the physical storage media of skills and abilities suffer from the increasing scarcity of government funds and the subsequent devitalization of educational institutions and venues for music, dance, performance art, theater, etc. It would therefore not be surprising if both forms of objects played a diminished role in the future. White cubes—including those white cubes camouflaged as something else called “a project”—and binders full of contracts, on the other hand, will probably have a great future, because they assemble objects on which private individuals spend money (and which they may also liquidate again, perhaps to spend on prestigious urban architecture that bears their own name) and because they don’t depend on paying audiences or on technical reproduction or public funding. This is true even though works of art that take the form of a contract rarely reveal their status as objects—or, if they do, they do so with a nostalgic nod to conceptual art, to whose administrative aesthetic we indeed owe several techniques of the contemporary contractual form.

This seems to suggest that the making process doesn't end with exhibiting the work, but rather that value continues to accrue, even while work is stored.

Let’s look at collecting. Normally it is assumed that the up and down of the market value of an art work after it has been sold follows other rules than value generated

by labor. It may also be objected that collectors collect on the basis of what is rare or of rare quality, rather than how much work something took to make. But no: they collect what took a great deal of work to make, and this in qualitative and quantitative terms; they do look for good artistic work, on the one hand, and the work of classifying good art, on the other. Value comes into being through human labor. This is no less true for the value of the rare object. Nothing is absolutely rare; what is rare is only so because it must be regarded as culturally relevant. The idea of rarity conceived as an absolute merely covers up another activity, one that is highly specialized and therefore used to be expensive: the activity of ascribing relevance, of distinguishing relevant from irrelevant rarity. Because everything is rare, even the dirt under my fingernails. Only the highly educated art-collecting waste manager, who hasn’t received any explanation from that chain of ascribers of relevance, doesn’t know yet that he needs a contract assuring him of the rights to this dirt. But by no means do I want to repeat here the old anti-modern-art argument that the status of art in contemporaneity is nothing but a scam in which intellectual windbags sell lemons to credulous, well-heeled clients. Quite the contrary: in my opinion, this selling of lemons and this ascription of relevance are in no way haphazard operations. In fact, they must refer to qualities that are verifiably present. And by bringing some meaningful order to the confusing mass of objects produced, they put a finishing touch on these art commodities. This operation of assigning relevance has become ever more important and more expensive, and is ultimately responsible (even more so than the activities of the notorious assistants) for ensuring that prices rise quickly and profit margins more quickly still. And many of us engage in this highly specialized operation for free. For instance, an article, or a lecture, is part of our relevance-ascribing production, but more importantly, we partake in this operation in the places where, and to the degree to which, we are the *art world*. Because it is not so much the experts who ascribe relevance to the art objects, but rather the visible presence of beautiful, important, authentic, and otherwise desirable living

people at parties and in social networks associated with the production and presentation of art that now takes care of this ascription. In the age of the contract, our activity has become even more significant because, like so many components of contemporary production and of contemporary cultural production in particular, it is deregulated. Contracts capture the results of deregulated relations without needing to determine the processes themselves.

So we all put in our time, whether we know it or not. Does this also mean that the artwork is primarily a commodity?

In the arts, the achievement of higher degrees of abstraction is often known as progress. This is not a fallacy. With the contractual form, infinitely complex and far-reaching objects or processes may be defined as coherent entities that no physical format or form could ever contain. This can be seen as progress in artistic complexity, but also as providing new tools of marketability and exchange. Thus it seems to support the suspicion that progress in abstraction is progress in the dominance of the commodity form. But works of art, however, are always two things at once, social facts according to the social order they are produced in, including commodities—and at the same time autonomous objects resisting exchange.

This resistance also protects the works from being read out at will, and insists on the fact that they contain something concrete that dialectically recaptures the abstraction. This concrete “something” must relate to the recipients and to their time. In most cases money is read out only as the time of others, whose labor and time spent on it are bought. Aesthetic experience, by contrast, relates to its own time and its openness, and not to the openness of a juridical form that has, moreover, increasingly lost its other storage formats. Once these other models of time storage have been utterly devalued and liquidated, the temporal forms of reception will atrophy as well. What will then remain of the “great artistic freedom” that the contractual form seemed to promise is nothing but the juridical framework and the coherence it enables.

How do you understand this notion of openness? That is, does it come from, or imply, this non-human participation in the processes of “making” that you previously described?

The openness is exclusively in the experience, but sometimes art works find metaphors for the potentially enormous openness of aesthetic experiences in their own production processes. Art responded historically to the total separation of subjects and objects into two unbridgeable concepts. At one crucial point it came up with two sometimes contrasting, sometimes even overlapping, movements: Conceptual Art, and Earthworks or Land Art. Land Art somehow seems an antagonistic reply to the Duchampian or conceptualist artist’s giving up the idea of the material or materiality. At the same time, it can also be seen as the application of conceptualism onto the work of the earth or onto the various working objects implied in it. At least some strand of Land Art emphasizes exactly this—enormous weight and huge time spans exerted by object-subjects working on their material object.

In the past, artists have used materials on which natural forces have worked as well—be they wood, iron, or oil—but they have subsequently applied human skills to them. These skills, consisting of memorized and/or abstracted time of learning, plus their storage in the brain and in the body, serve to emphasize the difference between human refinement and the raw and rough materiality, the heaviness, and the ancient, fossil character they would find in certain wood, steel or marble. In some earth works, these qualities are separated from the human touch—or, at least, such was the goal of some work. It tried to single out the objects made by other objects or the earthiness made by components of the earth. One can look at this tendency in relation to recent political developments; consider how Ecuador has granted constitutional rights to nature. To be sure, a mechanism stipulating how nature or elements of nature may use these rights has yet to be implemented—but that, I believe, will be comparable to an artist designing or constructing the circumstances under which the works of nature or earth become comprehensible or visible.

In such works it is obvious that the time invested in the production of, for instance, sand or dirt or a salt lake responds to the general construction of the aesthetic experience (think of works by Robert Smithson and the like). The experience of aesthetic time as time of one's own is measured against the imaginary time of the construction or performance of what one experiences. In the case of a telluric or tectonic production, this imaginary time is, of course, enormous.

Yet, here it seems that, even though the awareness of this other "maker" is crucial, you do insist on a distinction between the human and the non-human.

Reception as a concept is built on human experiences, but the concept can be extended. Anyway, the content or trigger of the aesthetic experience of a Smithson piece, for example, resembles the two versions of the Kantian sublime: both concern inadequacies between the object and the receiving subject. In this sense, they would be rejected by strictly object-oriented thought and Latourianism, particularly because of the anti-Kantian character of all the anti-correlationism associated with the larger branch of Speculative Realism. The mathematical sublime—the experience that my intellectual faculties are capable of grasping mathematical facts beyond my imagination, such as infinite numbers—is as involved in such kind of experience as is the second form of the sublime, the dynamic sublime, which deals with the inadequacy between fear and reason, the gaze into an abyss, which I force myself to endure through willpower until I experience the sublimity of that willpower.

So the question remains: How can earthworks, endless bass drones by SunnO))), or cinematographic desert images become models for experiences of the non-distinctness of the natural and the mental world when they are, as a genre, so entangled with the very establishment of this distinction?

If we could momentarily suspend this "experience" angle: Do you think one could approach art as an

actor-network in the Latourian sense? That is, as an entity that comes about through continuous translations between "actants," that is not finished at exhibition, and that may, from a certain angle, act as commodity, but which is, in fact, much more due to the multiplicity of relations it assembles.

The reading out of time of objects in every possible way as described in the beginning in relation to art works is only successful if we single out specific objects. It is impossible to perceive or measure gigantic processes, which involve in a highly complex manner all kinds of natural forces. One can, however, look at a single object, or at a single handful of objects, and experience that inadequacy that we know to be at the heart of the experience of the sublime. Here, it would no longer be an experience of artifacts and human labor or one of nature in general and its unspecific vastness, but rather of a specific inadequacy which could involve all kinds of objects. It is, in other words, possible to match single natural or non-artificial objects and other objects, among them recipients, in the same way one can match artifacts and other objects, among them recipients. In this sense, one could overcome the separation of the beautiful and the sublime as well as the difference between aesthetics of art and aesthetics of nature.

In most relations this matter is of little or no consequence to the functioning of relations between objects. But maybe it is in the case of the aesthetic relation (in and outside of art) concerned with the perception, comparison, and confrontation of highly different time relations that surface in the reality of production and reception time, in the projection of imaginary reception time and real time between all participants of the relation, and in economic terms and terms of surplus value, etc.

But I am not sure if aesthetic relations are more complex or contain more multiplicities than other relations. The fact that art is conceived according to ideas like meaning or anti-meaning, surprise and familiarity, effect and withdrawal, and so on leads to relations as conceived by humans in a specific tradition, which will actually limit the possible

relations. The art world and the aesthetic domain are in fact notorious for cutting relations in order to purify experiences. The white cube, the tools of abstraction and containment, which I mentioned earlier, participate in cutting off relations. But I think it is possible on the level of experience, or any other act of comparison and confrontation, to bring certain selected specific relations to attention.

And where would this leave the commodity as mentioned previously? In this context, how important is it that an art work is (or remains) a commodity?

My sketch of temporal inadequacies in aesthetics, on the one hand, and in economy and commodity culture, on the other, is based among other things on the assumptions that things are at least, among other things, commodities: being a commodity is the dominant storage principle and principle of temporal inadequacy, and inadequacy can practically always be turned into a commodity. They are, in other words, produced according to the law of value. If we leave behind the strong Marxist notion which insists that every commodity is fully characterized by the dominance of exchange value over use value, we might still argue that commodities might be other things too—a piece of art, or a coat that actually keeps you warm, isn't simply the dead, frozen former living labor turned into exchange value, but rather several things at once. My proposition certainly differs from those sociologies of objects, like Latour's, which refute the reduction of things to their commodity character and likewise refute the reduction of owning things to a symbolic or exchange value as well as to the strategies connected with status and symbolic capital. In the context of our conversation, I am not at all interested in symbolic capital and status, because I do not see any intrinsic relation between the object that guarantees status and the way it was produced: symbolic capital and status are based on arbitrarily selected objects. Only the work is important, the professional living labor of selecting the object that is valid for a certain period—not the content or the making of that symbol.

I am interested in objects and their specificities as containers of time; this includes all kind of objects, but the dominant methodology of containing and releasing time is the commodity form.

Let's finish by going back to the central theme of our exhibition: According to you, how can an object resonate?

I'm not sure whether it can. The law of value, when applied here, seems to describe a state of non-resonance. If acting is indeed some kind of use, or some kind of contact with the result of time spent in order to produce a usable entity, and if commodity character is the result of time withheld or unpaid from the production of the usability in order to heighten the marketability of the commodity, then we should be able to say (not in the absolute, but relatively) that the commodity character of a thing precludes it from participating in the democracy of objects, similar to the degree that capitalism has always been a hindrance to more conventionally humanist ideas of democracy.

The inadequacies of temporalities, real and imagined, in the resonance of art objects and other objects in the realm of aesthetics seems to overcome this problem, precisely because the idea of aesthetics seems to implement inadequacies as a quality.

This sounds very much like a rerun of older pre-object-oriented problems, which may have something to do with linguistic habits and the gravity of dear old metaphors, but it may also point to something more serious, something about the persistence of capital and capitalism which renders democracy at least partly impossible, no matter whether its participants are conceived as objects or as other entities.

And an Anecdotal Coda

I recently spent a weekend at a conference in Milan, Italy. As every visitor to the city does, I visited the famous all-marble cathedral, which was built over several centuries. Marble presents a perfect case in point for the presence of the time of Earth-work in human work. The marble cathedral stands as a fantastic constellation or co-presence of these different time orders, the human and the terrestrial, and it is, not insignificantly, also testimony to a very long human production process spanning many generations and human life spans. Aesthetically very concentrated, the building demonstrates its abilities and achievements in relation to the marble. Notably, marble comes about through a so-called "contact metamorphosis" at a minimum of 400 degrees centigrade and at huge pressure inside the Earth. Before anyone can sculpt or belabor the marble, it needs to cool down for several thousand years. I do not know whether the marble in the cathedral of Milan is petrographically correct marble—there are several minor or artificial marbles viewed as fake or bastard by the petrographic community. But the abundance of sculptural and decorative artwork at the front of the church still stands for the confrontation between Earth-work and human work.

It's from the tower of the Museo Novecento, the Museum of Art of the 20th century, that one has the best view of this façade. The museum is home to a great collection of Italian modernism, especially in relation to the city of Milan, and also specializes in media art of the 1960s. A very ambitiously constructed top section consists of two floors converging in a large hall with a window slightly higher than the cathedral. This window offers a great view of the cathedral's front, its right side, and the piazza. A large neon sculpture by Lucio Fontana, which is installed on the ceiling of that large room, reflects in this same window. These large, white, curvy neon lines seem to run like a kinetic corona over the cathedral's marble front, congregating marble with electricity, stone with gas, ancient with contemporary—all in the name of the local tradition of which Fontana is, according to the narrative of the

museum installation, the zenith, the prince. Behind the neon sculpture, on the other side of the room with the view of the cathedral, stands a cabinet with works by Fontana. This entire construction seems to demonstrate the harmonic resolution of the completely different, but equally present, time orders of the earth, the human body, craftsmanship, electricity, civilization, humanity, history, and, of course, place and territory. It seems as if commodification and exchange value are completely absent from this arrangement in the old commercial metropolis of Milan. But then you enter the cabinet with the Fontana work and for the first time in the visit to this museum you are somehow disappointed: you've recently seen much more of his work, with much more detail and context exposed and in more luxurious circumstances. *Where was this again?* you ask yourself. And, of course, you remember: It was in New York. It was in the rooms of a private gallery, owned by an art dealer, as part of a commercial presentation of commodities. That's where it was— at Gagosian.

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