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## REALISM TODAY?

OCTAVIAN EȘANU, EDITOR

Once a dominant artistic mode and an epistemological as well as a political perspective, realism was most basically understood as a form of representation, a style, or a pictorial technique capable of revealing the world in its recognizable facticity. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, aesthetic realism held a central position within the progressive artistic and popular imagination. Defined most commonly as the portrayal of beings and things in their plausible verisimilitude or their immediate material and social environment—that is, without embellishment or idealization—realism, in fact, frustrates any attempt to find a satisfactory definition capable of accommodating the great diversity of historical styles and forms subsumed under this term. Any attempt to define realism amounts, perhaps, to an attempt to define reality itself, and may well be at least as complex and difficult—which also explains the existence of diverse and at times radically opposed modes of artistic realism. From the 19th-century French realism of Gustave Courbet, Jean-François Millet, and Honoré Daumier to the Russian *Peredvizhniki* (Wanderers) and Ilya Repin, to the early 20th-century realisms proposed by Russian avant-garde artists and filmmakers, and further to the Socialist Realism; from the affirmative humanist social realism of Georg Lukács, which sought to truthfully reflect objective reality, to Bertolt Brecht's refraction of reality into radical artistic form, to

the sundry derivations, variations, or transformations hailed or denounced as “naturalism,” “photographism,” “verism,” “new objectivity,” “magic realism,” or, more recently, “capitalist realism”—realism, as artistic style and aesthetic worldview, once held the high promise of fully capturing the spirit of the modern age, delivering social justice, educating the masses, and even overcoming capitalist exploitation.

Modern “bourgeois realism” arrived on the historical stage together with industrial capitalism, playing a key role in the construction of bourgeois national identities or proletarian consciousness under various historical regimes. What was once a prevalent form of representation and an effective tool for controlling or educating the masses may have lost much of its universal efficacy and power today. With the crisis of the Western democratic traditions of the welfare state in Western Europe and North America, or the disappearance of “really existing” socialism from Eastern Europe and the USSR, official realist art and aesthetics lost a major source of patronage and power. In the background of various debates dedicated to postmodernity, and more recently to contemporary art, realism—especially the most conservative or naturalistic kind—has arguably been sidelined and marginalized, accused of “ideological” complicities, or declared incapable of revealing the complex truth of the current world. As a result, the lasting ideological standoff between realism and modernism (the main aesthetic and political rivals of the last century) has been dialectically leveled onto the thin surface of postmodernist “depthlessness” (to use one of Fredric Jameson’s tropes); meanwhile, an all-pervasive global entertainment industry has turned the idea of realism on its head, broadcasting and streaming to us higher and higher resolutions and forms of “reality” television.

Yet over the past decade or so, we have witnessed a growing, albeit scattered and sporadic, interest in realism in its many modes. This interest is notable, for example, among contemporary artists who have taken up figurative or reproductive realism, such as the Cluj School in contemporary painting, or in what could be seen as a revival of a more progressive “refractionist” type of Brechtian realism, deployed by such artists’ and curatorial collectives as Chto delat’, WHW (What, How, and For Whom), and the Realist Working Group, or in still another example, a number of Russian contemporary artists whom Boris Groys has recently grouped under the category “Russian post-conceptual

realism.”<sup>1</sup> Discussions of “new” realisms in theoretical and philosophical circles have also caught the attention and imagination of artists, art critics, art historians, and curators seeking answers to their own problems: the nature of representation in the late capitalist “society of the spectacle” and simulacra; the search for new emancipatory strategies; the question as to whether contemporary art could, or should, represent, reflect, refract, or respond to social reality; and the problematic nexus between figuration and political revolution that has been part of the legacy of realism ever since Courbet.

While much attention has been paid in recent years to philosophical realism—especially to speculative realism—and its implications for contemporary art, this roundtable purposefully aims to broaden the discussion to account for more “traditional” and art historical forms and modes of realism, which one can still find at the centers and margins of contemporary artistic and aesthetic debates. Without necessarily favoring or promoting any particular direction—be it mimetic, figurative, social or socialist, critical, or speculative—we are inquiring whether today the renewed interest in various modes of realism is simply another postmodern citation of what the Russian Formalists would have called an “automatized” and outdated historical device, or if it is an indication of the potential for a radical transformation of realism that is taking place at the crossroads of progressive art, culture, technology, and critical theory. We invited our respondents to reflect upon both the history and the present of realism, asking how its various revivals might be regarded as part of a long trajectory of “Western” art and aesthetics, and how such revivals might be triggered by discourses outside of contemporary art. If a new aesthetics of realism were possible, how would it differ from its multiple historical antecedents? Is realism in its various modes an obsolete artistic form or style of the past (like baroque painting or modernist collage) that as such is incompatible with the modes of production and the augmented social reality of late capitalism?

This roundtable has been in the making for a long time. The idea first emerged at the time when artists and critics in the contemporary art world showed profound interest in the so-called “speculative turn”

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1 See the exhibition review “Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art,” in Chris Chang’s “Five Points with Boris Groys,” *Art in America*, February 25, 2015, [www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/previews/five-points-with-boris-groys/](http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/previews/five-points-with-boris-groys/).

and its various manifestations (speculative realism, new-materialism, object-oriented ontologies, and others). Given the editorial direction of the journal, however, we decided to widen the basis of this discussion to include other opinions and beliefs about realism. The questions below were formulated collectively by the members of our editorial team, and the invitations to join this roundtable were sent to a number of practitioners for whom realism has played an important part in their research, thinking, and artistic or scholarly practice. We are very grateful to Dave Beech, Christoph Cox, Sami Khatib, John Roberts, and Marina Vishmidt for agreeing to participate in this roundtable held over electronic mail.

**Is realism in art a *passé* form, style, or aesthetic that has already played out its mediating role (for example, the construction of bourgeois identity through the 19th-century realist novel, or the construction of a communist society through socialism), or does it still hold hope for contemporary society or for the future?**

#### **JOHN ROBERTS**

First, we need to make a distinction between “realism” *as* art and “realism” *in* art: realism as “aesthetics” or “style” and realism as method. Realism as art and realism as aesthetics or style are, of course, defunct as self-rationalizing models, particularly when applied to traditional unilinear and patriarchal modes of literary narrative in the novel, figurative scenic painting, and even conventional cut-and-paste photomontage. They are now academic practices attached to the *doxa* of the faded moments of art’s nonreconciliation with bourgeois society, and as such, are invariably called upon by the left (and the right) to restore some kind of political or cognitive “order” to modern or contemporary debates on aesthetics. Realism *in* art, however, is another matter. Realism in art is the name we give, or should give, to the relationship between artistic form and technique and art’s representation and mediation of contradiction. In this respect, realism is epistemologically a version of modernism, an opening up of form and technique to the nonidentitary, asymmetrical, and aporetic character of social experience and social relations—in other words, the name we give to art’s encounter with, and internalization of, the conflicts, divisions, exclusions, opacities, and hierarchies of the relationship between subject, collective experience, and the social totality. In this it obviously has

some working relationship to the dialectical repositioning of mimetic representation in the early avant-garde (OPOYAZ, constructivism, or surrealist photography); as such, like the early avant-garde, it connects realism with the truth of artistic *form*, as opposed simply to the truth of appearances. Yet if realism in these terms is closer to the quantic than to the “mirror” in that old-fashioned sense, nevertheless, it is not another name simply for “montage,” or “fragmentation” and nonrepresentation, as if all we have to do today is dust down the European post-Dada legacy of art as a nonmimetic kind of realism. On the contrary, if realism is still to mean anything, it must continue to have a critical relationship to the identitary/nonidentitary complexities of representation and, therefore, must be seen as the epistemological core of a defense of the contemporary relevance of the avant-garde, in which the open-endedness of art’s research programs, nonetheless, retains the possibility that art can make the world legible and intelligible other than as an “expression” of the artist’s or artists’ “vision.” This means ridding the critique of realism of the notion that representation is simply *Vertretung* (copying, passive replication, control) as opposed to *Darstellung* (making, productiveness, staging; nonidentity), and therefore rejecting the cognate idea that for realism to be realism it must provide a contribution to the deductive understanding of the world, some nondiscursive truth of things. Art is *fictive* and, consequently, indivisible from the demands of the truth procedures of *Darstellung* as a process of construction. Thus if, realism is a *critical form of Darstellungsmethode*, it is discursive *through and through*; the world—or some part of it—is remade, constructed, on the basis that it is available for signification as a truth-disclosing process.

*John Roberts is Professor of Art and Aesthetics at the University of Wolverhampton.*

### **CHRISTOPH COX**

Realist *philosophical* positions have recently offered rigorous critiques of poststructuralist, postmodernist, and constructivist discourses. Yet the critique of *aesthetic* realism, representation, and mimesis characteristic of these latter theoretical enterprises remains powerful and retains much of its validity. As Nelson Goodman famously pointed out in *Languages of Art*, what we call “realism,” “representation,” “resemblance,” and “imitation” demand something more or other

than “an accurate depiction of the world” (whatever that means). They demand a certain sort of depiction under highly particular and artificial conditions: the presentation of something as it appears to the “normal” eye, in “good” light, from a particular distance, and so forth.<sup>2</sup> A microscopic photograph of my skin cells is unlikely to qualify as a realistic portrait, and to call a meticulously rendered painting of a totally dark room a “realistic” picture would surely be considered a joke. What we call “realism” is learned, fabricated, and constructed rather than given. As Boris Groys has pointed out, “realist” painting, drawing, and sculpture is also paradoxical: such art works present ordinary things under ordinary conditions, but are themselves rather extraordinary, distinguished from everyday utility and, as art works, often protected from the usual fate of ordinary things: decay and dissolution.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, as is evidenced by Komar and Melamid’s certainly cheeky (but also deeply revealing) *Painting by Numbers* project, ordinary people all around the world seem to prefer just this highly learned and constructed form of realism, and to greet with suspicion, disdain, and derision forms of art that fail to satisfy these “realist” conditions.<sup>4</sup> The modernist project that treats such demands for realism as ideological (Adorno, for example) accords with the philosophical critique rehearsed above and remains powerful. Yet it is unclear whether it still has force as a political project.

*Christoph Cox is Professor of Philosophy at Hampshire College.*

## **SAMI KHATIB**

The obsolescence of realism as an artistic style might be measured by its market value and its reception by art critics. As far as 19th-century realism (and its relation to naturalism) is concerned: every historicized style is open to its (post)modern revival and citation precisely because it is historicized and periodized. This might be the case with realism as well, if we consider Italian postwar neorealism. Within the “retro-manic” (Simon Reynolds) logic of postmodernity, it is possible to quote

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2 See chapter 1 in Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976).

3 Boris Groys, *In the Flow* (London: Verso, 2016), 115–20.

4 See Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, *Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid’s Scientific Guide to Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997); and Komar and Melamid, “The Most Wanted Paintings on the Web,” <http://awp.diaart.org/km/index.html>.

realist style elements and employ them in different art practices. Since realism, as an artistic style, is already historicized, it is “at the disposal” of contemporary art and its repertoire of citation. The case of Socialist Realism might be different, since the temporality of its historicization is too exact (October Revolution, Stalinism, end of the Soviet Union) to be cited in a nonlinear, anachronistic way. Put differently, Socialist Realism “belongs” to a certain period hermetically sealed off from today’s dominant age of capitalist realism. Any nonironic reference to Socialist Realism thus invokes an age that is precisely not fully historicized, since its periodization is “too exact”—that is, compulsively enforced and bound to a chronometric timeline. The specter of the past of Socialist Realism still “weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” subjects of contemporary art.

*Sami Khatib is a postdoctoral researcher at the Cultures of Critique research training group at Leuphana Universität Lüneburg.*

#### **MARINA VISHMIDT**

For a consideration of the question of realism’s timelessness, much, of course, will depend on which working definition of realism is adopted from the myriad guises the category has worn in both the historiographic and critical discourses of art. The common-sense, canonized idea of realism has to do with depiction: a realism that applies to a represented content. On the other hand, a less frequently encountered tradition of realism was decisive for the modernist avant-gardes, one that has to do with the form of representation; we could provisionally call this a realism of *conditions*. Within such a terrain we locate gestures that seem to partake equally of realism and of modernist abstraction, such as Kazimir Malevich’s 1915 *Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions* (also known as *The Red Square*), or Viktor Shklovsky’s critical approach of “laying bare the device.” With respect to the latter, we can say that Russian Formalism itself can be identified as a type of realism, insofar as it looks to the materiality of language rather than to language as a mediating screen between the subject and the object. This view of realism would then bestow the term on pretty much any artistic tendency that aims to realistically represent its own means of production, thus precisely opening up a hiatus between reality and representation, especially when abstraction is the mechanism for registering or conveying this reality—the reality



of social abstraction, of “real abstraction” (Sohn-Rethel)—in capitalist societies. Thus, I would suggest that a notion of social realism as a technique that deploys the aesthetic to convey elements of social abstraction, both imaging this abstraction and capturing its contingency, need not be bound by the naturalistic or reflection-bound precepts that often seem to accompany a conventional understanding of realism. Realism can then be rethought, as an approach to social structures that can be mimetic but need not be naturalistic—if a naturalism of abstract social processes is even useful to conceive. Here one could have in mind artistic practices that employ—as “devices”—exchange abstractions familiar from the world of commodity circulation, lease, or finance (Caleb Larsen, Cameron Rowland, Real Flow), as well as narratives that fictionalize and hypothesize extant ways in which social abstraction is redefining human affect, rationality, and biological existence (Harun Farocki, Melanie Gilligan), to give only a small sample here.

*Marina Vishmidt is a lecturer in the Department of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London, where she runs the Culture Industry program.*

#### **DAVE BEECH**

Social realism, Socialist Realism, and the realism versus naturalism debates are no longer active in contemporary art, except as traces. In their old forms, with the emphasis on realism as a mimetic relationship to a world interpreted in various ways, they survive as relics. Contemporary art after the social turn, however, does not confine itself to realism but engages in the real itself. Instead of social realism in artworks, we now have art projects that consist of real social interventions.

*Dave Beech is Professor of Art at Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg.*

**Today philosophers appear to have much to offer to artists on the issues of realism and materialism (as in the so-called “speculative turn”). How relevant is this for a revival of realism in art and a future “realist style”?**

#### **MARINA VISHMIDT**

What is interesting about the resurgence of philosophical realisms and materialisms in recent years, divergent in their commitments and

implications as they have been (speculative realism, neo-rationalism, eliminative materialism, speculative materialism, object-oriented ontology, new materialisms, etc.), is that they very much claim a distance from the range of critical projects that historical literary and artistic realism(s) have advocated. The core issue of speculative realism, in particular, has been framed as an overcoming of the critical project initiated by Kant of drawing the limitations of human knowledge in and of the world (“correlationism”). With this bracketing of the “social”—often conveyed in terms of the exhaustion of semiotic, linguistic, phenomenological, and performative models of theorizing subjective and structural phenomena—comes a preoccupation with “things themselves” and networks of (non)relationality, as in the work of Graham Harman, the ethics of engagement with non-human materiality (Jane Bennett), or an entrancement with “hyperobjects” (Timothy Morton)—all of them avowing a “postcriticality” that favors affirmation and immersion and that theorists such as Benjamin Noys have read symptomatically as part of a (conscious or unconscious) conservative turn in the humanities. Turning to some other realisms (Brassier, Negarestani), we can see tendencies potentially more fruitful for rethinking the challenges of aesthetic realism, particularly in their focus on totalizing frameworks predicated on the constructive faculties of (insufficiently but necessarily historically inflected) concepts of reason, and in Brassier specifically, of concepts of negation that have lately led him to a renewed encounter with the Hegelian corpus.

Thus, the short answer to the question is that, insofar as recent philosophical realisms wholly disavow a project of critique, they advance a commodity fetishism both of thinking and of art that can be accommodated quite well within the postcritical or gestural political milieu of art production for a speculative, data-driven market. On the other hand, to the extent that they have aimed to open up the cognitive, ethical, and institutional premises that subtend art’s relationship to the materiality of its own social, ontological, and institutional existence, and the notions of a relationship to a “real” attendant on those, these approaches have been at times generative. Such premises might include operative if critically disavowed routines of authorship, as well as divisions of labor—the subject-object relations or “support structures” that may reproduce what critically realist artistic projects would thematically reject. However, the relationship of philosophical

realisms to such art institutional routines would be more a matter of application and transfiguration than a straight translation or importation of these concepts, which in the exhibition space often do nothing more than draw lines of attribution and academic legitimacy for artistic propositions. This means that philosophical realisms may have a productive role to play in developing contemporary forms of artistic realism if they are disruptive rather than legitimating for artistic and institutional habits; this also relates to the extent to which they can allow their own philosophical commitments to be put into question by those processes, including certain forms of biophysical or neurological reductionism toward which eliminative materialism in particular gravitates. Here I have in mind, for example, the collaborations between Mattin and Ray Brassier, whereby a negationist project of rationalism and a negationist approach to free improvisation develop a socially experimental dimension through the mutual suspensions produced in their encounter.

#### **SAMI KHATIB**

Here I am not sure whether I agree that philosophers have anything to offer (or pretend to offer) to artists. It's rather the other way around: the system "contemporary art" is structurally in need of attracting, digesting, and catering for "theory." Speculative realism is only one "theory brand" name among others (think of "new materialism," "object-oriented ontology," "accelerationism," etc.). The value of speculative realism as a symptom is less indicative of art (or only in mediated ways, via the hyper-financialization of the art market). It's rather symptomatic of a practical and theoretical deadlock due to hyper-financialized capitalism. I agree here with the succinct analysis of Daniel Spaulding, who re-examined "speculative realism through an Adornian prism to disclose a thought of 'the great outdoors' beyond capital that is very much immanent to a world not only upside down but increasingly inside out."<sup>5</sup>

#### **JOHN ROBERTS**

Speculative realism, today, has obviously revived discussion of the possibility of realism in art in the wake of the collapse of postmodernism and poststructuralism in the academy and the "social turn" in

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5 Quoted from the abstract to Daniel Spaulding's "Inside Out," in the *Mute* journal, October 2015, [www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/inside-out-o](http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/inside-out-o).

contemporary art, which emphasizes action and praxis over and above aesthetic judgment (although this comes on the back of Roy Bhaskar's critical realism from the 1980s and 1990s, which speculative realism seems to studiously ignore; thus, this is hardly a "revival"). Speculative realism as a project, however, has a limited application and value for realism as an avant-garde research program and project of *Darstellungsmethode*. This is the case partly because of its internal incoherence as a philosophical realism (on the one hand, antiscientific Heideggerianism in Graham Harman's writing and that of his followers; on the other, objectivist and antisubjectivist scientism in the work of Quentin Meillassoux and his followers), but also because of the fundamental antidialectical character of its ontology, in which appearances are disconnected from truth. Rather than partial or conflicted sources of knowledge, appearances become fundamentally ideologically corrupt or uncertain, opening up thinking to an indeterminate theoretical speculation. This is the result, of course—particularly in Meillassoux, but also in the philosophy of a companionable thinker such as François Laruelle—of speculative realism's radical postmetaphysical temporalization or fractalization of the object. That is, in either its scientific or antiscientific modes, speculative realism asserts that the only way to truly attack dogmatic metaphysics (or the contemporary "religionizing" of thought in both the sciences and the humanities) is to extend the contingency of appearances to all objects, social and natural, meaning that nature, natural kinds, and the cosmos are—outside of nonhuman timescales—as equally frangible as humanly constructed social systems. In other words, natural kinds may have primary qualities and essences, but these primary qualities and essences can be at some future point *other than they are*. The physical behavior of the earth's moon may one day act in ways contrary to the way we know it "scientifically" now, thereby changing both what the moon *is* and the very laws of nature. There are no necessary forms, natural processes, or vectors of cosmological change.

But if *everything* is contingent, theories and social objects as much as natural kinds (trees, granite, gold, etc.) and the laws of gravity, then something might *not be* contingent; that is, the notion that "everything is possible" (in some extended time frame) might include the possibility that "everything is *not* possible." There is always a possibility of nonpossibility, noncontingency. Consequently, in presupposing

that the nonnecessity of necessity is the answer to dogmatic metaphysics in these terms, rationalist materialism of this stripe is guilty of a “non-dialectical generalization of un-totalizability,”<sup>6</sup> as Frank Ruda puts it—the absolutization of contingency becoming a metaphysical and abstract notion itself, destructive of the continuity necessary for thought, practice, and scientific enquiry. The political, artistic, philosophical, and scientific consequences that emerge from the absolute necessity of contingency, then, are questionable: “everything is possible” is uncoupled from the mediations between contingency, conceptualization, and the real, crucially delinking conceptualization from the dialectical *constraints* of praxis and the production of meaning within *historical* time frames. Speculative realism, admittedly, does not say that because the laws of nature may modify over the long scale, everyday constraints on thinking and practice are merely inconsequential. Yet its emphasis on *speculative* realism nevertheless sets up a certain disconnected mood, in which utopian projects and a certain sci-fi imaginary (particularly in Laruelle) direct thinking beyond the everyday, as if praxis in the real world was an ugly, ideological encumbrance. When speculation trumps dialectics, then, in these terms, it is hard to say that this is realism at all, given that change is abstracted from the realities of *not being able* to freely change the world *as a condition of* changing the world.

#### DAVE BEECH

Realism in philosophy, either in the Bhaskarian tradition of critical or dialectical realism, or in speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, and so on, has a tendency to turn artists back to questions of representation, mimesis, and interpretation rather than action. From the point of view of socially engaged art, realism in philosophy drives a wedge between the artist and the social world. The real is not reducible to epistemological questions about how reality can be conceived, interpreted, or represented. Contemporary art after the social turn is more informed by political theory (including the philosophy of political change) than by various philosophical realisms.

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6 Frank Ruda, “The Speculative Family, or: Critique of the Critical Critique of Critique,” *Filozofski vestnik* XXXIII, no. 2 (2012): 61.

## CHRISTOPH COX

*Philosophical* realism does not seem to me to have any necessary relationship with realism or representation as an aesthetic program. The former declares that reality exists independently of the human mind and its conceptual or linguistic constructions. Even the more radical philosophical position that this mind-independent real can be accurately *apprehended* as it is in itself does not require that it can or must be *depicted* or *pictured* as such, or that, if it could, it would look like, for example, a realist landscape. How would one depict or represent the “Hyper-Chaos” that, according to Quentin Meillassoux, properly describes the world as it is in itself?<sup>7</sup> Or the flows of matter-energy that, according to Manuel DeLanda, constitute the mind-independent world?<sup>8</sup>

As I suggested earlier, I think Boris Groys offers perhaps the most apt proposal for a properly realist art. If one accepts—as Groys, DeLanda, and I do—that the world is fundamentally a profusion of material flows, then a properly realist art would be a form that succumbs to this flow, that affirms its status as event rather than object, as material rather than ideal, and as being subject to decay and dissolution<sup>9</sup>—hence my proposal that sonic art has a leading role to play in a materialist, realist aesthetics.<sup>10</sup> Of course, a flux ontology such as this can account for any and all forms of art—art’s objecthood and preciousness simply indicating a *slowing* of fluid material processes rather than a transcendence of them.

**How relevant are more established aesthetic and philosophical discourses (such as Marxism and dialectical materialism, or social realism and Socialist Realism) for debates on contemporary artistic realism? Can they still help us conceptualize and understand empirical reality or think of ways to shape and construct it?**

## DAVE BEECH

Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845) can be used to track the shift from realism to the real in contemporary art. Here Marx teaches us that previous realisms (the “old materialisms”) have hitherto only interpreted

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7 See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).

8 See Manuel DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Zone, 1997).

9 Groys, *In the Flow*.

10 See my “Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Realism,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 2 (August 2011) and my forthcoming book, *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics*.

the world in various ways, whereas the point is to change it. In doing this, he emphasizes “practical activity” over “contemplation,” and therefore bases his analysis of what we might call the real on the “ensemble of social relations” and not on the (aesthetic or ethical) individual. As such, he assesses the realism of the materialism of philosophy according to its relationship to “revolutionary practice.” While some today have short-circuited this insight to produce artworks and exhibitions that reify the concept of utility and usership (instrumentalizing art in the service of convivial political and civic social programs), the only way for art to be immanently engaged in social change is if it is acknowledged as being always already a form of social action. That is to say, even painting and sculpture have their social institutions, social relations, and social relations of production; hence, art that is truly socially engaged begins by engaging in art’s own social systems. Institutional Critique did this only within the constraints of an identity politics that engaged with the realpolitik of the gallery as a workplace and universal archive, neglecting the wider processes through which art constructs and engages with publics as a component of the public sphere. Art is always already an agent of social change (and a bulwark against social change) because it is part of the wider system in which opinions, judgments, values, and categories are formed and challenged within society. Art therefore contributes to social change not by turning into something else (engineering, design, architecture, etc.) but by becoming a fully active agent in the real daily struggles over meaning. Art enters the real not by becoming more like other things but by entering the world and its disputes.

### **JOHN ROBERTS**

Some version of Marxism and dialectical materialism (based, *pace* Badiou and Žižek, in a psychoanalytically grounded subject)—yes. Social realism and Socialist Realism in their conventional forms—no. However, what is not discountable from any worthwhile account of realism is art’s relationship to narrative: how do we figure, historicize the passage of time? What kind of developmental logic is adequate to emancipatory thought under the repeated crises of capitalism? How might we historicize the unfolding and interlocking dynamic of classes and class struggle? These are all big realist questions that many realist novelists and filmmakers, at the height of realism between 1930 and 1970, considered important. They still have relevance today. But how

the *collective* interests of a class subject fit into this, a hermeneutic familiar from social and Socialist Realism, is less secure; the current atomization of the working class (deftly analyzed recently in *Endnotes* journal)<sup>11</sup> places very different pressures on narrative understanding. More than that, this atomization signifies the critical termination of realism and the mass workers' movement today. This is because realism in its post-avant-garde forms is not about the representation of workers at all. On the contrary, it is about rejecting the system of identity relationships, governed by the production of value, that produces the category "workers" in the first place. In other words, there are no *progressive* representations of workers; rather, what is progressive is when workers speak other than as workers when they are called on to speak *as* workers, *pace* Godard's *Tout va bien*. Then the representation of class establishes a working relationship with its emancipatory dissolution.

#### MARINA VISHMIDT

This seems like a fairly complicated set of questions nested within one another, so perhaps a helpful first move would be to try to tease them apart a little. The history of realism in art cannot be dissociated from histories of social and political critique conducted via mass social movements, institutional change, and progressive tendencies manifesting at the electoral and parliamentary levels across the Global North—and then, with decolonization (very much an ongoing project), everywhere else. The discourses of these historical social movements—revolutionary socialism, social democracy, Marxist-Leninism, Maoism, "third-worldism," but also more "identity"-focused movements, such as women's liberation, black liberation, and gay liberation—have all shaped and produced their own encounters with artistic realism, be it in the gallery or through campaign materials, a genealogy that some would chart from William Blake or Jacques-Louis David onward, others from Gustave Courbet and William Morris. Contemporary approaches to realism are *de facto* engaging with those forms and that debate, or else the category of "realism" would be otiose, unnecessary. If we think of art as a socio-historical phenomenon rather than an elemental, spiritual, anthropological one

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11 See "Unity in Separation," issue 4 of *Endnotes* (October 2015), <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/4>.



(or if we are able to relate how the latter understanding emerges out of the former), then a reflexivity about art's social conditions is at the root of any artistic realism, whatever temporally and spatially specific form it takes.

When we understand the social existence of art in this way—much less such a semiotically dense construction as “empirical reality”—a sort of realism is already part of the picture, inasmuch as reflexivity is integral to contemporary art practices, and inasmuch as this reflexivity has been part of aesthetic philosophy as well as art practice since German Romanticism, as Peter Osborne, among others, has pointed out, and inasmuch as it has been used to frame the condition of contemporary art as *postconceptual*, since it already includes its own critical apparatus within its speculative, material, and performative elements. More concretely, if we subscribe to the core analytic premises of historical materialism—that is, that capitalism is an encompassing social system—rather than following the liberal shibboleths of dividing the social from the political and the economic, these can help us capture the present quite clearly. Fewer and fewer of the mediations that allowed some 20th-century progressive thinkers to imagine that global capitalism could be politically regulated for the common good are still in place. However, it could also be suggested that the illustrative approaches of historical artistic realism have less traction nowadays than they did in the years of the ascendancy of social movements such as the ones briefly cited at the beginning of this response. Contemporary artistic realisms need to take a more performative or “infrastructural” tack in order not to merely reveal, reflect, or educate audiences on “empirical reality” but to emulate aspects of this reality in ways that unhinge the omnipresent fatalism rooted in its violence, thus shaping and constructing it instead. Of course, “making art politically” rather than “making political art” has been a demand of artistic realism since at least the 1960s, if not since the October Revolution. But this always means something different, and it is never self-evident what that should be, not even within defined artistic milieus with wide broadcasting powers, be they European cities or global biennials.

So I would try to tie up these reflections in the following way: yes, these “more established aesthetic and philosophical discourses” of realism are relevant, insofar as history is relevant to our actions in the present per se, and insofar as art is a historical phenomenon; these histories of practice, as well as the bodies of thought that inform them,

in all their colossal historical malfeasances and reverses, are still key to understanding and transforming the present because the domination, exploitation, extraction, racism, and murder that have characterized capitalism as a global system from its inception have escalated in the present and are likely to continue. Which is not to say, as again I indicated at the start of my response, that such historical materialism is at all self-sufficient—we cannot get very far, I would say, without also thinking of biopolitics, decoloniality, gender, and critical race theory—but rather that artistic realisms not only need to take into account, but are not even really legible without, those histories and premises. The apoliticality of most of the “newer” forms of philosophical realisms explored in the previous question would seem to confirm this hypothesis.

#### **CHRISTOPH COX**

As the dialectical materialist Theodor Adorno powerfully argued, all forms of art (“figurative,” “abstract,” etc.) are realist in a basic sense: they arise out of and are shaped by material and social forces that, in turn, can be read through them. At the same time, art can offer resistance to the social conditions from which it arises.<sup>12</sup> As another dialectical materialist, Jacques Rancière, put it, art has the capacity to shift the sensorium, to reorient the distribution of the sensible. Such resistance and redistribution are not unique to any particular form of art-making (“figurative,” “abstract,” etc.) but, in principle at least, are capacities of all artistic practices.

**How would you characterize the ideological impulses that might lie behind a renewal of interest in realism? What about the ideological impulses that might shape and inform recent interest in pictorial mimetic realism?**

#### **JOHN ROBERTS**

In light of what I said above, I have recently written extensively on what I call *alter-realism* as a way of thinking through the necessarily aporetic condition of art and the category of realism.<sup>13</sup> That is, realism by dint of the present atomization and crisis of narrativization, and as

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12 See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 225–48.

13 See John Roberts, “Aporetischer Realismus: Der Realismus als philosophisches Problem und kritischer Horizont der Kunst,” *Lettre Internationale* 109 (2015).

a result of realism's need to ground itself in method as opposed to aesthetics, is closer to the avant-garde and its research programs than it is to any traditional canon of realist achievement. By alter-realism, then, I mean that realism as method follows the avant-garde in reflecting on its own means and ends as a condition of this atomization and crisis of narrativization. This does not mean that alter-realism either replicates this atomization or dissolves it in the interests of an ideal or imaginary resolution of contradiction; rather, it recognizes that if realism is about making the world legible in some way, then the means employed to do so will necessarily reflect on realism as a category itself. As Fredric Jameson argues in a similar mode in *Antinomies of Realism* (2013), fundamentally, realism is "a historical and even evolutionary process in which the negative and the positive are inextricably combined, and whose emergence and development at the same time constitute its own inevitable undoing, its own decay and dissolution."<sup>14</sup> Thus, if realism proceeds by such "undoing," then we might say that realism is *aporetic to its core*: that is, it is the unstable, processual, and transitive site of an indeterminate process of formal resolution. Let me quote from the unpublished English version of my article "Aporetischer Realismus":

The technical and cognitive categories of realism are thereby produced precisely out of this aporetic condition. But, of course, realism is not aporetic alone; modernism and the historical avant-garde are no less driven by this formal instability, and as such, by the gap between the particular truth claims of the artwork and art's delimited place in the world. Indeed, it is art's delimited place in the world that produces realism, modernism, and the avant-garde's aporetic condition as such, and, therefore, art's drive for self-articulation (the recovery, re-positioning and re-constellation of its inherited technical and formal resources).<sup>15</sup>

But crucially, this instability is mediated by a set of historical and political conditions that are very different from the counterrealism of the 1920s, which itself sought to address realism as a formally open category. In this respect, my concept of alter-realism is defined, indeed structured, by a late, post-Thermidorian mediation of class and history

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14 Fredric Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 6.

15 Roberts, "Aporetischer Realismus," unpublished English version.

that barely relates to the formation of alternate (Brechtian) realism in the 1920s. Let me quote from my article again:

In this period of late alter-realism, of extended reaction, aporetic realism is overwhelmingly defined by the pathos of a defeated revolutionary political past, in a way early bourgeois literary realism, and even Brecht at the height of his powers, were not. . . . [Thus,] post-1950s alter-realism after Stalin is the aporetic expression of the overwhelming counter-revolutionary (second-Thermidorian) destruction of the political and historical conditions of realism as a research program, leading counter-intuitively to a thorough historical *saturation* of realist form, insofar as all practices of realism, without exception, are now over-determined by a metahistorical sense of political defeat. [That is, as soon as workers speak in a novel or film outside of their usual allotted naturalistic place, the pathos attached to this defeat rushes in.] This is why post-1960s alter-realism is defined by nothing so simple as a renewal of the post-Bolshevik move to realism-as-praxis [from the 1920s], but by the very suspension, or questioning, of the “political effects” of realism-as-praxis itself; realism is now haunted by a deflationary critique of “presentism” [actionism] and chronology alike.<sup>16</sup>

Alter-realism, then, is not simply a revival of realism-as-praxis from the 1920s. Its methodology, rather, is saturated by a structural pathos. But realism under post-Thermidorian conditions is not pathos alone, it is also an invitation, in Brecht’s sense, to the production of revolutionary anti-pathos (knowledge). Thus, if it is realism’s job to make the world legible in some respect, to saturate it with truth, then it is also the job of the artist to externalize the self, to refuse to indulge the individual predicament of both oneself and others.

### **CHRISTOPH COX**

The various versions of new pictorial realism are heterogeneous, and I doubt that they are driven by any singular set of ideological impulses. The same is true of the new philosophical realisms. In the latter case, however, I think most such philosophical positions are driven by a rigorously democratic and atheist egalitarianism that seeks to restore the value of universality, equality, and truth in the face of discourses (from

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16 Ibid.

the right and left alike) that relativize truth and justice claims to the particular—that is, to identities, cultures, communities, discourses, languages, bodies, and so on. As Meillassoux has aptly shown, such relativist positions are powerless to counter the rise of religious fanaticism or, beyond Meillassoux’s purview, to counter the white nationalism currently ascendant throughout Europe and the United States, a nationalism that justifies itself according to the particularity of white identity.<sup>17</sup> Against these currents, the new philosophical realisms (for the most part) advocate a rejection of identitarian, cultural, and communitarian particularism in favor of a properly democratic universalism and cosmopolitanism.<sup>18</sup>

### DAVE BEECH

The return of realism in painting and photography is a philosophical and political retreat from the avant-garde practice of montage and its radical corollary, appropriation. Instead of falling back into old habits and old debates about realism, contemporary art needs to upgrade its commitment to montage through what the Free art collective calls “real montage”—not montaging images together, but montaging reality, cutting up the world and rearranging it. Instead of appropriation consisting of taking things from the world and placing them carefully in the gallery, contemporary artists need to move things around within the world, putting people together, using objects as props in a lived theater of social action, changing things with words, making a difference with dialogue.

**Do you think “realist” treatments or approaches in art might provide useful resources for philosophers to conceptualize our relation to empirical reality, matter, and objects?**

### CHRISTOPH COX

It’s possible. Yet, for the reasons I have sketched above, I don’t see why *artistic* realism would or should have any priority over other aesthetic approaches in aiding the project of *philosophical* realism.

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17 See chapter 2 in Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.

18 Alain Badiou is the most explicit advocate of such positions, which, I think, are implicit in other realist positions that reject the parochialism and anthropocentrism of the linguistic turn and of correlationism. See Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2012), and “Thinking the Event,” in Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, trans. Peter Thomas and Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 1–48.

## SAMI KHATIB

Realist treatments might provide useful insight when they reflect on their own relation to “reality.” This kind of reflexive or materialist realism is aware of the peculiar situation of reality in capitalism. For the Marx of *Capital*, the reality of the commodity form is literally a sur-real reality, the reality of a world made of “sensuous supra-sensuous things.”<sup>19</sup> The reality of societies, in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, contains more reality than a “realistic” reading of reality can grasp. Things as commodities are not just objects but also the objective bearers of a real, yet nonempirical social relation (i.e., value). In this light, we might reread Benjamin’s famous remark on Brecht’s *Dreigroschenprozeß*: “As Brecht says: ‘The situation is complicated by the fact that less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG tells us next to nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations—the factory, say—means that they are no longer explicit. So something must in fact be *built up*, something artificial, posed.’ We must credit the Surrealists with having trained the pioneers of such photographic construction.”<sup>20</sup> The representations of reality might appear inverted, distorted, or “ideological” (think of young Marx’s famous metaphor of the “camera obscura” of ideology); however, the problem of capitalist sur-reality exceeds any epistemological problems bound to a subject of cognition. Capitalist reality pertains to a paradoxical ontology: it is “above” (*sur*) and, at the same time, “below” (*sous*) reality—it is a nonidentical entity in which the “real” kernel of reality that is repressed is class antagonism. The *sur*-reality of capital circulation (the infrastructure of financial capitalism and its visible surfaces

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19 In German: “sinnlich übersinnliches Ding,” translation mine. Cf. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, vol. 1, Marx-Engels-Werke, vol. 23, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED (Berlin: Dietz, 1962), 85. The English edition unfortunately does not render this third domain of “sensuous supra-sensuousness,” but remains within the binary of either sensuousness or supra-sensuousness: the commodity is “a thing which transcends sensuousness” [Karl Marx, *Capital. Volume I. A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 163]. I have discussed the consequences of this translation and reading detail in “‘Sensuous Supra-Sensuous’: The Aesthetics of Real Abstraction,” in *Aesthetic Marx*, ed. Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 49–72.

20 Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2.2, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 526.

in architecture, design, art) relies on a repressed sous-reality of invisible structural violence (exploitation of labor power by means of economic, political, cultural, and legal deprivation). With the Lacanian distinction between “Real” and “reality,” Marx’s discovery in *Capital* can be specified: if the “real” kernel of capitalist reality is always repressed in order to guarantee the functioning of “normal” reality as unproblematic *Lebenswelt*, the split within capitalist realism as sur-reality (and, to this extent, sous-reality) concerns a split within the ontology of capitalism. Capitalist realism, be it Mark Fisher’s term or Sigmar Polke’s art, can be read as a theoretical or aesthetic presentation of this split and its repressed “Real.” Taking into consideration the sur/sous-reality of capitalism, implied by the commodity form and its sensuous–supra-sensuous world of things and social relations, the split between the Real (class antagonism) and reality (the “normal” functioning of the market economy and its experiential counterpart in capitalist everyday life) gives rise to a new materialist concept of realism. Realism thus becomes the self-criticism of a nonidentical reality—a phantasmatic reality that is structured around the gaps of its nonsymbolizable Real. Such a concept of realism has conceptual and aesthetic consequences that are still to be explored.

#### DAVE BEECH

Philosophers do not describe the way things are, nor are they the art critics of an opaque world that needs to be interpreted for the rest of us. When philosophers write about artworks, either they treat the content of the individual work as illustrative of philosophical ideas (Foucault’s use of Magritte is a good example), or they treat the individual work as an instance or counterinstance of a philosophical theory of art and aesthetics (Adorno does this). Philosophers do not engage with artworks as artworks but translate them into material for philosophy. This is perfectly reasonable, but it means that the relationship between art and philosophy needs to be understood as strained rather than mutually enlightening. Since philosophers have mostly been suspicious of the idea of realism in philosophy, conflating it with a kind of naïve belief in knowledge of an unmediated world of things, it is not likely that philosophers will be the greatest allies of artistic realism. When philosophers have reflected on the turn to the real in contemporary art, either they have been dismissive and requested a revival of the aesthetic or something very much like it (Rancière, Badiou), or they have defended it on purely instrumental

grounds (Mouffe). Those philosophers who have a strong grasp of the practices and debates of contemporary art, such as Peter Osborne, shy away from the discussion of realism and the real because these terms have such a troubled and troubling history within philosophy. Just as Gramsci argued that the working class needs its own intellectuals, I would argue that artists must become philosophers (without converting themselves into contemplative subjects) rather than turn to philosophers for help.

### JOHN ROBERTS

The artwork of course can be divided into an object *for* philosophical reflection and an object *of* philosophical reflection, which the philosopher brings into view. It is hard to say which produces the better philosophy, but suffice it to say that the latter is invariably attached to a realist reflection on how the artwork/film/play/novel is made, as the basis for discussing how it signifies. The philosophical engagement with the claims of realism in art, therefore, has by definition been concerned with questions of production, insofar as it privileges a link between how and with what the work is made, as well as its claims on the real. Such concerns of course have always had implications outside the domain of art itself. Indeed, discussion of how the artwork produces its claims on the real is where traditionally philosophy goes to think about the unstable relationship between truth, representation, and agency. Today, however, the opportunities for this kind of philosophical interrogation of a critically engaging realist work (particularly in film and theatre) are rare. When such reflection does happen, it is certainly worth noting.

I'm thinking in particular of László Nemes's extraordinary film *Saul fia* (*Son of Saul*, 2015), one of the most important narrative films of the last ten years, given its formal, cognitive, and epistemological demands. The realism of the film lies overwhelmingly in how Nemes addresses the question of pathos and anti-pathos in a real-world situation (the Nazi death camps) where pathos invariably overwhelms both thinking and subjectivity. In this sense, Nemes restores thinking—value judgments—and subjectivity—social relations—to a situation that is perceived to be completely devoid of the possibility of subjectivity and value judgments: the supra-oppressed and absolutely degraded lives of those Jewish camp inmates who helped “escort” arrivals into the gas chambers and dispose of the bodies, the infamous *Sonder-*



*kommando*, who rarely lived longer than a few months before they themselves were murdered. In contrast to how a conventional liberal humanist writer/director might engage with such material, he refuses to “restore” the subjectivity of his leading character—the young Hungarian Jew Saul—through the satisfaction of him performing a humanitarian gesture, or act of generosity, to restore our faith in humanity defiled beyond measure. Or rather, he hints at such a resolution, then radically withdraws epistemological consent. Saul discovers a boy who is still alive after being gassed and gives the body over to an SS medical officer, who then promptly kills the boy, almost in an act of pique at his having dared to survive. From this point on, Saul, aghast—against sense and reason, and in defiance of the prospect of instant execution by the SS for any act of insubordination—is determined to give the boy a proper Jewish burial somewhere, anywhere in the camp. But our sympathy and understanding begins to weaken when it becomes clear that his determination to give the boy a burial is threatening the immediate safety of his comrades who are planning a breakout from the camp. Indeed, Saul seems so utterly reckless that he appears indifferent to the breakout and the collective interests of those with whom he has lived and experienced death. This is where the film works its aporetic realism, so to speak, on the basis that our growing concern for Saul’s plight, and our spellbound admiration for his heroism in conditions of the most extreme barbarity and bewildering oppression, dissolves into incredulous annoyance and irritation. Why is he doing this, why is he pursuing this act of solidarity with a corpse and a stranger, at the expense of solidarity with his comrades’ needs and the impending breakout?

The breakout happens as planned, and Saul escapes with the corpse and his comrades across a river into a wood where they are discovered and all shot. As such, given the foolhardy intransigence of Saul’s act, Nemes doesn’t give us the comfort of treating Saul’s decision as an act of spiritual redemption (the religious/humanist viewpoint), and therefore something we can feel emotionally replenished by, even after his death; we remain frustrated by his intransigence. Yet the intransigence is what determines the truth of the film. Saul’s relentless and impossible resistance to his surroundings is, in the end—in its failure and impossibility—an act of creative autonomy, *done for the doing itself*, in a situation where no such thing, and least of all the thought of doing such a thing, could possibly flourish and

survive. In this sense, the emancipatory force of Saul's decision lies in its indifference to its surroundings, whose own indifferences have the force of an incalculable inertness. This produces a radical disjunction in our perceptions of what is possible or impossible in a situation where all subjective avenues are seemingly closed down: this is its realism.