

## A Questionnaire on Materialisms

Art history in the wake of post-structuralism has relied heavily on theories of subjectivity. Recent philosophical tendencies, characterized as “Actor-Network Theory,” “Thing Theory,” “Object-Oriented Ontology,” “Speculative Realism,” and “Vibrant Materialism,” have profoundly challenged the centrality of subjectivity in the humanities and, arguably, the perspectives that theories of the subject from the psychoanalytic to the Foucauldian have afforded (on the operations of power, the production of difference, and the constitution of the social, for instance). At least four moves characterize these discourses:

- Attempting to think the reality of objects beyond human meanings and uses. This other reality is often rooted in “thingness” or an animate materiality.
- Asserting that humans and objects form networks or assemblages across which agency and even consciousness are distributed.
- Shifting from epistemology, in all of its relation to critique, to ontology, where the being of things is valued alongside that of persons.
- Situating modernity in geological time with the concept of the “Anthropocene,” an era defined by the destructive ecological effects of human industry.

Many artists and curators, particularly in the UK, Germany, and the United States, appear deeply influenced by this shift. Is it possible, or desirable, to decenter the human in discourse on art in particular? What is gained in the attempt, and what—or who—disappears from view? Is human difference—gender, race, power of all kinds—elided? What are the risks in assigning agency to objects; does it absolve us of responsibility, or offer a new platform for politics?

We wonder if it is possible to reconcile the different positions we’ve outlined, many of which seem to contradict one another, in order to theorize a new materialism or objectivity. If it isn’t, what is at stake in those irreconcilable differences? Which, if any, are the productive materialisms for making and thinking about art today? Please comment from the perspective of your own work on the significance and effects of these developments.

—David Joselit, Carrie Lambert-Beatty, and Hal Foster

## CHARLES RAY

Hello. This is Charles Ray. I want to tell you a story that's really quite scary. I hike every morning in the predawn hours. I do this for health reasons. I get up at 3:30 to be on the trailhead by 4:10–4:15. It's very dark at that hour, and during certain times of year it stays dark even after I finish my hike and am at home in my kitchen. I find it necessary for several reasons to carry a flashlight. The light not only illuminates the rocky trail, but is also a protective bubble, warning people and animals that I am about. I've gone through many brands of flashlight, but there was a time when I bought a rather inexpensive light that guaranteed 400 hours of use. This light was powered by a small-scale, camera-type, 9-volt disk battery. It was very difficult to believe this battery could last 400 hours. The light had many different modes; it could blink, the bottom of it could flash red, it could also signal S.O.S., and it had two different brightnesses. I found low power to be bright enough, and in the morning on the trail I would start out using it, illuminating my footfall.

Every day when I passed a certain rock, a somewhat large rock, not as large as a car, but bigger, I would say, than a motorcycle, my light would turn off. I would shake it, drum it against my thigh, but though I couldn't figure out why, it would only turn right back on when I pressed the on/off button. I wondered, "Could there be a magnetic field around this rock?" That seemed very improbable, and how would a magnetic field turn my light off? Maybe it would dim it, or make it flicker brighter and dimmer, but it seemed unlikely that it would turn it off completely, especially since, as I said, there are many different modes and things you can do with this flashlight depending on how you press the buttons: two quick presses is bright; three quick ones is even brighter; one long, held click and it flashes red; etc., etc. It was hard to believe that a magnetic field would just simply turn the light off. So then I wondered, "Could there be a spirit or a ghost about, some being traumatized in the vicinity of this rock, and I was disturbing it every morning with my light? And was it this specter that was turning the light off?" I thought that could be true, perhaps, but I don't really believe in ghosts, and I'm not sure you really do either.

I didn't rule out the possibility of a ghost completely, but I continued to investigate other phenomena that could cause my light to turn off. What struck me was that it always occurred at the same exact location, marked by this large rock. That seemed odd somehow, but it did make me think that it must have something to do with the rock. I wondered, "Am I turning the light off accidentally? Am I getting the weebie jeebies by this rock and my thumb is accidentally on purpose switching my light off?" That seemed improbable also. But one morning, when thinking about this possibility, I cupped my thumb between my flashlight and my hand, and held it, and the light still went off. I continued to ponder and wonder and think about this for several weeks, really, but I couldn't get to the bottom of it. One day I said, "Today I am going to think my way through this. I don't

believe in ghosts—it can't be a ghost, it can't be a magnetic field, it just can't be." If that were the case, the light would do other things rather than just switch itself off. I thought it was an interesting problem, and it totally occupied my thinking, I have to admit, for more than one day. But one particular morning I said, "Now I am going to really concentrate on this issue," and I thought and I thought and I thought. And then it occurred to me: switch the location of the problem. I had the problem at the rock; I had the problem located within a magnetic field or a ghost in and about the rock, or even within my own self switching off the light from a kind of nervousness at the rock, so let's put the problem somewhere else, in a different location. So I found another location; it was at home in my kitchen. I came back from my walk on another day after the light had turned off yet again. I switched the flashlight on in my kitchen before making breakfast, and I put it in a drawer and shut the drawer and forgot about it.

So it was on in that drawer, burning away, illuminating an unseen spoon. Before I went to work I opened the drawer and looked in and the light was off. Certainly the ghost hadn't followed me home and taken up residence inside my drawer. Certainly there wasn't a magnetic field in the drawer. No, I had located the source of the problem. The flashlight that lasts for 400 hours is a very high-tech object, and I unscrewed it all the way and took the battery out. And then I took other objects out. I took the lamp and the bulb out, and under them, under them and the battery, I found a very small, round circuit board. This was what controlled the light. This is what made the light, if you pressed the button three times fast, blink red, or whatever the exact configuration was, or blink SOS, etc., so it must have had another function. If you forgot the light and left it on in the trunk of your car, or left it on in the basement at the fuse box, it was guaranteed to last 400 hours, so it simply turned itself off in an hour if it was left unattended. Most people don't use a flashlight for an hour. They only go to the basement to change a fuse, or go outside with it to investigate a strange noise. Very few people use this type of light for a full hour. Usually it would only be on for that long if you left it on accidentally. And to save power it simply turned itself off. Being so regular in my pace on my walk, which I do day after day, I arrived at this rock exactly one hour after turning the light on at the trailhead each and every day. I had found the location of my problem, and somehow it was still just as scary as before I knew the solution.

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