

## Timotheus Vermeulen talks to philosopher Rosi Braidotti about the pitfalls of speculative realism, the movement that has created a buzz in the art world

Over the last few years, there have been seemingly countless exhibitions and symposia about the philosophical movement known as speculative realism; indeed, the German art journal *Texte zur Kunst* devoted a themed issue to it earlier this year. A philosophy that foregrounds speculation was always going to offer points of entry for artists, whose discipline trades in imagination, but few would have predicted the speed with which it's been picked up by them.

As writers and artists associated with speculative realism are eager to point out, the first thing to understand is that it is not a single philosophy. Rather, it is a label for a broad range of different ideas. Some of these are concerned with science, others with commodity culture, still others with ecology; there are hefty declamations *à la* Alain Badiou, and sprawling blog essays in the spirit of Gilles Deleuze. Indeed, the 2007 academic conference at Goldsmiths College in London, which lent speculative realism its name, featured four philosophers – Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux – whose thinking exhibits considerable differences. What their positions have in common, however, and what have given them this collective label, are their attempts to think beyond the limits of what we, as human beings, were long considered able to think, speculating instead about the nature of the non-human: cotton, stones, mosquitoes, the world around us.

If we are to believe the speculative realists, philosophy since Kant has been premised on the idea that we can only know the world in which we live, in so far as we can perceive it through our senses. Every discussion about the nature of the world is inevitably a discussion about us *discussing* it: about our vantage point, our intentions and so on. The term for this is 'correlationism': one already implies the other.

The speculative realists accuse Kant of placing a mirror between us and the world, forcing us to look at ourselves looking. Others are blamed for annotating the mirror: a thought by Hegel scribbled in the centre; a Schopenhauer Post-it at the bottom; a doodle by Derrida in the corner. Kant and his offspring may describe this as ontology (the study of being) but, in fact, they are busying themselves with epistemology (the study of knowledge).

This is a very particular reading of a very particular Kant – it is not the Kant of the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), nor of the numerous essays on history he published over the course of 15 years, in which he proposed an attitude to the world that Eva Schaper has described in terms of an 'as if' – words that are remarkably similar to Meillassoux's *peut-être* or 'may-being': how things could be. As Rosi Braidotti – one of the most important feminist philosophers of our time – points

out in the following interview, correlationist anthropocentrism was a topic of debate long before the speculative realists joined in, not least among Deleuze scholars. It is certainly true, though, that there have been thinkers who have taken Kant's cautiously correlationist claim as a given and who accept a logic that prioritizes the self over the other.

As far as I understand it, there are, by and large, two different strategies the speculative realists have come up with in order to speculate about the world around them. The first one is to shatter the Kantian mirror. The speculative realist can now look at the world unobscured by any reflection of himself or comments from others. (I say 'himself' as almost all speculative realists are men, in stark contrast to those associated with the congenial currents of new materialism or, to a lesser extent, object-oriented ontology.)

The second strategy is not to shatter the mirror but to turn it around, so that it faces away from the subjects towards the world: the world is in a relationship with itself. It is beyond me how we might describe this scenario, but since books have been written about it, I can only assume it must be possible.

However, in many ways, I find speculative realism stimulating, and I can understand why others feel an affinity with it. I am part of a generation that is tired of the endless epistemological discussions of modern philosophy, in large parts paralysed by the closed-circuit narcissism of post-structuralism. The speculative realists – if only by demonstrating that there are alternatives, or possibilities that currently seem unrealizable – have revived the debate.

That said, an apparent tendency to treat social and economic discourses as mere side aspects of organic evolution, or a disregard for issues of race and gender – a problem that, to be sure, some speculative realists such as Levi Bryant and Steven Shaviro are ready to acknowledge – has, unsurprisingly, brought about vehement criticism from neo-Marxist, feminist, queer theory and critical race theory camps.

Braidotti is one of the founders of neo-materialist feminism, a current that has been particularly critical of the speculative realists. The author of such canonical books as *Nomadic Subjects* (1994), *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (2002), *Nomadic Theory* (2011) and, most recently, *The Posthuman* (2013), Braidotti has spent her career updating post-structuralist theories of the subject to acknowledge material conditions. One of her key arguments is that, in order to counteract the influence of advanced capitalism, we need to mimic its logic. Though appreciative of the interest the speculative realists express in matter, she is also fiercely critical of their disregard for the epistemology of the subject.



Alisa Baremboym  
Untitled, 2012, ceramic, USB cable and  
gender changer, 27 × 17 × 12 cm

Courtesy  
the artist and 47 Canal, New York

## The so-called speculative realists are really speaking from nowhere, though they try to hide it.

### TIMOTHEUS VERMEULEN

*You were trained in the tradition of post-structuralism but quickly abandoned the models associated with that tradition – semiotics, deconstruction – for Deleuzian theory. In your writings on nomadism, you have been rethinking the historical subject; in your work on cosmopolitanism and feminism, you revised the boundaries of the political subject; and now, in your recent book on the posthuman, you have begun reconsidering the centrality of the human altogether.*

### ROSI BRAIDOTTI

Well, I am no longer young and have a long itinerary! My decision to break with the post-structuralists was conscious, up to a point. It stemmed both from an intellectual dissatisfaction and from personal disappointment. As for the latter, I came to Paris in 1977 on an Australian scholarship to study with Foucault. At the time, he was making a name for himself in France but had not yet been discovered by the Americans and the British, though there were some Australians reading him. At his lectures, however, I found him to be quite misogynistic. His seminars were no place for women. It remains one of the tragedies of women's studies, therefore, that his work – the few unfinished paragraphs and footnotes devoted to women – became such a reference point. I experienced similarly gendered politics with Lacan, who out of personal frustration destroyed the career of his student Luce Irigaray. Intellectually – in spite of all the respect I had and have for him – I became impatient with Derrida's meta-method of deconstruction. It was always deconstruction: that was his method; that was his answer. I felt much more at home in the seminars of Deleuze, which, at the time, I did not always understand but intuitively, in my gut, agreed with. Instead of deconstruction, Deleuze talked of reconstruction. Here were new theories of the subject, new notions of ethics!

**TV** *Your own work has been shaped by the attempt to develop new, affirmative and productive theories of the subject. Your best-known concept, probably, is the nomadic – even Pussy Riot were reportedly influenced by it. Could you explain what you mean by it?*

Swoon  
Swimming Cities, 2012,  
mixed media

Courtesy  
the artist; photograph: Tod Seelie

**RB** What is important to understand is that the nomadic is a navigational tool, not a concept. It is intended as a way of navigating the conditions of the present, of advanced capitalism. I always say that there are three components to it: the analytical, the normative and what I call the programmatic or utopian. The analytical part consists of a critical cartography. It tries to map what it means to live at this particular moment in time. These parameters of advanced capitalism can be characterized best, simply put, as those of displacement and mobility. We are all displaced, we are all mobile. Some of this displacement and mobility may be experienced positively, such as through Skyping and Erasmus exchanges, but much of it is disruptive. Just think of the uprootedness and homelessness many refugees and migrants have to endure; or think of the banality of commuting.

I take the nomadic to be normative in so far as it describes, or should describe, an ethics. The cartography of an earlier stage of capitalism could be drawn up along the lines of dualities: self and other, master and slave, culture and nature. Hegel and Marx, therefore, developed a normative and increasingly programmatic ethics of dialectics, an ethics premised on the principle of duality, of the two, the binary, thesis and antithesis. We have now moved from the dualistic system they describe, however, to a monistic one. One that is continuous and coterminous with itself. We must accept that capitalism will not break. It may bend, but it will not break. As Deleuze and Guattari pointed out, it is flexible: capitalism is able to adapt to any given state formation, to Dutch social democracy as easily as to Chinese authoritarianism. This does not mean that we cannot fight capitalism but, rather, that we need to adopt adequate techniques to do so. The perverse political economy of controlled mobility and opportunism calls for new analytical tools. If we want to navigate, let alone manipulate, this system, we need to change our ethics, fight negativity with affirmation, inertia with creativity. The result is a subject that is multiple and becoming, constantly in flux. Just as the dialectical subject was the subject thought fit to overturn a dualist system, the multiple, processual one is the one able to pervert the flexible system.

Let me be clear here: I do not wish to suggest that we should accept capitalism. Contrary to what some old neo-Leninists have suggested, nomadic politics is not defeatism. I see it as working from within the belly of the beast, opening up space

for alternatives. I am of this world; there is no other. So I can't just wait for another kind of future to arrive. If the analytic allows us to identify our own belonging in the very structure that we're trying to undo, the normative tells us that – with humility, acumen and a little bit of help from our friends – we can go about reterritorializing it.

**TV** *What makes the project of the nomadic programmatic, or utopian?*

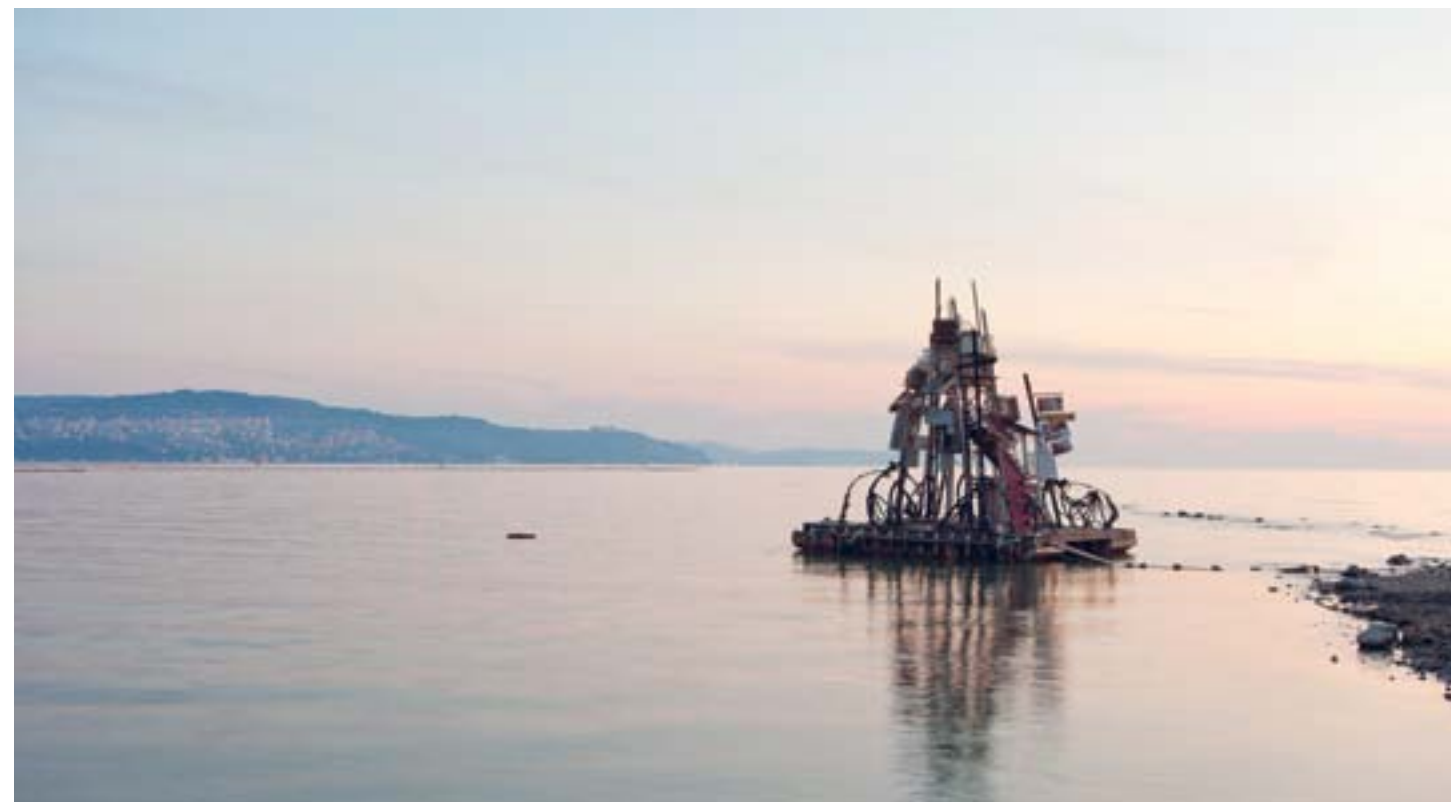
**RB** Let's call it programmatic; maybe that's a better term than utopian here. I call to actively embrace this ethic of affirmation. We need to borrow the energy from the future to overturn the conditions of the present. It's called love of the world. We do it all the time, not perhaps in philosophy but in our daily lives. Picture what you don't have yet; anticipate what we want to become. We need to empower people to will, to want, to desire, a different world, to extract – to reterritorialize, indeed – from the misery of the present joyful, positive, affirmative relations and practices. Ethics will guide affirmative politics.

**TV** *In your work on both nomadism and posthumanism, you pay a lot of attention to the materiality of life. You share this appreciation for matter, especially the non- or not-yet-human matter you describe in your latest book, with the speculative realists. Is this where you meet?*

**RB** Like nomadism, posthumanism is a navigational tool. It tries to make sense and make the most of the all-encompassing scientific, technological saturation of our social and bodily space. Our bodies mutate and conjoin with media, each of which has its own distinct logic – often a code or algorithm. What interests me about the speculative realists, or at least those of them whose work I am most familiar with – Bryant, Harman, Timothy Morton – is their treatment of the object as a self-organizing entity. Here, they extend our thinking about the limits of the human subject and its relationship to the world around it.

**TV** *Where does your thinking diverge from theirs?*

**RB** There are two or three things that I don't fully get about the speculative realists. First of all, the treatment of objects as self-organizing entities is not in itself new. Media and science fiction scholars – like Jussi Parikka now, or Donna Haraway before him – have been theorizing objects along these lines for years. Similarly, the emphasis on matter, and the continuity between matter and mind, and between human bodies and the world in which they live, is not new either. It has always been at the core of Spinozist, Deleuzian and materialist feminist studies, including those of Simone de Beauvoir, Haraway and my own. I am surprised, sometimes even shocked, that their discussions



and bibliographies make little mention of these debates. How can you wipe out the whole of Deleuzian studies in one footnote? 'The Deleuzian quest, even process ontology really, is correlationist.' Excuse me? What are you saying? Is that all Deleuze deserves? My political culture – feminism – never existed! Bryant makes these throwaway comments: 'Oh yeah, 1970s feminism.' Their mums, right? 1970s feminism: What is that? It's a planet, it's a galaxy. It includes De Beauvoir, Irigaray and Deleuzian studies. The disrespect, the competitiveness: that's bad scholarship. This really needs to be said because it makes the conversation extremely difficult. I've read the stuff; I do my duty. I doubt they have ever read anything I wrote but, if they have, it doesn't show. I can only describe this in terms of a political economy of negative affects.

Second, and in line with this, they make caricatures of some of these debates. What they don't see, or don't want to see – for I certainly think there is some chicanery involved here – is that the switch to Spinoza is a switch to the radical materiality of the body; the entire body thinks. You don't think with the mind; you think with the entire fleshed existence. So they start from an assumption about correlationism that is overdetermined by a number of deletions and flagrant bibliographical omissions. It is a very narrow point. And I don't understand why they do this to everybody: Deleuze isn't good; feminism isn't good; media theory (however much they use it) isn't good. We disagree on what the unit of reference for thinking

is. For me, it's the body immersed in radically immanent relations. You don't think in a mind that fantasizes a relation between being and knowing. No serious critical thinker does that any more, or has for some time. So we have a fundamental difference in the starting point.

**TV** *Though you and many of the speculative realists seem to have similar concerns when it comes to the relationship between subject and object, they appear to abandon the human subject altogether while you wish to re-theorize it.*

**RB** For me, the human or posthuman subject is still very important, if only because we experience everything from a position that is human. Of course, as we speak, scientists working in robotics are cloning the scent of dogs, or the radars and sonars of other species like spiders and bats. So, within a posthuman reality, multiple standpoints can be taken. But you cannot step outside the slab of matter that you inhabit. The limits of your skin – porous, highly intelligent skin that processes information as we go – are the limits of your perception. Complex, multiple – but not infinite.

I agree with the distinction Katherine Hayles makes between anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. You can be a posthumanist and post-anthropocentric thinker. In fact, in advanced capitalism, in which the human species is but one of the marketable species, we are all already post-anthropocentric. But I don't think we can leap out of our anthropomorphism by will. We can't. We always imagine from our own bodies – and why should we, considering that we still live on

a planet populated by humanoids who think of themselves as humans, in different ways, with different points of reference? Our very embodiment is a limit, as well as a threshold; our flesh is framed by the morphology of the human body, it is also always already sexed and hence differentiated.

The so-called speculative realists tend to be paradoxically dis-embedded and dis-embodied: they are really speaking from nowhere, though they try to hide it. They are unable to account for where they are speaking from. To me, however important it is that we concern ourselves with a-subjective or non-human matter, the politics of locations of the subject is something we cannot let go. What we should be speaking about are extended minds, distributed cognition, experiments with forms of affirmative relational ethics that take these parameters into account. ♣

*Rosi Braidotti is Distinguished University Professor at Utrecht University and director of the Centre for the Humanities in Utrecht, the Netherlands. She was the founding professor of Gender Studies in the Humanities at Utrecht and the first scientific director of the Netherlands Research School of Women's Studies. Recent books include Nomadic Subjects (2011, second revised edition of the 1994 original) and Posthuman (2013).*

*Timotheus Vermeulen is Assistant Professor in Cultural Theory at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands, where he also heads the Centre for New Aesthetics. He is co-founding editor of the academic arts and culture webzine Notes on Metamodernism.*