

Posthuman Exhibitionism

by Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk

The exhibiting of objects (stuff, things) as a means to ensure and confirm one's own individuality in the eyes of someone else is a well-known phenomenon, which has been chasing humankind for centuries. Or put differently, we let ourselves be chased by an elusive force which makes us repeatedly attempt to escape from the whirlpool of mediocrity, to avoid the idea of potential stagnation where possible. This elusive force is not so much of a phantasmagorical order, but is single-handedly created and kept alive by mankind as a seemingly realistic but fictitious arrangement, which is halfway between innovativeness and progressive thinking, self-realisation and a heightened state of self-awareness.

Within this dynamic objects play an important role, in both a material and immaterial sense: they enable us to feign knowledge, grant ourselves value and status, and, more importantly, they allow us to showcase these "achievements." As 'curators' of our own lives, we make our way through a massive and ever-growing range of products and brands, which are subsequently reduced to personal selections, partially in order to extend our own agenda's and ideologies. An agenda which lets itself distribute and circulate even easier digitally in the shape of *selfies*, *(insta)likes*, *tweets* and other self-manifestations. Due to the hurtling speed at which images and messages alternate – within the overall acceleration of the media as a constantly becoming, but never quite arriving whole – people and objects are being subjected, on a more or less conscious level, both voluntary and under pressure, to a constantly fragmenting flow of images. In short: we live in a landscape of mediations that is designed on the premise of a time-pressured culture of high-performance – *ad nauseam*.

In this densely populated ecosystem, the marketing department of a growing number of companies finds its way into our personal lives. Let us begin by saying that consumers are not being found today, but rather invented in an attempt at laying claim to the stable pattern of human behaviour to become a consumer. In this scenario, the consumer is not necessarily a human, but rather a human characteristic or trait. Successful marketing, one could say, is to invent and foreground a cognitive perception which allows us to give shape to and support us in the reading and organisation of the visual noise our realities consist of, in previously unknown ways. Apple and Facebook could be mentioned as good examples of structuring devices. Through the paths opened by these companies, other companies secure themselves on, for instance, your timeline, who are in turn brought to the foreground by an interplay between purchased advertising space and the search activity of the user. Shortly put, we could say that people today are engaged in a perceptual and visual arms race. In many cases, a thick skin has been developed for visual noise and people have become advanced readers in making a distinction between "relevant" and "irrelevant," "true" and "false."

On the premise of the previous tendency – one of persistent linear progression thinking, in which human egocentrism and accumulating material possessions remain the order of the day – this essay will introduce a so-called posthuman alternative of interdependence and mutual

reciprocity that has recently found its subscription into contemporaneity, mainly through contemporary art and philosophy.

Posthumanism – literally as in “after men” – is a rather contested concept and term, with various ramifications, descriptions and explanations. Because, what precisely comes after the human? Humans again? And what is the usefulness of posthumanism when the analysis remains to be conducted and performed by humans? Not entirely unimportant questions that often raise the field of posthumanism to a level of speculation and ambiguity. A relevant approach of posthumanism is expressed by the American philosopher Levi Bryant. In his point of view, a posthuman position concerns a situation in which no privilege is granted to the ways by which people experience and interpret the world. Instead an investigation is needed to consider how and by what means other objects and entities approach and apprehend the world. Here, the posthuman position is not so much of an attempt to reject or eradicate the human view on the world, but rather aims to show a plurality of perspectives. Consequently, posthumanism does not distance itself from the human as one of the possible perspectives on the world, but it does complicate our ability – after elaborate research into, for example, postcolonial theory, feminist ideology, racial and gender theory – to speak unequivocally about something called the human. In other words still, the posthuman position recognises the existence of various different human ways of perceiving and experiencing, which are being influenced by our gender and disabilities, our embodied and cultural experiences, our background and the technologies to which our bodies are connected. This latter point is well-known in the humanistic cultural and critical theory of recent decades. However, posthumanism goes even further by claiming that animals, micro-organisms, institutions, companies, stones and computer programs also have their own way of perceiving and apprehending the world

Within the context of contemporary visual art, more and more artists respond to this posthuman perspective. Whereas artworks were previously often considered as “carriers of meaning,” projected by humans in the shape of language and concepts, one could currently observe a shift and return towards the assumed idea that an art object speaks and acts as an autonomous agent. In other words, an object is more than the sum of its inherent qualities and characteristics, and is infinitely more than the functions and exchange values assigned by humans. In this, language can try to apprehend the object, but never embodies it as such. In short, we can speak of a shift from a linguistic and animated object, to an object that *is* in and by itself.

Under the markers *New Materialism* and *Speculative Realism*, a strong understanding between the arts and philosophy has emerged. One might even argue that before, there hasn't been a philosophical movement in which thought relates so strongly and equally to artistic practice and the objects it treats and puts forward. Probably, this is also partially due to the clear language of the respective philosophers. The clearness and lucidity of the language employed is also accessible to art professionals, who generally possess over a rather limited knowledge of philosophy, but often enough touch upon and borrow philosophical topics to interpret and legitimise artistic and curatorial intentions. The arts ongoing drivel on Deleuze's rhizome has been exchanged for a critical approach of German philosopher Kant's concept of 'correlationism.'

In his book *Après la Finitude (After Finitude, 2006)* the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux introduces his criticism of correlationism, in which he states that humans consider the visible world and the objects it contains from their own position. The external object can therefore only acquire its right to existence within that specific human framework, by submitting to the so-called subject-object relationship. Humankind is the central vantage point in recognising the existence of objects, and is decisive in interpreting the world. This hierarchical pecking order with the human as supervisor is full of ambiguities and inconsistencies, which particularly manifest themselves in the limited and ever fragmented perception of humans in approaching objects. In short, Meillassoux' philosophy advocates that objects exist, even if people would not think.

Instead, *New Materialism* and *Speculative Realism* examines alternative approaches to objects and their being, primarily by placing humans, other objects and entities on an equal footing with one another – the so-called object-object relation. Here one might think of a material world which is independent from human activity and thought, consisting of individual and autonomous entities that also relate to each other without human interference. Herein, objects are not being reduced to measurable units, molecular lumps of reality, or seen as deceptively deep things that only prompt superficial effects. These are, in short, thought-experiments that aim to provide a more-dimensional insight into the world by considering the ontology (theory of being), instead of the epistemology (theory of knowledge) of objects.

While philosophy is more or less bound to language in constructing and exemplifying its theories, in approaching the objects it aims to scrutinise, the arts seem to be more directly dependent of tangible matter. In the contemporary visual arts, written language is more of a secondary reality that is often disconnected from the object shown, by for instance descriptions in press releases and exhibition leaflets, but is likely considered to be of equal importance as the object it aims to elucidate. Here, we are thus being confronted with an impasse between the object and the intentionality of the artist regarding the object he or she brought forward, the materiality of the work and the external, projected, but the inherent text and meaning the objects is thought to carry and convey. This friction between the perceivable and experiential art object, and the leap it has to take in order to let the accompanying metaphor and symbolism resonate is fundamental in an understanding of most conceptual and contemporary art, but hasn't gone unnoticed recently by many artist, and is more often avoided. The pretense of a textual undercurrent is exchanged for a purely formal and material vocabulary in which the exhibited objects are considered to be autonomous and self-referential, without additional analogy in which "the thing" itself refers to an event or topic within a larger social context.

However, can you make and show objects without intentions as an artists, even if a subtext is absent? Or can objects that go without a manual written by humans only be found, for instance in the remainder of nature? Let us stress that to aim for an art – as a cultural field of human energy exchanges – without humans seems to be impossible so far, and would probably also be undesirable. On the other hand, within the aforementioned tendency, it seems possible to speak of a substantial turn in the ways in which many art practices are being activated today. There is an unprecedented attention for natural objects and entities (in particular plants, rocks,

weather conditions and animals) and materials (marble, gypsum, clay, earth, wood), which are then employed to react on strong cultural and artificial forms of expression (epoxy, fiberglass, plastic, production processes, retina displays and references to the internet culture). Here one could think of the artists Katja Novitskova, Marlie Mul, Carlos Irijalba, Rachel Koolen, Camille Henrot, Magali Reus, among many others, who respond to these fields of tension. The strong contrasts and contradictions between 'personhood' and 'objecthood' are rather present in many white, sterile exhibition spaces, but come to expire at the same time when you realise that such interplay of objects, materials and entities forms a reflection and is a part of the curious and complex ecology in which we live.

When we come to speak about a posthuman position within the field of contemporary art and the exhibiting of objects, we should not necessarily elevate man to be the most interesting object, but as one of the possible perspectives on interpreting reality. As a possible starting point, we see that humans make a translation from perception to cognition, from the visible world to thinking about that visual world, for which an increasing number of artists have been rebuilding fundamental metaphors and models for relating to reality. Here, the exhibition serves as an assembly point for different fragments, perspectives and positions – probably constituting one of the few remaining places in which one can still have the idea and feeling of “the world talking back to you” through and by means of objects. Where thinking with and about objects conveys new perspectives on the cohabitation of different appearances and entities; highlighting the mutual dependency between human and matter, or put differently, human *as* matter. By considering objects in and by themselves, and by putting them in the limelight, so to speak, art informs a position in which objects not only serve humans, but become partners in our daily work- and living practices. Things are *with* us, not *for* us.

The new insights that art offers regarding the ontology of objects and states of materiality can be considered as proposals for the relation of humans with the immediate and less proximate, global living environment, without being overly patronising or didactic. Proposals which internalise the exchange between both, which consider the habitat of humans and non-humans, living and inert objects, animate and inanimate, nature and culture, synthetic and organic, matters manufactured by man and natural things, as an equivalent and all-encompassing whole.

In the end, these artistic developments occur within a juncture in which there is a growing awareness of the fact that mutual reciprocity is a trait of crucial importance on the world stage. “Contemporary humans,” so to speak, increasingly turn away from mass production and the further depletion of scarce natural resources, tapped on behalf of “growth” and “progression.” Instead, we see the rise of a collective self-awareness which focuses on thrift and shared goods, on the single-handed cultivation of crops, on the self-construction and re-appropriation of things, other than to merely and passively consume, throw away or outsource objects. The concept of property obtains a whole different meaning when one understands that most objects and materials are more resistant than the presence of man. That the human is but a trace in the world that represents the total of the matter.

Art and the exhibiting of art objects simultaneously play an important role in this widely supported social tendency: as a common ground that provides more reflective and responsive approaches to a posthumanist position, where the understanding of and the relationships between objects are reconsidered and remediated. The exhibition, as a gathering place of objects and entities, is the perfect context to test a variety of perspectives and phenomenologies inherent to every object, through artistic practices. One could argue for the exhibition to start and serve as a forum that attempts to balance between artworks, people, dogs, plants, iPhones and their respective phenomenologies, striving towards a common language, or at least a broader understanding. This is precisely the great merit and quality of the arts: not only to advance the concept by means of language, but by physically embodying the concept through objects and materials. This will require us to move away from the idea that an artwork can fulfill a function, by simply giving the work a human designation and signification. The art object rather gives us the opportunity to be estranged, to transpose oneself into an object and the prospects it provokes. It is precisely in this interplay between human and art object that we can reach and extend beyond ourselves.