

## Introduction

### What is a Thing?

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We look everywhere for the unconditioned (*das Unbedingte*),  
and find only things (*Dinge*).  
(Novalis, *Pollen*, 1798)

Thoughts without content are empty,  
intuitions without concepts are blind.  
(Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781)

Since Immanuel Kant's intervention in the debates between rationalism and empiricism, thinking about things has had to contend with his formulation of the radical distinction between "objects of experience" and "things in themselves": i.e. on the one hand, things whose appearing and appearance are subject (or relative) to the conditions of the way in which we can have experience at all, and on the other hand, the absolute reality of what is, the essence of things. The innumerable displacements of this opposition--in Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Marx, in Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and the modern phenomenologists, in literary (and scientific) writings, and in connection with technological and social changes from the late eighteenth century until today--frame the conceptual and figurative history of things in post-Enlightenment modernity. Further, the conceptual terms defining the appearance of things after Kant have turned largely around the question of whether or not things that we experience need be (and if so, how they can be) synthetically constructed in our consciousness out of intuitions (above all conceived as images) and concepts. It is therefore not surprising that contemporary discussions of the thing continue to wrestle with the question of the interrelationship between images and concepts (or material and ideal dimensions) in the constitution of objects of experience, as we see in the essays

that follow. In addition, the question of things today obviously involves a large cluster of debates concerning representation, language, and semiosis. Indeed, in Kant the objects of consciousness were already construed as representations (*Vorstellungen*), and much of post-Kantian philosophy (e.g. in Hegel, in Schopenhauer, and in Heidegger) has persistently attempted to go *beyond* representations, by way of resistance to Kant's denial of access to things-in-themselves. In contrast, the twentieth century "linguistic turn" has extended the thought of representation into the most diverse and challenging reflections on language as constitutive for thought. Against the background of this history, any questioning of the thing today must concern itself with the potentially constitutive role of linguistic, semiotic, and rhetorical dimensions for the experience of things (whether that experience be, for example, an epistemic, an ethical, an aesthetic, a religious, a political, or an erotic one).

The current Special Issue took as its point of departure a combined faculty and graduate student conference on the question of "What is a Thing?" held at the University of Oregon on February 20-21, 2014, which was conceptualized and organized by Nicholas Reynolds.<sup>1</sup> The essays published here represent a refereed selection from the papers presented at the conference, in addition to further invited and refereed contributions, intended to increase the range of perspectives and topics represented in this Issue. The articles take up the general aspects of "thing"-ness, as indicated above, with reference to modernist and contemporary philosophy and theory, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies, and they treat, in addition, questions of poetics and aesthetics in both lyric poetry and the novel.

Jonathan Monroe opens the Issue by discussing the manner in which "things" are treated in modern and contemporary poetry and poetics. Specifically, he questions the ideology of the "thing-as-image" or "image-as-thing" that has enjoyed a certain hegemony since early twentieth century modernism. He argues that this belated and denegated doctrine of the symbol--present in one way in the Anglo-American imagist tradition since Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams ("no ideas but in things"), and differently also in the

doctrine of the Rilkean *Dinggedicht*--illusorily attempts to prevent the poetic thing from separating from itself and dispersing its own (and its reader's) presence, for example into its intellectual, affective, signifying, rhetorical, or discursive components and preconditions. Monroe proposes and describes, as his main example of a radical contemporary alternative to this model (where he construes the term "contemporary" with reference to Giorgio Agamben's writings) the poetry of Rosmarie Waldrop, especially in her book *Driven to Abstraction*. The issue opens, then, with the question of the place and placement of the (aesthetic) thing with respect to the binary oppositions of image and concept, sensuous concretion and supersensuous abstraction, and with the question of how these oppositions relate to language and representation, questions that will recur in various forms throughout the remaining essays. There follow two essays that draw principally on phenomenological and post-phenomenological philosophical thought; then four that work in diverse ways with the psychoanalytic and deconstructive approaches to fetishism.

Rochelle Tobias traces the close affinity between Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, in particular the fact that both of these figures question the distinction between self and world, which they construe as meeting within consciousness. Phenomenological "bracketing" becomes in Rilke's poetry, for Tobias, "the condition for the making of art and, more generally, for the making of meaning." The chiasmic inscription of self and world within each other, in Tobias's account, is one version of the disruption of the binary opposition between image and concept for which Monroe's essay calls. (It would be interesting to read this essay in conjunction with Thomas Schestag's essay, "Twombly's Roses," published in an earlier issue of this journal [*Konturen*, V]. Both essays undertake readings of Rilke's figures of roses from related but distinct perspectives.)

In contrast to the consciousness-centered phenomenology of Husserl, David Appelbaum focuses his remarks, which follow in the traditions of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, on the interpretation of the "thing" as an "event" whose arrival evades us even as it occurs. He unfolds the indeterminability of the

event in time (because it escapes punctual presentation or representation), in space (because it remains at a distance), and in ontological status (because it can be determined neither as ideal nor as real and both: as virtually real).

Reflecting on the event of his own spoken presentation on the thing-as-event, Appelbaum strikingly characterizes the precarious simultaneity of the occurrence and non-occurrence of this very presentation.

In a manner equally attentive to the lessons of rhetorical deconstruction and psychoanalysis, Erica Weitzman explores the literature of realism in its attempt to portray things as they are. Much more specifically, she writes on the difficult and threatening status of the "thing" as a potential fetish in Theodor Fontane's novella, *Grete Minde*. Notably, she examines the ways in which the novella's problematization of fetishistically constituted "things" casts a critical light on the conditions of its own aesthetic specificity as an instance of "poetic realism." Through a detailed reading, Weitzman shows how the iconoclastic anxieties of the post-Reformation period in which the novella is set--anxieties concerning the functioning of a "thing" as an image that would falsely be thought to contain an absent spiritual meaning--necessarily and appropriately repeat themselves as the anxieties of the realist author concerning his or her own project: the representation of material realities as containing more than just blind, senseless particularity. Here again, the problem of the thing as a possible conjunction of image and concept in the presentation of the object itself is centrally at stake.

From Weitzman to McNulty, we move from fetishism as a problem for poetic realism to fetishism as a resource for speculative realism. McNulty takes as her point of departure the new ontologies of thingliness, specifically Quentin Meillassoux's version of speculative realism. Notably, Meillassoux questions the "linguistic turn" of modern philosophy, mentioned above, for what he takes to be its failure to envision an actual encounter with the object or thing. Instead of remaining fixated on language as obstacle to an immediate grasp of things as they are, Meillassoux proposes mathematics--in a neo-Cartesian vein--as the privileged discursive modality of immediate human access to the world of

nonhuman objects. With reference especially to the work of Deleuze and the later Lacan, McNulty interprets Meillassoux's move as a fetishization of mathematics. Far from condemning it as such, however, she takes this move as an occasion for reflection on the positive philosophical interest and potential of fetishism in general, beyond the aspect of disavowal, which she nonetheless acknowledges. Rather than the fetishism of speculative realism, then, it is the speculative realism of fetishism more generally that is ultimately her topic here. According to McNulty, fetishism introduces a "radically new object" in the sense that it constructs, rather than merely discovers, the real. In this construction, the maternal phallus actually functions as a figure for the death drive, through a modality of figuration that takes on plastic connotations beyond the dimensions of the semiotic signifier. In exceeding both the symbolic and the imaginary registers, the real at which fetishism aims would concern neither concept nor image, but what escapes this binary opposition. Finally, McNulty argues that it is what Lacan calls *das Ding* ("the Thing")--as a psychic reality intimately within, and yet excluded from, the human subject--that is constructed by the speculative realism of perversion.

Daniel Wilson approaches the Lacanian conceptual figure of *das Ding* through an interest in its conceptual and terminological genealogy, which his article traces from John Stuart Mill to Sigmund Freud to Jacques Lacan. Wilson approaches Lacan's notion of the psychic "thing" as the lost object, a psychoanalytic narrative trope on the thing-in-itself, which one continually seeks in vain, although it remains unconsciously at work in one's body. To clarify its sense, Wilson compares and contrasts this notion of the "thing" with the notion of the "thing" as it functions within Freud's frequent discussion of the relationship between "representations-of-things" (*Ding- or Sachvorstellungen*) and "representations-of-words" (*Wortvorstellungen*). In the Freudian oeuvre, "representations-of-things" constitute the contents of the unconscious, understood as a realm radically beyond language. In turn, however, in order to clarify Freud's notion of "representations-of-things," Wilson shows how Freud derives it, in his early writings, from Mill's philosophy. Thus, Wilson's genealogy

passes from Mill's thing in general, as a set of associated sensory impressions, to Freud's unconscious representations-of-things, which are known only indirectly through their effects, to the Lacanian version of the lost object as "the effects of language on the subject that are unaccounted for in language and that remain unaddressed to the Other." Finally, Wilson illustrates the working of the Lacanian thing in the body of the subject, with reference to autobiographical writings by an autistic individual, Tito Mukhopadhyay.

With Eva Hoffmann's essay we reenter the domain of contemporary literature, this time in the form of novelistic prose. Hoffmann reads Orhan Pamuk's novel, *The Museum of Innocence*, in terms of the Freudian concept of the fetish, as also in terms of the reinterpretation of the fetish--with application to cultural voids and narrative impasses--by recent theorists such as Anne McClintock and Gerhard Neumann. As a museal collector, Pamuk's melancholic protagonist inserts relic-like "things"--objects that have belonged to his essentially inaccessible beloved--into the gap between tradition and modernity, a wound in contemporary Turkish culture. He thereby disavows and represents through one set of objects the intermingling of cultural and erotic loss (or trauma). Here, too, as in McNulty's analysis, the fetish marks--with its interplay of excess and lack--the limits of the signifier's effectiveness, as also the limits of the domain of stabilized imaginary identification.

In broadly divergent ways, then, the essays gathered here document a particular moment in the history of the question of the thing. In this moment--our own "here and now"--the continuing persuasive authority of the "linguistic turn" (with its predominant structural-analytical imperative) maintains a productive tension with multiple counter-currents--whether from phenomenology, historicist cultural studies, object-oriented metaphysics, psychoanalysis, or aesthetic and poetic ideologies--that seek (perhaps unavoidably) a return to things themselves. The status of such a return--e.g. as image-work, consciousness, event, realistic narrative, fetish, or unconscious object--remains here at issue.

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