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My work is not particularly influenced by any specific theory associated with the “new materialisms.” Nevertheless, I recognize the desire for a renewed account of the efficacy of material structures that function independently of the circuit of representations associated with linguistic or specular models of subject formation. In publicly recognizing this I’m immediately claimed by another interest, namely in the way premature bindings of varied theoretical standpoints function for an art world constantly in search of “new” theory in which to recognize itself. Currents of thought converge in the theory-commodity, congealing into the historical form shared by the subject that is in a position to consume it—no matter how trenchantly the distinction of the subject is expunged by a conceptual apparatus that wants to take steel wool to its outlines.

It may then be welcome that questioning human experience’s correspondence with worlds of material forces and agents is one of the central concerns of the “new” materialism. The problem it takes up—reality’s anteriority to human cognition—is rehearsed in different ways throughout the history of twentieth-century materialist thought. It appears as much in Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* (2008) as in Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909) and Lucio Coletti’s *Marxism and Hegel* (1974), to name a few. The precise relation (or nonrelatedness) of the rational and the real is at issue in these works. Emphasis lands in each case on an account of reality, which asserts that any historical form of theoretical consciousness about nature is preceded by a rich world of events, whose consistency does not fundamentally depend on the subject’s capacity for conceptual synthesis, but which is knowable by it. While the subject’s special status may be demoted here, it is also conceptually ramified by its capacity to find the cognitive resources to relate to a world of inhuman forces and events outside of its experience. This is a situation it must cope with using the means it has at its disposal.

Historical materialism deals with social relations as the grounds of those means. It attempts to critically dissolve the appearance of natural priority down to the historical relations that govern a society’s mode of dealing with nature, the means it mobilizes to reproduce those relations and the concepts that flow from those dealings. As a critique of the roles played by knowledge and practice in the value form, it eschews the nomination of strong ontological candidates in order to function in the capacity of a *methodological postulate* concerning the historical transformation of social being.¹ The understanding of historical material-

1. As Moishe Postone writes regarding his systematic reconstruction of late Marx: “In his mature works, Marx rigorously treats the categories of capitalist society as historically specific. In working out the non-ontological, historically specific character of the core relations grasped by Marx’s basic categories, [attention can be drawn] to their transhistorical, reified modes of appearance.” Neither value nor labor function as exclusive or historically stable concepts. The form taken by labor as a social category arises—and comes into conflict—with the historically specific system for capital’s self-valorization, making the necessary incompleteness of the relationship between value and labor under capital the central feature of experience. According to Postone, the overcoming of capitalism, which is the

ism as methodological postulate comes from Alfred Sohn-Rethel's critique of the scission between intellectual and manual labor.² This division, he claims, instantiates a norm of universal, timeless logic for science: a norm that is the direct product of historical reasoning. Sohn-Rethel is interested in a critique not of scientific rigor, but of the relation that scientific investigation has to the social forms assumed under the domination of social relations by the principle of exchange. It is a methodological critique of the philosophical epistemology of science as conditioned by an epoch that links scientificity to technocracy and epistemic neutrality.

Materialism understood as a methodological postulate therefore must remain as mutable as the social forms and practices it makes a claim upon. It is a familiar idea that historical materialism breaks the seal on social representations that appear to be given by nature. Yet it would only raise the stakes to understand method itself as an unstable historical product, one which accepts the challenge of continually *being broken in on* by processes and discoveries that force the recomposition of its theoretical standpoint. "Method" in this case pertains not to neutral, theoretical description, but to seeking out possibilities for political contradiction in a complex, shifting field of relations.

This seems all the more pressing today when the relation between historical construction and naturally occurring structure seems to actualize old-fashioned allegories of the commodity as nature. The gene and the cell have for some time supplanted the shop window as the abstracted elements of valorization processes: from Monsanto seed crops to the genetically engineered cells of livestock, the life-extending pharmaceuticals ritually ingested by Silicon Valley gurus, and the chemically desiccated organs of the people that make their products. There is nothing new about capital pressing against its own organic limits. What is new is the seeming degree of manipulability of the organism itself. The commodification of the lowest levels of matter, the construction of biogenetically and neutrally constructed materials, foregrounds the need for both a compelling account of processes intrinsic to matter and a critical methodology for organizing resistance to the abstract system of value that attempts to master it for its own ends.

This is also the case for macroscale environmental crises: there is also a need for new means of grasping the immense contradiction between the irrational global capitalist ideology of indefinite growth and the rapid destruction of material resources. What is thrown into relief, in addition to just how limited the range of atmospheric tolerance humans have to a catastrophe of their own making, is the need for cognitive tools to understand the way that catastrophes spurred by energy consumption are co-extensive with crises in valorization. As George Caffentzis argued during the "energy crisis" of the late 1970s, these cata-

overcoming of the value form, would mean the abolition of labor. See Moishe Postone, "Critique and Historical Transformation," *Historical Materialism* 12, no. 3 (2004), pp. 53–72.

2. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1978).

strophic conditions are accelerated by capital's race around the globe toward a receding bottom line, to gain the same control over the energy-commodity that it once had over work.³

From cellular and synaptic to global and geological timescales, what is less secure than ever is the possibility of directly sensible representation of these conditions. Here is one place where artworks might intervene—neither in providing representations nor in retreating to the sublime exaltation of conceptual un-presentability, but in articulating the mechanisms that enforce the exclusion of sensory experience from knowledge, taking up what these crises in representability push to the margins: to present what is materially incommensurable within the presentational powers of the concept.

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3. George Caffentzis, "The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse," in *In Letters of Blood and Fire: Work, Machines, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013), pp. 11–58.