Reality is Aesthetic and Political:
Editor’s Preface

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The Transreal arrives amidst a whirlwind of renewed philosophical interest in realism. Notably, the popularity of speculative realism has spun out across blogs, books, collected anthologies, and Facebook posts. This so-called philosophical turn has taken up not only realism and reality but also proffered critiques of worlding, materiality, and the subject. Although it might seem off-topic to begin this preface by engaging with speculative realism, its growing body of theoretical and cultural production—which now includes self-identified speculative realist artists—is an unavoidable interlocutor for this book. Crucially, Micha Cárdenas delivers an implicit refutation of speculative realism’s “reality” in the following pages.

Speculative realism, a rapidly developing philosophical movement, argues for an ability to speculatively access that which exists beyond or outside the correlation of being and world. Notably, Quentin Meillassou has referred to this as gaining access to “the great outdoors,” while others simply refer to the reality they are after as a world without us. Speculative realists posit that a world exists without humans, a world or reality that exceeds the perceptual world of the human, and

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various techniques must be generated to gain access to such a world. For example, Meillassoux uses mathematics, while others like Reza Negarestani create extremist, para-academic, theoretical-fictions.³ Importantly, there is an aesthetic dimension to these texts: speculative realism for Meillassoux is “the glacial world”⁴ and for Negarestani it is a fiery oil apocalypse filled with charred, blackened corpses. Others interlocutors, like Dominic Fox, offer an aesthetics of black metal, gloom, and coldness.⁵ In object-oriented philosophy (OOP), a strand of speculative realism, Graham Harman gives us an aesthetics of lists⁶ and also claims that aesthetics is first-philosophy, not ethics as Emmanuel Levinas previously suggested,⁷ but his prioritization of aesthetics evacuates the human at the expense of an apolitical choreography of objects.

When we consider the aesthetic and political realisms and realities of speculative realism--and they are all aesthetic and political--we find ourselves placed within a particular configuration of coldness and human absence or disintegration.

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⁴ Meillassoux, 115.
⁶ Such as “pollen, oxygen, eagles, or windmills.” See Graham Harman, Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 1.
⁷ See Graham Harman, "Aesthetics as First Philosophy: Levinas and the Non-Human," Naked Punch Issue 9 (Summer/Fall 2007).
Yet, as much as these thinkers might wish to do away with or destroy the human body and human concerns, their realities are always already culturally parsed through class, gender, and race. Although many of these texts have been criticized for their lack of political engagement, there initially were calls to seek, discover, and excavate the political dimension. There were even attempts at object-oriented feminisms, but these gestures fell prey to that dreaded correlationist trap that keeps human subjectivity at play in the constitution or identification of an object or reality. Now, attention to the political problem of speculative realism has dwindled with no sufficiently posited possibilities, let alone answers. Perhaps these failures suggest that the political can never be adequately addressed through this framework, or more insidiously, the framework encourages evasion of the political.

If we take notice that most speculative realist writers are white, heterosexual men, then it might not be a far stretch to state that the reality in speculative realism is a privilege and luxury to think and study. Their writings dictate a reality indifferent to various marginalized struggles of the everyday, to

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sexual and racial violence, to the dirty political battles that constitute the realities and realisms of the queer, the transgendered, the persons of color. The question becomes what are one’s ethical and political obligations when writing and constructing a conception of reality and realism? If one of the major trends in contemporary philosophy and critical thought today is the construction of a reality that abandons these political concerns, Cárdenas transports us to another “outdoors,” another speculative reality.

The implicit critique of speculative realism in *The Transreal* goes like this: If Meillassoux’s outdoors is only attainable in mathematics, who would actually desire this realism? If Negarestani’s radical openness is “catastrophically unpleasant”\(^\text{10}\) for the human subject, who would desire it? Why is the world without us aestheticized as such? Why isn’t it exuberant, superabundant, affirmatively chaotic—even if it is without us? The realities of speculative realism are what Hakim Bey once called Intellectual S/M, which is the intellectualized and fascist drive toward death and mutilation.\(^\text{11}\) Do the writers of

\(^{10}\) Negarestani, 200.

\(^{11}\) See Hakim Bey’s “Communique #5: Intellectual S/M is the Fascism of the Eighties--The Avant-Garde Eats Shit and Likes It” from *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (New York: Autonomedia, 2003). Bey writes, “Self-mutilating ‘performance’ artists strike us as banal & stupid--their art makes everyone more unhappy. What kind of two-bit conniving horseshit...what kind of cockroach-brained Art creeps cooked up this apocalypse stew? [...] Compared to that kind of intelligence we'd choose real
speculative realism conjure such horrors as a way to indulge in that which they will probably never experience, namely, the violence and destruction against minoritarian populations? Just as OOP’s objects forever withdraw from the world, so do most of these philosophers’ political concerns for the present moment, which is a world with humans and nonhumans. While both have an investment in the speculative and the real, *The Transreal* demonstrates that speculative realism is not yet compatible with a queer and transgendered politics.\(^\text{12}\)

*The Transreal* aligns with another trajectory of the speculative, as those creative forces that generate utopic ideality to change what is real. The transreal dimension of the speculative partners with José Esteban Muñoz’s queer futurity and Samuel R. Delany’s queer science fictions.\(^\text{13}\) These works

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stupidity, bucolic New Age blissed-out inanity—-we’d rather be pinheads than *queer for death*. [...] Ours is no art of mutilation but of excess, superabundance, amazement.”

\(^\text{12}\) It is important to note, however, that Michael O’Rourke is courageously and carefully attempting to articulate a queer speculative realism. See his article “‘Girls Welcome!!!’ Speculative Realism, Object Oriented Ontology and Queer Theory” in *Speculations II*.

posit a politics of the speculative that states we do not yet know what reality is or can be, so we must ethically and politically invest our imaginations into creating and experimenting with the realities we desire.

As no surprise, Cárdenas’ reality ends up inherently different from the speculative realist version because it affirms and is powerfully invested in politics, ethics, a human subject, and the abilities of the imagination to produce multiple realities. Furthermore, *The Transreal* does not even define reality but presents various cases and examples of what it can and might be from Cárdenas’ and other artists’ practices. There is a political motivation to leave reality open, an understanding that it can, should, must be left open as a tactic necessary for survival. As the Zapatistas say, “In the world we want, many worlds to fit.”

Speculative realists might engage with the nonhuman at the expense of the human, but the transreal accommodates both. The crucial point is not that the transreal invests in an older formation of identity politics with the human firmly at its center, while speculative realism expands into the cosmological. *The*
The transreal

*Transreal* aligns with a body of work that explores the nonhuman in queer contexts. For Cárdenas, the human is anything but stable and centralized; consider her projects on becoming-animal, techné-sexual, and viruses as instances of non/human transformation. Cárdenas pursues worlds and perspectives that are other than human; yet, she creates with care and compassion toward those that have always been cast out of the normatively human world.

Cárdenas also writes of her own uses of various technologies, including virtual and immersive reality systems, and even provides the computer code used during a performance. This direct, practical engagement with nonhuman materials directly comes to bear on Cárdenas’ theory of the transreal. Perhaps this is the major difference between speculative realists and Cárdenas: hers is a lived, practiced concept, concerned with a mode of living rather than solely an academic conversation or contribution. Hers is a praxis which, in fact, the book itself is an active part of, just as her artworks, performances, installations, and talks are. We have yet to see the speculative realists put their philosophy into a practice of everyday life, partially because this is impossible but also because it is not their concern.

*The Transreal* argues that if we only want to think reality, maybe we should turn to the speculative realists or search for

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any other academic conception of reality that allows the human body to withdraw from intellectual concern. However, if we want to *think and live* reality, change reality, embody it, fight exploitation and violence, and discover its astounding, incredible, multiple dimensions, then participating in the aesthetic and political construction of making realities that are human and beyond is a promising and empowering practice that can make life livable and joyfully intensified. Existing as transreal teaches us that to produce an artistic or philosophical project that imagines or theorizes into existence a world without us is a privilege that many queer and transgendered people cannot afford to invest in as they struggle to exist in a world that is painfully and amazingly present. Cárdenas’ realities are lived diagrams of transreal existence, and as such, they are inspired and needed framings of realities that have, can, and will be.
The aestheticization of politics was an idea first coined by Walter Benjamin as being a key ingredient to fascist regimes. In this theory, life and the affairs of living are conceived of as innately artistic, and related to as such politically. Politics are in turn viewed as artistic, and structured like an art form which reciprocates the artistic conception of life being seen as art.