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## The The Marfa Stratum: Contribution to a Theory of Sites<sup>1</sup>



Dust storm approaching Stratford, Texas, 18 April 1935; photo courtesy of NOAA, George

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## REASON

In what follows, we wish to argue that one of the great benefits of the recent import of the Anthropocene concept into artistic discourses and practices pertains to the reevaluation of art's relation to rationality.<sup>2</sup>

Our contention here is that far from simply strengthening or rehabilitating an all too familiar romantic trope, the incursion of dwarfing geological time scales and magnitudes within our present should have the reinvigorating effect of questioning yet again art's potency for knowledge and rational explorations.

To do so first involves firmly contesting the common use of the concept of the Anthropocene as that which, by bringing into the scale of our experience the otherwise unbounded movements of Earth formation, conveniently allows the suturing of old epistemological partitions. In such a case, any clear distinction between what we can feel of the world's movements and what we can know of them—any characteristically modern divides between the sensible and the intelligible—come to be fused and erased.

It is notable that this dismissal of classical epistemological categories in favour of a flattened net of "hybrids" and "actants" is nevertheless often accompanied by a reinforcement of one of its categories, namely: art. Granting the Anthropocene with intensive power for reconfiguration, this conceptual line of flight paradoxically leaves "art" untroubled by its movements. "Art" in the Anthropocene thus remains intact as the exceptional and foreclosed pacification zone where "things are made public," where concerns are revealed, and invisibles are made visible. Against such an impoverished and paradoxically traditional conception of art's capacity, the concern here is obviously not to salvage the historically constituted partitions from which it has emerged, nor to further fuse their distinctions. Instead, what we hope to do is consider the Anthropocene not simply as a way to abolish or comfort these epistemic divisions, but as an opportunity for a revision of their constitutive dynamics.

The fact that tectonic activities have infiltrated our gestures, that wide scales and vast processes collide with the locality of our human actions, should in no way legitimate new forms of irrationalism evinced by the conception outlined above. Art need not remain the safe and reinsuring place where our limited capacity to reason within this turmoiled world is vibrantly exposed to our senses; nor does it need to be delegated as the panic room of a supposed unthinkable and viscous Outside. Quite on the contrary, positioning ourselves within this turbulent landscape requires a taking hold, again, of epistemological questions; surely such a grasping of the conditions of knowledge is not meant to erase or dismiss them. To address these epistemological loci implies wider theoretical movements, of which this short text can only operate as a rough and partial attempt.

First, investigating rational epistemologies calls for a revised account of what rationality is, and consequently, of the type of agency art can be said to have within it. This implies a consideration of art not as the "other" of reason, but as a set of fully efficient rational operations in their own right. Such a task begins by severing rationality from its historical instantiation and approaching reason in its most general definition as a "conceptual conduct," not inherently or necessarily bound to economical violence and colonial subjugation. In addition, it demands an embrace of a fully pragmatist perspective, where rationality is not considered as a monolithic institution of overarching judgments and divisions, but instead as an intrinsic and collective practice open to revision and continuous self-correction. In this pragmatist and mobile approach, thinking is also indistinguishable from a kind of doing. Reasoning, for pragmatists such as Charles Peirce, Wilfrid Sellars, or Robert Brandom, is not merely the discursive activity of a subject about the world, but a transformative engagement of this subject with the

world. Far from any ruthless simplification that considers rationality as unilateral coercion, reasoning should be understood as a truly dynamic and plastic relation between what we do with concepts and what concepts do to us in return.

Secondly, this revised understanding of rationality has to be complemented with an approach to the Anthropocene as precisely that which ungrounds the very concept of nature. The Anthropocene can be said to have prolonged the historical transitions of modernity's approach to nature: it has concluded the progressive shift from a view of natural movements as driven by necessity and governed by static principles to the full-blown contingency of their drifting dynamics. Positing that one process among others (i.e. humans) can come to influence and determine the becoming of all processes should have strong conceptual consequences: it should open onto a groundless world without any proper identity or essence; it should beckon a conception of Earth as that which is constantly unearthing itself and thus produce a fully and continuously revisable concept of nature.

We think it is only on the condition of a particular re-alignment of these two revised conceptions—of a morphing reason and of an ungrounded nature—that an account of art in the Anthropocene can be meaningfully attempted. It is by engaging with the dynamic intricacy of these realms that epistemological questions can be effectively put back to work.

The way we can operate practically in between these levels can be best described in terms of a navigational process. Navigation, as we understand it here, is twofold: it is that which functions through a constant reevaluation of path and adaptation to the moving ground, while at the same time transforming the very ground on which it operates. As such, navigation is the most adequate mode of comportment with the revised notions we have just exposed. It is a type of conceptual and practical conduct which forbids any overdetermination by concepts (as in the standard conception of rationality), while avoiding any overgrounding of thought (as in an essentializing account of nature).

Navigation starts by recognizing that any concrete engagement with the world necessarily entails an engagement with the abstract. Or, to put it in our terms, that any orientation at the level of unearthing contingencies must be correlated to an orientation at the level of morphing rationalities.

In this text, we would like to take on the historical notions of site and site-specificity in art as precisely those which, in the context of the Anthropocene, permit a navigational binding of a concrete and abstract Earth. More precisely, we hope to rescue these notions from the pitfalls of postmodern and contemporary skepticism about rationality and to show how, from a pragmatist perspective, they can bring forward a definition of art as the practice of reasoning gestures.

To detach the notion of site from its misconstrued interpretations, we will start by presenting two different orientations in the space opened to us by the Anthropocene. We will then move to a presentation of the figure of Donald Judd and the locality of Marfa as exemplary of this revised pragmatist history and its rationalist perspectives.

## ORIENTATION

### The Plough That Broke the Plain<sup>3</sup>

The Dust Bowl of the 1930s in the Great Plains of North America is said to be the first “man-made” ecological disaster. Based on a nineteenth-century belief that “the rain follows the plough,” and after a prolonged drought, many settler farmers of the Plains thought that by tilling the earth, they would eventually succeed in permanently transforming the climate of the region; they believed these rough-hewn lands could be transformed into a new agricultural Eden. However, by deeply ploughing the delicate and unstable topsoil, they accelerated large-scale processes of erosion and uprooted the native plants that fix moisture in the soil. When the drought started, it not only destroyed the harvest, but also turned the topsoil to dust.

The combination of several severe droughts and the use of inadequate and intensive agricultural techniques led to the “Black Sunday” of 14 April 1935, when a gigantic storm stirred and raised the dust on a scale previously unseen and covered the Great Plains with a thick dark haze. In some regions, the Dust Bowl lasted nearly a decade. Confronted by a radically new and unexpected situation, farmers tried to create shields against the dust and wait for the storm to pass. A survivor from the Dust Bowl described: “We live with the dust, eat it, sleep with it, watch it strip us of possessions and the hope of possessions. It is becoming Real.”<sup>4</sup> Many of the survivors, pushed further west by misery and hunger, believed California and its mild climate was their last chance to start over.

### The Cognitive Dust Bowl

The Dust Bowl of the 1930s provides us with a striking analogy for our contemporary situation. As a giant cloud of dust rising from the ground and infiltrating all dimensions of human life, the emergence of Earth formations into thought processes constitutes the irrespirable atmosphere of the Anthropocene. This is as much a material process as a mental one; the Great Plains of North America seem to fuse with our cognitive landscapes. In this “cognitive Dust Bowl,” the horizon line dividing the ground from the sky is blurred as the human figure seems to slowly melt into the background. The landscape becomes a massive, opaque, and ground-sky, an all-over horizon of earth-infused thoughts or a thought-infused Earth.

Looking for an escape route from this epochal panic leads to fierce confusion: routes seem to have disappeared, observation tools are no longer efficient, and vehicles are inadequate. But the difference between the Dust Bowl of the 1930s and our present “cognitive dust bowl” is that there isn’t even any “California” to flee to anymore.

What kind of orientation is required by such a situation? What kind of position should one take in order to decide on a possible path? In the wide range of contemporary discourses, it seems that two key critical orientations and positions within the storm can be traced. The first focuses on the blade of the plough and criticizes its inadequacy to the specific kind of soil it encountered. The second proposes to rebuild the blade, but at a greater scale, in order to exit the storm. As the first retroactively attempts to deconstruct the blade and invent new tools, the second commits to the blade while trying to reorient its furrows. We want to consider these two orientations as opposed strategies, and, despite the risk of caricature, as two schematic figures in the diagram of our present.

### **The Blade From Nowhere: Locationism**

For what we will call "locationism" in this cognitive Dust Bowl another kind of plough broke the plain. It is a conceptual plough which by certain means of cutting, categorizing, and distributing our knowledge of the world provoked the conceptual and material panic we have inherited. This position envisages the causes and consequences of the Dust Bowl as already present in the birthing of modern rational tools. Such would be the position of Bruno Latour: understanding the Dust Bowl as one of those entities created by and despite the Moderns' will for purification and separation between humans and nonhumans. In this view, the blade of reason, "this eye [that] fucks the world to create technomonsters,"<sup>5</sup> raped the Great Plains and helped to complete a world defined by violence, expropriation, and domination. As such, this position proposes an account of reason as strongly entangled with colonialism.

For Donna Haraway, the inadequacy of the blade to its terrain is first and foremost a problem of vision and perspective. Most notably, in her critique of modern rationality, she names and attacks the "conquering view from nowhere" as an inadequate technique of vision that lead to an "unregulated gluttony."<sup>6</sup> The blade from nowhere is inadequate both because the earth is envisaged solely as a resource and because its abstract position cannot question itself: it implies neither commitment nor responsibility. For Haraway, feminism provides an inverse framework "about limited location and situated knowledge,"<sup>7</sup> allowing us to become "answerable for what we learn to see."<sup>8</sup>

In such a view, to orientate oneself within the storm requires a radical change in the tools of vision we have inherited from the Moderns. It requires that we abandon any attempt at generality or invariance in favour of an embedded practice of composition among irreducible, and thus necessarily singular, "situations." What such a view requires is a type of tool and operation capable of "re-stitching" and "reassembling"<sup>9</sup> what the blade of reason has violated and ploughed aside.

### **The Blade to Nowhere: Extensionism**

According to the position we will call "extensionism," the plough should not be abandoned, but instead prolonged and repurposed. The only way out of the storm is a deepened engagement with the blade, not a retreat from its implications. The extensionist landscape is one of a planetary dust bowl where cattle and crops are slowly dying and the human species risks its own extinction by asphyxiation. This position is made popular at the beginning of the recent Hollywood film *Interstellar*: "We were born on earth but we were never meant to die here." Once the earth has become inhabitable, what is required is a dismantling of the blade and a remodelling of its metal in the form of a space rocket. To escape the dust bowl, the extensionists strive for the production of literal escape routes and the enhancement of all technologies as the only path to salvation. Contrary to its locationist counterpart, the Anthropocene works here as a trigger towards a radical autonomization from the ground.

The terraforming of other planets is an exemplary image of this extensionist strategy. It demands an overcoming of tellurian boundaries and the extension of the sphere of the human to other planets. To terraform a planet such as Mars would require warming its climate by means of polluting its atmosphere in order to melt its ice caps and develop the conditions for a suitable human habitat. What is a local problem on Earth becomes the solution on Mars. The extensionist route perpetuates a colonial movement: the infinitely ambitious replication of the same violent imperialism.

## A Revised Reason

We would like to show that these common contemporary orientations are unsatisfactory to us for two main reasons: first, because their definition of what reason is insufficiently attends to its intrinsic revisability both as discursive and non-discursive conceptual practice, and second, because they precisely do not take fully into account what the Anthropocene as a concept does to reason itself.

What is at play in both cases—whether to withdraw from reason or to escape by reason—is a particular estimation of the relation between rationality and spatiality. While both trajectories recognize the transformative action of reason (the blade) on its spatial environment (the Great Plains) they seemingly endorse opposed strategies. The locationist can be said to be reactionary in so far as she not only reacts and questions but negates the bounded relation between rational movements and spatial production. The extensionist can be said to be conservative in so far as she tries not only to prolong but to preserve this very relation. As opposed as they may seem, both orientations embrace the same kind of positioning with regard to conceptual activity, and reasoning more generally. That is, they both posit a limit to what is eligible to conceptuality, or rational movements, and unfold their strategies from this very limit.

While the locationist critique of reason is performed by instantiating “locations” as bearers of some kind of non-conceptual truth, its extensionist endorsement excludes the possibility of questioning and revising the very relation of the blade to its terrain. This reason closed to any meaningful revision egregiously replicates its major blind spot. By establishing the irreducible kernel of locations or the imperialist dynamics of extensions at the heart of their respective accounts of reason, both seem to block the possibility of its reformatting.

Contrary to these positions, the type of rationality we are enquiring about here is not something one chooses to engage with or to dissociate from, but, we argue, the very process which makes us human. According to Robert Brandom, what conclusively sets us apart from other animals is our capacity not only to follow and adapt to rules, but also to transform and produce new rules.<sup>10</sup> Rationality is simply the name of this highly normative and properly human operation. It defines our ability to think as an embedded practice of moving through and adapting to conceptual norms—as a process of inferring and navigating through the space of reason.

For any critique or endorsement of reason to have any value, one must first account for the type of rational operativity these very gestures assume.<sup>11</sup> One must realize that they are in themselves specific engagements with conceptual norms, not some kind of non-conceptual exterior force or action. In other words, to be able to transform the game of reason one needs to enter the game in the first place, or to recognize that one has always been part of it. To assume otherwise is to fall victim to a kind of irrationalism and thus to abandon any attempt at transforming space or reorienting the blade.

We want to argue here that art, contrary to its historically constituted position of extraterritoriality, can claim a particular type of agency within the game of reason and its possible transformations. To reaffirm art as a conceptual practice requires that we revise the “representationalist” account of meaning in favour of an “inferentialist” one. For the pragmatists, meaning production is not solely the result of a direct relation between an idea and an object, but the product of an articulation between these relations.<sup>12</sup> As such, instead of the dialectical play of correspondence between subjects and objects, names and things, words and worlds, meaning is deduced through the comparison and evaluation of these assertions. This shift from meaning understood as “adequation to reference” to “production through inference” constitutes the operative ground of a truly pragmatist form of art.

If philosophy is a type of formalization making explicit what is implicit in our rational behaviours and thus allowing for their manipulations and transformations, it typically remains bounded to its discursivity as a linguistic practice. In what follows, we draft a definition of art as the proper formalization of the non-linguistic dimension of this conceptual practice.

## **NAVIGATION**

To address these notions does not only mean calling for a future kind of art; it requires us to enact an operative revision of our own history. It implies that we crawl back through the current of history, identify points of inflexion, and operate a reorientation of their becomings. It demands we take hold of untravelled paths or blocked routes and open them to bifurcations and reworkings; such notions include those of site and site-specificity.

Since their historical emergence in the 1960s, site-specific practices and discourses have become a normative framework and a standard of evaluation for any artistic gesture. Schematically, we can argue that the short history of site-specificity has had three phases. By binding the work of art to a complex set of material conditions, the first construction phase in the 1960s opened new relations to the notion of artistic experience and its constitutive gestures. In the 1970s, dynamic engagements such as institutional critique (Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Mierle Laderman Ukeles) opened the site to the social, political, racial, and economic context of the aesthetic experience, thus highlighting the hidden power relations at play in art institutions. In the 1980s, these concerns were further extended by their encounters with feminism and postcolonial theories, as well as a systematic questioning of modes of coercion, racism, patriarchy, and other embedded systems of privilege (Andrea Fraser, Fred Wilson). The third phase started in the wider context of a liberalized economy and completely diluted the notion of site in the newly grounded mobilities best exemplified by the triadic circulation within the "art world" between art residencies, art biennials, and art fairs.

If the notion of site was constructed as a practical and conceptual tool that once aspired to artistic and political emancipation, it now seems to work effectively toward further alienation. Even though it has now become common to denounce the contemporary effects of this paradigmatic shift and the failure of its promises, instead of abandoning the notion of site to its critics, we would like to rescue its inaugural movement and emancipatory virtue through an in-depth reevaluation of its terms and potentialities. Furthermore, we wish to use this notion of site as a hinge in a revised history of the relations between art and rationality.

### **Marfa as a Site**

To proceed to this revision, we wish to address the work of Donald Judd, as someone who opened the way for the notion of site to be developed through a practice of conceptual formalization. Although Judd himself never mentioned the concept of site as such, the array of concepts and practices he used clearly constitute a transitional phase in the overall epochal dynamics that led to its emergence. A specific is what relates dynamically to a generic. There is no specificity without its generic counterpart, and any practice of thought, any "meaningful act," as defined by Peirce's pragmatism, is always an articulation between these two polarities.<sup>13</sup>

For Peirce, "The idea of a general involves the idea of possible variations which no multitude of existent things could exhaust but would leave between not two, not merely many possibilities, but possibilities absolutely beyond any multitude."<sup>14</sup> In such a view, a generic does not designate a space, a particular entity or a set of elements but a truly indeterminate realm of pure possibility. A specific is nothing but the material and temporal instantiation of this generic, as Donald Judd elaborates in relation to his own work:

Three-dimensionality is not as near being simply a container as painting and sculpture have seemed to be (...). Much of the motivation in the new work is to get clear of these forms. The use of three dimensions is an obvious alternative. It opens to anything.<sup>15</sup>

In his foundational text "Specific Objects,"<sup>16</sup> Judd attempts to think through the movements that occurred in art after 1946, with Newman, Rothko, and others, and tries to define a general form of art that would be "neither painting nor sculpture"<sup>17</sup> but a three-dimensional realm of possibilities. He defines the "old works" as those which instantiated the limit within which the relationship of colours and forms occur. In those works, the painting was conceived as a bounded form, an enclosed space of possibility founded on a fixed spatial identity. On the contrary, for Judd, the identity of an art object is never something in and of itself, but the result of a specific operation within a truly indeterminate and generic space: a painting is a rectangular volume on a wall, a wall is a folded plane in a room, and a room a volume nested in a building. The new works he calls for do not allude or refer to a space outside of themselves but—through a series of material inferences—construct and unfold their specific and continuous spatiality. As such, the Juddian notion of specificity allows one to depart from any standard representationalist account of a disjunctive relation between space and reason and opens to a concept of site as the formalization of their possible continuity.

How does such a formalization occur? In the 15 untitled works in concrete (1980–1984), as well as in the 100 works in mill aluminium (1982–1986), exhibited in Marfa, each individual work resembles the next one with slight variations as the viewer moves from one piece to the next. The serial nature of the work allows for the global to exist as a reflection into each of its local elements. Its completeness can only thus be fully grasped through the association of a careful wandering among the local elements and a mental projection into their possible globality. Each work functions as a navigational marker, a material hypothesis of what the global may be. The continuity of the work is more than the mere sum of its parts and can only be reached through a constant relaunching of local abductive gestures.

An abduction is a mode of inference employed both as a keystone for the scientific method and in everyday reasoning. In Peircian terms, an "abduction is the process of inferring certain facts and/or laws and hypotheses that render some sentences plausible, that explain (and also sometimes discover) some (eventually new) phenomenon or observation."<sup>18</sup> In the case of Judd, an abduction occurs when the globality of the sculpture is inferred in each of its local constituents. As such, for Judd, any attempt to reach out for what he calls the "wholeness"<sup>19</sup> of space can only be successful if the local—apprehended through direct and physical experience—and the global—seized through conceptual projections—achieve a sense of continuity. He writes:

I've always considered the distinction between thought and feeling as, at the least, exaggerated (...). Emotion or feeling is simply a quick summation of experience, some of which is thought, necessarily quick so that we can act quickly (...). Otherwise we could never get from A to Z, barely to C, since B would have to be always rechecked. It's a short life and a little speed is necessary.<sup>20</sup>

Here, Judd introduces the notion of speed into the thinking process. "Fast-thinking" is for Judd the necessary condition for the production of new hypotheses that will then relaunch the thinking process. Meaning is nothing but a movement of temporary capture that allows one "to catch a gesture and to be able to continue."<sup>21</sup> Fast-thinking is the multiplication of material inferences in order to catalyze spaces of navigation. Abduction as an orientation tool, and fast-thinking as a constant retriggering of its movements, constitute the woven dynamics of Judd's formalizations. As we hope is evident from this brief account of Judd's work, the

notion of site that it opens has little to do with the way "site" came to be understood in its later art historical stages.

This distinction should be stressed for two reasons; first, for Judd, the specific is not to be misconstrued with the "situated" and the generic is not to be confused with the "nowhere." These terms do not entail a kind of irreducible and local concreteness or embodiment that one could oppose to abstract generalities. On the contrary, what Judd proposes with his practice of specificity is a new distribution and material constructive binding of what we traditionally deemed as abstract and concrete. Second, the abductive logic at the core of Judd's work radically opposes our standard conception of experience as non-conceptual "presentification." The experience of continuity, especially in his large-scale installations, is not "revealed" or "given" by the work but inferentially and materially constructed through a navigation within the work. Experience is a rational process through and through.

### **Marfa as a Stratum**

If a site has been defined as the formalization of continuity, we wish to prolong and conclude this investigation by asking: what does such a site become once confronted by the concept of the Anthropocene?

From Judd's arrival in the early 1970s until his death in 1994, the small town of Marfa in far West Texas was for him an ideal laboratory for the production of material navigations. For him, Marfa might have appeared as a specific fold in a generic desert, a site for the continuous extension of his rational formalizations.

In a hundred million years, if living entities were to drill core samples at the exact location of Marfa, what would they uncover in the fossil imprint that documents the human passage in the region? Among the inert and indifferent residues, they would find flattened remnants of navigation: Donald Judd's aluminium sculptures crushed and reduced as the compressed aggregates of old navigations.

Imagining a world where humans have disappeared constitutes a common grand narrative of the Anthropocene.<sup>22</sup> This tale of extinction of humans by humans tends to become a naturalized eschatology, a theory of the ends of which we would be both the trigger and the victim. Far from endorsing this falsely humbling and disabling new myth, the import of this image into our conception of sites nonetheless provides us with a necessary shift of perspective: it binds our account of rationality as horizontal and continuous navigation to the vertical intrusion of geological contingencies. As such, it introduces entirely new parameters in the game of reason and demands that we revise and reorient our abductive operations.

Classically, for geologists, a core sample works as a vertical cartography of natural processes and their evolution over time. It offers an image of history as a stacked up succession of fossilized movements. The thin line of compressed sediments testifying to Marfa's existence is one of them. It is the "human event stratum"<sup>23</sup> in so far as it holds the material traces of human activity in the region (from the first indigenous settlements to today's oil-infused art institutions) and, more importantly so, because it registers a unique correlation between two very different types of processes: those of formations (understood as the full range of geo- and bio-morphological movements) and those of formalizations (understood as rational constructions within these movements). The intricacy of their respective dynamics is what distinguishes Marfa as a stratum from all other strata in the core sample. Among the full genericity of stratified processes, the Marfa Stratum is the specific site of the human.

What is the nature of this site? How can we describe its distinctive constitutive movements and the kind of spatiality they open to? That formalizations have emerged from a cascade of natural formations is a well established fact. That formations themselves have come to be irreversibly altered by human formalizations is now widely accepted as well. What is much less frequently taken into account is the retroactive effect these movements have on reason itself. We contend that this dynamic feedback between human reason and natural causes constitutes the true conceptual import of the Anthropocene. As such, it can help us to shed an entirely new light on the tale of the cognitive dust bowl and serve to unlock orientations within it.

The dominant modes of problematizing of the relation of the blade of reason to its terrain had left us with only two possible alternatives: either to heal the wounded Gaia (locationism) or further prolong our geological humiliations (extensionism). While both recognize the transformative effect of reason within its environment, they fail to account for its inevitable reverse: the transformation of reason by its environment. In this view, the plough does not only irreversibly alter the Great Plains, but alters itself in the same movement. It opens to a space of reason as that which is constantly deracinating and reforming itself by the very gestures it triggers in the world.

To navigate within this space, to select orientations, and decide on rational conduct is to engage in the constant reconstruction of the vehicle that serves to enable these movements. From such a vehicle, to make an abduction on a possible route demands that one reconstruct the vehicle itself. In other words, if reasoning within a site, as we have argued above, is an inferential process of abducting possible routes of navigation, to reason within a stratum requires doubling this movement with an abduction of reason itself. As a particular binding of continuity and contingency, a site in the Anthropocene is such a vehicle: the deracinated morphing nexus of formations and formalizations.

We contend that the truly emancipatory aspect of the Anthropocene for art pertains to such a revised conception of sites and the type of rational practice to which it testifies. Art in this context cannot be reduced to representation. Art is not merely a conservation of what we were or a reaction to what we are, but a proper commitment to what we could be; it is the material formalization of the possible.

## Notes

- 1 The Marfa Stratum is a book co-written by Fabien Giraud and Ida Soulard; divided into six chapters, or vehicles, departing from the historical concept of "site-specificity," and strongly influenced by the American pragmatist tradition in philosophy, the book attempts to define a contemporary theory of sites. This essay constitutes an introduction to this on-going research.
- 2 In this text, we are tremendously indebted to the work of Ray Brassier and Reza Negarestani for having introduced us to the renewal of rationalism in contemporary philosophy, and opening our cognitive horizon to the works of Wilfrid Sellars and Robert Brandom, as well as the use of a navigational paradigm. Most particularly, we draw on Brassier's lecture, "How to Train an Animal that Makes Inferences: Sellars on Rule and Regularities," presented at the The Human Animal in Politics, Science, and Psychoanalysis Conference, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, organised by Lorenzo Chiesa and Mladen Dolar (16-17 December 2011), [vimeo.com/35371780](https://vimeo.com/35371780); also, Ray Brassier, "Nominalism, Naturalism and Materialism," lecture at The Matter of Contradiction - War against the Sun Conference, Limehouse Town Hall, London (1-3 March 2013), [vimeo.com/66702489](https://vimeo.com/66702489). Additionally, from Reza Negarestani, "Where Is the Concept," a transcription of a lecture given at "When Site Lost the Plot," a conference organized by Robin Mackay at Goldsmiths College, University of London, 2013, [blog.urbanomic.com/cyclon/Navigation-2013.pdf](http://blog.urbanomic.com/cyclon/Navigation-2013.pdf); and, Reza Negarestani, "Navigating with Extreme Prejudice (Definitions and Ramifications)," published on the Urbanomic blog, 25 January 2014, [blog.urbanomic.com/cyclon/What-Is-Philosophy.pdf](http://blog.urbanomic.com/cyclon/What-Is-Philosophy.pdf).

- 3 The plow that broke the plain (25 min.; 1936) was poet Pare Lorentz's first feature film, written in free verse, and the first educational feature movie commissioned by the US government for commercial distribution. The idea was to document the Dust Bowl and educate the population regarding the danger of using inadequate agricultural techniques. The film was premiered at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C., during an event sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art.
- 4 Avis D. Carlson, "Dust," *New Republic* 82 (1 May 1935): 332–333.
- 5 Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 581.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 581.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 583.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 We are thinking here mostly of Bruno Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 471–490. According to Latour, "It is really a mundane question of having the right tools for the right job. With a hammer (or a sledge hammer) in hand you can do a lot of things: break down walls, destroy idols, ridicule prejudices, but you cannot repair, take care, assemble, reassemble, stitch together," 475.
- 10 According to Robert Brandom, "I think of us as essentially normative beings, that what sets us apart from the other animals is our capacity to commit ourselves, our worrying about whether we are entitled to those commitments, whether it's a cognitive commitment as to how things are or a practical commitment as to how things shall be. I think of us as discursive beings and that means that our normativity is inferentially articulated. We're beings who engage in practices of giving and asking for reasons. And I think these two dimensions—the normative dimension and the rational dimension—are what set us apart from beings that can feel but can't think." From transcription of the interview with Robert Brandom (Interviewer: G. Seddone, Leipzig, 30 June 2008), edited by Aaron Luke Shoichet, [www.filosofia.it/images/download/multimedia/08\\_Brandom%20Interview\\_transcription.pdf](http://www.filosofia.it/images/download/multimedia/08_Brandom%20Interview_transcription.pdf).
- 11 "There can be no such thing as an extraterritorial or transcendent critique of reason, since critique is a normative term whose ultimate warrant derives from reason itself." Ray Brassier, "That Which is Not: Philosophy as Entwinement of Truth and Negativity," *Stasis* 1 (2013): 185, [stasisjournal.net/images/brassier1\\_eng.pdf](http://stasisjournal.net/images/brassier1_eng.pdf).
- 12 On the distinction between representational and referential reasonings, see Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), especially Chapter 1, "Representationalism and Inferentialism," 45–47, [bibliotecamathom.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/articulating-reasons.pdf](http://bibliotecamathom.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/articulating-reasons.pdf).
- 13 Our approach to the philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce is highly indebted to Fernando Zalamea's brilliant take on the Peircean continuity; see Fernando Zalamea, *Peirce's Logic of Continuity: A Conceptual and Mathematical Approach* (Docent Press, 2012).
- 14 Charles Sanders Peirce, "Lectures on Pragmatism," in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce Vol. 5, "Pragmatism and Pragmaticism,"* edited by Hartshorne, Weiss & Burks, Bristol (Thoemmes Press, 1998 [1903]; new reprint of Harvard University Press original edition, 1931–1958), 103.
- 15 Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965): 94; reprinted in Thomas Kellein, *Donald Judd: Early Works 1955–1968* (New York: D.A.P., 2002).
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Lorenzo Magnani, *Abductive Cognition: The Epistemological and Eco-Cognitive Dimensions of Hypothetical Reasoning* (Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer, 2010), 8.
- 19 "A person thinking, feeling and perceiving, which occurs all at once, is whole." Donald Judd, quoted by Richard Shiff, "Donald Judd Fast Thinking," in *Donald Judd: Late Work* (New York: PaceWildenstien, 2000), 5.
- 20 Richard Shiff, "Donald Judd, Safe From Birds," in *Donald Judd*, exhibition catalog, ed. Nicholas Serota (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), 28–61.
- 21 Jean Cavailles, "Méthode axiomatique et formalisme," in *Oeuvres complètes de philosophie des sciences* (Paris: Hermann, 1994), 178.
- 22 See, for example, Jan Zalasiewicz, *The Earth After Us: What Legacy Will Humans Leave in the Rocks?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 23 The "human event stratum" is a term used by Jan Zalasiewicz; see Zalasiewicz, *The Earth After Us: What Legacy Will Humans Leave in the Rocks?*