

Belated Report about V2's DEAF Conference on Vital Beauty

I had the pleasure to attend the one-day conference organized by V2 (Rotterdam) entitled [Vital Beauty](#), held on May 16 2012 in De Balie (Amsterdam), a part of the Dutch Electronic Arts Festival with the theme 'The Power of Things'. In his opening statement former architect Lars Spuybroek noted that everything has become process. Beauty no longer stems for dead objects. This was also one of the premises of the distributed aesthetics theses that Anna Munster and I and others discussed a few years ago and that I wrote about in Zero Comments. According to Spuybroek perception has become active and beauty thus moves towards the object. There is a reversal happening. We are constructing the object. It is not fixed in advance. Against the predetermined parts. Vital beauty means adding life. Structure is nothing. The notion 'vital beauty' comes from mid 19th century British art critic [John Ruskin](#). In his time beauty was associated with a fixed object. But if we follow Spuybroek we cannot judge the object anymore in a Kantian way because it is constantly changing. The object is changing, it is in crisis precisely because it is coming alive. Latour is right here. What makes Ruskin according to Spuybroek so interesting is the fact that he is reflecting the savageness, sudden variations, shifts (related to the pitoresque) of his time. "The vital principle is not the love of Knowledge but the love of Change," The gothic only has the undefined ribs. To make a column you have to bundle the ribs. Parametric variations. In the 19th century the structure itself starts to bend, creating a vitalized geometry (see Worringer, and Deleuze, always quoting that same phrase of Worringer). What Spuybroek did here was a reassessment of his own digital architecture of the early nineties. Against the mechanic folds, in favour of the Gothic. We going from mirroring, sympathy, emphathy, from mimesis to posthetic experiences. Einfühlung. The objects that start to resonate.

First speaker was Thierry Bardini (Montreal), a junkologist who spoke about the relation between life and junk. Junk is not waste, garbage or trash. Junk you keep just in case, garbage you throw away. Trash used to be good but then turned bad while junk was bad and now, giving some hints of a junk aesthetics. Unfortunately there is was little awareness, and sensitivity, for radical junk theory. The references were all worthy and neat, keeping up with the Joneses. It is a real challenge in this context not to quote Deleuze & Guattari, not going back to George Simondon, and instead coming up with unexpected insights of authors that live in the trash can. Bardini's fellow thinker from Montreal, Brian Massumi, suffers from the same problem: too

many correct quotations and references. No risks. It wouldn't all be so bad if hermetic thinking was without consequences. But it creates sects, with exclusions and expulsions as a result.

Why not loose up, take some freedom and go radical, walk the road less travelled and ask some questions instead of always pointing at the same old analogies. Please stop referring to the now empty notions such as 'the virtual'. Yes, we are becoming, but in the meanwhile the problem is rather that we don't. We are not possible, it all seems pretty impossible. Let's theorize that. In Old Europe people feel that they are in the defence, they seem to live in fear. They can only express themselves in the discourse of resentments. Look at Greece. Why is so hard to follow the call of these same D&G and develop new concepts? There is something to be said for explicit repetition ("I repeat you") but the way it is done right now leads to stagnation and empty conference rooms such as the one in De Balie. This is such a pity because there is a lot at stake. The theory community has a problem and is going the same way as the neo-marxists in the 1980s. Bardini is no doubt a good man. He is not to blame. But let's face it. The unpopularity of (academic) theory production is not solved by uncreative copy-pasting of material taken out of biology journals. The way Deleuzians deal with science a good example how not to deal with hegemonic knowledge production. Our fellow Marxists in the 1970s had to quote Althusser. These days the same happens in the Deleuzian Art & Science community, which is a shame. Lars Spuybroek at least was brave enough to present his book as a praise to Deleuze, and then moved on to question the Master himself, risking expulsion from the D&G Church. I hope he and others will take up the task to tear down the Virtual Cathedral. The same could be said about the contemporary arts scene where every essay or artist statement needs to have at least one quote of Ranciere and Agamben. Next I will do is read Spuybroek's latest book on that very same topic of vital beauty (I always write viral...), because if there one thing that was really interesting during this V2 seminar it was the introduction by the chair of the day, Lars Spuybroek himself, a real Dutch theory star!