

Materials Science: A Response to Mark Amerika's "Remixing the 'I'"

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The task appears to be quite simple and direct: "We would like you," the editors wrote, "to respond to the essay by Mark Amerika titled "Remixing the 'I.'"¹ But it is this very task and the way it has been articulated (and which could not have been otherwise, if the statement was to make sense and be at all readable) that is the target of the text in question. In other words, the very effort and endeavor—namely, that I should respond to an essay by Mark Amerika—is itself something that seems increasingly problematic and complicated, precisely as a result of what transpires in "Remixing the 'I.'"

Every word that has been used to describe the task—the personal pronouns, the verb "respond," the proper name of the author, the seemingly unimposing preposition "by"—is put in question and critically suspended by "Remixing the 'I.'" And everything coalesces and converges on that seemingly intuitive and apparently uncontroversial figure of the "I"—conveniently marked in the English language by a single letter. It was, of course, René Descartes who elevated this figure to a position of prominence in western thought. Following a rigorous and rather impressive program of radical doubt, whereby everything comes to be submitted to examination and critical questioning, Descartes finally arrives at what he thinks—and not just "thinks" but knows—to be absolutely indubitable: *Cogito ergo sum.*² It is with this remarkable statement of self-contained, self-assured, self-certitude—of the I that knows itself and can say with confidence and authority "I think, I am"—that the modern philosophical/scientific/artistic adventure begins.

After this, everything converges on the I, just as, in Descartes's earlier writings on optics, every ray of light converged on a single point in the eye (I/eye . . . another fortuitous accident of the English language). But for Descartes, it should be remembered, this subject has no material density. In fact, its apparent containment in the materiality of a body is an accident, something that (for Descartes and those who follow him, and especially those who do so without explicitly knowing that they do so) does not and should not really matter. It is, therefore, no surprise that the concept and technology of what is called *cyberspace*, beginning at least with William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, is closely affiliated with this Cartesian dualism—not only the separability of mind and body but the "despising of the body," as Friedrich Nietzsche's Zarathustra³ called it, that results from turning the immateriality of mind into the seat of consciousness, existence, and self-identity. As Gibson, channeling the spirit of Descartes, wrote: ". . . the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat."⁴

For the modern artist (and the modern institution of art, which comes to be organized around the proper name of the artist), the Cartesian *cogito* is pivotal. And it is one of

Descartes's successors, Immanuel Kant, who really connects the dots and closes the deal. In the third episode of his critical project, *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant further develops the Cartesian *cogito* producing a concept of artistic genius that is, in a word, ingenious.⁵ On this account, what makes something art, no matter the medium employed, is that it is the unique and original expression of a creative mind—literally the “pressing out” into material form of what was originally and properly an internal cognition. At this point, then, the artist becomes an author, a figure of authority who authorizes what is expressed by the stamp of *his* genius (and at this stage these geniuses are almost always gendered male, what Kathy Acker called “phallic centrism”⁶ or Jacques Derrida “phallogocentrism”).⁷ It is here, against this particular historical context, and under these characteristically modern conditions that the weighty task to respond to an essay by the artist/author called Mark Amerika begins to take shape and becomes material.

In fact, it is this modernist legacy and logic—one that has remained in place, authoritative, and fully operational, even now—that “Remixing the ‘I’” puts in question, reworks, and fore-closes. And there are at least two perspectives from which to register this critical intervention and its consequences. Two, it should be noted, because the effort will be marked out on the line of time, another modernist innovation. On the one hand, it would be possible to articulate something like a response to “Remixing the ‘I’” from the postmodern side by redeploying, among other things, Roland Barthes’s influential “Death of the Author.” Clearly what this title indicates is not the end-of-life of any one individual but the exhaustion and closure of this particular figure of authority and the kind of critical response that had been organized around “the man-and-his-works” model.⁸ What Barthes explains and theorizes, “Remixing the ‘I’” puts in play and practices. Drawing its material resources from other textual matters—the “source material everywhere”⁹—the essay is, strictly speaking, no longer the property and product of someone assigned the name “Mark Amerika.” The question “Who am I This Time?”¹⁰ resonates all the way down, indicating that the so-called author of the work is not some pre-existing father figure who (following metaphoric instituted as early as Plato’s *Phaedrus*) inseminates the text with his original thoughts and intentions but is, as Slavoj Žižek describes it, (*presup*)*posited*¹¹—a “subject” who is quite literally thrown under and behind the work as an after effect of the text that is then presumed to be its antecedent and direct cause.

On the other hand, it is also possible to explain the opportunities and challenges articulated in “Remixing the ‘I’” by returning to a premodern perspective, one that is situated on the other side of the line of time from that of the postmodern. Nietzsche described this (within, it should be noted, the context of the late modern period and therefore with a kind of negative retrospection) in an aphorism titled “The Greatest Advantage of Polytheism”: “For an individual to posit his own ideal and to derive from it his own law, joys, and rights—that may well have been considered hitherto as the most outrageous human aberration and as idolatry itself. The few who dared as much always felt the need to apologize to themselves, usually by saying: “‘It wasn’t I! Not I! But a god through me.’”¹² In earlier times, the act of

positing oneself as the originator or sole artistic genius of some artifact was considered to be an aberration and outrageous claim, a kind of idolatry and arrogance. Instead whoever would be called “artist” (assuming, of course, that it is still possible to employ this term despite the heavy sediment of modern history) explained what he or she did by deferring and referring things elsewhere—premodern pagan DJs channeling the material and creative forces of others. Think of the artist as a medium.

But both perspectives, despite considerable promise and insight, are still far too “spiritual.” Each reeks (in different ways of course) of the residue of *Geist* and the ghostly essence of immateriality that is part and parcel of the Cartesian legacy. This is where “Remixing the ‘I’” really messes with and mixes things up. And it does so precisely by reasserting the value and importance of the body, that inessential detritus left behind on the threshold of modernity. This is what matters and becomes material in the textual sample that “Remixing the ‘I’” appropriates from Kathy Acker: “I wanted to talk about the body and languages of the body. Which art criticism has denied. And about what art criticism could come out of the languages of the body.”¹³ “Remixing the ‘I,’” situated in this precise way and channeled through these media, announces something like a *materials science*. An art and a concept of artistry that are not the original expressions of true genius working under the sole authority of a proper name but a form of distributed corporeal interaction that operates on and can respond to the source material everywhere—a messy, dirty, and weighty matter that has a responsibility not just to others but to other things and things that are and remain otherwise.

So where does this leave us? Considered from a perspective that is still informed and framed by the Cartesian legacy, this response can only be a miserable failure. Not only have I not responded to an essay by Mark Amerika, but I have done so in a way that is less than responsible. In other words, I not only failed to achieve what was asked of me (which is something that still might be excused and explained as accidental), but I have, it seems, done so deliberately, purposefully, and with calculated intent. But from another perspective, one that shares important affinities with what comes both before and after the advent of the “I” instituted in the wake of the Cartesian *cogito*, it is only in and by such complete failure that something like a response to “Remixing the ‘I’” would have been possible. It is only by relinquishing the presumed individual responsibility to make a response—that is, by becoming the kind of medium that can say with confidence “It wasn’t I. Not I. But the source material everywhere through me”—that it becomes possible to read and respond to “Remixing the ‘I.’”

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NOTES

¹ Mark Amerika, “Remixing the ‘I,’” *English Language Notes* 49, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2011): 165–182.

² René Descartes, *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 36.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 146.

⁴ William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984), 6.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1978).

⁶ Kathy Acker, "A Few Notes on Two of My Books," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 9, no.1 (1989): 36.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 129.

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

⁹ Amerika, 171.

¹⁰ Ibid., 167.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2008), 209.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 191.

¹³ Amerika, 171.