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The Center series is published by the Center for American Architecture and Design at the School of Architecture at The University of Texas at Austin. [soa.utexas.edu/caad](http://soa.utexas.edu/caad)

ISBN: 978-0-934951-28-9

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Design: Tenderling Design | [tenderling.com](http://tenderling.com)

Front and Back Cover Photos by Noah Winkler

*CENTER 21: The Secret Life of Buildings* is supported by The Hal Box Endowed Chair in Urbanism, The Center for American Architecture and Design Endowed Excellence Fund, and the Eugene and Margaret McDermott Excellence Fund for the Study of American Architecture.

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Printed in Canada, Friesens Corporation

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# AESTHETICIZING THE LITERAL: ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Object-oriented ontology (or OOO, pronounced “Triple O”) has been remorseless in promoting aesthetics as central to philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Although philosophy is usually viewed as a form of *knowledge*, OOO finds this assumption dubious for both historical and conceptual reasons. Historically speaking, the great ancestral hero of Western philosophy is Socrates, who repeatedly tells us in Plato’s dialogues that he has never been anyone’s teacher, that the Oracle of Delphi was right to call him the wisest man in Greece only because he is aware of his ignorance in a way that others are not, and that the only thing he knows is that he knows nothing. Any attempt to treat philosophy as a “science” or as some lesser form of knowledge must at the very least turn its back on the Socratic origins of the discipline. In principle this is certainly possible, since an argument based on the authority of Socrates cannot be a showstopper any more than an argument based on the authority of anyone else. Any contravention of the Socratic profession of ignorance must demonstrate that it—the contravening philosophy—is able to make direct contact with reality itself. This would require establishing that it is perfectly possible, at least in principle, to reach an adequate definition of justice, virtue, friendship, or any of the other ideas before which Socrates comes up short (recall that there is no passage in the dialogues where Socrates achieves an adequate definition of anything). It would also require that proponents of philosophy as a science somehow outflank Kant’s objections to any dogmatic claim to reach the thing-in-itself beyond the conditions of human finitude. Of course, there have already been many such efforts, to such an extent that Kant’s *Ding an sich* has few advocates even among his greatest admirers. But objections to the thing-in-itself usually follow some variant of the familiar German idealist critique: to think of a thing that is outside of thought is itself an act of thought, and therefore it is pointless to try to refer to anything that would somehow escape the circle of thought. Such efforts always boil down to the claim that we cannot say something without saying it: either we can say



Fig. 1 Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937. Courtesy of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain.

it or we cannot, and in the latter case it is best passed over in silence, as Wittgenstein famously put it at the close of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.<sup>2</sup>

The second and more serious problem with presenting philosophy as a form of knowledge is conceptual. For there are really only two kinds of knowledge: we can say what something is *made of*, or we can say *what it does*. Both are ways of reducing the object to something that it is not: either downward to its components or upward to its effects, and both of these procedures lose the thing being talked about.<sup>3</sup> The first kind, which OOO calls “undermining,” replaces a thing with its causal or compositional roots. In so doing, it fails to account for the *emergence* of things over and above their background conditions. Things are in large part robust to changes in their components, and also do not retain all of the information contained in the genetic tale of their origin. Though nothing can come into being without a historical and compositional backstory, once a thing exists, it exists: it becomes, to some degree, autonomous from the details of its origin. The second kind, known in OOO circles as “overmining,” holds not just that a thing is only *known* through its actions and outward effects, but that it only exists in these outer symptoms, even if this implicit and more radical claim often hides behind the more agnostic position that we “cannot know” if there is something called an apple hiding behind all its various apple-qualities and apple-actions. Undermining and overmining usually join together in a composite form known as “duomining,” in which the downward and upward reductions draw on each other as alibis in an effort to conceal their own respective weaknesses.

Rather than dealing head-on with the question of whether philosophy is equivalent to some form of duomining, here we can begin with the question of art. While many readers will be reluctant to abandon the picture of philosophy as one branch of a wider quest for knowledge, it is easier to show that art cannot count as a form of knowledge. Only a severely uncultured person will think it possible to *paraphrase* the meaning of a

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (New York: Dover, 1998).

3 Graham Harman, “Undermining, Overmining, and Duomining: A Critique,” in *ADD Metaphysics*, ed. J. Sutela (Aalto, Finland: Aalto University Design Research Laboratory, 2013) 40–51.

1 Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2013); Graham Harman, “Aesthetics as First Philosophy: Levinas and the Non-Human,” *Naked Punch* 09, Summer/Fall 2007, pp. 21–30.

work of art or literature in clear, discursive prose propositions in a way that replaces the artwork. Picasso's *Guernica* is obviously a protest against the Luftwaffe bombing of a small Spanish town during the bloody civil war in that country (fig. 1, p. 61). But if it were nothing more than that, it would be a piece of political propaganda that might easily be replaced by several paragraphs on an anti-fascist flyer. If *Guernica* has merit qua artwork, this is not reducible to its socio-political message. The same holds for some of the other most successful pieces of political art: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* comes to mind.<sup>4</sup> While this claim commits us to a certain degree of aesthetic formalism, I will give reasons below why socio-political considerations can be admitted into the art object without sacrificing the autonomy of work from context that every formalism demands. From there, I will show why philosophy is more closely allied to the arts than to the sciences, fully aware that many philosophers will view this as a denigration of philosophy's cultural role. It is not.

Architecture seems to present a trickier problem for the would-be formalist. Unlike artworks, architecture is inherently embedded in relations. The architect builds something that serves a purpose, and therefore architecture seems easier to view in instrumental or broadly socio-political terms than is the case with artworks proper. Even in 1998, decades after the anti-formalist reaction of the 1960s, Nicolas Bourriaud caused a bit of a stir in the art world with his book *Relational Aesthetics*.<sup>5</sup> Yet a title like *Relational Architecture* might seem superfluous rather than controversial, since a non-relational piece of architecture sounds from the start like a contradiction in terms. What, after all, would be the point of an architecture that cut itself off from relations with people and other things? However, at the close of this article I will make the case for non-relational architecture in an unexpected sense of the term.

We are now in the golden age of relationality. Almost everyone is united against the idea of traditional independent substances that exist in a vacuum, affected by each other only in accidental ways. Objects are nothing more than their effects on other objects, says Bruno Latour, one of the most significant relational thinkers of the present day.<sup>6</sup> Relations do not pre-exist their *relata*, says Karen Barad, another influential thinker of our time.<sup>7</sup> Entities are not "vacuous actualities," but must be analyzed concretely into their "prehensions" of (i.e. relations with) everything else in the cosmos: thus speaks Alfred North Whitehead, the intellectual grandfather of some of our most innovative philosophers at present.<sup>8</sup> Nor is this claim restricted to metaphysics, since it is easy to find relational claims in the arts, where many hold that artworks that fail to pave the way for proletarian revolution are the self-indulgent productions of "bourgeois" artists subservient to the neo-liberal marketplace. As already mentioned, OOO rejects relational philosophies as forms of overmining, due to their not allowing for any surplus in things themselves, a surplus that could account for change. We cannot explain change by saying that entities are defined by their mutual relations and change by means of a mutual "feedback loop." Feedback only works if both entities are receptive to outside influence, and receptivity already requires that an entity be more than what it is currently doing or relating to: if an acorn is nothing more than its acorn-actions and acorn-relations, then it cannot possibly grow into an oak tree.

These considerations are precisely what led Aristotle to develop his concept of potentiality, which by definition is not something actual.<sup>9</sup> Any philosophy that allows for nothing more than action is *ipso facto* a philosophy of the present moment alone, since it holds nothing in reserve that can move objects from one state to another. If we try to solve the problem by simply *positing* a drive towards change—a Bergsonian *élan vital* in the heart of things—then we have fallen into the classic error of Molière’s *vis dormitiva*: the sleeping pill that works by virtue of having sleep-causing power, which of course is no explanation at all.<sup>10</sup> For an entity is either nothing more than it currently is, in which case we have a purely “actualist” philosophy, or else an entity is somehow *more* than its current actions, in which case the central premise of OOO has already been conceded. Yet we part company with Aristotle on one important point. To speak of “potential” is to view the surplus in things in terms of some possible *future action*, which is simply a subtler form of the kind of actualism Aristotle attacks. If we call the acorn “a potential future oak tree,” then we are placing its surplus only in the future, without accounting for where it is right now. What we should say instead is that the acorn is a reality not exhausted by any current, past, or future actions. Even if we could adopt the position of God and unfold all future states and all possible states of the acorn, we would still have nothing more than a series of relations. What interests OOO is the *non-relational reality* of the thing. The acorn is not more than its current actions simply because it will perform other future actions, but rather because its reality, now and at all other times, can never be fully actualized.

But our purpose here is to discuss aesthetics, and so we will limit ourselves at first to discussing the non-relational aspects of art before turning to the slightly trickier case of architecture.

The usual term for the approach that treats aesthetics in a non-relational manner is “formalism.” Formalist art critics usually take heat for excluding the non-aesthetic context of an artwork from consideration. Formalists will exclude the socio-political meaning of an artwork. For example, they will set aside the question of whether the artwork is agreeable or disagreeable to us personally, along with the biography of the artist, issues of class or gender in the art world, or any considerations of how the art market or other financial backing helps shape the art of a given period. To this extent, OOO inevitably feels a certain sympathy for formalism, given OOO’s ardently non-relational view of all objects, including art objects. This puts OOO in the proximity of such eminent art critics as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, who are often, today, the targets of contempt for their high modernist conception of art as having aesthetic value quite apart from its context. In fact, OOO leads to a broader conception of formalism than formalists themselves usually entertain. My major concern here will be with Fried, in particular with his classic essay “Art and Objecthood,” which I will approach via Kant and Greenberg.<sup>11</sup>

The father of aesthetic formalism is surely Immanuel Kant, although to my knowledge he speaks of “formalism” only in connection with ethics.<sup>12</sup> I discussed the matter in detail in my 2016 book *Dante’s Broken Hammer*, but will repeat some of that analysis

- 4 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (New York: Norton, 2010).
- 5 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon, France: Les presses du réel, 1998).
- 6 Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays in the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 122.
- 7 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 8 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1979).
- 9 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. J. Sachs (Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion Press, 1999).
- 10 This is done by Michael Austin, “To Exist is to Change: A Friendly Disagreement with Graham Harman on Why Things Happen,” *Speculations* 1 (2010), 66–83.
- 11 Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- 12 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. M. Gregor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

here for the benefit of those who have not read it.<sup>13</sup> In trying to determine the central feature of an ethical act, Kant pushes aside any notion of reward or punishment. If I give to charity in order to avoid eternal punishment in Hell, or simply in order to live with a clean conscience, the act is not yet ethical. I am performing this action for some ulterior purpose rather than for its own sake. Kant goes so far as to suggest that a flinty introvert who performs actions solely from duty is more ethical than a warm-hearted philanthropist who experiences visceral enjoyment when assisting the unfortunate. Though this seems counterintuitive, Kant thinks that nothing less is required in order to isolate what is truly ethical in certain actions. This leads him to his famous ethical formulae, of which the most prominent is this: that we should act in such a way that our action could become a universal law. Lying is never justified, then, even if we lie for the apparently benevolent reason of saving an innocent fugitive from a tyrant who will have our refugee tortured and executed. Developing our innermost talents is ethical not because we owe allegiance to our personal passions, but because it would be wrong to posit as a universal law that everyone should be a lazy hedonist who fails to develop his or her socially beneficial gifts. The object plays no genuine role in Kantian ethics, which is primarily a question of formal duty.

There is much more to say about Kantian ethics, but our concern here is with his aesthetic theory, as developed in his celebrated *Critique of Judgment*.<sup>14</sup> Though Kant does not call his theory of art “formalist,” it functions in precisely the same way as his ethics. Namely, aesthetic pleasure should be both universal *and* disinterested. The fact that some artwork is agreeable to me is merely a personal matter, not the basis for aesthetic judgment. Aesthetics concerns judgments about things that *ought* to be regarded as beautiful by everyone. Personal taste should play no role; a sufficient refinement of taste ought to lead everyone, in principle, toward the same aesthetic judgments. After all, as human beings we all share the same transcendental faculty of judgment, and thus there is as little room for personal idiosyncrasy in art as in ethics. And here too, as in ethics, it is not the object—the artwork itself—that is important. Since aesthetic taste is a matter of the faculty of judgment shared by all humans, the old saying that beauty is in the eye of the beholder remains true: for we are speaking, as we should, of the ideal and universal human beholder with sufficiently refined taste, rather than of the arbitrary, personal beholder who has nothing but personal opinions about which artworks are enjoyable. The human subject and the aesthetic object are cleanly separated, and aesthetics takes place entirely on the human side of the equation, just as in Kantian ethics.

OOO splits objects from their relations, but this is by no means the same thing that aesthetic formalism does when it separates objects from subjects. This is why OOO is not altogether formalist in the Kant-Greenberg-Fried sense of the term. The latter trio assumes that we need a *purism* that treats subjects and objects as two mutually corrosive materials that must never be allowed to meet. Once an object meets a subject or a subject meets an object, these purists think that we have now entered the kingdom of relations, meaning that the non-relational demands of formalism have been

sabotaged once and for all. By contrast, OOO holds that art *always* involves the meeting of humans with non-humans, but insists that it remains non-relational in an important sense: an analogy would be that water has an integral, emergent reality even though *causally* it requires a relation between hydrogen and oxygen.

But before saying more about OOO's response to formalism, it is interesting to note that although Greenberg is no less an aesthetic formalist than Kant, he *inverts* Kant's claim that aesthetics happens on the subject side and places it instead on the object side. This is made clear in Greenberg's posthumously published book *Homemade Esthetics*, where we find both agreement and disagreement with Kant.<sup>15</sup> Their agreement comes on the point that art is non-relational. A better way of saying it is that they agree that art is not *paraphraseable* (to use the terminology of the literary critic Cleanth Brooks).<sup>16</sup> That is to say, no artwork can be adequately translated into literal statements about its meaning, whether that meaning is taken to be political or anything else. An artwork can only be experienced directly, not at the discursive level of commentary: this is what separates art from science, which always aims to paraphrase objects by turning them into lists of verifiable properties. A scientist *must* replace the proper name "electron" with a list of features that truly belong to electrons; by contrast, a painting, sculpture, or novel called *The Electron* would have a function entirely different from communicating knowledge about this subatomic particle.

Another consequence is that no rules can be given about what makes an artwork good. Any general principle, such as "abstract art is better than representational art," is easily falsified by pointing to examples of bad abstract art and good representational art. The same holds true for any other rule we can imagine. Aesthetics takes place beyond any prose musings about the qualities that make for good or bad art.

So much for Greenberg's basic agreement with Kant. Their disagreement is perhaps even more interesting. In *Homemade Esthetics*, Greenberg also rejects Kant's view that aesthetics happens on the side of the subject rather than that of the object. Taste, for Greenberg, is not a Kantian matter of thinking that aesthetic pleasure is rooted in some transcendental faculty of judgment shared by all human beings. Instead, the relative stature of various artworks is a question of the "consensus of taste," meaning that the people of best taste in every era are said to generally agree: the ancient Egyptians ranked their own various periods of art much as we rank them today, and the same holds for the Japanese, as well as for Greek sculpture and Italian Renaissance painting. Indeed, Greenberg goes so far as to prefer openly the views of Kant's quasi-enemy David Hume, who says that all knowledge comes from experience, not from the universal structure of the human mind (as it does for Kant). For this reason, Greenberg holds that aesthetics is a matter of experiencing artworks directly. In short, we learn aesthetics from our contact with artworks, not from grubbing around in our own human minds and asking about how they are universally structured. On this second point, Greenberg reverses Kant by trying to downplay the human side of the equation.

For our purposes, the same holds even more clearly of Fried, who was Greenberg's one-time disciple before falling out with him in the 1960s. In Fried's work we find

13 Graham Harman, *Dante's Broken Hammer: The Ethics, Aesthetics, and Metaphysics of Love* (London: Repeater, 2016).

14 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987).

15 Clement Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 29.

16 Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1947).



Fig. 2 Henri Matisse, *Interior with a Violin*, 1918.  
 Courtesy of the National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen,  
 © SMK Photo.

evidence of the same ambiguous relation to Kant that we have already seen in Greenberg. On the one hand, Fried rejects any “literalism” in art. The artists he has in mind are minimalists, such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris, who offer a what-you-see-is-what-you-get aesthetics of naked white cubes and spare wooden rods. Ultimately, the problem with literalism is that it amounts to a form of *relationism*, though Fried never puts it quite this way. Literalist art is nothing more than what it presents to the viewer’s perceptions and even emotions. Minimalist art gives the appearance of being “staged,” even of being hollow. Fried makes both of the latter points explicitly, and whether or not we agree with his diagnosis of minimalism, we can agree with his (ultimately Kantian) view that if an artwork is reduced to its relations then it cannot be art, since it is reduced to serving a function for some non-aesthetic purpose. This is the enduring core of Kant’s formalist insights in the fields of ethics (duty), aesthetics (taste), and metaphysics (the unreachable thing-in-itself). A thing is what it is only if it is, to some extent, self-contained. Otherwise an ethical act degenerates into fear of the afterlife, an aesthetic act into personal opinion or emotion, and metaphysical thought into an idealism that holds human experience to exhaust the whole of reality. Even if

someone were more enthusiastic than Fried about the prospects of “political art,” there would still be a difference between political art and any explicit political statement—or at least, such a difference would exist if the political art were any good. A political sculpture, for example, must be more than its surface message if it is to deserve being called art rather than propaganda or ideology.

OOO has no complaint whatsoever about formalism insofar as it means *anti-literalism*. The literal does not deserve to be called art any more than an act deserves to be called ethical if it aims primarily at improving our public reputation. The problem arises with Fried’s (and to a lesser extent Greenberg’s) reversal of Kant’s second point. I refer to Fried’s view that art should also be *anti-theatrical*. What Fried claims is that insofar as minimalist sculpture is literal—being nothing more than a surface that affects us directly—it exists only to provoke some sort of dramatic reaction in us as the beholders of the work. To this extent, minimalist art brings the subject into play, which Greenberg would also reject even though Kant makes it the heart of aesthetics (though admittedly

in a contemplative rather than theatrical spirit). Another way of putting it is that Fried and Greenberg, despite downplaying the role of the subject and raising the status of the artwork itself, continue to repeat the primary mistake of Kant's own formalism: the assumption that the non-relationality of art must also entail a lack of relation *between subject and object* specifically.<sup>17</sup>

While this demand that subject and object be separated is the central feature of modern philosophy (opponents of this split usually just glue the two terms together, without contesting the fact that they are the two primary terms in the universe), there is no reason for us to give in to the demand. Consider the case of a human subject perceiving some object. While there is certainly a relation here between two separate entities, such as a person and an artwork, it does not follow that this situation is contaminated by relations in a way that degenerates into literalism. A painting by Matisse is, in one sense, admittedly a relational object: it could not exist at all without a relation between various pigments, the canvas, and certain events in Matisse's own life and career. But this relation between the components of the painting does not entail that the painting itself is constituted by its relation to yet other objects. That is to say, it is one thing to admit that objects are produced by the inward relations between their parts, and quite another to insist that this means that objects are nothing more than their outward relations with politics, economics, and various forms of oppression. Matisse's painting does require all its components as a condition of its birth, but it is not thereby undermined so that it disappears and only its tiniest components can be granted reality (fig. 2). By the same token, the painting does always exist in an economic, political, and biographical context, but this does not mean that the painting can be overmined and thus disintegrate into nothing but its relational effects on other entities in the surrounding environment. The painting itself exists in a space between all efforts at undermining and overmining.

Perhaps this will be clear enough in the case of the artwork. What might not be as clear is that we do not save artworks from overmining by subtracting the beholder from the equation, as if an artwork were still an artwork in a world in which all humans were exterminated. Stated differently, the aesthetic unit is not a piece of wood, metal, or canvas that no human can be allowed to contaminate with his or her subjective and theatrical presence. Instead, the basic aesthetic unit is work plus beholder. My relation to a painting is itself a new object, different from the two objects known as the painting and as I myself. The situation is no different from that of an atom of some chemical element. Here too, the atom is composed of parts in relation to each other, but it does not follow that the atom is a purely relational being and counts for nothing in itself. In just the same fashion, aesthetic experience is made of work and beholder no less than an atom is made of quarks and electrons. The artwork is a composite reality indeed, but is not for that reason "relational." This is the basic mistake at the root of Kant's formalism in ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics: the idea that to make anything non-relational, we need to ensure that it never contains both human and non-human elements at the same time. This idea is merely an artifact of the modern prejudice that

17 It should be noted here that by "objects" Fried means that which is always "literal," which is the opposite of how I mean it, since for OOO the real object is precisely that which is non-literal insofar as it always withdraws from view. In this respect, Fried is closer to Heidegger's own terminology, which always treats "object" pejoratively as nothing more than a correlate of human representation. When speaking positively of entities, Heidegger uses the term "thing." See Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper, 1975).

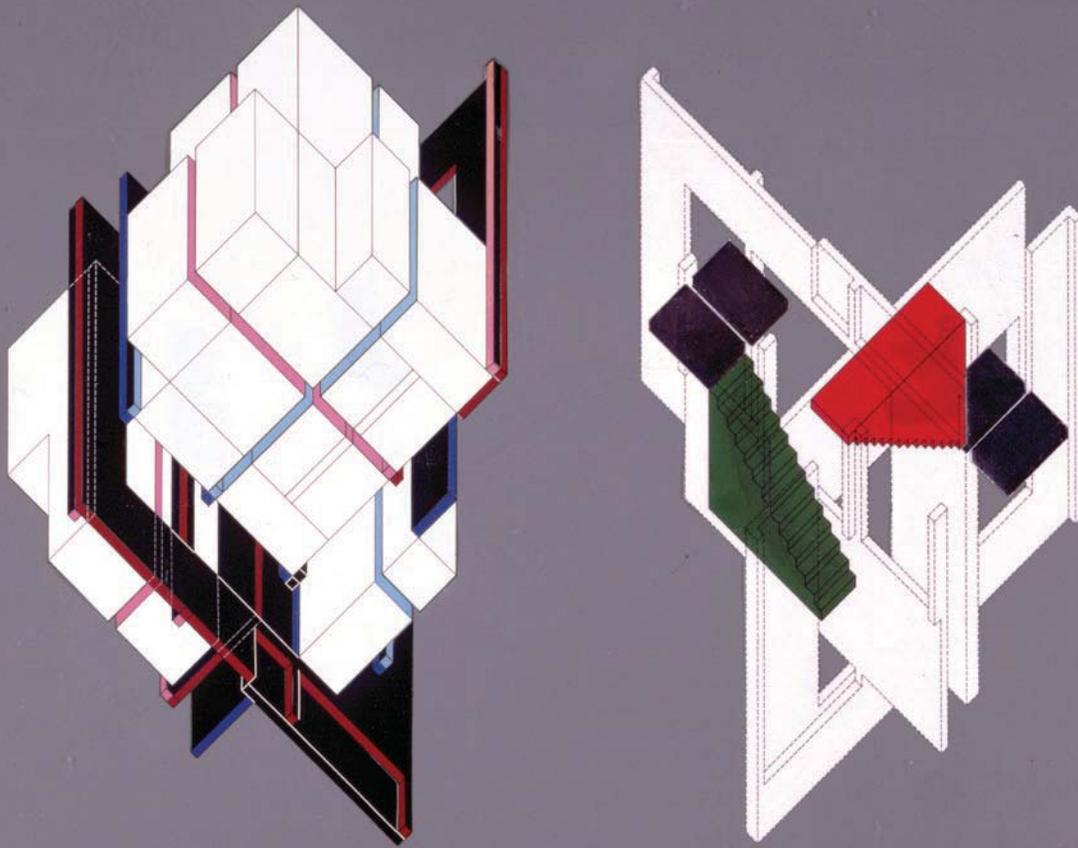


Fig. 3 House VI, Cornwall, Connecticut, by Eisenman Architects. Courtesy of Eisenman Architects.

mind and body are two totally different kinds of things that must never be combined, as diagnosed so brilliantly by Bruno Latour.<sup>18</sup>

The problem, in short, is that Fried's bias against theatricality merely repeats the modern prejudice that human and work are two ontological poles so different in kind that any attempt to combine them must degenerate into a mere relation, which in Fried's case means a mere literalism. By refusing to accept this prejudice, we can continue to embrace the non-relationist side of formalism (as anti-literalism) while refusing to join Fried in denouncing theatricality as a supposedly illegitimate amalgam of human and non-human entities. One of the immediate consequences is that we need no longer accept the less fortunate side of the Greenberg/Fried formalism: its excessive skepticism towards genres of art that directly involve human participants, such as performance art, conceptual art, even minimalism itself. Perhaps this already goes a long way to assuaging some of the fears about "formalism" that lead many anti-formalist dissidents to embrace relationism too quickly as the only way of saving decades' worth of post-Greenbergian artworks, works that might otherwise be doomed to the slaughterhouse of formalist criticism.

We now turn briefly to architecture, where "formalism" has a different meaning, one derived mainly from its opposition to "functionalism." Though no formalist architect will go so far as to claim that a building should have no function at all, someone like Peter Eisenman would make the case that functional considerations will always underdetermine the autonomy of a building's form, which Eisenman (at least in his early

years) sees as being constructed from purely formal root-language operations of basic centroidal and oblong forms, rotated, overlaid, re-scaled, and combined into more complex mixtures, such as the corkscrew pattern of many staircases (fig. 3).<sup>19</sup> To do otherwise would reduce architecture to the resolution of engineering problems, with little or no attention paid to the autonomous language of form itself, which is the architect's primary task to decipher and assemble.

In any case, the mistake would be to assume that, because functions exist only in relation to those who potentially benefit from them, there is no such thing as a truly formalist architecture. This would be analogous to Fried's claim that true art can have no theatrical basis, since that would amount to an illicit mixture of object and beholder. Against this, OOO argues that autonomy does not come from mutually purifying subject and object (or appearance and function) from each other. Instead,

it comes from the recognition that any new relation or relation-set forms a new object, and that this new object never admits all external entities and relations into its interior. Only certain functions are allowed to manifest in the form of an artwork, edifice, or tool, and this will inevitably exclude a great multitude of socio-political and environmental factors from the architectural object, which cannot be allowed to bleed seamlessly into the environment as a whole. Though some have claimed that architecture is a means for framing social communications—Patrik Schumacher says this explicitly<sup>20</sup>—architecture is first and foremost a profession of the merits of non-communication. To turn everything into communication is to envisage a holistic universe in which everything is everything else, bleeding into a final white

noise in which everything discrete and determinate would become a kind of One of neo-Platonic philosophy. The relation between beholder and artwork, or visual form and function, is a distinct combination cut off from everything else in the cosmos, all other combinations. This is what it means to aestheticize the literal: not to turn the political realm into a spectacle designed by the likes of Albert Speer (fig. 4), but to turn the relational into the non-relational: into something that is autonomous—an object—despite its being pieced together from numerous human and non-human elements. No matter how connected to the world, works of architecture stand alone. To miss this is to overlook what all objects must do to exist at all. ♦



Fig. 4 Aerial view of the Olympic Stadium, by Albert Speer, as it nears completion. Courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

18 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

19 Peter Eisenman, "Toward an Understanding of Form in Architecture," in *Eisenman Inside Out: Selected Writings, 1963-1988* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

20 Patrik Schumacher, *The Autopoiesis of Architecture*, 2 vols. (London: Wiley, 2011/2012).