

[met] *afourisms*

Art Practice & Documentation

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Aesthetics and the Tension in Objects

by Graham Harman

Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) is probably best known for its thesis that objects “withdraw” from direct interaction with one another, a term drawn from Martin Heidegger’s emphasis on the withdrawal (*entziehen/Entzug*) of Being from all presence to human Dasein. While it is certainly not inaccurate to stress OOO’s concern with this topic, to do so marks an artificial restriction of a wider problem. A more fitting way to characterize OOO would be to say that it holds the world to be made up of two types of objects (sensual, real) and two types of qualities (sensual, real). Since only *real* objects and qualities can be said to withdraw, it needs to be noted that OOO addresses the withdrawal of the real as only around half of what goes on in the cosmos. Or perhaps we should say *three-fourths* rather than half. After all, OOO is not normally concerned with sensual objects or sensual qualities in isolation, but with the four possible kinds of object-quality pairing: RO-RQ (essence), RO-SQ (space), SO-RQ (eidos), SO-SQ (time).¹ And since only the last of the four deals with a purely sensual tension, with the first three all containing some element of withdrawn reality, only the last has nothing to do with withdrawal at all.

OOO’s tendency is to use the word “aesthetics” as a general term covering all four kinds of object-quality tension. But since the educated public normally means aesthetics in the more restricted sense of “art,” I will use “aesthetics” only in the restricted sense of the term in what follows. Which of the four tensions just listed is relevant to what is normally meant by art? That would be RO-SQ, whose further denomination as “space” need not concern us here.

The reason for our saying that artworks consist specifically of an RO-SQ pairing is easy to explain. Imagine any standard example of an artwork, such as a painting or sculpture (though the principle holds for more *recherché* artistic genres as well). The qualities of the work must be directly accessible to us, as beholders of the work, since otherwise we would not be experiencing anything at all. For this reason, the colors of a painting or the play of light on the marble of a statue are SQ sensual qualities rather than RQ real qualities, since the latter withdraw from every view. Let's take this to be the first established point in the present discussion.

This leads us immediately to a second point, which is somewhat more difficult to grasp, but for that very reason more illuminating. Namely, the *object* of the artwork, that which bears or supports its palpable sensual qualities, cannot itself be sensual. If that were the case, we would not be dealing with an artwork, but simply with a phenomenal object that appears directly to us alongside its qualities. All of the objects described in Edmund Husserl's phenomenology are of this latter sort. Although Husserl shows historic brilliance in his distinction between an object such as a tangerine and all the various tangerine-profiles it shows us when rotated in the hand or in mere imagination, such purely sensual objects have nothing to do with art. Indeed, it is striking how closely these Husserlian *Abschattungen* (or "adumbrations") resemble what Immanuel Kant calls "charm" in his *Critique of Judgment*, with charm for Kant being a delightful but ultimately sub-aesthetic secondary phenomenon. The examples he gives include "the changing shapes of the flames in a fireplace or of a rippling brook".² Flourishes of an analogous sort can add much to the peripheral delights of art, but obviously cannot make up its subterranean core. For this we need *real* objects, objects that never become fully present. It is no accident that it was the withdrawal-obsessed Heidegger rather than the lucid, natural-born mathematician Husserl who authored a long essay entitled "The Origin of the Work of Art".³ But Heidegger turns out to lead us to the doorstep of one of the greatest art critics of the twentieth century: Clement Greenberg. And from Greenberg we are soon led to the

related but basically different insights of his one-time protégé Michael Fried. OOO has learned a great deal from both figures, but is led to modify one central thesis of each.

The Medium is Many

The most typical claim by Greenberg about modern art is that it has learned to consider its medium seriously rather than taking it for granted. From the early Italian Renaissance up through roughly the masterpieces of Édouard Manet in the 1860s, the development of Western painting was guided by the principle of an ever-improving three-dimensional illusionism. Greenberg complains that this process culminates –like most extrapolative processes– in the dead-end of robotic academicism, with any good Sunday painter able to execute a successful realistic academic painting. By contrast, the avant garde increasingly turned towards an explicit attempt to come to terms with the inherent flatness of the canvas background medium. Clear cases of this can be seen in the obstructed depth of the impressionists, the uncompromising flatness of the joint analytic cubism of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, the ultra-abstraction of Piet Mondrian, and to some extent still in the poured paintings of Jackson Pollock (though here the illusion of an optical third dimension begins to reassert itself). Those advanced painters who continue to rely on traditional illusionism, such as Salvador Dalí and even Wassily Kandinsky, invariably rank far lower on Greenberg's totem pole of modern art, accused of "academic reminiscences". This is especially the case with Dalí, whose subject matter –however bizarre– is dismissed by Greenberg in the same way as nearly all pictorial subject matter: as "literary anecdote" more appropriate to verbal storytelling than to the more formal language of visual art.

Note that in taking this tack, Greenberg not only negates the traditional storytelling function of painting. He also tends to negate any *plurality* in the painting at all. To an increasing degree for Greenberg, the sole function of pictorial content is to hint slyly at the hidden

flat background that subsumes all specific images in a painting. All the various elements in a given painting belong to the same flat background, and indeed, all modern painters (or so Greenberg has it) must come to grips with *the same* flat background. The flat canvas of Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* is no more or less flat than that of Helen Frankenthaler's *Grey Fireworks*, even if the canvases differ in shape, size, and alignment. What this means is that Greenberg's own brand of artistic formalism, much like formalism in literary criticism or elsewhere, tends toward an unjustified *holism*. There is just one universal medium for advanced painting in the modern period –the flat canvas– and any content depicted on the canvas is just trivial distraction except insofar as it signals an awareness of its own superficiality relative to that underlying flat medium.

A similar dynamic can already be found in Heidegger's "Origin of the Work of Art" several years before Greenberg's own public debut as a critic. In this mid-career lecture-turned-essay (it dates from the 1930s), Heidegger approaches art as what he calls a "strife" between *earth* and *world*. Here we find him already working towards his mature post-1949 "fourfold" of earth, sky, gods, and mortals, with "earth" already in place and "world" serving as a placeholder term for what would eventually become "sky".⁴ In every artwork, Heidegger's essay proclaims, the hiddenness of earth shows through slightly in the visibility of world. It might seem to be analogous to OOO's own aesthetic distinction between RO real objects and SQ sensual qualities. But this is not so, for an important reason that puts Heidegger much closer to Greenberg than to OOO. Namely, Heidegger's "earth" is holistic, universal, and inarticulate in a manner reminiscent of Greenberg's flat canvas; by contrast, OOO's trademark claim is always that the background is pre-carved into distinct parts.

To be more specific, for OOO there is not a single flat medium at work in Picasso's *Les demoiselles*; rather, each of the girls in the painting has her own depth. Every element of every artwork is in strife with its own specific and individual reality, and not with the entire painting as a holistic unit. This makes the surface diversity of pictorial figures far

more important for OOO than it is for Greenberg or Heidegger, just as OOO gives more philosophical weight to individual beings than Heidegger could ever allow. The various portions of the painting also become free to enter into dialogue or combat with each other, and not just with the background medium as a whole. At first glance it might seem as if Fried was on to this topic with his thoughtful interpretations of the English sculptor Anthony Caro as a “syntactic” artist, one for whom the parts of each sculptor relate to each other explicitly. But the analogy breaks down when Fried appeals to the basically holistic linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure to explain Caro’s work. Unlike Saussure (and somewhat more like Jacques Derrida, if only in this one respect), OOO is not a holistic model in which every element of a system helps determine every others. Instead, a OOO reading of Caro –if one were attempted– would have to stress the way in which none of the sculptural elements succeeds in exhausting the full reality of its neighbors. It is fine to pay attention to the syntactic *relations* between the elements of these works, but only as long as we recognize that syntax does not tell the full story of language. At the very least, language also consists of *proper names*, which Saul Kripke has shown to be irreducible to any list of facts about the objects they name.⁵ So too for the objects of OOO, whose relations give us only the smallest part of their biographies.

This is the first point I want to propose as part of a OOO philosophy of art. The individual elements of an artwork do not just exist in relation to their medium, or in relation to each other. Instead, each element generates its own background medium, unfathomable by the others. We could use OOO to argue for a “pluralism” in the arts, not in the sense that all genres and styles must be permitted (though that idea is a good one too), but in the sense that every artwork has as many media as it has specific elements. Perhaps every artwork other than the most minimalist sort deserves to be termed “mixed media”.

Theater is Everywhere

The second and final point I would like to make concerns what Fried polemically terms “theatrical”. In his classic 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood”, Fried makes a frontal attack on minimalist sculpture, which he prefers to call “literalist” rather than minimalist.⁶ With their wooden rods and solid, colorless blocks the minimalists seem to offer no aesthetic mystery, and indeed nothing but bare, literal objecthood: in the brute physical sense of the term, not OOO’s ontological one. Given the lack of internal depth of these pieces –or so Fried thinks, at least– there can be no other purpose to such artworks than to provoke a theatrical reaction from the beholder. Hence the close connection between “literal” and “theatrical” in Fried’s work as an art critic. Now, although Fried does not often wave the banner of Kant, he is Kantian enough that any idea of a theatrical interaction between work and beholder offends his silent fidelity to Kant’s formalist insistence on an eternal *separation* between thought and world in every domain he covers. In the *Critique of Judgment*, this takes the form of Kant’s insistence that both beauty and the sublime are not about the *objects* they present, but rather about the transcendental faculty of judgment that we share with all other humans. Fried like Greenberg seems to reverse this emphasis and favor the *object* rather than the subject as the site of aesthetics; nonetheless, the Kantian separation between the two remains operative in Fried’s thinking. His rejection of theatricality is, in effect, a rejection of any possible fusion between work and beholder.

In all fairness, we should note that Fried is so honest in his work as an art historian that he does not force-feed his own dislike of the theatrical on readers of his historical work. Consider his famous trilogy on the evolution of French painting from the early 1700s through Manet.⁷ Fried finds a very strong critical ally in the eighteenth century in the person of Denis Diderot, as important for art criticism as he was for philosophy as a whole. It is highly important to Diderot that the figures depicted in a painting seem *absorbed* in whatever it is they are doing, so as to close off any sense that

they are hamming it up for the beholder in any theatrical way. Fried easily demonstrates this point for such important painters of the period as Chardin and Greuze. But there are other moments in the history where Fried is forced to admit that we cannot know whether a given painting is theatrical or anti-theatrical, especially in the case of the great Revolution-era master Jacques-Louis David. The second book of the trilogy begins by showing that the same debate surrounded the painting of Jean-François Millet in the early 1800s, seen by some observers as brilliantly anti-theatrical but by others as laughably theatrical. The trilogy closes with Fried showing two other, dramatically different ways of coming to terms with the problem of theatricality: Gustave Courbet does it by painting himself into his pictures, and Manet by deliberately intensifying the problem and having his two great nudes (in *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* and *Olympia*) stare directly at the beholder rather than absorptively ignoring them. In other words, Fried does not denounce theatricality altogether in his historical work, even if he seems to do so in his art criticism of the 1960s, and even though he denounces many contemporary artworks as “theatrical” in the most dismissive possible spirit. More than this, in Chapter Two of the first book of his trilogy, he concedes that the supposed non-existence of the beholder of a painting is a “supreme fiction”. Stated more bluntly, there is an irreducibly theatrical aspect to all aesthetics, and *only for this reason* must Diderot’s favored painters work so hard to suppress it.

But why should OOO care so much about issues pertaining to theatricality? The reason is as follows. OOO is arguably even more *anti-literal* in its aesthetic position than is Fried. From an object-oriented standpoint, the aesthetic object is always an RO real object, inaccessible to any direct view by the beholder. It is no exaggeration to say that for OOO, the artwork is a Kantian thing-in-itself: the least literal thing imaginable, since no literal description or perception can ever hope to reach it. At the same time, however, OOO is committed to the tacit phenomenological principle that there is no object without qualities or qualities without an object. Since the artwork is always an elusive real object that disappears behind its sensual

surface properties, we might seem to have an exception: a case of qualities without an object, since their object is now withdrawn. Yet it seems clear to me that the necessary union of object and qualities continues to hold, and that therefore something different happens. While Picasso's *demoiselles* do withdraw from all direct access, there is one object that does not withdraw in the least: I myself, as the beholder of his brilliant early painting. It is I who perform the girls of the Avignon Quarter and provide a support for their sensual qualities on the canvas. Note that this has nothing to do with the postmodernist sense of the word "performativity", which always implies the anti-essentialist argument that a thing is only what it publicly *does*, and has no internal essence. Quite the contrary, *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* and all its various elements *does* have an essence, since otherwise its sensual qualities would tell the whole story of what they were. "Performativity" in the postmodernist sense is the least OOOish concept imaginable, but "performance" in the sense of an actor trying to live their role round-the-clock is perhaps the most OOOish notion under the sun.

Concluding Remarks

Combining the two principles developed above, we see the outline of a new OOO attitude towards the arts. In critical dialogue with Greenberg and Heidegger, we gained the sense of the artwork as a non-holistic medium whose elements exist in relative independence from each other. Though I did not mention it above, it would also follow that artworks might be capable of greater or lesser variation while still remaining more or less the same works.⁸ It is not just the artwork as a whole that remains partly mysterious; this is equally true for each element of a work. Meanwhile, in critical dialogue with Fried, we concluded that the beholder needs to be theatrically engaged with the artwork if it is to be an artwork at all. This implies several important corollaries. One is that the specifically *personal* role in how artworks are interpreted is far more important than Kant's appeal to

a universally shared human faculty of judgment could possibly allow. The other corollary would be a call for greater innocence and sincerity in the arts than what followed from the model of an aloof or cynical subject-creator confronted with nauseating and meaningless physical materials such as canvas and pigment.

More generally, philosophy's turn to aesthetics would amount to a simultaneous turn toward the *concealed* and the *plural*.

Notes

- 1 For a full explanation of this terminology, see Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011).
- 2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by W. Pluhar. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 95.
- 3 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Off the Beaten Track*. Translated by J. Young & K. Haynes. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 4 Martin Heidegger, "Insight Into That Which is," in *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking*. Translated by A. Mitchell. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012).
- 5 Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- 6 Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- 7 Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 8 I developed this notion for the purposes of literature in Graham Harman, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism," in *New Literary History* 43.2 (2012), 183-203.