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Research Methods
MA/MFA Art in the Contemporary World
29 August 2021

“Uttering the Unutterable” Artistic Research Through Object Oriented Ontology.

“And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable [das Unaussprechliche] then nothing gets lost. But the unutterable will be -- unutterably -- contained in what has been uttered!”¹

In 1917 Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote the above seemingly obtuse lines in a letter to his friend, Paul Engelmann, after reading the poem ‘Count Eberhard’s Hawthorn’, by Ludwig Uhland. After the Count returns from war and sits under a tree he planted from a sprig of hawthorn worn during his crusade, the final stanzas read-

*“The Count was worn with age
The sprig became a tree;
‘Neath which the old man oft
Would sit in reverie.*

*The branching arch so high,
Whose whisper is so bland,
Reminds him of the past
And Palestina’s strand.”²*

At risk of a literalist interpretation and saying the ‘unsayable’, - the ‘bland’ every day sound of wind through the leaves of this tree perhaps becomes a symbol and metaphor for Eberhard’s memories and emotions, connecting whispers of the turbulent past with an eternal present in a myriad of un-spoken, *un-knowable*, yet meaningful ways. We can see how this line of thinking later informed Wittgenstein’s concluding proposition in *Tractatus Logicos Philosophicus*, 1921; *“Whereof what one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”³*

¹ *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein, with a Memoir* [ca. 1916-37], ed. McGuinness [Appendix with Wittgenstein's letter to Ficker, ca. 1919], tr. Furtmüller. Oxford: 1967.

² Ludwig Uhland (1787-1862). Translation by Alexander Platt, 1848; quoted by [Paul Engelmann in his *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein, with a Memoir*](#), p. 83-84.

³ Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2007) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden. New York: Cosimo Classics

Considering that the revolutionary writing of James Joyce would have also been available to Wittgenstein, the dated Victorian style of this poem is a curious choice. It is likely that Wittgenstein's high octane danger-filled and voluntary experiences as an artillery scout as well as being held prisoner in the first world war gave him a certain personal empathy to this narrative, and he apparently wore his blue Austrian army coat long after the war until it became thread bare.

Alluding to the limits of knowledge, and the interior un-knowable reality or 'noumena' of things in themselves introduced by Kant, Wittgenstein explores these seemingly absurdist ideas in his early philosophical work as things that are unsayable but which can reveal themselves and must be shown instead. In this essay, I am going to look briefly at ways of approaching these un-utterable interior truths that continue to inspire the making of art, (including my own practice), through Graham Harman's philosophy of Object Oriented Ontology (OOO). By illustrating some critical comparisons to the limitations of Actor Network Theory (ANT), and other post modernist theories, I will examine OOO as a basis for further artistic research. Unlike other disciplines that claim to be a new theory of everything, OOO seems to allow indirect access to the 'unutterable' that Wittgenstein mentions without it being destroyed or altered with literalist interpretations, by using a mixture of re-defined 'objects', aesthetics and metaphor.

In OOO, Harman begins with the term 'object-oriented' computer programming, where existing programs are called 'objects' that exist in their own right. To save having to reprogram from scratch, object oriented programming economically uses existing programs to form new compound programs of infinite complexity. Keeping this loose definition of what an 'object' can be, Harman then looks at the uneven and tiered metaphysical relationships or ontology between medieval ideas of God, and Creation being replaced by the equally uneven modern ontology of thoughts and the world.

Critical of the anthropocentric emphasis from medieval philosophy of the Arab and European Occasionalists to modern western philosophy since Descartes, Kant, and Hume. In an effort to create a flat ontology that can include inanimate objects as equally as everything else, real or fictional, including thinking animals such as humans, OOO returns to Kant's metaphysical Noumena as things existing in themselves that we can never experience directly because we are trapped in the realm of human experience. Harman defines this as the 'Zero-person' aspect of things that is inspired by the two following passages by Jose Ortega.

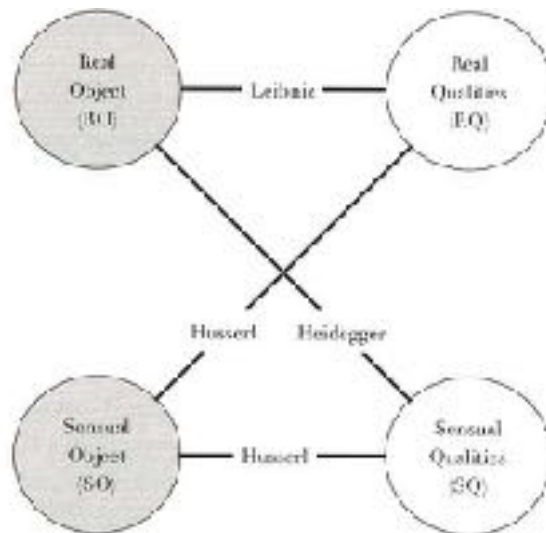
"There is the same difference between a pain that someone

tells me about and a pain that I feel as there is between the red that I see and the being red of this red leather box. Being red is for it what hurting is for me. Just as there is an I-John Doe, there is also an I-red, an I-water, and an I-star. Everything, from a point of view within itself, is an I." ⁴

But according to Ortega (and OOO), the inner being of things is not completely inaccessible.

"Now then, imagine the importance of a language or system of expressive signs whose function was not to tell us about Things but to present them to us in the act of executing Themselves. Art is just such a language; this is what art Does. The aesthetic object is inwardness as such - it is each Thing as 'I'." ⁵

Seeing metaphor as a way that *seems* to access this inner reality, Harman cites an example from the Spanish poet Lopez Pico, "The cypress is like the ghost of a dead flame." ⁶ OOO uses metaphor as a philosophical tool where aesthetics and theatricality also play an important role, defining reality as coming in only two types of objects, *real* and *sensual*. In OOO, real and sensual objects have a matching pair of real and sensual qualities. (See image).



Real objects, real qualities, sensual objects, sensual qualities. OOO Graham Harman.

⁴ Harman, Graham Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything. Pelican, 2018.

⁵ Harman, Graham Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything. Pelican, 2018.

⁶ Harman, Graham Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything. Pelican, 2018.

Using the cypress and flame metaphor, OOO discusses how here we have a real object, (cypress), real qualities, (branches etc), a sensual object, (flame), and sensual qualities, (shape, etc.) Crucially, OOO stipulates that the object and qualities are not reciprocal. It also states that the metaphor of likeness is not symmetrical, so the metaphor cannot be reversed to be the flame is the ghost of a dead cypress, as this becomes something very different.

Because the real object is inaccessible as a thing in itself, OOO says that we must fulfil the role of the object in reading this metaphor as an actor would act his or her part. This crucial role of theatricality as well as the four categories above are the main pillars of OOO.

Critically looking at what Harman calls 'bundle theories', where things are described merely as collections of properties such as a realist atomistic view of objects being '*undermined*' by a deeper reality of their constituent parts, OOO is also critical of theories that '*overmine*' objects as being nothing more than their effect in the world. One such overmining theory according to Harman is Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory, (ANT). While he recognises ANT's contribution to bringing inanimate objects into the arena as "a debt that can never be repaid", ⁷ because of its emphasis on the effects things Harman says that ANT cannot clearly distinguish between the thing and its effects. He illustrates that in ANT things and their effects are reciprocal and symmetrical. This flatness leads to excessive gradualism and not being able to distinguish passive periods of less impact during an event. Also, where a number of actors become a symbiotic new event, ANT sees this symbiosis as symmetrical between the separate actors, where OOO sees symbiosis as asymmetrical, such as prokaryotes absorbing parasitic bacteria to become Eukaryotic cells that benefit from the bacteria's ability to process harmful oxygen. This symbiotic relationship is reductive for the bacteria and so is asymmetrical.

The biggest difference between the two theories is that apart from ANT not recognising the need for metaphor in seeing the inner truth of things in themselves, or that things can exist in their own right, for OOO *an object is more than the sum of its parts but less than its effect in the world*. ANT defines its actors only by having effect in the world.

⁷ Harman, Graham Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything, Pelican, 2018. P. 106

The main reasons that led me to OOO as a model for artistic research are firstly, poetry; While poetry maintains a certain presence in post modern dialogue, there seems to be a lack of coherence surrounding the aesthetic imagery, and the theatrical use of metaphor found within poetry. Post modern ideas largely reject the aesthetics of high modernism in favour of semiotics.⁸ Karen Barad's anti-representationalist ideas surrounding language and fixed object hood, where the terms of a relation cannot pre-exist it,⁹ also appears to follow a narrative that is reactionary. In terms of poetry's ability to produce aesthetic imagery in the imagination of the reader while communicating deep philosophical insights through the poetic use of metaphor allows it to penetrate deeper than many other art forms. While I remain strongly a visual artist, I am interested in researching other uses of metaphor such as in poetry and prose. Some favourite examples spring to mind:

*"Sleep, that knits the ravelled sleeve of care,"*¹⁰

- from Shakespeare's Macbeth, and T.S. Eliot's opening lines of the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock;

*"Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;"*¹¹

Secondly, ideas of art as activism, political art and literalist interpretation. While not all politically inspired art falls into this category, such as *A Fairy Tale of Displacement* by Ai Wei Wei, Documenta 2007, and *Library of Exile* by Edmund de Waal, Venice Biennale, 2019, Arthur Danto questions whether art can even be a political instrument of change in the first place, saying *"it rarely changes attitudes but mirrors them, memorialising causes but not converting new recruits."*¹² Whether this is the case or not, specific political references in artwork that also strives to de-aestheticise itself can in some case result in two dimensional results, that can only be appreciated from a literalist perspective with little room for

⁸ Holt, David K. "Postmodernism: Anomaly in Art-Critical Theory." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 29, no. 1 (1995): 85-93. Accessed July 5, 2021. doi:10.2307/3333520.

⁹ Barad, Karen M. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. , 2007. Print.

¹⁰ Shakespeare, William. 1992. *Macbeth*. Wordsworth Classics. Ware, England: Wordsworth Editions.

¹¹ Eliot, T. S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Gleeditions, 17 Apr. 2011, www.gleeditions.com/alfredprufrock/students/pages.asp?

¹² Danto, Arthur C. "The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art." *Grand Street* 4, no. 3 (1985): 171-89. Accessed July 4, 2021

reinterpretation by the viewer and what Ernst Gombrich calls the 'beholder's share'. OOO places the viewer at the heart of the work and by the four tenets of real objects, real qualities, sensual objects and sensual qualities, could allow a new way to express socially or politically motivated narratives without becoming reductive or literalist.

Thirdly, Aesthetics. While I have mentioned the post modern replacement of high modernist aesthetics with semiotics, it also generally replaces ideas of an underlying essential modernist single truth with ideas of the 'many truths' of relativism. In an age of post truth, where Trump's spokesperson Kellyanne Conway infamously talked of 'alternative facts',¹³ previously left wing relativism has now shifted to the right to enable the creation of whatever narrative is needed. While the theatricality of modernist minimalism has been criticised by Fried,¹⁴ in OOO we have seen that aesthetics and theatricality play an essential role, as the viewer acts out and imbues the work with its qualities. While Harman is critical of modern western philosophy's inclination to avoid poetry and aesthetics. Wittgenstein was one such exception to this trend, when he said "One really ought to write philosophy as poetry."¹⁵

In terms of artistic research, Irit Rogoff talks about the migration of research into creative practices, and that the concept of research has shifted from traditionally highly academic to "research being an event itself"¹⁶ Lucy Cotter also discusses a similar change in her book Reclaiming Artistic Research. Using the structure of OOO to research a way of addressing the moment, and building on previous work and fields of interest with material-led research, it is my intention to create a body of new work based on the above methodology that begins with a mistrust of grammar and language as a starting point to examine the work of Wittgenstein through the lens of OOO.

¹³ Harman, Graham Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything. Pelican, 2018. P. 105

¹⁴ Fried, M. (1998). Art and objecthood: Essays and reviews. Chicago (Author-Date, 15th ed.)

¹⁵ Vermischte Bemerkungen.

P. Long, Ludwig Wittgenstein, G. H. von Wright & H. Nyman - 1979 - Philosophical Quarterly 29 (114):81.

¹⁶ Rogoff Irit. Becoming Research. Sonic Arts Festival. 2019. 22 Feb. De Brakke Grond. Amsterdam.

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P. Long, Ludwig Wittgenstein, G. H. von Wright & H. Nyman -*Vermischte Bemerkungen*.

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