Object Oriented Environs

Julian Yates, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen

Published by Punctum Books


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76499
The best television arguments and discussions are...those which open themselves towards people not assumed in advance to be already represented....Some of the worst, for all their internal skills, are those that simulate a representation by their own criteria.
—Raymond Williams, *Television*

In the spring of 2013, we were invited to propose a possible session for the Shakespeare Association of America meeting in St. Louis for 2014. The SAA is an organization that, in addition to running paper panels at its annual conference, offers participants the opportunity to share work-in-progress through themed seminars. The two of us had been in conversation for some time about nonhumans, *things*, animal, vegetable, and mineral, medieval and renaissance, about questions of ecology, and how to craft nontraditional conversation and thinking spaces in which something unanticipated might unfold. We decided to collaborate to build a gathering that would bring together these interests, objects, and possibilities for eventuation. The title of the seminar we proposed was “Object-Oriented Environments in Early Modern England,” which took its cue from the philosophical movement called Object-Oriented Ontology (frequently abbreviated to OOO) in the hope of provoking a conversation about how early modernists, or humanists in general, parse the question of matter, of *things*. We called the collocation OOE @ SAA.

Beyond or beside this thematic set of concerns, our hope was to have the seminar itself constitute an object of sorts, a *thing* in the word’s etymological sense of a gathering that might become more than the sum of its papers and our parts. We wanted to create an experience akin to the open spaces that Raymond Williams imagines in *Television*, a conversation that unfolds not by fulfilling a set of criteria laid out in advance, simulating a sense of fullness, a sense of community or comprehension, but remaining open to the unexpected, comfortable with pauses, meandering, moments of silence, experiments that might fail, that might solicit still other sets of criteria, viewpoints, orientations than those we were able to imagine at the start. José Esteban Muñoz calls such unforeclosed expectancy *cruising utopia*: finding the openness where an unknown or queer futurity might start, a journey with companions and with a destination difficult to know in advance.² We wanted not a gathering that maps terrain already covered in the hope of attaining some certain prospect, but a seminar on the move. Or to adapt Williams a bit, we wanted to collaborate with the seminar participants and the gathering of objects they would make to create openings towards people and things “not assumed in advance to be already represented,” towards strangers unknown and unanticipated, possibly even hostile to the unfolding project yet welcome all the same.

While it may seem odd to invoke a televisual signal and form as a model for face-to-face conversation, all communication occurs across gaps. We are all, however intimate, however habituated or oriented to one another, *tele*-friends or *tele*-beings, operating at a distance, bridging those divides and crossing the gaps by way of sound, vision, affect, touch, and forms of technical mediation. Like Williams, what we hoped for was something on the order of a community or “charity of production” as opposed to the frequently happy, even festive, “charity of consumption” that tends to characterize our shared spaces.³ It seemed to us that this might be accomplished by calling attention to the distances between us, that we still endeavored to cross, distances rendered lively by the objects that oriented us, the objects that we threw in each other’s way, and so came between us. The resulting book, *Object Oriented Environs*, archives

---


INTRODUCTION (AN ENVIRONING OF THIS BOOK) xiii

this endeavor. But it is a strange form of repository for its existence was mooted, projected, planned for, and announced to all-comers, to all members of our seminars in advance. Writing, compiling, this book began as a collective endeavor and putative product—some thing that everyone, seminar participants and their objects, and the turn to which their objects put them, helped to make, enables us to compose. **Ooe** is an archive of hazard, an aleatory recording of things fleeting, perilous, embarrassing, embraced; of enthusiasms and reluctances; of objects and bodies that cross distances for a while to become an ephemeral gathering with a powerful trace.

**RUBRICS**

We began by publishing the following rubric in the notice of seminars disseminated by the Shakespeare Association’s Fall 2013 Bulletin:

This seminar will stage a confluence between two important trends in critical theory: the environmental turn so vigorous within early modern studies and object-oriented ontology (vibrant materialism, the new materialism and speculative realism). Our aim is to imagine a conversation that moves beyond anthropocentrism and examine nonhumans at every scale, their relations to each other, and the ethics of human enmeshment within an agentic material world. How does our apprehension of the inhuman change when texts become laboratories for probing the liveliness, mystery and potential autonomy of objects, in their alliances and in performance?

To this invitation we received thirty-five requests to participate and, at the request of the conference organizers, agreed to run two seminars. We agreed that these would be held back to back on the same day to engender continuity, intensity, and exhaustion. We also agreed that the two of us would share a hotel room and much conference time. The planning for the seminar’s unfolding proceeded through the mediation of email, Face-Time chats, meals, and rambling walks.

This collection of essays archives the endeavor and offers its essays as the still remarkable, surprising fruits of the conversations we shared in
St. Louis in the course of a day of two-hour long seminars, the email conversations that preceded and post-dated them, and a collective feast at an Indian restaurant to end the event. Full of bees, bushes, laundry, crutches, lists, poems, plague, planks, chairs, rain, shoes, meat, body parts, books, and assorted humans (living and dead), these are the essays that those papers and conversation became. Each responds in its own particular way to the rubric we offered but also to this further prompting we sent in advance of the sessions as we invited participants to think expansively about the topic, and to bring an object or totem to St. Louis:

Dear Object-Oriented Environers,

Welcome to our seminar and collective adventure. We hope that you are as excited as we are by the prospect of our collaboration. We are delighted by the response to the topic, but in order to accommodate everyone who signed up, we have decided to run two parallel, independent seminars of roughly 15 people each. Obviously, you are all invited to attend both sessions as you are able—we should be delighted in fact if you did. In terms of format, we would like to imagine each two-hour seminar as an opportunity to stage an object-oriented event-space focused on the things/issues you are embarked on studying and writing about. Each seminar will take on its “feel” from the inventory of things you provide.

To that end, in place of the usual 12-page (3000–4500 word) papers, we should like each participant to write a 6-page (1500 word max) position paper on his or her object and the environs it orients that names the importance of the thing in question, outlines what it enables you or prompts you to think/say, and so do. We will pre-circulate these papers as per SAA deadlines and then Jeffrey and Julian will work out a way of ebbing and flowing through them or setting the things into a cascade that opens things up to discussion for each seminar. We will provide a current that you can allow to take us, that you can buck, or dam, as the mood/orientation takes.

To help anchor us in the “thingliness” that our papers will invoke, we ask also that on the day of each seminar, you bring some version/iteration of your object or a totem with you to the seminar.

We realize that the words “object” and “thing” carry with them a range of philosophical and theoretical moorings anchored to a
succession of names and movements (Martin Heidegger, Michel Serres, Bruno Latour, Object-Oriented Ontology, Affordance Theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis, the object relations theory of Winnicott, as well as the rich and varied bibliography of material culture studies and preservation studies). We welcome all these orientations to the table as, in our view, each tends to emphasize some differing aspect or property of an object—its physicality, psychic life, finitude, function.

We are fortunate also, in the context of this impossible wealth of a bibliography, to have invited four respondents (Drew Daniel and Julia Reinhard Lupton and Eileen Joy and Vin Nardizzi) who have worked extensively with objects in different registers—and we have asked them to share with us a short excerpt from their work to serve as an example of some of the work that medievalists and early modernists have embarked upon. In addition, because the movement gives it name to our seminar, we recommend reading the following excerpt from Ian Bogost’s *Alien Phenomenology* as an emblem for the broader development of an object-oriented ontology/speculative realism as developed by philosophers such as Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman. (Readings are attached at the end of this message in PDF).

In terms of imagining our flow of work, we provide a timetable below:

- December 1, 2013 please circulate a brief introduction and “hello” to the group from you and your object (4–5 sentences). Please also let us know at this point if it would be useful for us to have any particular kind of a/v help on site if that is necessary to staging your object.

- March 1, 2014 SAA requires that all participants pre-circulate their papers by this date to have their name included in the conference program. We ask that you do your very best to honor this date—especially given the number of participants involved.

Looking beyond SAA, we invite all who would like to do so, to turn their 1500 word position paper into a short essay of 3000–4000 words that we hope to include in a book (likely with Punctum
Books http://punctumbooks.com) that aims to archive the work of our two seminars along with responses from our respondents. Please feel free to write us both with any questions you may have.

Best, Excited wishes to All!

Jeffrey and Julian

The book you now possess marks the end of a collective work cycle that aimed to allow a series of projects or object orientations to cohabit for a day, to cross-pollinate, and so provoke juxtapositions, quandaries, epiphanies, and frustrations. We think also that the mooting of a book project, a collective home but also moment of ending at which ideas become papers become essays, might be alienated in the form of publication, even as some of us continue to work with our objects, provided an important impetus and sense of shared endeavor, a sense that the time we spent together in St. Louis would lead to more than individual memories or remembered conversation—always partial, always fragmentary.

Reading over the essays these papers and our conversations became, we cannot help but still feel a welcome sense of surprise at the object-oriented environs together we crafted, environs that occurred in and around, anchored to and by the ligatures that formed between and among the contributors, the respondents, and the objects that oriented them, the seminar, and this resulting book.

---

ARRIVAL

When a fountain runs red, an object enacts its etymology and throws itself (*obiacere*) into the world and in our way. We knew the local sports team was at the stadium, that the crimson of the city’s fountains was offered to the Cardinals and not some record of sacrifice. Yet gathered in St. Louis to speak of Shakespeare, objects, and environing, it was difficult to look at the fountains and not see the joyful excess of early modern plays that revel in red. As civic architecture, fountains domesticate water into the soothing center of a park or the obligatory ornamentation of corporate plazas. Most function by remaining invisible. They are simply part of the mundane cityscape, below notice. Their mineral means of relaying water obey the seasons—or condense them to a binary on and off as they are “winterized” and then allowed to spring forth once more. Seasonal change registers in the human maintenance of an infrastructure that the weather might corrode. Stony desert become spring’s new gush, the fountain testifies merely to the maintenance of a network against the changes that local environs might wreak. Yet the shift in the water’s spectrum through the addition of some dye proves estranging. The cascade of red de-cloaks the fountain from obscurity (Figures 1 and 2).

As we walked around the city, pondering the shape of the seminars to come, we found ourselves drawn to the flowing red waters. One of us may have reached a hand into the liquid, performed a strange anointing. The other may have proved too shy, too timid. Red proves uncanny. And we wonder now if the fountain full of red is a story that offers a parable. Maybe no truth of the object inheres, only a tale of humans and dye,
sports or academic meetings, and a desire for a world that is assertively nonhuman.

Objects throw themselves in the way of human (in)attention, as when the water of a public fountain runs crimson and triggers thoughts of blood, of Shakespeare. How disorienting, like a golden apple that tumbles the path and ruins the race. But the apple was tossed by human hand; it did not “throw itself in the way of” Atalanta’s attention. Someone dyed those fountains and made of them a human story, not a tale of water. Or maybe the tale is too tangled to unloose its smaller strands, so that worrying about human versus object agency limits our expanse? And what about objects that abide, the apples and the streams and stones that enable cooking, transport, friendlier relations? Objects offer quiet environments most of the time. We are used to their compliance. And so that is why we walk. Peripatetic philosophizing traces some new routes, or follows familiar paths in the hope that something not so ordinary will surface. The anthropologist Tim Ingold calls the process “thinking with the feet.” Rejecting the relegation of the pedestrian to mere “stepping machine,” he advocates a process of unknowing quotidian environments by wandering them sensually, in bare feet if necessary, so that perambulation becomes a mode of cognition.5

To heighten attentiveness, environing is best done in company.

---

the hotel’s infrastructure, up and down escalators, through doors, and back—changing our orientation, rendering the world that we take as a support, something now that we need to take cognizance of. Halfway through our conversation, we invited our participants to take a walk (or not), to spend the interval between talking on his or her or our own recognizance (Figure 3). The break, the walk, did us good; provided a necessary break to the flow of conversation (an on and off switch) that enabled us all to take our seats again and respond to what we had heard anew, as a group that now had walked together or clustered in corners around the table, refreshing coffee cups, water glasses, nipping in and out to the bathroom, devolving into smaller, serial, serendipitous polities.

Table, you have become urgent to us—that urgency tied to the mundane eventfulness of getting up and sitting back down, the becoming lively of the table as environing object. The course of the perambulation was left to the respondents (though we did give suggestions). In the first seminar we strolled as a group out the doors of the room and down the long escalator to the hotel lobby. On reaching that public space we made a U-turn and took the escalator heading back up, passing seminar members still descending. Some of them may have tried to reverse their own steps; resist the pointlessness of our way-finding but the downward drag of the escalator proved too much. They gave in and allowed the machine to do their walking for them. We confess that we enjoyed their looks of surprise when they realized that we had departed the confines of the room to wander together. We enjoyed as well the wonder of those who were not at the seminar, those just milling around outside to catch up with friends or gossip about the plenaries, witnessing their quiet space traversed. The second seminar wandered farther: through a door marked STAFF ONLY DO NOT ENTER and into the portion of the hotel where the labor that enables a meeting to unfold is hidden. Those who walked into the service area
(and there were many who turned back to the conference room at this point) saw where the coffee is made, the tablecloths laundered, the dishes washed. We stopped and chatted with people at their interrupted tasks, who seemed pleased not to be invisible for a few moments (but we admit they may also have been annoyed beneath the contracted cheerfulness the hotel demands of its employees or hospitality technicians) and to guide us through the winding corridor and out a “secret” exit on the other side, the route they used to access our meeting space without walking among the visiting scholars. You will have guessed that a story about race, privilege, and access unfolded here and was carried into what followed when we returned to the beige room.

These walks fractured the group. That was also their purpose. There was no correct way to walk. The point was to enable this devolution of the group into smaller ones; chance decisions or demarcations; deliberate and accidental. It was not possible then or now to map all the routes we collectively described. And those who wandered, who left the room assigned to us, cannot begin to know what passed among those who stayed put with the table or chatted with the onlookers (these seminars have audiences) or took the elevator back to their room to retrieve this or that or snatch a moment alone. And this fracturing, which designated also a moment of formation, enables us to return to the table and begin a second time, bodies and minds registering the fact of the conversations we had had and attuned also to the urgency of the time that remained.

“Starsky and Hutch”

Of course, memory idealizes, inoculates itself against the lapses or losses, the erasures. Our seminars were not utopian, or were precisely so in the sense that the only “end” they knew was provided by the clock. We begin now. We end now. Our time together unfolds between. Let’s make the most of it. Still, St. Louis punctuated our conversations with its own strange writing, its own comprehending or environing of the bubble we sought collectively to blow. The Gateway Arch (Figure 4) at the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial framed our time together, proclaiming this river crossing an entrance, a gateway to an America that retrospectively re-articulates that crossing in stone and steel. You can still cross
the river; drive coast to coast; plying the trails-become-freeways; but you can also ascend the arch from within by way of a tram of tiny capsules, and achieve a synoptic view of the land that travelers past lacked even as the trails and tracks their wagon wheels and trains left made today’s view possible. (You will be warned as you enter the capsule that you may experience claustrophobia, and that these conveyance devices were designed for a time when Americans better fit their seats [Figure 5].) We enjoyed our space travels; enjoyed the social awkwardness that our newfound capsule friends and we finessed with time-honored scripts and hunched up knees. They thought we might have been in St. Louis for the skin-care-products exhibition at the city’s convention center, a conference far better attended than the SAA. But what a short journey we had in comparison to those whose wagon-riders, whose collective writing enabled the translation of those tracks to stone, glass, steel — to the concrete, tar, and trade of the manifest destiny of the interstate below us, as though the road wanted to run that way, wanted to carve out a track through the land, obliterating or over-writing what came before. Of course, those wagon trails are themselves now idealized. In the nineteenth century, there were in fact lines and long waits at treacherous crossings, handbooks or how-to-do-it guidebooks as to when to set off; which trails to follow; and sites of mass
graffiti to memorialize the fact of the journey, fellow travelers who died en route, ephemeral traces of those human subjects whose destiny manifested precariously whatever the state or the nation claimed as its rights (Figure 6).⁶

Of course that imperative proves to be of shallow foundation. Outside of the city are giant mounds, the remains of a vast indigenous Mississippian settlement that vanished before pioneers built St. Louis and dubbed it the “Gateway to the West.” These structures tell a deeper story about habitation, one in which cities rise and fall long before European-descended settlers colonize, one in which a variety of peoples come and go, build and abandon, one in which genocide and white agency do not yet dominate story, but unfold as merely one chapter within a larger structure of relation. No one is quite certain why they left, but the city was empty long before Europeans arrived. We rented a car to get there; joined the handful of tourists; a minor parade of elementary school children; tramped the curated walkways alongside city-dwelling joggers who drive out to experience the muscle burn these artificial mountains now afford in this place of flatness. Cahokia Mounds is located in Collinsville, Illinois, just off the interstate, fifteen minutes east of St. Louis. During the Middle Ages, the city dwarfed London. The people who dwelled there over the centuries were accomplished builders. They constructed ordinary houses, vast public monuments, roads and walkways. They planned their city. Not a

---

gateway but a destination. Good-
bye Old World. Goodbye New
World (Figures 7–9).  

“St. Louis also spoke to us—called us out if not exactly to
account. Out walking early one
morning, we met almost no one,
but turned the corner to be saluted
by a glance and the wag of a finger
and a voice that greeted us with
the words “Starsky and Hutch,” a
phrase we processed, inevitably,
instantaneously, for we knew the
reference, had watched the show,
maybe even owned or once upon
a time played with the iconic car.
Starsky and Hutch names the late
1970s police procedural set in “Bay
City, California” (no such place has
ever existed) starring Paul Michael
Glaser and David Soul. At the time
we were delighted; played the giddy
game of academic tourists, who
routinely make lemonade out of
the bitter but not unsweet realities
of the environs that host their pres-
ence. Environs bought and sold by
municipalities and City Fathers,
contracted for a certain period of time within the calendrical liturgy of
the conference scene and circuit, bartered in terms of services offered
and opportunity costs, but whose residents are never asked whether they
might like to have the purveyors of the bard or skin care products set up
their respective shops in their town, in their environs. We kept on walk-
ing; enjoyed our breakfasts; debated who of us was Starsky, and who
might be Hutch?

---

7 You can visit the online, curated remains of Cahokia at http://cahokiamounds.org
But, thinking back (or even at the time), it seems best that we own the fact that we did not know and do not know now what those words meant—“Starsky and Hutch”—even as they seemed to beckon to us, to address us with a televisial past, with the memory of one island in the “flow” of programming that, once upon a broadcast time, in Williams’s sense of things, kept time. Yes. The man’s words, his naming of the show, formed a momentary relay between us that (despite our respective environs—when and where we were coming from and going) linked Jeffrey to Julian to this old man who seemed emphatically not to be passing through. What and how did this cry of the city mean? To whom was it addressed? To us, perhaps—or not—just a note to self, or an address to the environs: look who’s coming now. It seems important also to admit that, while we might have smiled, both of us knew that we had been remarked and had acknowledged that remarking, been hailed, hallowed, named or maybe simply seen and designated as if Starsky and Hutch, a duo of white guys who do and do not belong, who move ghost-like along the sidewalk through neighborhoods that are not their own, and get into their car and drive off. And who, whatever their associations with the likes of Huggy Bear (who stole the show), bore guns, brought violence with them even as they might like to think of themselves as peace officers. In a city that everywhere bears the scars of racial violence both slow and sudden, we were hailed as if the police, addressable, stunt or touristic keystone cops whose exaggerated movements weren’t funny any more, just evidence that we got to inhabit a different time and space even as we inhabited another’s. We never met this man even as he remarked us. All we can recall is the impression he made on us and the way in which our turning of a blind corner accosted him in his environ.

8 Williams, Television, 78.

9 In recalling this moment, we are alluding obviously to Louis Althusser’s account of ideological interpellation or hailing in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127–186. Crucially, however, the scene of nomination we describe functions a bit differently casting us in the guise of the police. The address calls our world into question. In this sense, our little street theater enacted something that Donna Haraway adds to Althusser’s account of interpellation—that the moment of ideological hailing can function also as a calling of the question, a call for recognition or the recognition of a shared world. See Donna Haraway, When Species Meet (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 278.
Later in the summer of 2014, Michael Brown would be shot to death in nearby Ferguson. Thinking back to what had seemed a little theater of the street, it stops us now in our tracks, brings home to us that whatever we may have managed to do in our seminars—they were no community or charity of production, or if they were, then the price for them was paid by a host of others, who were there also even as they went unacknowledged. “There is,” we know “no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”

This book entails its own erasures.

---
