Weaponising Speculation

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AS someone who engages and writes about art on a consistent basis, the challenge to approach research, or even a text, in the absence of an object is always a challenge: there is nothing to fall back upon or anchor the work around. And yet, there is often, too, an over-reliance on the object, as though description alone can redeem the translation of aesthetic experience into language. When writing an account of a work or body of works, whether that be in a review, an artists’ text or academic treatment, the sure sign of ‘bad’ work is to be able only to describe it: the text stops short at an engagement with form. So too the one that relies overly on description, whether by laziness or disinterest: it can never be a good text, or speak to the heart of what it describes. Thus, any effective text must diverge from the object it describes – creating a new object – and at the same time avoid engagement with works that appear to invite only description. A two-fold negotiation of the object, then, is what is needed: objects as not only things to get at, but also things to emphatically restrain oneself from. For me this is the whole problem of writing about art: to adhere but also to rebel from the object of study.

I am not purporting some form of poetics at a deliberate remove from the object of interest, in this case the artwork. And I am definitely not suggesting a shift in emphasis from the object, to the relation between it and myself. Instead, I argue that an emphasis on substances, rather than relations, makes for a pretty dull criticism. In short, art criticism – at least of the successful breed – is always built on a considered relation; fleeting and impartial though it might be, it demands an engagement that aspires towards some form of peace with the thing. The process of writing about art demands reconciliation with the object of study, but not complete degradation of the borders between it and I: in such a case, the object, being dumb, finds only a mouthpiece, and textual representation slides into the inanity of description. Over-reliance on the object suggests an
asymmetrical relation between it and I; not, I must add, through its sublimity or ineffability, but because – and only because – I am not trying hard enough to get at it. It is not the question of some indivisible remainder, to which I have no or limited access, though this may in fact be the case: rather, it is the question of this aporia being acknowledged. Through such an acknowledgment, the pre-eminence of the object is codified, resulting in either a fall back towards it – by description – or by disavowal of its transparency, resulting in some breed of mystic abdication of the possibility of access. Both approaches preserve the object or art object as the site of substance, rather than as the product of a relation, or one actor within a relation of potentiality.

I set out to write here as a means of grappling with this particular problem, attempting to articulate my thoughts on it, and of teasing out ways in which Speculative Realism (SR)/Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) might offer a new means of thinking and working through it – if any. The title of this paper, A Seductive Union: Speculative Realism and Contemporary Art, may allude on my part to a certain cynicism or disillusionment with what is now completely saturated within contemporary art discourse. SR, encompassing OOO, is indeed a seductive breed of thought; Harman’s term ‘allure’ appears only to reciprocate this view. Steven Shaviro, in the text The Actual Volcano: Whitehead, Harman, and the Problem of Relations, describes this state of allure as,

(T)he attraction of something that has retreated into its own depths. An object is alluring when it does not just display particular qualities, but also insinuates the existence of something deeper, something hidden and inaccessible, something that cannot actually be displayed... it stretches the observer to the point where it reaches the limits of its power, or where its apprehensions break down. To be allured is to be beckoned into a realm that cannot ever be reached[1].

Thus Harman’s allure, specifically the allure of objects, connotes the existence of something outside of one’s grasp or ability to understand. It is akin, as Shaviro says, to the experience of the sublime[2] – a term recognised by every art graduate (that particular painting by Friedrich apparently the only example in attempting its representation). Understood thus, the sublime object is the site of terrifying self-reflection. Kant, however, did not apply the term ‘sublime’ to art; either did Burke. Both were concerned with nature, not objects of aesthetic

2. Ibid
reflection: however impressive the artwork was, it could not rival nature, and thus could not be considered sublime in itself. Of course, this is the Romantic sublime: much has since been written about the possibility of a post-modern sublime that might encompass networks and technology etc.

The temptation to relinquish the artwork to the dominion of the sublime, for me, is much the same as adopting an object-oriented conception of the artwork. Both anchor themselves on some form of non-knowledge, outside of the remit of human understanding. I agree with the proposition that such an exterior exists, but do wonder whether it is here where the art object rests. Arguably, if SR and OOO are in some part indebted to an understanding of the sublime, then perhaps they cannot speak to art at all. If we treat the art object as an object of sublimity, its steadfast inaccessibility leads to an essentialised estrangement from thought. It is operative outside of any true relation – even that of the artist who makes it. To me the art object is ‘neither this, nor that’ [3]: neither outside of a relation, nor wholly enclosed within its demarcations. It trembles somewhere between relations – between the artist and it, and it and the subsequent subject that apprehends it – and substance, and it is here that our attention must be drawn.

I consider objects all of the time, everyone does. Everything, indeed, might be construed as an object, but I feel art objects encompass their shadowy dimension to the greatest degree. By their transcendence of the mere stuff of the world, and acquisition of what Duchamp called the ‘art coefficient’, the inexplicable potentiality available to all objects is made explicit. By transformation of the stuff of which it is comprised, art objects allude to the potential for all others to do just the same: anything, even the lowly urinal, is imbued with this potentiality.

But how can their activation as artworks be explained as simply the product of substance? Is it a question of some substances being of a more or less aesthetic consistency, and of this bubbling up spontaneously?

What SR and OOO, in particular, appear to usher in is a kind of formalism, whereby art objects – and all objects alongside them – are treated as distinct substances, shadowy and never quite fully accessible, either to the subject or indeed to other objects. They recede from view. But how can this understanding of objects be made to encompass a definition of art, if not by flattening its privileged position as art? SR and OOO put forward a democracy of objects in which no one has priority over another: hence, the somewhat tiresome preponderance of long sentences listing off unrelated things. But are not some objects given a special place in (human) consciousness, among these things being works of art? I would like to think so. Arguably their special status cannot rest on their withdrawn nature, here made explicit, but rather by virtue of something else: in short, it must rest at least to some degree on a relation rather than some shadowy substance.

I am problematising this specific treatment of objects because it sweeps everything up alongside it: even though equivalence is only suggested at an atomistic level, not in terms of subjective prehension, objects still arise from a flattened space, art objects included. In such a light, it appears counter-productive, contradictory even, to allude to any natural sympathy between SR/OOO and contemporary art practice. Such philosophical thought cannot, or chooses not to, account for the question of the art object, which is of course an object, made like many others, but not adherent to other objects that should, by their understanding, share their tendencies. The chair is not the same as the Rembrandt, and not because of some essentialist understanding of art, but by virtue of the relation between artist and work, and subsequently the subject that apprehends it. Artworks are given their special status – provided that we grant them it – through being in the world: they are not estranged from thought, but a definite product of it.

Being in the world: then, what would it mean for an artwork to not be in the world? If the artwork – at least to some extent – is validated and granted its status as art by its insertion into wider relations and chains of significance, to what does the absent artwork attest? I use the example of the Geneva Freeport, which I am indebted to learning about from Barbara Knezevic. This is a 435,000 square-foot tax haven and storage facility in Switzerland.

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currently housing an inestimable amount of priceless art. Bizarrely, due to tax-reasons, many works are bought and sold from within the Free Port, changing hands without ever seeing the light of day. The likelihood is that no one, or virtually no one, gets to experience and appreciate these works of art: we can only speculate on them, quietly wondering why some of the world’s most well-known artworks are slowly slipping from public view. As Nicholas Brett, underwriting director of AXA Art Insurance in London, says, when asked to guess at the total value of Freeport art, ‘I doubt you’ve got a piece of paper wide enough to write down all the zeros. It’s a huge but unknown number.’ These artworks have become pure relation – exchange value – containing nothing in-themselves. This is the other side of the dichotomy, where no substance at all remains, or is relation-turned-substance. The objects exist, of course, but the question is whether or not one can call them art if and when they are not actors in any relation outside of exchange value. The Geneva Freeport, for me, is illustrative of what happens when substance is refuted altogether, when the artwork is transformed into a shadowy relation that recedes from view.

It might seem that the heir to such a business is none other than Duchamp, whose decision to ‘choose’ something as art enabled a wholly relational art, in which the artist imbues the object with substance only by means of his relation to it. And yet even Duchamp cannot cede fully to this point of view, and he kind of backtracks somewhat with what he terms the ‘art coefficient’, which I mentioned in passing earlier. In The Creative Act (1957), Duchamp says,

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\text{(I)n the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap, representing the inability of the artist to express fully his intention, this difference between what he intended to realise and did realise, is the personal ‘art coefficient’ contained in the work. In other words, the personal ‘art coefficient’ is like a arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed. [4]}
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Thus the objects ‘art coefficient’ is what surpasses the artist-artwork relation, undermines and escapes it, in so doing granting it the status of art. The ‘art coefficient’ is not born of substance, then, but of a kind of substance-born-of-relation.

This is how I think about the art object: indeed this might change, and I think it is important to stay open to that possibility. For me SR and OOO are objects in-themselves: the temptation to bend to them is great, employing their method as a stand-in for the description of art; but they too, like the object itself, must be rebelled against. It is only in this intersection of positions that they can speak to the discourse of art.