Some Ways of Making Nothing

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Since the 1970s, Haim Steinbach’s art practice has (mostly) involved arranging and displaying various objects on shelves. The shelves are specifically constructed to display the particular objects they are displaying. The objects are not affixed to the shelves; they merely rest on them. The shelves are usually colored in some way that correlates to the color of the objects, and often the shelves have two tiers. These custom shelving units displaying their accompanying objects are meant to be installed on walls, usually at about chest height, either in a collector’s home, a gallery, or a museum.

These ensemble shelf/object pieces function as lures and traps for human-generated critical and theoretical perspectives about objects and their relationship to humans and other objects. It is in this sense that Steinbach’s object ensembles function as apophatic art apparatuses. Surprisingly, numerous competing theories about objects are readily accommodated by Steinbach’s work.

It might be objected that all art accommodates multiple interpretations, each of which may be convincingly supported by a number of equally valid critical perspectives.
I disagree. A Rembrandt self-portrait inherently rewards certain art-critical perspectives and thwarts certain others. To critique a Rembrandt as if it were a Warhol would perhaps be a wacky post-modern exercise in perspectival subjectivity, but it would yield a poorer analysis of the Rembrandt than any number of critiques based on more formal or material aesthetic perspectives. A Rembrandt etching doesn’t purposefully give itself over to multiple critical perspectives. It is not that kind of art apparatus. It invites and accommodates certain perspectives while eluding and impoverishing other perspectives. Whereas, not only do Steinbach’s object ensembles draw out and yield themselves to multiple art critical perspectives, they also draw out and yield themselves to multiple and differing ideological and cosmological perspectives.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from the Rembrandt etching, an accidental cobweb in the corner of a gallery is so unpurposeful, so unstaged, it welcomes any old kind of critical perspective at all. The cobweb invites all of the same, rote, unrigorous, boring, unproductive, philistine perspectives wielding all the same old, blunt, brutally well-trodden questions: Why is Duchamp’s urinal even art? Why is Felix Gonzalez-Torres pile of candy art? Why is Tracey Emin’s unmade bed art? Isn’t my child’s drawing just as good as Picasso’s? The cobweb in the corner may indeed function as an apparatus (because any part of the universe cut off from the rest of the universe may function as an apparatus), but it is not yet an explicitly human-directed (i.e., “art”) apparatus, because there is no human-devised, human-aware rigor or staging which would purposefully include humans in any particular way. The cobweb is not intended for humans. And so, we are left asking the same banal semantic questions about what constitutes art at all, rather than asking more rigorous questions about what this particular art apparatus is actually doing.
Whereas I contend that Steinbach’s object ensembles have purposefully and willingly yielded themselves up to an onslaught of critical perspectives over the decades (and the parade of perspectives shows no sign of stopping). By so utterly and unreservedly yielding to competing theoretical perspectives about objects, Steinbach’s work continues to elude, confound, and play the coquette to an army of theory suitors who continue to try (in vain) to woo it into becoming the object-lesson mascot of their object-centric theories. Through its apparent straightforwardness and seeming openness to analysis, Steinbach’s work lures each of these theoretical perspectives into revealing itself. After all, these are just some objects arranged on a shelf, similar to what you might find on a knick-knack display shelf in your grandmother’s house (if your grandmother were a surrealistic metaphysical comedian). (Most of) the objects aren’t moving. They are just sitting there. The objects don’t resist examination or theoretical capture. They don’t even resist physical capture, since they are not glued down to the shelves. Once a pair of basketball shoes was stolen from an object ensemble at a gallery opening by a boy who wandered in and wanted a new pair of basketball shoes.1 According to Steinbach, the motivating question driving his entire art practice is deceptively simple: “What happens when you put things next to things?”2 His object ensembles evoke myriad interpretations not because they are occluded, misty, and vague; but precisely because they are so plainly denuded (like a kind of object porn). The fact that they remain intriguing even after they have been so plainly

1 Haim Steinbach, interview with the author at Steinbach’s New York studio, April 21, 2017.
Some Ways of Making Nothing

and obviously “displayed” makes them all the more intriguing. Their plain apparentness is their lure.

Ultimately, however, the work resists being summatively and reductively analyzed by any single explanatory theory. It accomplishes this feat by yielding to multiple explanatory theories simultaneously. Steinbach’s object ensembles are wily and acrobatic in their temporary dalliance with, but ultimate indifference toward, any single human-generated cosmology. The object ensembles are porously resistant. They are like ingenious, paradoxical, theory-confounding trawling nets: they capture other people’s interpretations in their own apparatal nets, but manage to slip through the nets of the interpretations which they capture.

Steinbach’s shelf/object artworks are human-designed apparatuses which orchestrate objects in such a provocative, open, curious, and faux-apparent way that they invoke and draw out of humans a variety of theories about objects. Steinbach’s apparatuses not only invoke various human interpretations, they willingly make themselves available as proof positive of these interpretations. They lure human-invented object-theories to the fore, tease them into articulation, and all without being summatively captured by any of them. Although Steinbach’s apparatuses appear to be object-centric and human agnostic, they are anything but. They are explicitly engineered by a human in order to provoke humans into thinking about objects, even when (particularly when) the human-constructed theories which they provoke claim that Steinbach’s art lets objects “speak for themselves.”

Before I proceed any further, I should introduce the particular Steinbach piece on which I will focus. It is titled 00:02 (2,4S). It was made in 1988 and acquired by the Stedelijk Museum in 1989. It is part of the Stedelijk’s permanent collection and is on display (as of summer 2018) in the sculpture room of “part two” (1980–now) of their displayed permanent collection (“STEDELIJK BASE”). The
piece is comprised of two trash cans and four lava lamps. The two trash cans sit toward the left on a large black shelf. The four lava lamps rest on a smaller silver shelf, inset into the right side of the black shelf, raised slightly above the black shelf, and protruding slightly to the right of the black shelf (see Fig. 1).

If the descriptive wall text in the Stedelijk is to be believed, “00:02” in the title refers to an amount of elapsed time; “2” and “4” in “(2,4S)” refer to the number of trash cans and lava lamps respectively; and “S” stands for “small” (because the same work has been realized in both large and small versions). The title of the work is a bit anomalous for Steinbach. Many of his shelf/object ensembles are either simply titled “Untitled” with a list of the objects in parentheses, or their titles are minimally sly and wry (to list just four examples: the village people; oxygen; oz; and orient point). His titles are sometimes followed by numbers describing the identity of that particular shelf/object ensemble within a related series [to list four examples: Untitled (breast mugs, Marilyn guitar) I-2;
One minute managers I-1; One minute managers II-2; and One minute managers, IV-1]. The materials listed for 00:02 (2.4S) [hereafter referred to as 00:02] are “plywood, black veneer, silver-colored metal leaf, lava lamps, trash receptacles.”

I selected this piece as an example not because it is perfectly representative of Steinbach’s entire shelf oeuvre. Arguably, by design, no single shelf/object ensemble is representative of the others. Indeed, one interpretation of the object ensembles is that they purposefully trouble the line between “this” specific object (its haecceity) and this object as representative of a generic kind (its interchangeability). One reason I selected 00:02 is because it includes objects with well-decohered (not merely subatomic) moving elements (the lava lamps are plugged in and their lava is “active”). Just as a point of comparison, two other objects with moving elements in Steinbach’s other ensembles are digital clocks and those wave machines that sit on office desks and see saw back and forth. I also selected 00:02 because it is a mixture of objects that are meant to be functionally utilized (the trash cans) and objects that are meant to be visually contemplated (the lava lamps). Finally, 00:02’s contextual situation in the Stedelijk Modern Sculpture room (across from Damian Hirst’s transparent bin of medical waste, and in the same room with Donald Judd’s phenomenology-centric chairs and Ashley Bickerton’s own version of an object ensemble) affords a critical opportunity to comparatively think through what Steinbach’s work might uniquely be doing in the immediate physical vicinity of other work arguably functioning in similar ways.

Throughout the decades, people have theorized that Steinbach’s object ensembles were about: the objects themselves, the shelves themselves, about what an object even is, about commodities and capital, about semiotics and language, about fundamental numerical relationships, about minimalism, about formalism, about found objects and readymades, about pop art, about the
psychological and mnemonic connection that humans have with objects, about domesticity, about the artist as curator, about minimalist phenomenological sculpture, about institutional critique, about symbolic narrative, and about Steinbach himself. Evocatively, and somewhat in line with my own approach to the work, Steinbach asserts, “It’s about the display showing itself being displayed.”

This formulation is the inverse of Derrida’s formulation regarding the way in which the sublime (inadequately) presents itself: “Presentation [...] is presented in its very inadequation, adequate to its inadequation. The inadequation of presentation is presented.” In the case of Steinbach’s object ensembles, his claim is that there is no man behind the curtain: no inaccessible sublime “beyond” which obliquely reveals itself by prohibiting our access to it. Quite the opposite, in fact. The object ensembles don’t simply display and disclose their content while occluding the act of display itself. Instead (at least according to Steinbach), the shelf/object ensembles are all openly, purposefully, and primarily displaying the fact that they are putting objects on display, regardless of the specific objects actually being displayed.

Whether we take Steinbach at his word or not depends on our own interpretation of what the work itself is doing, but I find his claim intriguing at least. It suggests that the things on display (whether as types or singularities; whether as semiotic signifiers or surplus commodities; whether as “enduring objects” or “societies of actual entities;” whether “in-themselves,” “for-us,” or “in-themselves-for-us”) are simply there to jump-start the more primary meta-function of their holistic art apparatus: namely, to display the act of displaying. You can’t display nothing, so you must start with something. But the work

3 Ibid., 365.
is not really about the somethings (per se); it is about the act of displaying (in toto). What it is it to display? Is displaying the same as disclosing? Uncovering? And if so, uncovering what? Essences? Qualities? Intra-object relationships? The act of uncovering itself? Also, uncovering to whom? To humans? To other objects? To being itself? All very Heideggerian and Derridean questions.

When I initially encountered Steinbach’s object ensembles, I had the distinct impression that their creator had somehow mastered access into the essences and subjectivities of ordinary objects. The work bodily affected me. It still does. Initially, it seemed like Steinbach was some kind of object-whisperer. I don’t quite believe that anymore. I still believe Steinbach is a master, but he is a master at discerning the affinities that objects seem to have with one another (based on their production histories, material qualities, formal qualities, past functional uses, historical cultural connotations, art historical resonances) all from his own capacious human perspective; and he is a master at staging those objects in order to evoke rich and resonant responses from other humans. I concur with Germano Celant’s observation that “[Steinbach] wants to verify [the thing’s] degree of seduction and persuasion, of delight and repulsion.” Yes, but verify to whom? To himself and to other humans. It turns out Steinbach’s work wasn’t deftly revealing the subjective hidden language of objects right before my eyes; instead, Steinbach was orchestrating objects in such a way that I intuited them talking to each other. He was creating inviting and connotative blanks for me to fill in. What I initially mistook as the occult voice of the objects I now recognize as the siren voice of the holistic apparatus, luring me into its ingenious trap: a trap set in holistic collaboration with the objects, the shelves, and art history; a trap for humans,

invented by a human. At least that is the theory which the object ensembles are currently provoking from me.

According to this position, oo:02 functions as a kind of double-slit apparatus for human-generated cosmologies. Whereas Young’s apparatus is “measuring” photons, Steinbach’s apparatus is “measuring” humans. In Young’s double slit apparatus, humans are purposefully excluded from the experimental measurement results, and the photons themselves are left to make their own decisions and marks. In Steinbach’s oo:02, humans are purposefully invited into the apparatus. We are lured into believing that we are measuring the results of the intra-actions between trash cans and lava lamps. We declare them either withdrawn objects (per object oriented philosophy), ongoing events (per process philosophy), linguistic signifiers (per Saussurean semiotics), etc. We imagine we are reckoning the marks these objects have made; when in truth, we are the ones making the marks and getting reckoned. All the while, the trash cans and lava lamps “themselves” remain, utterly indifferent to our presumptuous cosmological pronouncements on their behalf. oo:02 isn’t an object-centric apparatus for measuring trash cans and lava lamps; it is a display-centric apparatus employing trash cans and lava lamps to measure humans.

The rest of this chapter will examine some of the human-generated cosmologies and ideologies that Steinbach’s shelf/object ensembles have enticed thus far, beginning with past dalliances and proceeding toward the work’s most recent paramour, object-oriented ontology (and in particular, its progenitor, Graham Harman’s dashing yet troubled object-oriented philosophy). We will conclude our examination of the theory suitors with one of the work’s most ardent and persistent hopefuls, semiotics. This will lead to my own personal favorite (yet still woefully unrequited) theoretical interpretation, the artist as master craftsman of the medium known as object arranging.
Suitor #1: Symbolic Narrative

There was an idea in 1970s art criticism that every object contained its own narrative. Critics subscribing to this approach failed to understand or appreciate Steinbach’s work, because they were not able to interpret his ensembles in terms of any sort of cohesive symbolic story. His work was criticized as nonsense. There seemed to be no “meaningful” relationship between his objects. In fact, the objects in Steinbach’s ensembles have always been very purposefully selected and arranged. His selections and arrangements are not in the least random or non-sensical. It’s just that the work doesn’t parade any overtly symbolic narrative “meaning.” Instead, Steinbach’s object-selections and object-groupings are driven by his own oblique attunement to objects rather than by any agreed upon cultural symbolism (or even by any idiosyncratic, personal mythology, à la Matthew Barney).

In an attempt to interpret the object ensembles as “narratives,” we might choose to see Steinbach as the director, the shelves as the stage, and the objects as the actors. But the object ensembles are not really “plays.” There is no “narrative plot,” no “rising action.” The closest we are going to get to symbolic narrative is the paradigm of a staged tableau, in which case Steinbach is more like a stage director, or perhaps a prop master, or is he the wedding photographer, or perhaps the tableau placement orchestrator, or maybe the window dresser of a department store product display? If we must interpret the object ensembles as “narratives” at all, they enact a new kind of symbolic language developed by Steinbach in collaboration with the histories, forms, and materialities of the objects that “star” in his micro-tableaus. But if that is indeed the case, why awkwardly strain to retroactively shoehorn these object ensembles into the anthropocentric constraints of “symbolism” and “narrative” at all?
Despite the overall weaknesses of this symbolic narrative approach toward the shelf/object ensembles, the ensembles themselves are nevertheless able to seduce and draw out (human-supplied) symbolic interpretations. For example, to me, when I first saw 00:02, it seemed like all of the objects were in some sort of object rock band. The two black trash cans were like twin, male, death metal lead guitarists; and the four lava lamps on their raised silver background platform seemed like female, doo-wop backup singers. The title 00:02 seemed to allude to John Cage’s 4’33”. To me, the entire ensemble seemed like a conceptual speedmetal doo-wop John Cage cover band, except the band was so minimalist and monumental, they only made it two seconds into the performance before they froze. The only thing left moving was the slow undulation of the lava in the lamps, which was like the fluttering poodle skirts of the doo-wop backup singers. According to this symbolic narrative interpretation, I just happened to walk into the room at the four second mark of the performance, right after the band had frozen.

To add further fuel to the symbolic suitor fire, Steinbach says that the squawking stuffed pumpkin object that appears in several of his ensembles actually symbolizes the Belgian critic Thierry de Duve, who criticized Steinbach for betraying Duchamp.6 This proves that the symbolic narrative interpretation is correct!

Seriously, the symbolic narrative suitor is ill-matched to the object ensembles because it is too wed to the other media for which it was more purposefully developed (fictional literature, theater, and film). Applying it to Steinbach’s work proves an awkward fit.

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6 Haim Steinbach, interview with the author at Steinbach’s New York studio, April 21, 2017.
Steinbach’s work doesn’t betray Duchamp. If anything, it continues and complexifies what Duchamp was doing, and in so doing, exceeds it. Duchamp was interested in displaying everyday, manufactured objects in a museum setting to undermine the value placed on rare, esoteric, hand-crafted objects within the modern art world and the modern art market of the early Twentieth Century. The gallery was a key context for Duchamp’s historical move. In contrast, Steinbach’s investigation of the mechanisms of display doesn’t require the gallery; it also works in the home of a collector beyond the gallery building (if not beyond the art market). Steinbach’s practice is less institution-centric. Furthermore, Steinbach’s objects are much more diverse than Duchamp’s. Steinbach’s objects include Yoda heads, ancient pottery, rocks, rubber dog chew toys, Hulk hands, medicine balls, and eastern European salt shakers. Although most of Steinbach’s objects are man-made, not all of them are. Also, many of his objects dive headlong into proper-name pop culture in a way Duchamp’s objects refuse to. Duchamp dealt with coffee grinders and snow shovels, not C-3PO and Tony the Tiger.

There is of course a comparison to be made between Joseph Cornell’s object-filled boxes and Steinbach’s object-laden shelves, but the comparison proves superficial. Cornell is exploring a kind of personal object surrealism, combining wonderscabinetry with Magritte’s object synecdoche. Steinbach’s object combinations might initially seem interpretable through this lens, but the viewer winds up encountering object assemblages that refuse to assemble, even according to the alter-logic of surrealism. Perhaps Steinbach is akin to artists like Mark Dion and Fred Wilson who also use and arrange objects. But Wilson’s arrangements are made with an explicit interest in the social history of his objects, often in order to subvert
the implicit colonial perspective of museological curating. And Mark Dion’s arrangements are meant to evoke a cultural memory of Victorian exploration and early scientific experimentation. Steinbach is also interested in the cultural history of his objects, but this is not his primary interest.

All of the artists mentioned (and we could add Daniel Spoerri, Arman, the Fluxus box artists, and Ashley Bicker
ton) have engaged in the collection, arrangement, and display of objects they did not themselves “make.” But, so what? Each of these artists is pursuing very different topical and conceptual trajectories. A similarity in process and media alone is not enough to group Steinbach with the found object artists. No one would curate a group show of Vermeer, Klee, Rothko, and Bob Ross simply because they all used brushes to distribute paint on canvas. Once again, the object ensembles entice, yield, and pass through the trawling net of another theory suitor.

**Suitor #3: Minimalist Phenomenological Sculpture**

The shelf/object ensembles may be considered as minimalist phenomenological sculptures. From this theoretical perspective, Steinbach removes everything but the essentials in order to cause us to experience what the essentials are essentially doing. The work of minimalist sculptor Robert Irwin seems a particularly relevant point of comparison, since Irwin is intent on foregrounding spaces between objects rather than objects themselves. Or rather, Irwin uses ephemeral materials to create gaps that our bodies are meant to phenomenologically experience. Irwin’s sculptures are like dimensional versions of John Cage’s 4’33″. The sculptures are more about removal than addition. Regarding earlier experimental exercises that led Irwin to his process of removal, he recalls, “Maybe it didn’t need any of the details I added. What was really
essential was going on there anyway.”\footnote{Lawrence Weschler, Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 172.} Irwin biographer Lawrence Weschler adds, “The point of these exercises, it sometimes seemed, was to achieve the maximum transformation with the minimum alteration.”\footnote{Ibid.} The point of these exercises, it sometimes seemed, was to achieve the maximum transformation with the minimum alteration.

Steinbach’s process seems similar. Select an initial group of objects that seem to have an affinity with each other; add and remove objects, fine-tuning the relationships between the objects; rearrange the objects, moving them further apart and closer together; sit with the objects; walk away from them; think about the objects while absent from them; revisit the ensemble; continue rearranging, until... what? Until, according to Weschler’s dictum, the maximum transformation is achieved with the minimum alteration. But the maximum transformation of... what? In Irwin’s case, the maximum transformation of the space of the room. In Steinbach’s case, the maximum transformation from plain old objects on any old shelf into... what? Into maximally resonating objects on a shelf? Into maximally receding objects on a shelf? Into objects on a shelf with the maximal discrepancy between what they seem to be doing and what they are actually doing? It is hard to say exactly. On the process of addition via removal, Irwin invokes Wortz’s law: “Each new whole is less than the sum of its parts.”\footnote{Ibid., 181.} From a minimalist theoretical perspective, this law applies to Steinbach’s work as well.

Both Irwin and Steinbach are meticulously precise. The shadows that the trash cans and lava lamps cast in 00:02 are perfectly symmetrical and can’t help but be read as intentional. The minimalist sculptural approach to precision and detail is always present and palpable in Steinbach’s shelf/object ensembles. Also, in a home, no
one would put a trash can on a shelf at chest height; by doing this, 00:02 forces us to feel the scale and volume of that trash can in implicit proprioceptive relation to the volume of our own chests. Such a move is straight from Donald Judd’s playbook.

And of course, there are the shelves themselves, which are perfectly milled, seamlessly joined, and precisely finished. As with many of Steinbach’s shelves, the shelves of 00:02 are triangular when viewed from the side, and the raised triangular shelf eases into the base-level triangular shelf in a proportional relationship appreciative of fundamental geometric forms. If 00:02 were simply the shelves without the objects, it might still hold its own in the post-1980 sculpture room at the Stedelijk. Regarding Steinbach’s shelves, sculptor Lisa Lapinski proposes, “The shelf works are fractions: the things in the world divided by the minimalist object.”

And yet Steinbach and Robert Irwin are, in many ways, worlds apart. Whereas Irwin’s sculptures achieve their less-ness by receding yet remaining, Steinbach’s object ensembles achieve their lessness by exceeding yet remaining. Steinbach’s objects give everything away in plain sight. Instead of being subtle and shrouded, they are utterly denuded and presented. Irwin’s materials are shadow and light. Steinbach’s materials are shadow, light, and Yoda heads. Steinbach takes maximal, wacky, incongruous objects from contemporary pop capitalism and displays them with all the care, precision, attention, and concern of a Donald Judd cube. The results are strange and jarring. Steinbach’s presentations seem to monumentalize and Platonize his otherwise banal objects. Steinbach is not a minimalist sculptor per se, but he applies the tactics of minimalist sculpture to the contents of the Sears Catalog in order to display an array of mass-produced

objects as phenomenally profound. Is Steinbach *revealing* these objects as phenomenally profound (this would be the claim of minimalist phenomenological sculpture), or is he merely *staging* them to *seem* phenomenally profound? Or... is he throwing these objects into an aporetic toggling apparatus that perpetually flips them back and forth between profound object and banal object until we start to question what it is to “display” something in the first place? My money is on this last interpretation.

**Suitor #4: Pop Art**

Steinbach’s work incorporates objects from popular culture, but he treats them in decidedly non-pop art ways. Regarding his choice of objects, Steinbach says, “What’s most important is that all of these objects are in the world; they are part of our language. And they overlap.”¹¹ Steinbach selects objects from popular culture not because he wants to celebrate pop culture, or critique it, or use it to critique 1960s minimalism. He selects objects from popular culture because he is interested in the world and the ways in which humans are in the world. The creation, use, circulation, sale, and resale of objects is a primary way that contemporary humans are in the world. Given this broader interest in the mass production, consumption, and circulation of objects themselves, if Steinbach is a pop artist, he is a quite heady and conceptual one. One obvious difference between Steinbach and pop artists proper is that Steinbach uses actual objects from contemporary mass consumer culture rather than making copies of them. Andy Warhol makes his own Brillo Boxes. Such weak mimeticism is Warhol’s strong conceptual move. Steinbach doesn’t make his own Yoda heads. He just buys

them off of eBay. Incidentally, Pope.L’s *Black Factory* incorporates Yoda heads as well (albeit shrink wrapped to racist literature and sold from a mobile truck). But the mere use of Yoda heads does not make one a pop artist.

Even compared to apparently similar work like Jeff Koons’s stacked vacuum cleaners in plexiglass (which are actual vacuum cleaners), Steinbach’s ensembles are exploring different territory. I find Koons’s vacuum cleaner stacks beautiful and monumental (they are the only works of his I like), and that seems to be Koons’s objective with them – to reveal a mass-produced commodity item as aesthetically beautiful in a classical sculptural sense. Whereas Steinbach is not primarily interested in celebrating the hidden beauty of his objects by recontextualizing them in a museum setting. Instead, Steinbach is more interested in the implicit (human-inferred?, human-imbued?) resonances of the objects within the ensemble, and the potential conceptual connections that suddenly materialize in the space around the objects when they are removed from their commodity contexts and given some breathing room. Also, some of Steinbach’s shelf objects (like rocks, and even our two black trash cans) don’t really come from “pop” culture. They just come from the world.

**Suitor #5: Marxism**

Marxism (of the art criticism variety) arrives hard on the heels of the pop art suitor to scold the object ensembles for not shunning pop art altogether. Apparently, even a weekend fling with pop art is enough to label you Mrs. Pop Art in the eyes of the Marxist suitor. The object ensembles should have publicly declared their intentions toward Pop Art early on. If they were not serious about Pop Art, they should have properly distanced themselves from him via irony. They should have at least made some overt protestations (if not in the work itself, then at least
in an accompanying artist statement)! Otherwise, Steinbach’s work risks complicity endorsing and celebrating its objects (which are obviously from contemporary popular culture); and by proxy, endorsing and celebrating the capitalist system that produces these popular commodities. Shame on you, object ensembles, for allowing yourselves to be seduced by the lascivious charlatan of Pop Art!

This Marxist critique might be valid if the object ensembles weren’t also simultaneously giving themselves over to every legitimate suitor who passes through the door. And, of course, the object ensembles give themselves over to the Marxist suitor as well. But it is at best an awkward blind date (with your ex-boyfriend’s activist uncle). The Marxist suitor does all the talking without taking the time to really get to know the object ensembles. What’s a nice apophatic art apparatus to do?

Regarding Steinbach’s approach to his objects, Germano Celant explains, “[His] orientation is inclusive in nature and incorporates in the work the greatest quantity of things and information, of corporeal and mass-media traces, with an open and unbiased attitude.”12 This openness to capitalist culture disturbs the Marxist suitor, but it is precisely this same broad openness that lures multiple and even competing theoretical interpretations into Steinbach’s work.

Furthermore, and as mentioned above in regards to their relationship with pop art, the object ensembles don’t always incorporate mass-produced contemporary objects. A wonderful example of this is a piece called Untitled (jugs and mugs), Number 1 from the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s permanent collection. The piece consists of two shelves, one above the other, whose materials are listed as “Laminated plywood, ceramic mugs, and ancient

pottery.” The top shelf supports four ancient, handmade, earthenware vessels. The bottom shelf supports three contemporary, mass-produced ceramic mugs, one of which displays Milton Glaser’s “I heart NY” logo. Yes, the ceramic mugs are products of contemporary popular culture, but like the earthenware jugs, they are also vessels for gathering (to reference late-era Heidegger). jugs and mugs consists of seven ceramic vessels created by humans to hold liquids. The earthenware jugs are antique archaeological objects, quite pre-capitalism. The point of this and other object ensembles, then, is to engage with all of human culture, throughout history, via the display of objects. An engagement with “capitalism” is necessarily part of that overall project, but not an exclusive part of it.

Furthermore, the object ensembles are not above celebrating certain aspects of capitalism. Steinbach tells of growing up, going to the dry goods store, knowing what you wanted, but having to ask the clerk to retrieve it for you, because all of the objects were behind the counter. He describes his first visit to a supermarket as a positive experience: “There was the supermarket, which was supposed to be the modernism that you were against, but I liked it. You could walk down the aisles, and there were all the things on the shelves in front of you.”13 There is something inarguably wondrous about having row upon row of objects displayed on shelves within one’s grasp.

Of course, Steinbach’s object ensembles put the objects back behind the counter, so to speak; but not exactly. There is something important about the fact that the objects are not affixed to the shelves. It mattered to the boy who stole the shoes off the shelves at the gallery opening. And it matters to the collectors who display the object ensembles in their own homes. Each collector has the very real option of putting her own objects on

13 Haim Steinbach, interview with the author at Steinbach’s New York studio, April 21, 2017.
the shelves, creating a collaborative work with the artist. The Marxist suitor complains that the work fetishizes the objects by separating them from their use value. But Steinbach points out that, once collected, the digital clocks and boom boxes in the ensembles may be left on in one’s home, providing the use value of music and the current local time. And although a docent at the Stedelijk would have surely objected, there was nothing physically prohibiting me from using the trash cans in 00:02 as trash cans.

**Suitor #6: Formalism**

Although Steinbach is not primarily interested in the aesthetic beauty of his objects from a classical, beaux arts perspective; he is interested in their formal aesthetic qualities (shape, color, volume, materiality, opacity, reflectivity, scale, balance, symmetry/asymmetry, mobility/stability, serial progression) from a modernist or formalist perspective. His objects appear beautiful not because they are inherently beautiful, but primarily because of the way in which he arranges and displays them. Koons couldn’t lose with his stack of vacuum cleaners. They were already beautiful on the Sears showroom floor. But Steinbach has his formal aesthetic work cut out for him with a box of Fruit Loops cereal. Steinbach’s eye for formalist aesthetics transforms his objects into something much more beautiful than they were on the grocery store shelf. This transformation is part of what it is to “display” something.

The shelf arrangements all have formal properties. The shelves themselves are triangular volumes. The objects on the shelves are always formally related to one another. They exist in volumetric ratios with one another. Stein-
bach says, “I am dealing with the same angles at different scales and proportions. Then I am amplifying them by extending them horizontally. And I am playing with color throughout.” This attention to formal aesthetic principles comes through implicitly and explicitly in the work. The object ensembles are always well-proportioned and beautiful.

Still, these formal aesthetic qualities are a means rather than an end. They display (help us recognize?) the objects as having not just popular connotative qualities, but also formal aesthetic qualities. Steinbach’s formalism and minimalism concurrently make the objects seem profound. Simultaneously, the ordinary historical usage of the objects (the trash cans and lava lamps of oo:02, for instance) often make the objects seem banal. This toggling back and forth between banal and profound is one of oo:02’s major apophatic tactics. Steinbach’s shelf/object ensembles court, use, and employ formalism to help achieve their desired apophatic effects; but they are wise enough not to begin and end with formalism alone.

**Suitor #7: Psychology**

As far as a psychological explanation of the poetic ways in which humans relate to objects – mnemonically, empathetically, and affectionately – I trust and enjoy Peter Schwenger’s excellent *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*. Via nostalgia and sentimentality, objects act for humans as unwitting mnemonic horcruxes (my analogy, not Schwenger’s), storing parts of our memories inside themselves for our later involuntary retrieval. I also find Schwenger’s own interpretation of Steinbach’s work sensitive and convincing from a psychological perspective.

15 Ibid.
But no one tops Proust in evocatively describing the psychological, subjective relationships that humans develop with the objects of their own personal histories. Here is a selection of relevant excerpts from *À la recherche du temps perdu*:

Love, and suffering which is one with love, have, like intoxication, the power to alter for us inanimate things.\(^\text{16}\)

Only imagination and belief can differentiate from the rest certain objects, certain people, and can create an atmosphere.\(^\text{17}\)

With the sandwiches of cheese or of green-stuff, a form of food that was novel to me and knew nothing of the past, I had nothing in common. But the cakes understood, the tarts were gossips.\(^\text{18}\)

We exist only by virtue of what we possess, we possess only what is really present to us [...]. A simple crescent of bread, but one which we are eating, gives us more pleasure than all the ortolans, young rabbits and barbavelles that were set before Louis XV.\(^\text{19}\)


\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., 27.


All impression is two-fold, half-sheathed in the object, prolonged in ourselves by another half which we alone can know.  

Wonderful as Proust is, Steinbach is not fully convinced. Regarding Proust’s conception of objects, Steinbach observes, “We put our life into objects, and we leave, and others come in and find us in the objects, or so we believe when we meet objects. But we are fooling ourselves.”

My own problem with the psychological explanation of Steinbach’s work is that it presumes a hard and fast subject–object divide. It would be very uncomfortable with Whitehead’s dissolution of the subject–object divide via his concept of the superject – the idea that during the concrescences of actual occasions, “human” entities and “non-human” entities are both subject and object simultaneously. Regarding Steinbach’s object ensembles, if I had to place a wager on which of these two entities (human or non-human) was doing most of the prehending (in other words, which one was acting most “subject-like”), my bet would definitely be on the human. (And I say this not just because I am a human!) This is why I’m not terribly bothered by the psychological account of Steinbach’s work, an account which posits humans as the main agents in these encounters between humans and shelf/object ensembles. But again, there is more going on in these apparatal intra-actions than human subjectivity merely psychologically imputing characteristics into otherwise passively inert object receptacles.

21 Haim Steinbach, interview with the author at Steinbach’s New York studio, April 21, 2017.
I put Whitehead’s own process philosophy explanation at #8 because I don’t want to give it the last word (since my argument is that no suitor gets the last word); but also because, in the case of the shelf/object ensembles, I don’t intuitively and affectively feel that process philosophy is the most convincing explanation of what is happening. The trash cans and lava lamps of 00:02 sure seem solid enough. Viewing them, I sure seem like a discrete human subject. It doesn’t seem like the objects and I are involved in an ongoing series of occasions whereby we are prehending each other. 00:02 is not displayed to draw my attention to present-tense time and immediate process. On the contrary, my attention is drawn away from the idea of an ongoing series of events, and toward the quite hermetically sealed, removed, pristine, idealized, static, Platonic presentation of the objects.

But, of course, this is simply how the encounter seems to me. Henri Bergson explains what might actually be happening:

Does not the fiction of an isolated material object imply a kind of absurdity, since this object borrows its physical properties from the relations which it maintains with all others, and owes each of its determinations, and, consequently, its very existence, to the place which it occupies in the universe as a whole?²²

According to Bergson, my very act of reckoning the objects as separate from me, is itself a kind of intra-action with the objects: “Perception, in its pure state, is, then, in very truth, a part of things.”²³


²³ Ibid., 64.
tively scratching my chin, and trying to think detachedly about the nature of subject and object, I only seem to increase the subject–object divide. When in reality, according to Karen Barad’s reading of Niels Bohr, “We are a part of that nature that we seek to understand.”

As one would expect, Whitehead has more to add on the matter of our own detached perception of objects:

Reaction to environment is not in proportion to clarity of sensory experience […]. The specialist in clarity sinks to an animal level – the hound for smell, the eagle for sight. Human beings are amateurs in sense experience. The direct, vivid clarity does not dominate so as to obscure the infinite variety involved in the composition of reality.

Perhaps there is another, less abstractly generalized, more viscerally specialized way of encountering these object ensembles? Whitehead suggests there is: “The subject-object relation can be conceived as Recipient and Provoker, where the fact provoked is an affective tone about the status of the provoker in the provoked experience.”

Applying this model to my own situation at the Stedelijk, 00:02 provokes an affective tone about its status which I receive in our shared occasional experience. I am no longer a removed subject over here, perceiving 00:02 as a separate object over there, and then detachedly contemplating the object I am perceiving.

In truth, whether or not I ever achieve the mental state of “becoming object,” I am always already entangled with the objects of 00:02. Whitehead explains: “Every indi-

vidual thing infects any process in which it is involved, and thus any process cannot be considered in abstraction from particular things involved. Also the converse holds.”27 Furthermore, “The group of agitations which we term matter is fused into its environment. There is no possibility of a detached, self-contained local existence. The environment enters into the nature of each thing.”28 I don’t have to consciously attend to this moment by moment process of concrescence in order to make it happen. It is always already happening.

It is important to understand that the actual occasions in which 00:02 participates, although intended by Steinbach to include a human audience, are by no means contingent upon human participation in those occasions. Much of what 00:02 contributes to its occasions is negatively prehended (or minimally prehended) by entities other than humans (i.e., the rest of the objects in the sculpture room), but 00:02 presents its contributions nonetheless. Affect is actual, and not solely human-psychological. Humans don’t manufacture affect in their psychological, “subjective” minds.

Does this mean that all of the objects in the sculpture room of the Stedelijk are picking up on all the affect the other objects are exuding? No. Does it mean there is an excessive surplus of noun-ish affect stored within the hidden molten core of each object? No. It means that affect is produced and contributed when apparatal entanglements occur (i.e., when actual occasions occur), and they are occurring all the time. As Karen Barad asserts, “Reality is composed not of things in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but of things-in-phenomena.”29 Are these actual occasions contingent upon human presence? No.

27 Whitehead, Modes of Thought, 97–98.
28 Ibid., 138.
29 Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway, 140.
With that said, something is happening between me and 00:02 well beyond me looking at it and thinking about it, and well beyond it displaying itself to me. Are the (actual occasions that comprise the enduring) objects of 00:02 prehending me in the same way and to the same degree that (the actual occasions that comprise the enduring object called) I am prehending them? No. As I continue to argue, the trash cans and the lava lamps are mostly negatively prehending me. Were they mostly negatively prehending Steinbach when he was arranging and re-arranging them in his studio? No. They were more actively attending to those arrangement intra-actions. Were the trash cans negatively prehending the metal extrusion machine at the factory which molded them into shape? Again, no. Those formational, transformative actual occasions “meant” more to the enduring object that was to become known as “trash can” than the subsequent actual occasions of me standing in the Stedelijk gazing upon it. By “meant more,” do I mean anything like what the word “mean” means to a human? No. According to my understanding of Whitehead, all objects “experience” (in their own thingy ways), but only human objects experience in humany ways.

Thus, according to process philosophy, all of the entities in the Stedelijk sculpture room (myself included) are prehending and prehended by each other moment by moment as usual, all in our own well-decided and decohered, macrocosmically scaled, thingy or humany ways. But the most remarkable intra-active encounters in the sculpture room are occurring not amongst the shelf objects themselves, nor amongst the other artworks in the room, but amongst the artworks and the enduring objects in the room known as humans. This is because all the artworks in the room are apparatuses specifically designed by humans to intra-act with humans; and also, because humans are, in truth, quite remarkable and pe-
culiar enduring objects. (And I say this not just because I am a human!)

00:02 allows this process philosophy interpretation, but doesn’t exactly foreground it. Our process philosophy suitor is invited to the theory party, but 00:02 doesn’t go out of her way to dance with him. Which suits process philosophy just fine, because (according to process philosophy) he and 00:02 were always already dancing any-way.

The Suitor Du Jour: Object-Oriented Ontology

Object-oriented ontology is the theoretical dandy currently courting Steinbach’s object ensembles; and indeed, courting contemporary art in general. The genealogy of its popularity may be traced back to a conference in 2007 at Goldsmiths College in London called Speculative Realism where four philosophers spoke (Ray Brassier, Ian Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillasoux). Subsequently, these philosophers discovered that they didn’t really have all that much in common, but the conference spawned academic discussion and helped popularize the philosophy of Graham Harman known as object-oriented philosophy. This philosophy in turn spawned its own broader flavor of thought known as object-oriented ontology (whose main propagators are Harman, Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, and Timothy Morton).

A decade from now, the amount of time that I devote to object-oriented ontology (hereafter OOO) and object-oriented philosophy (hereafter OOP) will likely seem scatological, dated, and all very two-thousand-teenish. But here we are. I will focus most of my attention on Harman’s OOP. It is the progenitor of broader approaches to OOO; it makes the most daring claims of positions within OOO; and it is the position within OOO that proves the most
fruitful foil to Whitehead’s process philosophy. Rather than begin with OOP’s goals, motivations, and challenges, I will skip to the end and explain the cosmology it wound up proposing. This explication is based on Harman’s first two books (*Tool-Being* and *Guerilla Metaphysics*), and his 2011 book *The Quadruple Object*.

**What Does OOP Claim?**

OOP proposes that all real objects are withdrawn and cannot be directly accessed by other objects. (Humans are objects too.) Real objects store a reserve of excess potential within themselves that can never be exhausted by other objects or the world. Real objects are divided from their own real qualities. Real objects are also divided from sensual objects, which are themselves divided from their own sensual qualities. When we feel we are coming into contact with real objects, we are in fact only contacting sensual objects. These four parts (real objects, real qualities, sensual objects, and sensual qualities) make up the world. These four parts are able to influence each other, but only obliquely and via indirect causation. The particular way in which this indirect causation occurs is aesthetic, a kind of poetic encounter made possible via (something akin to) metaphor and (something akin to) humor. Indirect causation is not a metaphorical encounter (per se), but an actual encounter that takes place via something like metaphor, where one object encounters another object obliquely, and the first object is changed via that indirect encounter. I encounter (the sensual instantiation of) a cypress tree, it seems like the ghost of a dead flame, and I am changed. I’ll never look at a cypress tree the same way again. It becomes a different entity for me. How this aesthetic encounter changes the (real instantiation of the) cypress tree itself, and what the exact mechanisms of that change are, remain unclear and speculative in OOP’s explanatory cosmology. Presum-
ably, the real cypress tree has similar (but less human, more thingy) metaphor-ish encounters with (the sensual instantiations of) other objects, and it too is (really) changed.

These poetic, metaphor-driven change encounters are the weak link in the OOP cosmology for me. Whereas Whitehead provides a detailed account of the concrescence and emergent self-becoming of actual occasions (one that has the benefit of correlating with the way in which quantum-behavior-measuring apparatuses happen to work), OOP provides oblique descriptions of oblique encounters. Whitehead understands the world primarily in terms of processes (verbs). OOP understands the world almost exclusively in terms of hermetically sealed objects (nouns). Karen Barad’s quantum-based cosmology (akin to Whitehead’s) understands the world primarily in terms of relationships (prepositions, although she would say “intra-actions”). To Barad, relations precede relata. In other words, the contextual relations that objects have with one another constitute the very object-ness of those objects. To OOP, relata precede relations, so much so that one can hardly even call them relata, and one has difficulty concretely explaining what relationships even are.

Why Invent OOP?

Why even propose such a speculative cosmology of hermetically sealed objects? What does it solve? And by what means could one ever verify that it was actually so? OOP sets out to solve a human-philosophical problem. Here is an uber-brief summary of the problem: Kant asserted that humans couldn’t directly access objects. (This assertion came to be known as “correlationism.”) Kant’s argument was pretty convincing, and it bothered lots of people. How to respond to his assertion?

Perhaps humans can access objects and Kant was wrong. But then, how to prove it? (Husserl tried, failed,
limited his attempt and tried again, and still pretty much failed. Heidegger further limited his attempt, got pretty close, and also failed.) Perhaps Kant’s problem was merely a problem of false premises, in that he wrongly assumed a divide between humans and objects that is really not there. But again, how to prove this? (For my money, Whitehead’s process philosophy comes pretty close.) Perhaps Kant had an unduly philosophical understanding of what “access” is. Perhaps we do have a *kind* of direct access to objects; it’s just that this access doesn’t reduce to philosophy. If that is the case, we’ll never be able to prove the existence of this kind of direct access *philosophically*, but we could still prove it (or at least experience it) scientifically, affectively, aesthetically, mathematically, or via any number of other means. Or perhaps we are more stuck than even Kant realized, and the human language which constrains our philosophical access to the world also permeates and thus constrains all the other (scientific, affective, aesthetic, mathematic) ways we have of accessing the world. This is Derrida’s position. To me, Derrida’s position is more or less unassailable *within the historical game of philosophy*, because you always have to use philosophical language to dethrone his position, which then opens you up to Derrida’s ingenious critiques of philosophical language.

Which brings us to *OOP*. Derrida’s reign in contemporary philosophy was becoming boring to those within the historical game of philosophy, so Harman made a move (within the game) to change the game. Perhaps (and here is Harman’s move) the problem is not that humans lack direct access to objects via philosophy, but that all objects lack direct access to all other objects via any direct means of encounter whatsoever. The problem is not with humans. The problem is with the world. Although this “solution” seems more like a resignation or an abdication, it appeals to (some) people for several reasons: it purports to make humans nothing special and to start
taking objects more seriously; it absolves humans of having to overcome a centuries-old philosophical problem; it makes aesthetics important again (but in a weird way); and it is something new in continental philosophy besides deconstruction. Ironically, however, rather than decentering humans and overcoming correlationism, OOP winds up making the world more anthropocentric than ever before.

Despite OOP’s opposition to Derrida and the “semiotic turn” that followed him, OOP takes Derrida’s suspicion of knowability two steps further. To Derrida, we can only indirectly access the world beyond us via language, and pretty much all of our human forms of access are entangled with language. To OOP, not only are we barred from directly accessing the world beyond us by any means at all, but all the other real objects in the world are in this same hermetically sealed state. One of the motivating factors of OOP’s theory of universally withdrawn real objects is to be un-anthropocentric. We humans are ourselves just objects amongst other objects, all equally barred from direct access to each other. But in fact, this theory of universally withdrawn real objects is the ultimate act of anthropocentric hubris, because it theoretically extends our own human-thinking, solipsistic, philosophical psychosis (the correlationist suspicion that we can’t directly access the world) to the rest of the world. Our human-specific desire to overcome the (human-invented) human-specific condition of correlationism motivates Harman to theoretically imbue all other objects in the world with our same human-specific condition. Correlationism is overcome(?) via its universal distribution. Objects, you’re welcome. Sincerely, your fellow objects, thinking humans. It is a bit like patting yourself on the back for sharing your virus with everyone else at the office party.

From the perspective of a (fairly orthodox) Whitehead adherent like myself, correlationism is a human-invented
problem existing within the historical game of philosophy. It need only be “overcome” by those humans wanting to make the next historical move within the game of philosophy, but it doesn’t need to be overcome in the actual world. Rocks don’t existentially struggle with their lack of direct access to other rocks.

Even within the game of philosophy, OOP gives rise to more problems than it solves. If we have no direct access to real objects in the world, then how is Harman able to access the rest of the real objects in the world in order to discover and verify that none of them have direct access to each other either? By speculative, indirect, oblique causal contact with their sensual object counterparts, of course. But labeling one’s philosophy “speculative” doesn’t excuse it from being tautological. OOP is like picking up your phone, discovering that the line is dead, and poetically inferring that everyone else’s phone line is dead as well. How are you able to connect with everyone else and verify this fact? Via the indirect access you have to them through your own dead phone line. Yikes.

What’s the Problem with OOP’s Aesthetics?

Any cosmology that posits aesthetics as a fundamental universal force is bound to be received as validating and exciting by artists, curators, and art critics. The problem with OOP’s aesthetics is that they are redundant and regressive. Whitehead’s cosmology already includes a quite nuanced explanation of what might be called object aesthetics. Deleuze and Guattari have also developed a sophisticated aesthetics of ethology, geology, and the entire immanent universe. In comparison, Harman’s model of object aesthetics is vague, blunt, and late to the game. Worst of all, it fails to connect explanatorily with the actual world of objects.

To take just one example, OOP uses the term “allure” to describe the oblique connection between real objects and
sensual qualities. But Whitehead also uses the term “allure” to describe the prehending affinities which actual entities have toward one another, and Deleuze and Guattari incorporate into their philosophy an explanation of natural selection via aesthetic attraction (“a lure”).

Whitehead and Deleuze have been accused of the same kind of anthropomorphism of which I am accusing Harman, so what is the difference between Deleuze and Guattari’s “lure,” Whitehead’s “allure,” and Harman’s “allure”? Whitehead begins with his understanding of mathematics and quantum physics, and uses human language to describe quantum behavior as rigorously as possible. Whitehead’s writing includes poetic, “extra-scientific” language to describe novel (to humans, at the time) but natural quantum behaviors, behaviors that the “objective” Newtonian scientific language of the time lacked the vocabulary to articulate. Whitehead doesn’t claim that human affective allure is the direct result of our being fundamentally made up of photons. It is simply that both photons and humans exist in a world functionally driven by allure. Whitehead isn’t anthropomorphically imposing human behavior onto electrons. Indeed, it could be argued that prior Newtonian physics was a kind of anthropomorphic imposition of the observed behavior of well-decided, decohered macrocosmic entities (like rocks) onto less decided, pre-cohered microscopic entities (like photons). It was only via Whitehead’s “listening” to quantum-behavior-measuring apparatuses and what they had to say, that some of our prior scientific and philosophical anthropomorphisms began to be undone.

Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari don’t project human aesthetics onto the animal kingdom as much as they recognize a kind of behavior in the animal kingdom that functions in the same way as human aesthetics. Female birds are lured into mating by the appearance and behavior of male birds. In the case of bower birds, this behavior involves a kind of performative treatment of objects
and materials that exploits aesthetic attraction. Similar to Whitehead’s position, Deleuze and Guattari aren’t simply saying that humans appreciate aesthetics because we evolved from animals, who themselves fundamentally evolved via aesthetic appreciation. Instead, Deleuze and Guattari are saying that humans and animals both exist in a world functionally driven by aesthetic allure.

In Deleuze and Guattari’s own words:

We can then say that the musician bird goes from sadness to joy or that it greets the rising sun or endangers itself in order to sing or sings better than another, etc. None of these formulations carries the slightest risk of anthropomorphism, or implies the slightest interpretation. It is instead a kind of geomorphism. The relation to joy and sadness, the sun, danger, perfection, is given in the motif and counterpoint, even if the term of each of these relations is not given. In the motif and the counterpoint, the sun, joy or sadness, danger, become sonorous, rhythmic, or melodic.\(^{30}\)

When “we” come to attend to our own flow and entanglement with “the rest of the world,” this entanglement is not anthropomorphic simply because we begin attending to it. Indeed, this entanglement, flow, or pulse predates humans and even geological strata. It is baked into the behavior of the cosmos.

My critique of Harman’s “allure” is that it is arrived at deductively rather than inductively. Indeed, according to OOP, the concept of allure could never be arrived at inductively, since we have no direct access to real objects, but only speculative, oblique, or indirect access to them. Harman develops his concept of allure by beginning with an

analysis of the way in which metaphor and humor work in human language systems, and then speculatively imposes this type of behavior onto the world. Whereas Whitehead and Deleuze and Guattari each begin their understanding of allure with the (largely) human-indifferent world (Whitehead with slit-selecting electrons and Deleuze and Guattari with mating birds), Harman begins his understanding of allure with the way that metaphors and humor within human language systems represent the world. This seems a backwards place to begin for someone intent on overcoming anthropocentrism. Harman linguistically speculates the existence of a world wherein the only means of real change (aesthetic allure) functions according to speculative linguistic slippage. It all seems a bit too tidily self-confirming and tautological.

OOP achieves its self-referential, hermetically sealed, unassailable neatness at the cost of failing to access the complex, ongoing becomings of the actual world. Granted, pure evolutionary ethology and pure quantum physics fail to wholly access the ongoing becomings of the actual world, but at least they more courteously attend to the things themselves (although OOP would say that they are only attending to mere sensual things). Whitehead’s incorporation of physics into his cosmology and Deleuze and Guattari’s inclusion of evolutionary ethology into their cosmology doesn’t guarantee them direct access to the actual world, but it gets them deeper into actual objects than Harman gets.

Why Does the Contemporary Art World Love OOP (and OOO)?

Why then have OOP and (its less daring spawn) OOO been so embrace in contemporary art circles? I don’t believe

31 Graham Harman, Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), ch. 8–9.
32 Ibid., ch. 10–11.
Object Oriented Ontology has been embraced for its epistemological rigor, or for its ability to most satisfactorily explain the actual functioning of the actual world. On the contrary, I believe it has been embraced precisely because it is a daring and beautiful (if slightly harrowing) speculative fiction that engages with the relevant contemporary topic of overcoming anthropocentrism. OOO serves as a speculative provocation for launching subsequent speculative art-curatorial provocations. And (dare I say it), OOO also serves as a kind of self-justification for the less socially relevant, hermetically sealed, white cubed, contemporary art scene. “All we have here in our gallery are objects (you see), only obliquely and indirectly connecting to the world outside these walls. But don’t blame us; blame the world. Direct connections between objects are simply not possible.” The hermetically sealed, intellectually contemplatable, idealized aesthetic art object and OOO are a match made in Plato’s heaven of pure forms. As a point of radical contrast, consider how utterly out of place Pope.L’s object-pulverizing, world-connecting, community-modulating Black Factory would be in a white cube gallery show about Object Oriented Ontology.

Why Does OOO love 00:02?

Writing about Proust (and his iconic madeleines), Samuel Beckett observes, “When the object is perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family, when it appears independent of any general notion and detached from the sanity of a cause, isolated and inexplicable in the light of ignorance, then and then only may it be a source of enchantment.”33 Steinbach’s object ensembles meet Beckett’s requirements, and thereby enchant OOO – hook, line, and sinker.

And of course, the shelf ensembles welcome their latest suitor unreservedly (but never ultimately or even exclusively). oo:02 takes objects out of their usual networks and leaves them suspended (via minimalism, formalism, and the gallery’s inherent hermeticism) in a strange kind of Platonic netherspace. All of their former connections have been temporarily severed. All of the ways in which they were plugged in and refracting with the world have been disconnected, unplugged. And those empty sockets remain open to new, imaginative, speculative connections. OOO imagines these sockets are open to connections with a litany of other objects (all in the sensual realm, of course). But actually, in their gallery setting, these non-human shelf objects aren’t connecting with other non-human objects that much. Instead, these open sockets act as lures to draw out and connect with human theories.

Object-oriented ontologists imagine these empty object sockets being filled by a million sensual object plugs obliquely reaching out and plugging in via allure. In actuality, these empty sockets are being filled by the human-invented theories of object-oriented ontologists (and a host of other human-invented theories). Steinbach’s ensembles lure and trap human cosmological theories via the same mechanism that clothing store window displays lure and trap customers. The clothes on the mannequins exist in an isolated and ideal Platonic world (the world of pure “display”). They don’t really belong to the mannequins. Instead, the clothes are open to an infinite possibility of owners, and thus I am lured into imaging that the clothes could (one day) belong to me. OOO imagines that oo:02 suits its explanatory theories. OOO can see itself in oo:02.

In truth, the trash cans and lava lamps of oo:02 aren’t really connecting all that much with other objects in the Stedelijk sculpture room. Most of the non-human, non-oo:02 objects in the room are mostly not intra-acting
with the trash cans and lava lamps (and vice versa). A good work of art is able to hold its own in a group show without getting conceptually hijacked by the other work in the show. Holding one’s own is particularly challenging in a group show based around the very loose theme of “sculpture made in the 1980s.” Many art apparatuses, with many different conceptual functions, are all pulling in different directions. The weak apparatuses risk getting hijacked and munged up by the strong ones. In the Stedelijk room, 00:02 holds its own amongst the other apparatuses (although the minimalist in me thinks that Steinbach’s shelves are flirting with the Donald Judd chairs). By “holding one’s own,” I don’t mean to imply that the art apparatuses actively resist each other all night long in the room while no humans are present. I simply mean that each of the art apparatuses in the Stedelijk sculpture room are designed to intra-act with humans in one unique way or another. “Holding one’s own” as an art apparatus means continuing to fulfill your intended function of intra-acting with humans (in whatever your intended way) without that function being modulated by another nearby apparatus’ intended function of intra-acting with humans.

00:02 is there to intra-act with humans, and it does. Passersby just making the rounds through the Stedelijk collection, checking off the artwork one by one, frequently stop and stare at 00:02. It is too elegant to be a mere anti-art joke, but too pop-object-ish to be minimalist sculpture. Even for the casual viewer, aporia is (however temporarily) invoked. And of course, the theorizing art patrons (like myself) get good and mired in 00:02’s yielding, theory-invoking, theory-provoking quicksand facade.

It is important to note that the art of Steinbach’s trap does not reside in his objects alone; his apparatal trap is set and sprung by a deftly orchestrated interplay between his minimalist shelves, his formalist arrangements, the gallery setting, and Steinbach’s own intuitive feel for ob-
ject display. As a point of comparison, consider this image of my middle daughter staring at some of Steinbach’s pre-ensemble objects, stored on shelves in his studio, all (patiently?) awaiting inclusion into future object ensembles (See Fig. 2).

I spent a good while surrounded by these shelves of objects in Steinbach’s studio. Although the objects were odd and evocative, and many of their incidental arrangements evoked me to make mental connections between the objects, this room full of objects did not cause me to experience anything like what the trash cans and lava lamps of 00:02 caused me to experience in the Stedelijk. According to 000, the studio room should have been teeming with sensual allure between the objects themselves, and between the objects and me (as one more object in the room). But the room was not teeming with such allure. Or at least it didn’t seem to me as if it was.
Maybe the sensual objects were connecting with each other, and I just wasn’t in on their allusive chatter! Maybe I’m just an object dolt who lacks the nuanced subtlety of an attuned object-whisperer. Of course, who could “really” know? But about that which one cannot justify, one can always speculatively assert.

In Steinbach’s studio on the day that I visited, I was even able to see a few objects in the transitional state between the storage shelves and the gallery shelves. On the floor of the studio were a selected group of objects that Steinbach was in the process of arranging and re-arranging. There was not yet any shelving (the shelves are custom-built and out-sourced, so that is the last step); but even just sitting on the floor without their minimalist shelves, not yet in their final ensemble arrangements, this proto-ensemble in proto-arrangement mode already seemed to me much more resonant and full of implicit meaning than the objects on the storage shelves. The fewer the objects, the more removed from their ordinary contexts, the more purposefully displayed by Steinbach to ensnare me, the more the apophatic art apparatus was beginning to work its mojo.

As an even more refined point of comparison (an even more rigorously controlled case study), that large Creature from the Black Lagoon object on the studio storage shelves was also famously featured in Steinbach’s 2011 solo show (Creature) at the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in Chelsea. In that show, the Creature object alone occupied a single, room-length shelf in a large upstairs room of the gallery (see Fig. 3). On Steinbach’s studio shelves, the Creature object looked comic, goofy, and awkward. In the Creature show, the Creature object looked commanding, epic, and revelatory. It stole the show, so to speak.

It was the same object in both spaces, so what was the difference? Of course, the context made all the difference. In the gallery, I was rigorously and meticulously lured into an apophatic apparatus designed to elicit spec-
ulation from me. In the studio, I incidentally observed a studio apparatus (a series of shelving units) designed to store objects. Whitehead’s cosmology of concrescence and Barad’s theory of apparatuses both readily explain this difference. ooo has to perform all sort of schematic gymnastics to explain this difference.

But (and here is the particular trap that Steinbach’s work sets for ooo), in the gallery alone, without a point of extra-gallery comparison, properly seduced theorists may imbue all sorts of qualities and withdrawn essences into these helplessly receptive shelf objects. Then those same objects, once imbued with this new (human-theoretical) essence, may be used as object oriented poster children (poster objects?) – proof positive that all objects in the universe behave like Steinbach’s shelf objects. ooo would contend that Steinbach’s work gives us oblique insight (albeit not direct access) into the essence of objects, an

Fig. 3: *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* figure standing on a big shelf in the upstairs room of the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in 2011. Drawing by Jordan Cloninger.
essence that was there all along. Process philosophy (as I’m employing it) would contend that Steinbach’s work creates an event which entices humans to have undeniably resonant, poetic feelings of allure toward an ensemble of objects; feelings to which the objects themselves, alas, are almost utterly indifferent. OOO would say that the Creature object in the gallery is the same as the Creature object in the studio, and the gallery just helps humans realize more of what it already is. Whitehead would say that the Creature object in the gallery and the Creature object in the studio are not the same object. They are both enduring objects made up of an ongoing series of related actual occasions, changing from occasion to occasion as they prehend (or negatively prehend) the rest of the world. But the actual occasions in the gallery are not at all the same as the actual occasions in the studio.

OOO entices OOO with its (Apparently) Flat Ontology

Flat ontology is the broad idea that all objects are objects in their objectness, and that there is no real hierarchy of objectness. Flat ontology is not unique to OOO. A form of flat ontology is (arguably) found in actor–network theory, the sociological model of Bruno Latour. Actor–network theory (hereafter ANT) is designed to help humans think properly about objects in situ in the world. According to ANT, objects are indeed connected, with each other and with humans, at microcosmic and macrocosmic scales, and we humans should better attend to these objecty connections, this democracy of objects (of which we ourselves are just one part). For Actor Network Theory, objects have meaning in relation to other objects, as nodes in a broader and reconfigurable network. The network is flatter and not as hierarchical as we humans had originally supposed. Latour’s flat ontology has led to a literary trope amongst OOO writers called the “Latour litany,” where incongruous objects (incongruous from
the perspective of humans, one supposes) are listed one after the other, indifferent to any hierarchy (indeed, they are implicitly required to not seem hierarchical). These litanies are meant to indicate (by force of repetition and alliteration) that objects are objects are objects, regardless of scale, material, complexity, animality, etc.

But once objects in situ have been removed from their networks and placed with their open and empty sockets in a gallery on Steinbach’s shelves, ANT has less to say about the nature of these curious, pragmatically disentangled objects. This is because Steinbach’s objects are not actively connected to the world in their ordinary use capacities (the lava lamps are not enticing hippies to have trippy trips; the trash cans are not receiving trash). And ANT is a tool for dealing with objects actively situated in networks.

To put it another way, Steinbach seems to have thrown the brakes on the intra-active becomings that create time. With time seemingly frozen, objects begin to feel much less verb-y and much more noun-y. And noun-y objects are OOO’s raison d’être. At this point, OOO is enticed to rush in and fill in the metaphysical gaps about which ANT would otherwise hesitate to speculate. Because of their superficially apparent incongruity, Steinbach’s shelf objects initially seem to be ideal illustrations of the flat ontology that Latour litanies are meant to illustrate. But from a formalist theoretical perspective, the objects are not at all incongruous. They have all sorts of formal volumetric, scalar, color, shape, and material relations. And even from a Marxist perspective, the objects still retain their own unique production histories and prior use functions in the historical context of human economic markets. And from a theatrical perspective, the objects are always facing outward toward their human audiences. They never face each other. They are on display for us. Similar to characters in a stage play, the objects are staged to perform the fiction of their implicit relation-
ships and dialogues with each other *for us*. And so, once again, the object ensembles willingly yield themselves up to be used as proof positive of the explanatory prowess of their latest theory suitor, while still remaining poly-amorously faithful(?) to all of their prior theory suitors.

**Why Am I Still Talking about OOO?**

Like Steinbach’s object ensembles, Object Oriented Ontology sets its own kind of trap. It is a purposeful provocation that trolls other theorists into interminable debates about its own speculative assertions. I don’t intend to have the final word on OOO in this brief subsection of a chapter in a book about art. I only mean to engage with OOO long enough to illustrate that it doesn’t get the final word about 00:02. To Steinbach’s shelf/object ensembles, OOO is just the latest in an increasingly long series of illicit affairs. As with all its other theory suitors, Steinbach’s work entices OOO, lures it out into the open, yields to it, and then has to go because it has a call on the other line.

**The Most Ardent Suitor: Semiotics**

Semiotics has been attracted to Steinbach’s object ensembles from the beginning, in part because both were coming to prominence in the United States during the late 1970s. There are all sorts of flavors of semiotics, but Ferdinand de Saussure’s is the easiest to digest, which is no doubt why it has become so popular. According to Saussurean semiotics, a signifier signifies a signified. Both signifier and signified together constitute a sign. A signifier can be the word “dog” signifying a physical dog, or it can be a physical dog signifying all other dogs. Saussure discovered that chains of signification are infinite (they never arrive at any core or grounding signified [like
God] that would act as the foundational, bedrock guaran-
tor of meaning for the chains of signification leading up
to it). He also discovered that semiotic signifiers (words)
are arbitrarily coupled to their signifieds (in other words,
the word “dog” is no more or less inherently “doggy” than
the word “chien” or the word “perro”). Derrida took these
two discoveries and ran with them into the wilds of de-
construction. To me, Charles Sanders Peirce has a much
more robust and grounded tri-part semiotic system made
up of sign, object, and interpretant (compared to Saus-
sure’s merely bi-part system of signifier and signified),
but Peirce’s system never gained the popularity of Saus-
sure’s system.

Semiotics is seduced by Steinbach’s shelf/object en-
sembles because they look like sentences made out of ob-
jects and shelves. The shelf sections act like sentence dia-
grams, indicating the grammatical sentence parts. This
object must be the subject, and that object must be the
predicate. Steinbach’s objects are often repeated, and more
or less interchangeable because of their mass-produced
nature, so they seem like common nouns. To semiotics,
there is nothing different about the following two words
— “lamp” and “lamp” — other than the context in which
they are used (and in this particular sentence, there is not
that much difference between their two contextual us-
ages). I could swap the first “lamp” for the second “lamp,”
and you would not be able to tell the difference. For this
reason, to the semiotic suitor, 00:02 “reads” like a kind of
physically instantiated sentence. 00:02 is purposefully
designed to give itself over to this semiotic “reading.” As
already mentioned, the objects in Steinbach’s ensembles
are prepared with an overt understanding of formalism
and minimalism. These approaches combine with the
hermetic, Platonic idealism of the white cube gallery to
ontologically sterilizes and de-individualize Steinbach’s
objects, preparing them for easy assimilation into the se-
miotic regime of interchangeable signifiers.
But of course, there is a problem. If the phrase “trash can” points to some physical object that functions as a garbage receptacle, then what does an actual physical trash can point to? Also, the two trash cans in 00:02 are not interchangeable – the light of the gallery reflects differently off of one than off of the other. Are we meant to bracket these “surface” differences and solely focus on the “essence” of the object-noun-ness of the trash cans? Are the different light reflections from the trash cans simply incidental to their trash-can-ness, like the same word set in two different typefaces? Are typefaces simply incidental? Incidental to whom, and in what ways? In what ways are object-signifiers different than word-signifiers? When an object becomes a signifier, to whom does it become a signifier? When an object is placed beside another object, do they become “signifiers” to each other? Or is signification solely a human phenomenon? Is there any way for an object to fully resist being “read” as a signifier? What would such a non-signification cloaking device look like? Would it “read” as “unreadable?” Would its non-significance even be able to signify? Such are the questions that have provided the erotic fuel which has stoked the flames of the liaison between the semiotic suitor and Steinbach’s object ensembles for decades. Let us briefly open up a few of these worm cans.

An Emphasis on the Space between the Nouns
(Alas, for Naught)

Because Steinbach’s object signifiers are so semiotically vague, we are forced to concentrate on the space between his objects and on their own implicit signification. Like translating a foreign language where we don’t know the meaning of the nouns, perhaps a proper understanding of the articles and prepositions between the nouns will give us some clue. As if we somehow have a better chance of gaining a semiotic purchase on the spaces between the
trash cans and the lava lamps than we do of gaining a semiotic purchase on the trash cans and the lava lamps themselves.

This shift of emphasis from nouns to articles and prepositions occurs in the work of Samuel Beckett, Gertrude Stein, and Emily Dickinson. Here is Samuel Beckett’s (implicit) mission statement as a writer, age 26:

The experience of my reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence, communicated by the intervals, not the terms, of the statement, between the flowers that cannot coexist, at the antithetical (nothing so simple as antithetical) seasons of words, his experience shall be the menace, the miracle, the memory, of an unspeakable trajectory.34

But, whereas Beckett and Stein often leave semantic relational structures intact while omitting (or obscuring, via pronoun-ization) the nouns which these structures relate (relations preceding relata, so to speak), Steinbach does something even more confounding. He allows common “nouns” (trash can, lava lamp) to remain as common nouns (albeit physical-object-nouns), but he makes them so minimalistically concrete that they refuse to operate explicitly as semiotic signifiers and merely seem like plain old objects (they are what they are). So, we are forced to turn our attention to the shelves in an attempt to try and find some more concrete prepositional or grammatical meaning to these object sentences. But we are stymied there as well. If the ensembles are sentences, they are indeed written in a foreign language. Perhaps we are discovering the hidden language of objects! More likely, we are discovering the failure of semiotics to ex-

clusively and reductively interpret Steinbach’s work. And of course, displaying this failure of the semiotic suitor to “make an honest woman” out of the object ensembles is the goal of the object ensembles.

A Surrealistic Language of Objects

Unable to properly nail down any specific semiotic meaning, our human imaginations run wild in an affectively rich play of multiple, supra-semiotic possibilities. Such free and refracting imaginings are properly understood as surrealistic. Plenty of theorists have noticed the power of uncanny objects to trigger surrealistic connections. Foucault on Magritte: “It is in dream that men, at last reduced to silence, commune with the signification of things and allow themselves to be touched by enigmatic, insistent words that come from elsewhere.”

Derrida: “The dreamer invents his own grammar.”

Even Whitehead:

An inhibition of familiar sensa is very apt to leave us a prey to vague terrors respecting a circumambient world of causal operations. In the dark there are vague presences, doubtfully feared; in the silence, the irresistible causal efficacy of nature presses itself upon us; in the vagueness of the low hum of insects in an August woodland, the inflow into ourselves of feelings from enveloping nature overwhelms us; in the dim consciousness of half-sleep, the presentations of sense fade away, and we are left with the vague feeling of influences from vague things around us.

I would argue that Steinbach’s object ensembles are uber-surrealistic precisely because of their bald-faced realism. The objects in 00:02 trigger all of the surrealistic connections and imaginings that vague and hazy liminal objects invoke, while still remaining utterly clear and plain. Germano Celant calls Steinbach’s objects, “resolutely palpable.”38 The stage magician’s trick is all the more harrowing when there is no smoke and there are no mirrors; everything is plain as day, and yet still the magic occurs. The object ensembles have nothing up their sleeve. We should be able to figure this out. How are they tricking us?

Whitehead’s observations give us a clue. Via minimalism, formalism, and the white cube gallery, the object ensembles shut down the ordinary noise of objects in functional situ, and our own thoughts rush to fill in this vacuum. We are not hearing the withdrawn essence of real objects (or even the clamoring of their sensual object counterparts), and we are not hearing a new form of object language (objects calling out to other objects via semiotic signification). We are hearing ourselves theorizing that we are hearing these things.

Semiotics Plus X

Jenny Jaskey suggests that the object ensembles are both semiotic and caught up in situational networks somewhat similar to the ones described by ANT:

Steinbach cares about how cultural valuation gets altered through language and about how the stuff of everyday life has its own rich material interchange in excess of what might be said about it by us [...]. His works are invested in revealing how objects gain or lose different kind of significance for humans [...], but that they are at the same time undeniably material

aggregations of a human–inhuman matrix that continue to gather momentum as they take on new forms over time.”\(^\text{39}\)

Her interpretation is not so much that Steinbach’s object ensembles are interpretable \textit{neither} by semiotics \textit{nor} by ANT, but that they are simultaneously interpretable both. I agree with this. I would only add that they are also simultaneously interpretable as minimalist, formalist, psychological, and phenomenological. Furthermore (and here is the main point of this chapter, in case you somehow missed it), by purposefully being simultaneously interpretable from all of these theoretical perspectives, Steinbach’s object ensembles are \textit{primarily} apophatic art apparatus for capturing human theories.

\section*{My Favorite Suitor: Artist as Master Craftsman}

If I had to choose which of all the suitors I find most convincing, I would choose the Artist as Master Craftsman suitor. I agree with those who think that Haim Steinbach is a master craftsman of displaying objects on shelves. He is idiosyncratically and uniquely skillful at displaying objects that confound human interpretation. His chosen medium is the display of objects. If you think anyone can do this as well as Steinbach, try it on a shelf in your own home. The results are virtually guaranteed to be much less enticing and much less disturbing than \textit{00:02}. Steinbach’s object ensembles are so confoundingly evocative because he is really, really good at displaying objects, and he’s had a lot of practice. Steinbach is the Michelangelo of obfuscatory object display. That is my contention, in an era where the artist as craftsman is beyond passé, and

arranging found objects hardly qualifies as a craft or a medium. Steinbach is so good at displaying objects, he got bored with it and went on to master the meta-craft of displaying display itself.

Perhaps Steinbach is a kind of object-whisperer after all. He is able to discern object relationships that are particularly resonant in a number of simultaneous ways: formally, phenomenologically, art-historically, pop-culturally, humorously, ironically, functionally. When we feel as if we hear the voice of the objects calling to us and to one another, we are really experiencing traces of the idiosyncratic hand of the master craftsman coming to us through his medium. Steinbach has spent time sitting with these objects. When we ourselves sit with the objects in the gallery, we are also sitting with his prior sittings with the objects. Steinbach is in the room with us and the objects.

Steinbach himself describes the objects in his ensembles not like words in sentences, but like pieces on a game board:

The thinking around the object [...] starts with the concept of the game board, because for me it is like [...] a blueprint of the thinking of the arrangement of the pieces. Also, while a game involves a scheme and a strategy, it also consists of aspects of chance. There is engagement as well as the unpredictable.40

And elsewhere, “I do not ‘curate’ objects, but put them into play.”41 In Steinbach’s game, the pawns are the Kong-

brand rubber chew toys.\textsuperscript{42} Maybe the giant Hulk hands are the rooks? In Steinbach’s own words:

Each [object ensemble] is a study in different relations, like [Joseph] Albers with colors and squares. He kept doing the color studies to see what would happen when you put the different colors in play, their affinities with each other in different contexts, within a constrained system. I am doing a similar thing with these objects.\textsuperscript{43}

According to Steinbach, the object ensembles are also about math, number relations, repetition, and the difference between one and many.\textsuperscript{44} Perhaps the next theoretical suitors will be game theorists and number set theorists.

From another perspective, Steinbach has described the ensembles as musical compositions. “When I arrange these objects, I am looking for new sounds. Sometimes something will sound too familiar, and I will move on. Sometimes something will sound foreign, and I am intrigued. I ask, why is that foreign to me? Why am I bothered by it?”\textsuperscript{45} The goal is not necessarily to create the most “harmonious” compositions, but to create compositions with new and uncanny frequencies.

So, is Steinbach an object composer, an object game player, or a displayer of display? Of course, he is all of these and more. According to the Artist as Master Craftsman theory, Steinbach is simply an artist who has mastered the idiosyncratic and peculiar rules of his own self-devised art game, the same way other great artists (Rembrandt, Klee, Duchamp) have mastered the idiosyncratic

\textsuperscript{42} Haim Steinbach, interview with the author at Steinbach’s New York studio, April 21, 2017.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
and peculiar rules of their own self-devised art games. Duchamp’s king was a sideways urinal; Steinbach’s king is the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

Conclusion

Which theoretical suitor will “get the girl?” All of them to greater or lesser degrees, but none of them exclusively. Is my own meta-theoretical interpretation just one more theoretical interpretation destined to take its place in the suitor line? In order for my interpretation to be self-consistent, it has to be; and I’m fine with that. I don’t want to reduce oo:02 once and for all. I simply want to show the ways in which it functions as a particularly wily apophatic art apparatus. oo:02 is a theory trap. It lures theories out, and then paradoxically resists their exclusive theoretical interpretations by simultaneously yielding to all of them. It makes nothing of human theories. Even now it sits in the Stedelijk, silently awaiting future suitors.