

ArtReview

Michael Borremans
Read our feature on the Belgian artist, currently showing in Dallas and London,

Tobias Zielony
Read our feature on the German photographer (and one of the five artists in the German Pavilion at

Gregor Schneider
Read our feature on the German artist whose 'unheimlich' interventions in the

Koki Tanaka
the Japanese artist and Deutsche Bank's Artist of the Year 2015, discusses the pressures of

Ming Wong
Ming Wong's new exhibition, *Next Year*, is showing at UCCA, Beijing through 9 August. Read

AR NEWS REVIEWS PREVIEWS SEARCH

OPINION VIDEO MAGAZINE PO

of contradiction, humour, horror, beauty and a cautious approach to truth, from the May 2015 issue

By Martin Herbert

margins in a way that is itself ambiguously positioned between documentary photography, photojournalism and art, from the May 2015 issue

By Kimberly Bradley

take the rubble of Goebbels's birthplace to Poland, hide a synagogue in the suburbs and tunnel into the hidden spaces of a museum, from the April 2015 issue

By Ory Dessau

the 'Fukushima effect' and how to sell palm fronds, from the April 2015 issue

By Hou Hanru

our cover feature on the Singaporean artist, from the Spring 2015 issue of *ArtReview Asia*

By Sara Arrhenius

^ **FEATURE**

Graham Harman: Art Without Relations

In an exclusive essay, one of the philosophers at the forefront of Speculative Realism makes some connections

By Graham Harman



Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled 2012 (Freedom Cannot Be Simulated)*, 2012. Photo: J...

Let's begin by introducing the term 'nonrelational aesthetics'. This is not meant as a retort to Nicolas Bourriaud, whose influential book *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) is not my target. What Bourriaud means by 'relations' are staged encounters between humans who would otherwise pass each other anonymously but are now encouraged to interact through jointly cooking packets of soup or other forms of conviviality (as in the artworks of Rirkrit Tiravanija). What I oppose is relationality in a wider sense, one so sufficiently familiar to recent art history that I might seem to be wandering into a long-settled debate. At issue is the independence of artworks not only from their social and political surroundings, their physical settings or their commercial exchange value, but from any other object whatsoever.

Relationality has long had a good press well beyond the arts. Widespread sympathy for dynamic relations over dreary substances marks the general intellectual mood of our time. In recent Continental philosophy, figures from Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze to Isabelle Stengers, Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett are all cited as admirable champions of process and relation over static autonomous things. Yet the claim of object-oriented philosophy, which I advocate, is that the primacy of relations over things is no longer a liberating idea (since it reduces things to their pragmatic

impact on humans and on each other).

Let's begin with philosophy, whose vocation is to deal with the most universal subject matter. I propose to call this subject matter 'objects', in a broad sense that

includes human beings along with everything else: copper wire, weather systems, fictional characters, reptiles, artworks, protons, transient events and numbers. Unlike the various special disciplines, philosophy cannot deal with some of these while ignoring the others.

WIDESPREAD SYMPATHY FOR DYNAMIC RELATIONS OVER DREARY SUBSTANCES MARKS THE GENERAL INTELLECTUAL MOOD OF OUR TIME

By 'objects' I mean unified realities – physical or otherwise – that cannot fully be reduced either downwards to their pieces or upwards to their effects. We know that human and inanimate bodies cannot exist without tiny physical subcomponents. Yet we also know that objects have a certain degree of robust reality that can withstand changes in those components. An object is emergent beyond its subcomponents, and cannot be explained exhaustively by its pieces alone.

But for the arts, as for the social sciences, the greater danger is the *upward* reduction that paraphrases objects in terms of their effects rather than their parts. For it is dubious to claim that objects are utterly defined by their context, without any unexpressed private surplus. To defend this view is to commit oneself to a world in which everything is already all that it can be. Change would be impossible if this melon, that city or I myself were nothing more than our current relations with everything else.

The two reductions differ only in the direction in which they propose to destroy objects:

EITHER WE EXPLAIN WHAT SOMETHING IS MADE OF, OR WE DESCRIBE ITS EFFECTS

pulverising them into sawdust, or elevating them into an all-devouring context. Admittedly, these are the two basic kinds of *knowledge* about what something is: either we explain what something is made of, or we describe its effects. But philosophy was never meant to be a form of knowledge. The Greek word *philosophia*, which means love of wisdom rather than wisdom itself, incorporates a

basic ignorance into its etymology.

But if philosophy is not a form of knowledge, the same holds even more obviously for art. An artwork littered with scientific falsehoods might still be better *as art* than a pedagogical work that inspired young viewers to win a dozen Nobel Prizes. Just as little does art provide the sort of knowledge claimed by social or political explanations. Even a politically provocative work – Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), for example – might succeed as art even among those it denounces. The specifically aesthetic handling of the theme might have greater or lesser power than the surface political message of the work, which in turn might be readable in ways that would baffle Picasso himself. Nor can we replace an artwork with its biographical or historical backstory. The art object, taken in a broad sense not restricted to mobile and durable entities, is just as resistant to knowledge as objects in the philosophical sense.

A quiet breakthrough in the theory of objects was made by the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. One key strategy of the empiricist philosophers was to deny the very existence of objects, replacing them with 'bundles of qualities'. Strictly speaking there is no such thing as 'moon' but only qualities such as 'white', 'round' and 'luminous', which appear together so frequently that we come to use 'moon' as a sloppy nickname for this rough set of qualities. The greatness of phenomenology lay in its reversal of this prejudice. For Husserl, 'moon' as a unified phenomenal object precedes any particular qualities it might display. The object of experience comes first, and it endures despite considerable ongoing shifts in its evident features. Heidegger raises the stakes by critiquing his teacher Husserl as a philosopher of 'presence': although Husserl discovered a unified object of experience, irreducible to its sum of qualities, his objects are exhausted by their presence to the mind. Against this, Heidegger insisted that objects are usually withdrawn into a silent background.

Yet there is something overly holistic about Heidegger's withdrawn realm of 'being', which he opposes not only to beings insofar as they are visible, but also to beings insofar as they are many. This excessive unity of Heidegger's hidden kingdom of being haunts his famous essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1950). Heidegger's notion of artworks as 'strife' between hidden earth and accessible world has not been improved by later philosophers. Yet Heidegger's 'earth' is every bit as unified as his 'being', so that every artwork ends up pointing to the same hidden earth in all cases. Whereas normal experience is adrift in a realm of presence, the Heideggerian artwork seems to punch a hole in presence and gesture vaguely towards an irreducible reality-in-itself. Yet the Heideggerian artist is left with a fountain of sensual images in the mind (jugs, temples, peasant shoes) that all hint monotonously at the same earthy background.

Heidegger's
deadlock is
roughly the same
as that faced by
Clement
Greenberg in his
own theory of
modern art.
Greenberg's
career-long enemy
is *academic art*,

WHEREAS NORMAL EXPERIENCE IS ADrift IN A REALM OF PRESENCE, THE HEIDEGGERIAN ARTWORK SEEMS TO PUNCH A HOLE IN PRESENCE

whose chief weakness lies in trying to dupe us with explicit content while paying no heed to the background structure of the medium itself. Famously, modern painting for Greenberg is the kind that comes to terms with its flat canvas background and makes no concession to the three-dimensional illusionism dominant from Giotto until Manet. For Greenberg as for Heidegger, the flat background is the same no matter what content is deployed to hint in its direction. In this respect both authors make the surface too shallow and the background too deep, with the artwork's form conceived too holistically and its content too dismissively.

In defending an art concerned with objects deeper than their relation to humans, it might seem as if we are returning to a high modernist conception of the autonomy of the artwork. And by referring to objects at all, we might seem to be straying in the opposite direction of an observer-centred literalism. In Michael Fried's canonical 1967 article, 'Art and Objecthood', Donald Judd, Robert Morris and their minimalist confederates are famously described as 'literalists', since their various oblongs, cubes and rods are supposedly experienced as literal objects rather than in some special aesthetic sense. For Fried, the literal is the same as the theatrical: 'Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work.' In other words, literalist artwork is made with the viewer and the context of viewing in mind. Aesthetics is replaced by spectacle, since the viewer is now anticipated in the structure of the artwork itself.

In a later essay, 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism' (1998), Fried provocatively traces the roots of both theatricality and literalism to his estranged and deceased mentor Greenberg. By insisting that modern painting take account of its medium, Greenberg supposedly paves the way to a triumphant final step of presenting blank canvases or naked cubes unadorned with depicted content, despite his preemptive warnings against the emptiness of such a result. Here Fried misreads Greenberg. While the flat canvas background can certainly be treated as a literal physical object, this is not what Greenberg does. Instead, he treats the background as that which

never becomes present in its own right and is thus *never* literal. Greenberg's flat canvas is not a piece of literal physical material, as it might be for Judd: it is a dematerialised two-dimensional space that all content must take into account in any truly modern, postillusionist painting. To point to the literal physical canvas is not the same as to point to the aesthetic background that the canvas enables.

Yet I am less concerned by the misreading of Greenberg than by Fried's unfortunate conflation of the literal with the theatrical. On philosophical grounds, I am prepared to agree that the literal should be avoided. Unlike the natural and social sciences – which attempt a literal paraphrase of what objects are by detecting and summarising their qualities – art and philosophy are joined in a love of objects insofar as they cannot be paraphrased. But Fried's understandable rejection of art as a literal presence of everyday objects is mixed with an admittedly personal revulsion for the theatrical.

The distinction Fried fails to make is that between humans as literalist observers of art and humans as theatrical *ingredients* of art. As observers and agents, we are literalists who paraphrase the things we encounter in terms of their explicitly detectable qualities, thereby failing to get at the objects beneath these qualities. But as ingredients of the world, we are not literalists or paraphrasers at all, since here we are parts that *produce* societies, armies, dramas and artworks, just as diamonds or bricks produce other objects.

Another name for the literal is the *relational*, since both refer to the outward effects of a thing rather than the cryptic inner reality that makes

THE THEATRE IS LESS A SITE FOR OBSERVATION THAN FOR PITY, FEAR AND IMPERSONATION

such effects possible. Likewise, another name for the theatrical is the *nonrelational*, since the theatre is less a site for observation than for pity, fear and impersonation – a place where we do not *observe* what is portrayed but *become* it, through *mimesis* in the actor's rather than the illustrator's sense of the term. This essay has made two basic claims. First, Heidegger and Greenberg were right to call for a depth behind the surface content of art, but wrong to identify this depth with a unified holistic background. The problem with modernist theory was not that it decontextualised art and made it too autonomous, but that it rooted autonomy in the features of the medium rather than the internal fascinations of content itself. Here Surrealism was an undeserving loser, along with Kandinsky, as in Greenberg's blatant dismissals of both.

Second, Fried was right to call for an art without literalism, but wrong to see the human as solely a literalising agent. While the artwork must have a depth beyond how it is encountered by the spectator, the human is less a spectator than a co-constituent of the artwork itself, since nonfascinating art simply fails in a way that nonfascinating science does not. The undeserving loser here is not just performance art in the strict sense, but any form of passionate attachment, or 'sentimentality' as Fried terms it.

Since Karl Popper recommends that a theory should make risky predictions, let me venture two such predictions here. Among living artists, I will claim that the Russian-born artist Grisha Bruskin, already well known, may be considerably more important than believed. His figures of Soviet and Jewish mythology, arranged somewhat in the fashion of hieroglyphics, display both the inscrutable depth and the theatricality that I have just defended.

As for the dead, I will take an even bigger risk, and suggest that we give a second look to none other than the Dutchman M.C. Escher – the favourite artist of countless children and few respectable adults – for reasons similar to those given in Bruskin's case. If nothing else, a counterfactual art history in which Escher looms large is a delightful thought experiment.

This article originally appeared in the September 2014 issue

RELATED

The Biennial Questionnaire: Nicolas Bourriaud on the Taipei Biennial
13 September 2014 through 4 January 2015

An Anatomy of Power

Nicolas Bourriaud discusses ArtReview's Power 100, from the November 2013 issue

Rirkrit Tiravanija

Read the interview with the cover artist of ArtReview Asia's November 2013 Power 100 issue

Daniel Steegmann Mangrané

The Brazil-based artist's diverse body of work brings together radical anthropology, warped reweavings of the modernist grid and a fascination with the stick-insect family in an elegant assault on the nature/culture divide

What Frame for What Modernisation?

Anselm Franke on the 10th Shanghai Biennale

Mark Leckey

Ahead of his exhibition at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York, and forthcoming retrospective at Wiels, in Brussels, Mark Leckey talks to J.J. Charlesworth about what it means 'be' in the midst of a world where images have become things

Hito Steyerl

Read our profile of the Berlin-based writer and filmmaker who suggests that we can be more than just consumers: we can be active agents in the world around us

Ragnar Kjartansson

The Icelandic artist's epic performance works and videos toy with our emotions – sorrow, joy, boredom and exhilaration among them

Pierre Huyghe

Read our feature on the Kurt Schwitters Award-winning artist, from the October 2013 issue

David Maljkovic

Read our feature on the Croatian artist, from the October 2013 issue

Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier & Iain Hamilton Grant

Graham Harman



Tweet



Like

445

**SUBSCRIBE | ABOUT US | DISTRIBUTORS |
ADVERTISE | NEWSLETTER | CAREERS | FAQ**

CONTACT

© 2015 ArtReview
Made by Grandad