

***Dog Muscles, Luminosity and Chromatic Experience:
a Speculative Octopoid Aesthetics***

This seminar investigates what may or may not be continuous from one (nonhuman) body to another (human) body, in order to address the problem of how to mediate mollusc phenomenal worlds through storytelling practices. In posthuman ethics, there is much recent discussion of relations to and representations of other animals. These offer frameworks for human-nonhuman relations, often based on the idea that humans need to transform themselves and their ways of living and being in the world.

Vesalius' depiction of a dog's muscle and a monkey's bone in a human body suggests a species overlap, projection or adaptation. This seminar considers how Vesalius' dog muscle might offer a means of analysing fictional phenomenal worlds of octopuses. It reads this in relation to Graham Harman's 'weird formalism', a theory based on the idea that the relationship between viewer and artwork theatrically constitute a new, third object. It then uses these ideas to examine octopus-based experiences of light and colour depicted in the storyworlds of science fiction novel *Children of Ruin* (Tchaikovsky, 2019) and immersive art installation *Altered Ways of Being* (Burton Nitta, 2020).



Table VI ↑ Table VII ↓



'T: This part of the chest and neck should have been drawn as in the following table; but I decided it would not be entirely pointless to depict here from a dog the muscle mentioned of Galen that takes its origin (marked O) from the transverse processes of that cervical vertebrae; it is fleshy as far as the fourth rib, but at the point marked P it becomes a membranous tendon marked Q, and this extends further down to some of the ribs.'

Andreas Vesalius, *On the fabric of the human body*, tr. W. F. Richardson and J. B. Carman (San Francisco, 1998-2009), vol. 2, 43.



Burton Nitta, *Altered Ways of Being*, 2020 (installation details)

ART + OBJECTS



GRAHAM HARMAN

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Abbreviations

I	Clement Greenberg, <i>The Collected Essays and Criticism</i> , Vol. 1
II	Clement Greenberg, <i>The Collected Essays and Criticism</i> , Vol. 2
III	Clement Greenberg, <i>The Collected Essays and Criticism</i> , Vol. 3
IV	Clement Greenberg, <i>The Collected Essays and Criticism</i> , Vol. 4
AAM	T.J. Clark, “Arguments About Modernism”
AB	Robert Pippin, <i>After the Beautiful</i>
AD	Jacques Rancière, <i>Aesthetics and its Discontents</i>
AEA	Arthur Danto, <i>After the End of Art</i>
ANA	Peter Osborne, <i>Anywhere or Not at All</i>
AO	Michael Fried, <i>Art and Objecthood</i>
AOA	Robert Jackson, “The Anxiousness of Objects and Artworks”
AAP	Joseph Kosuth, “Art After Philosophy”
AT	Michael Fried, <i>Absorption and Theatricality</i>
AW	Arthur Danto, <i>Andy Warhol</i>
BBJ	Elaine Scarry, <i>On Beauty and Being Just</i>
BND	Hal Foster, <i>Bad New Days</i>
CGTA	T.J. Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art”
CJ	Immanuel Kant, <i>Critique of Judgment</i>
CR	Michael Fried, <i>Courbet’s Realism</i>
DB	Gavin Parkinson, <i>The Duchamp Book</i>
ES	Jacques Rancière, <i>The Emancipated Spectator</i>
FI	T.J. Clark, <i>Farewell to an Idea</i>

ABBREVIATIONS

GD	Graham Harman, “Greenberg, Duchamp, and the Next Avant-Garde”
HE	Clement Greenberg, <i>Homemade Esthetics</i>
HMW	Michael Fried, “How Modernism Works”
KAD	Thierry de Duve, <i>Kant After Duchamp</i>
LW	Clement Greenberg, <i>Late Writings</i>
MM	Michael Fried, <i>Manet’s Modernism</i>
NO	Bettina Funcke, “Not Objects so Much as Images”
OAG	Rosalind Krauss, <i>The Originality of the Avant-Garde</i>
OC	Leo Steinberg, <i>Other Criteria</i>
OOS	Roger Rothman, “Object-Oriented Surrealism”
OU	Rosalind Krauss, <i>The Optical Unconscious</i>
PA	Jacques Rancière, <i>The Politics of Aesthetics</i>
RR	Hal Foster, <i>The Return of the Real</i>
TC	Arthur Danto, <i>The Transfiguration of the Commonplace</i>
TN	Harold Rosenberg, <i>The Tradition of the New</i>

Introduction

Formalism and the Lessons of Dante

This is the first book to address in detail the relation between art and Object-Oriented Ontology (hereafter OOO), in the wake of a number of earlier publications on the topic.¹ For the purposes of this book, “art” means visual art, though the principles developed here could be exported – *mutatis mutandis* – to any artistic genre. What ought to make OOO’s relation to art of especial interest to the reader is that this new philosophy treats art not as a peripheral subfield, but as the very heart of our discipline, as in the well-known OOO call for “aesthetics as first philosophy.”² But what does it mean for aesthetics to serve as the basis for all philosophy, and why would anyone accept such an apparently deviant thesis? To develop these questions is the purpose of this book.

The title *Art and Objects* was recommended by an editor at Polity, and I could hardly refuse such a straight-to-the-point suggestion. Nonetheless, it could lead to one of two possible misunderstandings. The first is the verbal similarity of the phrase “Art and Objects” to the titles of two other works that lead in different directions from my own. One is Richard Wollheim’s 1968 book-length essay *Art and its Objects*, a lucid piece of analytic philosophy not discussed directly in the pages that follow. The other similar title, no doubt more familiar to readers of this book, belongs to the provocative 1967 article “Art and Objecthood” by Michael Fried. This latter coincidence is more important, since Fried unlike Wollheim *has* had a significant impact on my thinking about artworks. Nonetheless, our respective uses of the word “object” have precisely the opposite meaning. For Fried, “object” means a physical obstacle literally present in our path, as he famously complains in the case of minimalist sculpture. For OOO, by contrast, objects are always absent rather than present. OOO’s

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real objects – as opposed to what we call sensual objects – can only be alluded to indirectly; they never take on literal form, and need not even be physical.

That brings us to the second and broader misunderstanding to which the title of this book might lead. Positive talk of “objects” in an arts context is often assumed to mean praise for mid-sized durable entities (sculptures, statues, glassworks, easel paintings) at the expense of what seem to be more free-form art media (performances, happenings, transient installations, conceptual works). In a OOO setting, however, “object” has a far broader meaning than solid material things. For the object-oriented thinker, anything – including events and performances – can count as an object as long as it meets two simple criteria: (a) irreducibility downward to its components, and (b) irreducibility upward to its effects. These two types of reduction are known in OOO as “undermining” and “overmining,” while their combination – which happens more often than not – is called “duominning.”³ OOO holds that nearly all human thought involves some form of duominning, and tries to counteract it by paying attention to the object in its own right, apart from its internal components and outward effects. This is admittedly a difficult task, since undermining and overmining are the two basic forms of knowledge we have. When someone asks us what something is, we can answer either by telling them what the thing is made of (undermining), what it does (overmining), or both at once (duominning). Given that these are the only kinds of knowledge that exist, they are precious tools of human survival, and we must be careful not to denounce these three forms of “mining” or pretend we can do without them. Yet my hope is that the reader will come to recognize the parallel existence of forms of cognition *without* knowledge that somehow bring objects into focus, despite not reducing them in either of the two mining directions.

Art is one such type of cognition; another is philosophy, understood in the Socratic sense of *philosophia* rather than the modern one of philosophy as a mathematics or natural science *manqué*. As I wrote in “The Third Table,” art has nothing to do with either of the famous “two tables” of the English physicist Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington: one of them being the physical table composed of particles and empty space (undermining), the other the practical table with distinct sensible qualities and the capacity to be moved around as we please (overmining).⁴ For precisely the same reason, the celebrated distinction of the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars between the “scientific image” (undermining) and “manifest image” (overmining) cannot do

productive work for us.⁵ Instead, art like philosophy has the mission of alluding to a “third table” that lies between the two extremes of cognition recognized by Eddington and Sellars. Already, those familiar with Fried will see that art in the OOO sense entails the exact opposite of the *literalism* that he associates with objecthood, though this is a mere difference in terminology that does not yet run counter to Fried’s core principles.

It is well known that the OOO program emphasizes objects considered apart from their relations, which cuts against the grain of today’s relational fashion in philosophy, the arts, and nearly everywhere else. By “relational” I mean the notion that an artwork (or any object) is intrinsically defined by some sort of relation with its context. In philosophy these are called “internal relations,” and OOO upholds the counter-tradition that takes relations to be external to their terms: so that, in all but exceptional cases, an apple remains the same apple no matter the context in which it occurs. Now, to consider an object apart from its relations obviously sounds like the well-known “formalism” in art and literary criticism, which downplays the biographical, cultural, environmental, or socio-political surroundings of artworks in favor of treating such works as self-contained aesthetic wholes. In this connection, I have written some admiring things about the long unfashionable Greenberg, who deserves the title “formalist” despite his own resistance to the term.⁶ We will see that the same holds for Fried, who is also a formalist in my sense despite his ongoing displeasure with that word. Robert Pippin’s complaint that “there persists a myth that Fried’s work is ‘formalist,’ indifferent to ‘content’” certainly hits the mark, but only if we accept Fried and Pippin’s definition of formalism as denoting indifference to content.⁷ It is true that no one should accuse Fried of suppressing the content of paintings in the way that Greenberg usually does, but I will claim that there exists a more basic sense of formalism than this.

Given OOO’s emphasis on the non-relational autonomy or closure of objects from their contexts, it is no surprise that there has been some wariness toward object-oriented thought in those aesthetic quarters where formalism is in low repute, even among those who feel sympathy for us on other grounds. Claire Colebrook, the prominent Deleuzian, worries aloud that OOO literary criticism will merely amount to a continuation of formalist business as usual.⁸ My friend Melissa Ragona at Carnegie-Mellon University reacted as follows when I first posted the cover of this book on social media: “Excellent move from the old days of discussing Clement Greenberg to Joseph Beuys!”⁹ Some months earlier, the Munich-based artist Hasan Veseli

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had interrupted an otherwise positive email to express the following reservation about my past writings on art:

My art friends and I can't understand why you go on and on about Greenberg, although we do get your point (background, flatness). In retrospect it feels that his writings were already assigned an expiration date at the time that he wrote that stuff (probably because of his problems with subject matter, making art just a formalist exercise). Notable critics, from today's perspective, are the likes of Rosalind Krauss, David Joselit, Hal Foster, Arthur Danto . . .¹⁰

In my continuing fondness for Greenberg, I am outnumbered in the art world by his detractors. Nonetheless, I would respond by saying that there are perfectly good reasons to “go on and on” about him, even if his theories seem linked with a kind of art that lost its cutting-edge prestige a half century ago, and even if some of his theories can be shown to be wrong. The issue, as I see it, is that formalism was at some point simply denounced and abandoned rather than assimilated and overcome, as some literary critics have also argued in their own field.¹¹ A similar thing happened in philosophy to another theory that stressed the isolation of autonomous things: the unloved doctrine of the thing-in-itself beyond all human access. Here we have crossed into the long shadow of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose three great *Critiques* sounded the formalist keynote in metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics, respectively. We will see that Kantian formalism, conveniently centered in his recurring term “autonomy,” consists of an intriguing combination of breakthroughs and deficiencies. Until the deficiencies are addressed and assimilated rather than circumvented by makeshift means, such as the vacuous claim that autonomy is inherently “bourgeois” or “fetishistic,” there is a risk that philosophy and the arts – their fates more closely linked than is commonly believed – will continue to amount to little more than an ironic contempt for formalist claims.¹² I hold that this is exactly what happened in the first post-formalist philosophy (better known as German Idealism) and a century and a half later in post-formalist art. In both cases, important new possibilities were gained that had been foreclosed to formalism, but an even more crucial breakthrough was lost. One of the broadest claims of this book is that there will be no further progress in philosophy or the arts without an explicit embrace of the autonomous thing-in-itself. Moreover, we need to draw the surprising *theatrical* consequences of this point, despite Fried's understandable wish to banish theatricality from art. David Wellbery restates Fried's position with wonderfully flamboyant rhetoric:

The (essentially ‘theatrical’) instigation of a frustrated yearning, a vertiginous sense of transport toward the never-to-be-achieved completion of an additive series, elicits a form of consciousness that is essentially non-artistic. Thought, work-internal differentiation, lucidity, and self-standing achievement are sacrificed for the sake of the *frisson* of a mysteriously agitated, portentous emptiness.¹³

Let us all stand united against “mysteriously agitated, portentous emptiness” – though I still find much of aesthetic value in Richard Wagner’s operas, which Wellbery seems to detest. The idea of theatricality defended in this book is not that of histrionic melodrama.

I took up these themes in 2016 in *Dante’s Broken Hammer*, a book whose first part is devoted to the *Divina Commedia* of Dante Alighieri, and whose second part challenges the thought of that most un-Dantean figure, Kant.¹⁴ As mentioned, *autonomy* is perhaps the most central of Kant’s terms, unifying as it does the chief insights of all three of his *Critiques*. His metaphysics features the unknowable thing-in-itself, unreachable in any direct fashion; opposed to this noumenal thing is human thought, structured according to our pure intuitions of space and time and the twelve categories of the understanding.¹⁵ Each of these realms is autonomous, even if Kant speaks in contradictory fashion of the thing-in-itself as *cause* of the world of appearance, an inconsistency on which the master was hammered by his first wave of converts.¹⁶ In ethics, Kant’s commitment to formalism is openly declared.¹⁷ An action is not ethical if it is motivated by any sort of external reward or punishment: whether it be fear of Hell, the desire for a good reputation, or the wish to avoid a bad conscience. An act is ethical only if performed for its own sake, in accordance with a duty binding on all rational beings. Stated in technical terms, ethics must be “autonomous” rather than “heteronomous.” Contextual subtleties play no role in Kant’s ethics: in his most famous example, lying cannot be justified even when done with the best of intentions and yielding the most admirable results. Indeed, context is what must be rigorously excluded for an act to count as ethical at all.

This leads us to Kant’s philosophy of art, another triumph of formalism, even if he does not use that exact word in this portion of his philosophy.¹⁸ Beauty must be self-contained in the same manner as ethical actions, unrelated to any personal agreeableness. Here as in his ethics, what is at stake for Kant is not the art object, which cannot be grasped directly any more than the thing-in-itself, and cannot be explained at all in terms of criteria or literal prose descriptions. Instead, beauty concerns the transcendental faculty of judgment

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shared by all humans, which serves as the guarantor that anyone of sufficiently developed taste ought to agree on what is beautiful. The same holds for our experience of the sublime, whether it comes in the “mathematical” version of something infinitely large (the nighttime sky, the vastness of the sea) or the “dynamical” version of something infinitely powerful (a crushing tsunami, the discharge of a nuclear weapon). Here once more, Kant holds that the sublime is really about *us* rather than the apparently sublime entity, since the crucial feature of the sublime is that it overpowers *our finite selves* with an experience of infinite magnitude.

Nonetheless, Kant mixes two very different senses of formalism in a way that is fateful, in the negative sense, for modern philosophy and art theory. The important kernel of truth in his ethics should be clear enough: an action whose purpose is to gain rewards or avoid punishment is not really an ethical act, though we can never be entirely sure that any given act is free of ulterior motives. From here it is a small step toward recognizing the substantial truth of his aesthetics: an artwork is not beautiful just because it happens to please or flatter us in the manner of, say, Augustus Caesar reading Virgil’s fulsome praise of his dynasty in the *Aeneid*.¹⁹ Nonetheless, I hold that Kant is *overly specific* in his claim as to what must be separated from what in order to establish autonomy. For him as for nearly all modern Western philosophers, the two primary elements of reality are human thought on one side and everything else (a.k.a. “the world”) on the other, and it is these two realms in particular that must be prevented from contaminating each other. In my opposition to this sentiment, I follow the French philosopher Bruno Latour’s interpretation of modernity, in *We Have Never Been Modern*, as the impossible attempt to isolate and purify two distinct zones called human and world.²⁰

At any rate, if the main problem with Kant is his formalist obsession with separating humans from everything else, we know which great figure in intellectual history resembles him least: that would be Dante, who wishes not to separate humans from world, but to fuse them together as tightly as possible.²¹ Dante’s cosmos is famously composed of *love*, in the sense of someone’s passion for something: whether it be good, bad, or downright evil. The basic units of reality for Dante are not free autonomous subjects, but amorous agents fused with or split from the targets of their various passions, and judged by God accordingly. This is the sense in which Kant is the perfect anti-Dante: someone who promotes cool disinterest in ethics as in art, since to do otherwise would meld thought with world when, according to Kant, these two must be kept separate at all costs.

In his admiring critique of Kantian ethics, the colorful German philosopher Max Scheler looks very much like a twentieth-century Dante for philosophy. While Scheler insists Kant is right that ethics must be self-contained and not just a tool to attain certain “goods and purposes,” he remains skeptical toward what he calls the “sublime emptiness” of Kant’s call to universal duty.²² Scheler’s alternative model displays at least two salient features missing from Kant’s theory. In the first place, ethics is less a matter of duty internal to human thought than an assessment of the things that one loves and hates, whether properly or improperly: an *ordo amoris* or rank order of passions.²³ In the second place, Scheler finds Kant’s ethics too sweepingly universal, since any given person, nation, or historical period has a specific ethical calling that belongs to it alone. More generally, Scheler’s theory entails that the basic unit of ethics is not a thinking human in isolation from the world; rather, the unit of ethics is a *compound* or *hybrid* (the latter is Latour’s term) made up of the human ethical agent and whatever they take seriously enough to love or hate. Ethical autonomy thus gains a new meaning: no longer a clean separation of humans from world, but that of any specific human–world combination from all that surrounds it. Note that this does not amount to a regression into what the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux has concisely termed “correlationism”: a type of modern philosophy that focuses on the correlative relationship between thought and world, while denying us the right to speak of either in isolation. For one thing, both humans and the objects they love remain independent of their relations, since neither is fully exhausted by them. And more importantly, the ethical relation between human and object is itself a new autonomous object whose reality cannot be fully grasped by either of these elements or by any external observer. The real embraces us from above no less than eluding us below.

The relevance to art of this ethical detour will now perhaps be clear. It had seemed to me until recently that there was no Scheler-like figure in the arts to critique Kant’s aesthetics on analogous grounds. But it now seems clear that Fried is the man for the job. True enough, his concept of “absorption” seems to perform the basically Kantian labor of keeping us at a distance from the artwork through the preoccupation of its elements with each other, resulting in a “closure” that ensures their obliviousness to the beholder. Yet even in Fried’s account this is true only for a number of French painters of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century anti-theatrical tradition – as theorized by the philosopher Denis Diderot – along

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with certain trailblazing forerunners such as Caravaggio.²⁴ For it is Fried himself who has shown that, no later than the work of Jacques-Louis David, it becomes increasingly difficult to read any painting as straightforwardly theatrical or anti-theatrical – and that in the crucial career of Édouard Manet, the need for a painting to face and acknowledge rather than negate and close off the beholder becomes unmistakable.²⁵

In aesthetics no less than ethics, Kant insists on the separation of disinterested spectators from the objects they contemplate. It is noteworthy that Greenberg and Fried do it the *opposite* way from Kant, by asking us to focus on the art object while subtracting the human side of the equation. This can be seen in Greenberg's rejection of Kant's transcendental approach to art in favor of something closer to Humean empiricism and, of course, in Fried's vehement if qualified distaste for theatricality.²⁶ What Kant shares with Greenberg and Fried is the assumption that autonomy must mean one very specific autonomy in particular: that of *humans* from *world*. This probably explains Fried's unease with such recent philosophical trends as Latourian actor-network-theory, the vital materialism of Jane Bennett, and OOO itself, all of them committed in different ways to a flattening of the Kantian human–world divide.²⁷ The analogy in aesthetics for Scheler's anti-Kantian ethics would be the view that the basic unit of aesthetics is neither the art object nor its beholder, but rather the two in combination as a single new object. Despite Fried's probable hostility to such a notion on anti-theatrical grounds, we will see that he comes surprisingly close to adopting it in his historical work. Though I will end up endorsing something much like the theatricality that Fried condemns, this by no means ruins the autonomy of the artwork, since the compound entity made of work and beholder is a self-contained unit not subordinate to any external practical or socio-political purpose. This admittedly strange result will require that we jettison a number of typical formalist principles in aesthetics, though mostly not the ones that post-formalist art has seen fit to abandon. At the same time, we will be led to some new and important considerations for philosophy.

Chapter 1 (“OOO and Art: A First Summary”) gives an overview of OOO aesthetic theory, which conceives of art as activating a rift between what we call real objects (RO) and their sensual qualities (SQ). This will return us to the long unfashionable phenomenon of beauty, which we grasp by contrast with its eternal enemy: not the ugly, but the literal. An examination of metaphor is the easiest way to see what is wrong with literalism, though metaphor also turns out to

have a particularly clear *theatrical* structure, and this has important implications for the sphere of visual art no less than for literature.

Chapter 2 (“Formalism and its Flaws”) offers a more detailed tour of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. The goal of this chapter is to pin down the strengths and weaknesses of that foundational book of modern aesthetics, which in most respects remains unsurpassed. I will claim that despite abundant discussion of that book, the basic principle of Kant’s aesthetic theory has been ignored more than overcome; for this very reason, it continues to draw us back into its midst, like a black hole capturing fugitive satellites. Among other things, I will claim that Kant’s distinction between the beautiful and the sublime does not hold. There is in fact no such thing as the sublime, assuming we follow Kant in defining it as the *absolutely* large or powerful. As Timothy Morton has shown in *Hyperobjects*, there is something deeply anthropocentric about absolutes and infinities: which Kant might be the first to admit, given his surprisingly human-centered interpretation of the sublime.²⁸ Infinity has recently returned to philosophy in the works of Alain Badiou and his student Meillassoux, through their intriguing shared debt to the transfinite mathematician Georg Cantor.²⁹ Yet I am inclined to agree with Morton that very large finite numbers are of greater philosophical interest than infinity. Certain kinds of beauty can provide an experience of gigantic finitudes without making an ultimately impossible passage to the non-existent sublime, which is replaced in OOO by the notion of the “hyperobjective.”

Chapter 3 (“Theatrical, Not Literal”) considers the work of Fried, the most significant living figure in the formalist tradition despite his own continuing rejection of that term. I will claim that Fried’s critique of literalism is uncircumventable, though he uses “literal” in a more restricted sense than OOO. Any art that ventures too close to the edge of the literalist crater must find some way to avoid it, at the risk of its dissolution as art: this is the major problem faced by Dada, though *not* – I will argue – with its supposed brother Surrealism. But whereas Fried pairs literalism with theatricality, I hold that the two are polar opposites. Indeed, we avoid the literalist destruction of art in no other way than through the theatricality which alone brings art to life. There is the added complexity that for Fried theatricality is not something that can be straightforwardly avoided, given that there is no art without a beholder. Nonetheless, when speaking as a critic of contemporary art, “theatrical” remains Fried’s adjective of choice for works that fail to impress him, and I do not follow him in this usage.

In Chapter 4 (“The Canvas is the Message”) we turn to Greenberg,

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focusing on the limitations specific to his powerful way of thinking. Turning away from an increasingly academic tradition of illusionist three-dimensional painting, the modernist avant-garde had to come to terms with the essential flatness of its medium: that of the background canvas. This shift to the flat background has at least two consequences. The first is Greenberg's consistent denigration of pictorial content, which he tends to dismiss as mere literary anecdote that continues to suggest an illusion of depth. The second, seldom if ever noted, is that the flatness of the canvas background medium is also treated as a *oneness* devoid of parts. On the latter point Greenberg has much in common with Martin Heidegger, that tainted but central philosopher, who often ridicules the surface of the world and its various visible entities as "ontic" rather than ontological. Heidegger also shows a nagging reluctance to conceive of Being as pre-dispersed into numerous individual beings, whose multiplicity he tends to portray as merely the correlate of human experience. It is Greenberg's version of this prejudice that prevents him from grasping the importance of pictorial content.

Chapter 5 ("After High Modernism") considers several of the most prominent ways in which the High Modernism championed by Greenberg and Fried has been rejected. I will focus here on those who do not play a significant role in other chapters of this book. Something should first be said about Harold Rosenberg and Leo Steinberg, two of Greenberg's contemporaries, often portrayed as his rivals. I then turn to the more recent figures T.J. Clark, Rosalind Krauss, and Jacques Rancière; though of necessity my treatment of each figure can only give a rough indication of where my views differ from theirs.

In Chapter 6 ("Dada, Surrealism, and Literalism") we turn to Greenberg's puzzling assertion that Dada and Surrealism are both forms of "academic" art. The problem with treating both movements in the same way is that, although they remain broadly linked in cultural history as overlapping currents of irreverent opposition, by Greenberg's own principles they lead in opposite directions. While the Surrealists retain the traditional medium of nineteenth-century illusionistic painting in order to call our attention to astonishing content, Duchampian Dada offers the most banal content imaginable (bicycle wheel, bottle rack) in an attempt to challenge our sense of what counts as a valid artistic object. Using an analogy from Heidegger's philosophy, I argue that Dada and Surrealism are diametrical opposites in how they go about dismantling literalism, while arguing further that they are not radical departures from the history of Western art.

Chapter 7 (“Weird Formalism”) concludes the book. First, we consider the present state of art as surveyed by one well-informed observer: Hal Foster. Second, given that the most unusual claim of the first six chapters is that beholder and work theatrically constitute a new, third object, this chapter asks what the implications of this idea might be. As for the term “weird,” it is no empty provocation, but a technical term drawn by OOO from the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft. Weird formalism is a kind that pertains neither to the object nor the subject, but to the unmapped interior of their union.

Heidegger, with the proviso that objects hide from each other no less than from us). The same holds for the qualities of objects, which can either be present to the senses (SQ, Husserl's "adumbrations") or forever withdrawn from direct access (RQ, like Husserl's "essential qualities," with the proviso that Husserl is wrong to think the intellect can grasp them directly).

Furthermore, since there are no bare objects without qualities or free-floating qualities without objects, none of these four abbreviations can exist in isolation, but must be paired with one of the opposite type. This yields four possible pairings in all. Let's consider Husserl once more. Though we reject his notion that the real qualities of things can be known by the intellect, we agree with him that real qualities exist: his analysis is perfectly convincing when he shows that any sensual object (such as a horse) has essential qualities no less than inessential ones. In OOO terminology, Husserl shows that when dealing with sensual objects we have both SO-SQ (inessential qualities) and SO-RQ (essential ones). Turning to Heidegger's case, in which the broken tool announces its qualities while remaining forever withdrawn, we have the interesting hybrid form RO-SQ, which proves to be the most important of the four tensions for art. I say four rather than three because we must also speak of the RO-RQ tension, one that is admittedly hard to talk about, since both of its terms are withdrawn from direct consideration. But without RO-RQ, withdrawn objects would all be the same: interchangeable substrata that would differ only insofar as each displayed different sensual qualities at different times to some observer. Since this would preclude any inherent difference between a hammer-in-itself, a horse-in-itself, and a planet-in-itself, there would be no way to account for the special character of each withdrawn object. Thus, the existence of an RO-RQ tension must also be affirmed. Leibniz already saw this in *Monadology* §8, where he insists that his monads are each one, but that each must also have a plurality of traits.¹⁶

Metaphor and its Implications

We are now ready to turn to art. Although this book deals primarily with the visual arts, there are good reasons to start with a discussion of metaphor, which shows us the workings of art more generally in lucid form. How so? Because metaphor is easy to contrast explicitly with *literal* language, and it turns out that whatever else art may be, it cannot have traffic with any form of literalism. This is the point of

closest approach between OOO's theory of art and that of Fried, to be discussed in Chapter 3 below. This does not rule out considering, say, Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades as art, but merely requires that we find a non-literal element in them if they are really to qualify as art.

By *aesthetics*, OOO means the general theory of how objects differ from their own qualities. Given that there are two kinds of objects and two of qualities, there are four separate classes of aesthetic phenomena: RO-RQ, RO-SQ, SO-SQ, and SO-RQ. Generally speaking, RO-RQ is the tension at stake in causation of every type; the old philosophical topic of cause and effect is thus brought for the first time under the banner of aesthetics, where it rightfully belongs.¹⁷ RO-SQ is a less surprising aesthetic tension, the one that deals with our perception of objects under constantly changing appearances and conditions, of the sort that Husserl meant whenever he talked about adumbrations; we will soon see that this tension was noticed by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* as well, under the name of "charm." SO-RQ, which again owes so much to Husserl, concerns the tension between the objects that appear to us and the real qualities that make them what they are; it is here that we find "theory" in the sense of cognitive understanding. It is only with the RO-SQ tension that we find *beauty*, which I do not hesitate to insist is the domain of art, even if most artists today want nothing to do with beauty, but would rather sidestep that question in favor of some socio-political topic or other, given that emancipatory politics is the great intellectual piety of our era. On this score, the situation described by Dave Hickey in *The Invisible Dragon* has not significantly changed, despite his misleading mention of politics: "If you broached the issue of beauty in the American art world of 1988, you could not incite a conversation about rhetoric – or efficacy – or pleasure – or politics – or even Bellini. You would instead ignite a question about the marketplace."¹⁸ For OOO, the meaning of beauty is not some vague appeal to an ill-defined aestheticism, but is explicitly defined as the disappearance of a real object behind its sensual qualities. For reasons soon to be explained, this always has a theatrical effect, and beauty is therefore inseparable from theatricality – despite Fried's understandable insistence to the contrary.

In any case, the OOO theory of metaphor owes much to an important but neglected essay on the topic by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, who was more widely read during the heyday of existentialism than is the case today.¹⁹ Here I will not repeat my interpretation of Ortega's essay, but will simply present the revised

OOO theory that emerged from it.²⁰ In the past, I have always used metaphors from renowned poets; this time I will choose a homely anonymous example found at random in a Google search. It comes from a poem that most intellectuals would scorn as sentimental greeting card verse, though it works perfectly well for our purposes:

A candle is like a teacher
 Who first provides the spark
 That kindles love of learning
 In children's minds and hearts.²¹

If it helps the reader to take it more seriously, we can pretend that this is simply the first stanza of a morbid poem by the Austrian expressionist Georg Trakl, one that soon takes a darker turn toward cocaine, incest, and extinction. Let's also simplify the exercise by limiting ourselves to the first line: "a candle is like a teacher." Next, we should contrast this statement with the dictionary definition of a candle. When I enter "definition of candle" into Google, here is what comes up first: "a cylinder or block of wax or tallow with a central wick that is lit to produce light as it burns." For good measure, let's also use Google to look up the definition of "teacher." This is the first result: "a person who teaches, especially in a school." If we combine the two definitions to replace the original metaphor, the result is perfectly ridiculous. Namely:

A candle is like a teacher.

becomes

A cylinder or block of wax or tallow with a central wick that is lit to produce light as it burns is like a person who teaches, especially in a school.

While somewhat amusing, the second statement is not only unwieldy, but utterly absurd. Yes, we might imagine a master poet of Dada who could pull off this line in a poem, and therefore we hesitate to exclude it from art for all eternity. Yet barring the rare appearance of such a master, there is nothing but sheer literality when we read "a cylinder or block of wax or tallow with a central wick that is lit to produce light as it burns is like a person who teaches, especially in a school." Like every definition taken in isolation, this joint definition is structured as a literal identity. But since under normal circumstances the combined identity is patently false, we are not sure what to make of the statement. Though we mentally repel the second statement in the same way that we hold all nonsense at a distance, we do not

do the same with the original poem, even if we regard it as cloying kitsch. “A candle is like a teacher” is somehow able to draw us into its atmosphere to a sufficient extent that we take it with at least provisional seriousness. We see immediately that this is not a literal statement of the sort we expect from scientific or other knowledge. But what makes the two cases different?

A literal statement treats objects, explicitly or not, as interchangeable with a list of the qualities it possesses.²² Imagine speaking with someone who had somehow managed to go through life without ever hearing the word “candle,” despite a relatively large overall English vocabulary. In such a case, we could repeat the dictionary definition and instruct this person that a candle is a cylinder or block of wax or tallow with a central wick that is lit to produce light as it burns. This definition gives *knowledge* about what a candle is. It does this by deflecting our attention away from the candle itself in two opposite directions. First, it undermines the candle by telling us what it is made of: “a cylinder or block of wax or tallow with a central wick.” Next, it overmines the candle by telling us what it does: “[it] is lit to produce light as it burns.” In the effort to instruct our ignorant acquaintance, the candle is treated as purely equivalent to the sum of its physical composition and its external effects on the world at large. The same holds for the definition of a teacher. If somehow our friend also does not know what “teacher” means, we can give him this knowledge by moving in the same two directions. Looking downward (undermining) we find that a teacher is “a person,” since human beings are the raw material from which all teachers so far have been made. We can also look upward (overmining) to learn that the teacher is someone who “teaches, especially in a school.” Here once more we gain knowledge, and knowledge always entails that an object is replaced by an accurate description of its components, apparent properties, or relations. No aesthetic effect occurs, and hence there is no beauty. We have nothing but paraphrase: nothing but *literalism*. There is no sense of any surplus in the candle or the teacher that goes beyond what we get from adequate definitions of them. Even if these definitions leave out numerous additional details about candles and teachers, we are already on the right track, and cease defining them further only because we have already conveyed enough information for the person to grasp what we mean.

Literal descriptions sometimes fail, of course. It is possible to define a candle or teacher incorrectly, however rare this may be with such widely familiar objects. Yet I remember a moment of youth when someone asked me the meaning of “concierge” and I gave them an

incorrect definition: not as an impish prank, but because at that age I misunderstood what the word meant. When this happens, we have simply ascribed the wrong qualities to the object named. We saw this occur earlier in more bizarre fashion when the definitions of candle and teacher were absurdly combined: “A cylinder or block of wax or tallow with a central wick that is lit to produce light as it burns is like a person who teaches, especially in a school.” Failure also occurs when we replace just one of the definitions and say either “a candle is like a person who teaches, especially in a school” or “a cylinder or block of wax or tallow with a central wick that is lit to produce light as it burns is like a teacher.” Such combinations fail because the literal similarity of candles to teachers is not especially compelling. But this is precisely what makes their *metaphorical* union possible, which leads to some important insights.

Consider the following three statements: (1) “A professor is like a teacher.” (2) “A candle is like a teacher.” (3) “The demographic makeup of Los Angeles at the time of the 2010 census is like a teacher.” Which of these is a good candidate to work as a metaphor? Number 1 is out of the question in most cases, since it is merely a literal statement that points to numerous banal properties shared in common by teachers and professors. With number 3 we have the opposite problem. The two terms appear so unrelated that no aesthetic effect occurs when we hear the sentence: though again, perhaps a poet or comedian of genius could make it work, given the right set-up. Number 2 seems closer to a happy medium, one in which candle and teacher have some connection, though it is not entirely clear what that might be. Perhaps it has something to do with the way that both “bring light” in different senses of the term. But once this is made too explicit, we have again entered the realm of the literal comparison of qualities, and the metaphor immediately falls apart. Imagine the following lines by a poet who should have quit while she was ahead: “A candle is like a teacher, because candles literally bring light to a room, and teachers figuratively bring light to the minds of students.” We now have little more than an annoying platitude. For metaphor to occur, there must be a connection between its two terms, but it must be non-literal and should not be made too explicit.

To learn another important property of metaphor, we can simply *reverse* each of the three statements from the previous paragraph and see what happens. (1) “A teacher is like a professor.” (2) “A teacher is like a candle.” (3) “A teacher is like the demographic makeup of Los Angeles at the time of the 2010 census.” In Number 1 there is really no change from the previous version. A professor is like a teacher,

and a teacher is like a professor; reversing the order of the terms makes no difference to the palpable if tedious truth of the statement. Since the two objects share similar properties, it hardly matters which is mentioned first. In Number 3 there is also no real difference when the terms are reversed: an already highly implausible description has been flipped around, and it is no more or less plausible than it was in original form. It is still difficult to see any connection between a teacher and the demographic makeup of Los Angeles in 2010; this comes off as merely a failed literal description in which the properties of the two terms do not match. But notice how different things are with Number 2: “A candle is like a teacher” and “a teacher is like a candle” both work as metaphors, even if not as especially brilliant ones. Yet the important point is that the metaphors are completely different in the two cases. In the first, we have a candle that seems to impart some sort of teacher-like wisdom and prudence as we sit with it vigilantly through the night, or something along those lines. In the second, we have something like a teacher who somehow illuminates young minds or sets them aflame, though no such literal paraphrase can ever exhaust the metaphor, any more than a globe can be successfully rendered in a two-dimensional map without certain distortions. In the first case the candle is the subject and somehow acquires vague teacher-predicates; in the second, the reverse is true. Literal description or paraphrase simply compares the qualities of whatever two objects are discussed side by side, and hence the order is easily reversible. In metaphor, however, it is a case of translating qualities from one object to another, and thus it is either a teacher with candle-qualities or a candle with teacher-qualities, each completely different from the other.

This has philosophical importance. Imagine a literal statement of the following sort: “a teacher leads the classroom, prepares lesson plans for each day, assigns homework, grades student performance, and lets parents know how their children are faring academically.” We need not interpret this statement in empiricist fashion as just a bundle of qualities. We may be well aware – like Husserl himself – that teachers do many other things besides these, and that the teacher remains a teacher no matter what limited things they are doing at this very moment. If that is the case, then we are already aware of a certain tension between the teacher and his or her currently manifest qualities. In OOO terms, we are dealing with the teacher as SO-SQ, an accessible sensual object with numerous shifting sensual qualities. Yet something different happens with “a teacher is like a candle.” Here, the teacher takes on candle-qualities rather than the expected

teacher-qualities. We have no clear idea what a teacher with candle-qualities would be like, and for this reason the teacher is no longer an SO teacher presented directly to our minds, but an RO teacher: a withdrawn object, a kind of black hole around which the candle-qualities mysteriously orbit. Here we have the (Heideggerian) RO-SQ tension that is the basis of all art. Even if we know that the sensual teacher is different from his or her sensual qualities, in principle he or she can always be described in terms of an accurate qualitative description. But no such paraphrase is possible when the teacher becomes a real object, one that mysteriously withdraws behind the sensual candle-qualities it is now said to possess. Elaine Scarry is on to the same insight when she tells us of metaphor that “when one term ceases to be visible (either because it is not present, or because it is dispersed beyond our sensory field), then the analogy ceases to be inert: the term that is present becomes pressing, active, insistent, calling out for, directing our attention toward, what is absent” (*BBJ* 96).

But this also raises a significant problem: in what sense do we direct our attention toward what is absent in the metaphor? That which is absent is said to be inaccessible in any direct way to human cognition, like a Kantian thing-in-itself or Heideggerian tool-being. Just the same, it makes no sense to think that an object might withdraw and leave behind purely detached qualities, given our acceptance of the phenomenological axiom that objects and qualities always come as a pair. In the metaphor “a teacher is like a candle,” the teacher becomes an RO withdrawn object that leaves behind insistent candle-qualities. And since these candle-qualities cannot attach themselves to a withdrawn teacher, and cannot reattach themselves to their original candle without collapsing into a merely literal statement, there is only one remaining option. Namely, it is *I the reader* who am the real object that performs and thereby sustains the candle-qualities once they are stripped from their usual candle-object. As strange as this may sound, it really just expresses the obvious fact that if the reader is not truly engrossed in the poem, then no aesthetic effect can occur amidst the literalizing boredom. Stated differently, *all aesthetics is theatrical*, as we will see again in Chapter 3 when partially disagreeing with Fried. Nonetheless, the withdrawn teacher does not lose *every* role in the metaphor, since it guides or steers the way in which we perform the candle-qualities it leaves behind in its wake. This becomes clear if we consider alternative metaphors such as “a policeman is like a candle” or “a judge is like a candle.” If it were merely a question of the reader performing candle-qualities in place of the absent subject