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From Essences to Flat Ontologies: Recontextualizing Modernist Thought for the Present

Abstract: In terms of connecting seemingly disparate strands of thought relating to modernism and modernity, Philobiblon's special issue edited by Amalia Cotoi and Alexandru Matei, "Modernism and Bruno Latour. For a Resumption of Modernity" (2023), made a resounding start. Yet Latour's relationism will always be at odds with the purity, stability and autonomy characterizing certain models of modernism, particularly the formalist modernism envisioned by Clement Greenberg. In this article, I will explore a flat ontology that resolves this problem, namely object-oriented ontology (OOO). It emphasizes the nonrelational autonomy of objects, in the same way as Greenberg's modernism emphasizes compositional elements such as line and colour over and above context, disregarding any social or political relations or associations the work might have. As I will suggest, OOO connects with modern art and modernism on multiple levels, testifying to modernism's ongoing relevance.
Keywords: Art; Object; Autonomy; Metaphor; Clement Greenberg; Michael Fried; Machines.

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In terms of connecting seemingly disparate strands of thought relating to modernism and modernity, *Philobiblon*'s special issue edited by Amalia Cotoi and Alexandru Matei, "Modernism and Bruno Latour. For a Resumption of Modernity"[1], made a resounding start. Yet Latour's actor-network theory, defined as "a *flat ontology* that places humans, nonhumans, concepts and fictional characters on the same footing"[2], is based on relations and connections, on the "dissemination, heterogeneity and the careful plaiting of weak ties [such] that each tie, no matter how strong, is itself woven out of still weaker threads"[3], on networks with "nothing in between them"[4]. For this reason, it will always be at odds with the purity, stability and autonomy characterizing certain models of modernism, particularly the formalist modernism championed by Clement Greenberg[5], which is the model that will be discussed here. Greenberg's modernism disregarded any social or political relations or implications a work might have, unlike the models of modernism adopted by Dada, Constructivism and Surrealism. As Colin Trodd points out, the goal of the latter models

was "to generate visions of social and cultural emancipation. In all three cases modernism involved disputing and contesting the shape and nature of modern society"[6]. Greenberg's modernism opted instead for autonomy, which, as I will show, is its main point of convergence with object-oriented ontology or OOO, a flat ontology developed by Graham Harman[7] that is more in line with Greenberg's formalist modernism than Latour's relationism can ever be. A flat ontology is a non-anthropocentric ontology that "decentres obsessive focus on the agency of humans so as to investigate the agency of things"[8], and as a flat ontology, OOO decentres the human in that it regards all objects – a term that for OOO includes both humans and nonhumans – as equally objects. While acknowledging that all objects may not be of equal political or ethical value[9], it emphasizes that they are all autonomous and thus nonrelational. Formalist modernism likewise foregrounds autonomy, focusing on compositional elements specific to painting, such as line and colour, over and above contextual considerations. There is thus a resemblance of sorts between OOO and formalist modernism, in that they both downplay context and/or relations.

Of course, there are also important differences between OOO and modernism, the main one being that as a flat ontology that puts all objects (human and nonhuman) on a par, OOO outstrips formalist modernism by claiming that the object is autonomous not only with respect to the human perceiver, but also with respect to nonhumans. The question of autonomy is thus key to OOO, and is also what differentiates it from other flat ontologies such as actor-network theory and new materialism, which embrace relationality and connectedness. OOO further 'improves' on formalist modernism by asserting that social or political content does not necessarily need to be categorically excluded from artworks. Yet it also claims that the artwork must remain at least to some degree independent of its context, in other words, it cannot engage with all aspects of its context, but only with a limited number of them, if it is to endure and persist as a self-sufficient entity. Thus, in practice, OOO does not really diverge from modernism in this respect: although political content need not be excluded, in practice it nearly always is, in view of the fact that the artwork must not engage with too many aspects of its context. Because of its avoidance of context, OOO cannot be compared to new modernist studies, which, like the new materialism with which they are aligned, advocate a strong contextual and relational engagement. On the contrary, OOO's emphasis on autonomy testifies to its proximity to Greenberg's modernism as opposed to other types of modernism, and its distance from relational modernist models such as new modernist studies.

In this paper I will explore the similarities and differences between OOO and Greenberg's modernism. I will begin by defining the term autonomy as it is employed by Graham Harman and Clement Greenberg respectively. I will show that OOO not only concurs up to a certain point with the formalist approach to autonomy, but also engages with various other aspects of high modernism as defended by its two main protagonists, Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried[10]. These connections between the formalist model and the similarly nonrelational model defended by

OOO testify to high modernism's ongoing relevance in terms of contesting relationality and connectedness. Taking the opposite tack, new modernist studies emphasize modernism's need to take context and connectedness into account, yet as in the case of new materialism, such an approach is ultimately untenable in that it abolishes critical distance and objectivity. In contrast, OOO defends the autonomy and nonrelationality of all objects, thereby promoting separation, objectivity and mutual respect.

OOO and Greenberg's modernism

Before comparing OOO and its perspective on art with Greenberg's modernism, it is necessary to define the term autonomy as it is employed by OOO. As Harman writes: "By *autonomy*, I mean that while all objects have both a causal/compositional backstory and numerous interactions with their environment, neither of these factors is identical with the object itself, which might well […] dispense with much of its backstory"[11]. Autonomy is thus associated with objects, a term that has a special meaning for OOO: for Harman, anything – from events and performances to humans and nonhumans – counts "as an object as long as it meets two simple criteria: (a) irreducibility downward to its components, and (b) irreducibility upward to its effects"[12]. In other words, the object must avoid what Harman calls undermining, or reduction to its parts, and overmining, or reduction to what it does and to its effects, an object being something in between, that cannot be reduced in either of these two ways. The autonomous object is bound up with the notion of a flat ontology, which is similarly defined as "an ontology that refuses to undermine or overmine objects"[13]. Objects for OOO are thus irreducible and consequently autonomous. For Greenberg, the autonomous artwork is also irreducible. As he writes: "What had to be exhibited and made explicit was that which was unique and irreducible not only in art in general, but also in each particular art"[14]. Indeed, only by discovering what was irreducible and specific to it, could painting become autonomous and self-sufficient, with respect to the neighbouring arts. "For the sake of its own autonomy painting has had above all to divest itself of everything it might share with sculpture"[15].

Whereas for Greenberg, it is the methods of other arts that must be avoided to attain autonomy, for Harman, it is undermining and overmining that pose a problem. A frequent form of overmining is the claim that everything is connected or related, which reduces objects to their effects on each other, eschewing the object as such. In opposition to such relationally-oriented philosophers as Bruno Latour or Jane Bennett, Harman defends the object as such, as exemplified by his theory of the third table. In contrast to physicist Sir Arthur Eddington's two tables, one of which is made up of particles (undermining), while the other is the utilitarian object we put to multiple uses in daily life (overmining), Harman proposes a third table that constitutes the table itself[16]. The third table inhabits a different kind of space, a mental space that transcends what can be felt or seen. In the same way, the abstract modernist painting has, according to Greenberg, "abandoned the representation of recognizable objects [...] of the kind of space that recognizable, three-dimensional objects can inhabit"[17], in favour of

abstraction, which also implies going beyond that which is readily visible. In both cases, there is a kind of transcendence at work, an excess that takes us beyond the everyday object into another realm.

For OOO, this excess does not just emerge in our relationship to objects, but also in relations between objects themselves[18]. In other words, OOO considers that the thing in itself is manifest not only in human-human or human-object relations, but also in object-object relations, to which we humans are not privy. The reason for this is that we cannot access relations of which we are not part, all objects being nonrelational and inaccessible with respect to each other. On this point, OOO goes further than modernism, claiming that autonomy does not only imply the autonomy of humans from the world or the world from humans, but refers to the autonomy of every object from every other object[19]. As Harman notes: "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"[20]. OOO takes the idea of autonomy in a different direction than formalist modernism, exploring it in a philosophical rather than artistic context. However, the core idea that the (art) object is cut off from the world is a key point that they have in common.

Harman himself underscores their similarity: "Where we agree with formalism is in its view that the artwork, like any other object, must be treated to a large degree as an autonomous unit cut off from its surroundings"[21]. For Greenberg, autonomy goes hand in hand with similarly exclusionist qualities such as medium-specificity, which means using only methods that are intrinsic to painting, and flatness, which is the only quality unique to painting that it shares with no other art. Greenberg's reasoning is that in order to prevent art from being assimilated to entertainment, it is necessary to show that painting is quite different to entertainment and is estimable in itself[22]. OOO, on the other hand, emphasizes the existence of the withdrawn object, but once again, both for Greenberg and for OOO, isolation and separation are core, as a means of protecting the work or object in itself from absorption and devaluation by the outside world.

That said, there is a sense in which OOO may be said to 'improve' on formalist modernism's avoidance of social and political content, inasmuch as its notion of autonomy is more open-ended than Greenberg's. For OOO, such content need not be explicitly excluded from artworks, it is rather that the artwork must remain at least to some degree independent of its context. In other words, the artwork cannot engage with all the elements of its context, but only with a limited number of them, if it is to endure and persist as an autonomous and self-sufficient entity with respect to the other objects in its surroundings. Yet in practice, this leaves little room for social or political considerations in art as it is defined by OOO. For Harman insists that political considerations can only enter an artwork if they are presented artistically, that is, if they contribute to the work's allure, defined as the fissure between the real thing and its sensual properties that makes us call it art[23]. He thus retains the need to limit social and political content, and when he does permit it, insists that it must be aestheticized. Despite his assertion that

political content need not be barred from artworks, Harman's approach turns out to be fairly close to Greenberg's in terms of excluding non-artistic context and real life.

Metaphor and Illusion

We might conclude from the above that OOO's connections with modern art and modernism are centred around the notion of autonomy. However, is this as far as the parallel goes? Further research shows that there are subtler links, not only between OOO and Greenberg but also between OOO and another key proponent of modernism, Michael Fried. One such connection revolves around the similarity between metaphor (OOO) and illusion (Greenberg) in relation to art. OOO's use of the term metaphor is intrinsic to its approach to art. Indeed, for OOO, the workings of art are best explained through metaphor, which it opposes to literalness, or non-art. "A professor is like a teacher" is a literal statement because it is obvious, while the example "The demographic make-up of Los Angeles at the time of the 2010 census is like a teacher"[24], cannot be metaphorical because there is no connection between the two terms. Only when there is a potential likeness or relationship that is not too obvious can a metaphor – or art – come about. When the metaphor is successful, as in the case of "a teacher is like a candle", the teacher expresses the tension and non-literalism that for OOO defines art[25]. Greenberg's vision of art is also based on non-literalism, namely on the illusion of an optical third dimension. As Greenberg notes, the flatness pursued by modernist art "can never be an utter flatness. The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion […] but it does and must permit optical illusion […] a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension"[26]. A process of deliteralization thus occurs, that is common to both.

For OOO, art is about metaphor, but it can also convey a certain number of literal truths, even though such paraphrasable statements or effects do not suffice for it to qualify as art. In other words, art can have a literal part and a metaphorical part, even though the metaphorical part, the unparaphrasable surplus, is what makes it art. This is exemplified by the ready-made. According to Harman, the ready-made is merely a bundle of qualities presented as art – unlike a sculpture or a painting, which offer a different experience, that of the real object separate from its qualities. Yet under the right circumstances, such as when it is placed in a gallery, the ready-made can also acquire an aesthetic dimension and be experienced as art[27]. For Greenberg too, there is a process of aestheticization, as he points out with respect to Mondrian's work, explaining that black lines and coloured shapes are generally thought to be unsuited to painting, yet in Mondrian's case they mimic the outline of the painting, giving it a new integrity and plenitude[28]. As in the case of the ready-made, something quite ordinary takes on an aesthetic dimension.

Metaphor and art have another key role to play in Harman's scheme of things, insofar as they connect with the real. For even though metaphors are fabrications, it is the metaphorical mode of knowing rather than the literal approach that gives access to the real, according to OOO's somewhat counter-intuitive approach. This is because metaphor, unlike the literal, allows us to rise beyond the object's

sensual qualities and experience its unparaphrasable withdrawn core. As Harman remarks, we do not know "what a teacher with candle-qualities would be like, and for this reason the teacher is no longer [...] presented directly to our minds, but [...] a withdrawn object […] around which the candle-qualities mysteriously orbit"[29]. In other words, we cannot describe the candle-like teacher literally and directly, but only indirectly and metaphorically. Metaphor and art thus give us a momentary glimpse of the withdrawn core concealed in every object, the hidden surplus it possesses, over and above the uses to which we put it or the qualities we assign it. The art object is autonomous, and what makes it art is the glimpse it allows us of what it is really like. Greenberg's position is similar in its quest for the meaning of art. He notes: "The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself […] in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence"[30]. The differences between OOO and modernism notwithstanding, we may note that formalist modernism, like OOO, is also trying to get at the essence of art.

There are also other parallels between OOO and Greenberg. They are both interested in the notion of an invisible background, a kind of unchanging essence. In his article *Greenberg, Duchamp, and the Next Avant-Garde*, Harman draws on Heidegger, on whom his own philosophical approach is based, to suggest that whatever is visible "appears only against a hidden background from which it draws nourishment"[31]. He compares this critique of presence with Greenberg's critique of academic art, according to which academic art takes "its medium too much for granted. In similar fashion, 'academic philosophy' for Heidegger would be the kind that treats being as something that can be exhausted in some form of presence"[32]. In other words, both academic art and academic philosophy fail to acknowledge that there is more to art or philosophy than the medium or presence. Harman emphasizes the importance of the invisible background, which in his case is the thing itself, noting that it cannot be grasped through the relations we have with it. We necessarily reduce, caricature and distort it, because we only ever interact with a few of its many properties.

As Harman explains, media theorist Marshall McLuhan likewise focuses on the notion of the deep invisible background, arguing that that we cannot look directly at a medium such as television, but only at its effects. As in in the case of OOO, the background medium counts for much more than content[33]. The same applies to Greenberg, for whom Picasso, Braque and other modern artists are noteworthy because they are inspired by the medium in which they work[34]. Content is less important than exploring the possibilities of the medium, which is why Greenberg is especially interested in artists who in his view make the invisible structure of their medium visible through their art[35].

Another point that Harman and Greenberg have in common is their reevaluation of the human. As a flat ontology, OOO seeks to eschew hierarchical modes of thought by putting humans and nonhumans on a par and thereby decentring the human. Greenberg's modernism, which emphasizes vision at the expense of the other senses can, according to Caroline Jones, be understood in the context

of the bureaucratization of the senses that was taking place in the United States at mid-century – as exemplified by technologies such as hi-fi, which targeted the ear. For Jones, the bureaucratization of the senses reflected the collective dehumanization resulting from processes of rationalization and segmentation[36]. In other words, OOO decentres the human, while Greenberg's perspective takes into account the process of dehumanization, and so, in terms of reconsidering the status of the human, they can be said to be on neighbouring ground.

Finally, they are also on neighbouring ground with respect to the viewer. For OOO, the human is a necessary ingredient of the artwork – in the sense that a painting is only a painting if someone is there to experience it. Yet this does not compromise the artwork's autonomy, because the human as an ingredient of the work is not the same as the human who beholds the work. The human who beholds the work does not grasp it in its totality, which is why the work remains autonomous[37]. For Greenberg, autonomy is also a question of incompleteness, in the sense that the work's non-artistic ramifications are no longer taken into account. In both cases, albeit for different reasons, the work is not fully grasped by the viewer. Both Harman and Greenberg reevaluate the viewer, thereby pointing up high modernism's relevance to current philosophical concerns.

OOO and Michael Fried

We might also explore the parallels between OOO and the work of the modernist art critic and art historian Michael Fried[38], who was influenced by Greenberg. As Harman points out, Fried not only rejects the view that the relations between a painting and its beholder are the outcome of sociopolitical forces, but he also denounces the theatricality of Minimalist artworks, deploring their need for a beholder and their focus on the viewer-artwork relation[39]. Fried furthermore dislikes the anthropomorphism of Minimalist works, by which he means that the scale of the work recalls the size of the human body and a kind of human presence, and questions the Minimalists' interest in situations and duration. Indeed, for Fried, what counts are objects rather than situations, presentness and instantaneousness rather than experiences that develop over time. Harman writes: "Non-theatricality vs. theatricality is, for the Fried of 1967, the basic strife separating the legitimate Modernist avant-garde of Noland, Olitski, and Stella from the illegitimate, literalist, and anthropomorphic theatre of the Minimalists"[40].

Harman outlines the main points of agreement and disagreement between OOO and Fried as follows: Fried's point that the continuing survival of the arts depends on their capacity to oppose theatre is echoed by OOO's insistence on avoiding literalism, a literal situation being an encounter consisting solely of our relations with objects, that does not address the object itself. Yet although Harman agrees that art has become more theatrical in the sense of including performance, happenings and situations, he does not agree that it has become more literal. The same applies to Fried's second principle, which is that art degenerates when it approaches the theatrical: for OOO, art degenerates when it approaches the literal. Finally Fried considers that the notion of quality is only applicable to individual arts, in other words that each art should focus on its own

qualities and therefore respect the barriers between the genres. For OOO, however, there is no reason to exclude works drawing on multiple genres[41]. There is thus little common ground between Fried and Harman on these points, even though Fried's emphasis on the artwork's autonomy remains an important parallel between them.

In his text *The Anxiousness of Objects and Artworks*, Robert Jackson identifies yet another parallel, between OOO's term'allure' and Fried's term "absorption". Allure is defined as the operation through which "objects are split apart from their traits even as these traits remain inseparable from their objects. Above all else, it seemed to be aesthetic experience that splits the atoms of the world and puts their particles on display"[42]. Absorption, on the other hand, refers to an artwork whose protagonists disregard the beholder, inasmuch as they are absorbed in what they doing – as opposed to theatricality, which refers to an artwork that addresses or takes into account the viewer. An example of absorption is Chardin's *The Soap Bubble* (c. 1739), where a boy is engrossed in blowing a soap bubble, oblivious to everything else[43]. For Jackson, the role of the viewer, who is disregarded and ignored, recalls the notion of the thing in itself. He asks: "How can the beholder not be taken into account and yet circumstance dictates that they have a relation towards the work? For the same reason that *the thing in itself exists but can never be made present*"[44]. Or as Harman puts it, "the beholder is *neutralized*, despite being there anyway"[45]. In other words, the viewer is present but their presence is cancelled out, just as the thing in itself is there somewhere, since it exists, but is not present either.

Harman likewise explores the relation between absorption, theatricality and OOO: he accounts for the viewer's involvement in the artwork by suggesting that art is a kind of performance or theatre, insofar as the beholder who is convinced by an artwork, becomes involved in it and reenacts it[46]. As he rightly points out, there is an inherent theatricality in all art, since the participation and performative involvement of the viewer are essential in order to deliteralize what is seen and turn it into art[47]. In other words, for Harman, literalism in art is to be forever eschewed, but theatricality in the performative sense is welcome, constituting a kind of absorption. As Harman points out, contra Fried: "The theatrical relation between artwork and beholder is simply absorption by other means. This makes it impossible to read theatricality as being *ipso facto* the death of art"[48].

Radicalizing Greenberg and Fried

In the second part of *The Anxiousness of Objects and Artworks*, Jackson seeks to radicalize the modernist criticism of Greenberg and Fried with a view to reconciling it with OOO's performative non-anthropocentrism. Quoting J. M. Bernstein in *Against Voluptuous Bodies*[49]. he explains that the rationality of modernity consists in critically overcoming the temptations of anthropomorphism, i.e. the projection of human traits onto inanimate objects or animals. Having overcome anthropomorphism, modernity's rationalist drive instrumentalizes value and morality, reducing them to the fulfilment of materialistic needs and desires. Greenberg's modernism contradicted this tendency, indeed it "*defended* the human limits of anthropomorphism against visionless pure reasoning and rational justification"[50]. As Jackson points out, once again citing

Bernstein, Greenberg's world was a world seen through human eyes[51]. It was a world in which the artist derives his inspiration from the medium in which he works and in which "the form of such a medium remains intrinsically correlated with artists and viewers"[52].

On this basis, Jackson seeks to bring Greenberg's criticism closer to OOO. As noted previously, what unites Harman and Greenberg is their conviction that works of art are irreducible and discrete entities that cannot be defined in terms of social, political or scientific analysis. Jackson writes: "Harman values in Greenberg what he also values in […] Marshall McLuhan, namely that such critics [...] identify a central interaction between the present-at-hand sensual figure, content, or foreground, and the withdrawn, real background of medium and form"[53]. With regard to Fried, the relation with OOO is even more intricate. Although Fried rejected the thesis that painting has a timeless essence, his critique of minimalism is in line with the tenets of OOO. As Jackson notes, for Fried, minimalism was a form of "theatre, which brought out the *wrong sort of anthropomorphic relationship* compared to the more authentic high modern one. Distinct emphasis was placed on the relationship between the beholder and the work [whereby] *each duration of experience 'was' the work*"[54]. As noted previously, for Fried, the subjective experience of the work advocated by Minimalism did not measure up to an actual art object, just as the minimalist work's focus on the duration of the subject's experience did not measure up to the non-durational authentic experience. The presentness of the high modernist artwork had no duration and required a timeless object, as timeless as the object in OOO[55].

For Fried, presentness meant that the work was manifest instantaneously and completely at all times. As Jackson points out however, such presentness is necessarily a mental process and thus cannot take place without the viewer[56]. In order to steer Fried closer to OOO, he looks at how Fried traces the invention of the absorptive mechanism back to Caravaggio, subsequently locating it in Chardin and more recently in the work of Anri Sala and Douglas Gordon, who are among the artists featuring in his book *Four Honest Outlaws*. Jackson's conclusion is that the latter publication "points towards the beginnings of a non-human anti-literal presentness within the work of artists working today"[57].

For Jackson, such a non-human presentness would imply that empathy could be felt with non-humans. He identifies such a presentness in Fried's description of Douglas Gordon's *Play Dead: Real Time* (2003), which features an elephant trained to play dead and then stand up and walk around. Here Fried confronts the question as to whether the elephant, as a non-human, can be said to be absorbed in its actions and to elicit empathic acknowledgement. The elephant does indeed appear totally engrossed in its actions, to the point of encouraging empathy and fully absorbing the viewer, thereby suggesting that "the anthropomorphic tropes of anti-literal absorption can be witnessed and extended *beyond* the modernist limits of human sensibility"[58]. As Jackson writes, empathic projection also "suggests that we acknowledge the existence of *something specific* outside of ourselves, even though it is projected and unknowable"[59]. The work thus converges with OOO's realist perspective, which endorses the mind-independence of the

world[60]. At the same time, the work does not go quite as far as OOO, which makes the claim that empathic projection can take place among objects without humans being involved.

However the work does open up the possibility that a feeling of empathy could come about not just between humans and animals but also between humans and machines. Machine learning, as explored in Pierre Huyghe's 2018 exhibition at the Serpentine, is an example of a technology that could be regarded as giving access to the object's reality and 'point of view', in line with OOO. For his exhibition, Huyghe chose a set of images and asked a collaborator to recreate the images in their mind. A scanner recorded the person's brain activity during this process and passed the data on to a deep neural network, which tried to reconstruct the images from the data, drawing on material from its image bank[61]. The deep neural network's multiple attempts to represent human thinking were displayed on the LED screens in the gallery, in the form of blurry, flickering images. Yet although its interpretations were distorted and unidentifiable as far as the viewer was concerned, they were nonetheless completely logical from the viewpoint of the machine. Just as OOO insists on the mind-independent real concealed within objects, so does Huyghe's nonliteral artwork give us a sense of the autonomy and non-humanness of the machine.

In point of fact, neither the AI nor the viewer had access to the original images that had triggered the production of the data, as a result of which, both were caught in a guessing game of their own: while the AI was trying to guess what the original images were, the viewer was trying to guess what the AI's interpretation of the original images represented. The confused, flickering images produced by the AI, and the viewer's inability to recognize them confirm that each was carrying out its assigned task, but that neither was succeeding in it. Here, as in Douglas Gordon's video, empathic projection is taking place, this time with respect to a machine. Once again, the empathic projection is more than just a projection: in both these works, the viewer projects feelings of absorbed concentration and effort onto an animal or a machine, in which the concentration and effort are really taking place: the computer tries in vain to identify the original images, just as the elephant focuses on playing dead. We empathize with their efforts which are more than just projections, but are very real. These works illustrate OOO's point that the viewer becomes performatively involved in the artwork and that such empathy need not only concern human sensibility[62], thereby bringing Fried's modernism in line with OOO.

Conclusion

Both OOO and Greenberg's modernism emphasize autonomy, on which point they share common ground. Yet in both cases this poses a problem. As Bernstein points out with regard to Fried, rationalization, industrialization and mechanization were all impacting art and pushing it to find new forms of authenticity for itself, making the separation of high modernist art from external influences untenable and leading to its demise[63]. OOO finds itself in a similar situation, for just as artistic autonomy had to contend with the forces of rationalisation and industrialization, so does autonomy as

defined by OOO have to contend with resistance to distance and separation – due in no small part to the pervasive influence of new materialism and similar theories not only in the arts but also in science and culture in general – theories that lay emphasis on relationism and connectedness. New materialism, for instance, holds that there are no individual actors, but only interconnections and entanglements between humans and nonhumans, and its widespread acceptance in philosophical and artistic circles means that any notion of separation or distance immediately appears suspect. However, the thesis that everything is connected is problematic, for if everything is indeed connected to everything else, it becomes harder to distinguish between different things, people or forces. It is difficult to ascribe moral responsibility for an action when the person or persons who carried it out cannot be clearly identified or distinguished. Individuality is also at risk, the only choice when everything is interconnected being to dominate or be dominated by others. As I have shown, OOO takes a different view, in that it supports distance and separation instead. On the one hand, OOO marks a shift from the hierarchization and elitism of high modernist art in the direction of a greater equality between entities. On the other hand, it counters the focus on relations, as high modernism did in its day. This time round however, an awareness of the failings of generalized connectedness is slowly but surely beginning to emerge in philosophical and cultural circles, coupled with the realization that autonomy and distance can be a bulwark against these failings. These forces may well save contemporary conceptions of autonomy from the fate of high modernism.

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