

POCKET-CALLS

POINT(S) OF CONTACT BETWEEN ART PRACTICE AND PHILOSOPHY

di James Charlton

Abstract

Written as the first lockdowns of the COVID pandemic forced us to confront the practical realities of withdrawing from the world, this essay responds to the apparent 'ontological softening' of Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) set out by Graham Harman in *Art + Object* (2020). It aims to return the 'complement' paid by Harman and considering how contemporary art can be useful to philosophy rather than how OOO can be useful to contemporary art?

Following Harman's analysis of art critics Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg work, the essay sustains the metaphorical narrative of the telephone-call drawn from Joseph Beuys's sculpture *Telefon S-----E*, 1974, as means of un-packing the *weird* aesthetic of absorptive beholder-artwork theatrics that Harman sets out in support of OOO's *quadruple object*. While outlining salient points raised by *Art + Objects*, there is, in the context of this journal, an assumption that the reader has sufficient familiarity with the key principles of OOO to allow meaningful comparison with philosophies of relation, represented here via the work of Barbara Bolt, Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, as a socialising superposition. However, rather than enflame extant ontological hostilities the essay focuses on the *handability* of practice as a mode of knowing or revealing.

This comparison serves to highlight key methodological differences between the contortions of Harman's art historical reading of Real Objects of art as being withdrawn behind the surface of representation, and the practices of Post-object artists Jim Allen and Bruce Barber in which the artist doubles as a performer immersed in their own psychic experience. The point being made that Harman's vicarious method of *allure* is predicated in a *violent* resistant to presence, whereas art is premised on a practice of *care* that is held present in theatrical contact: an aesthetic distinction regarding the proximity of substances through which Harman argues for aesthetics as first philosophy. The intended 'complement' is thus returned by suggesting that one way in which contemporary art can to prove useful to philosophy is by asserting that in as much as *care* is an aesthetic that takes form in practice, philosophy might resist the violence of representation upon which the withdraw of OOO object is based in deference to the aesthetic practice of care as the foundation of metaphysics.

Key words: Object Oriented Ontology, Post-object Art, practice, contemporary art, philosophy, performance, aesthetics.

Pocket-calls (Art and Philosophy)



Jim Allen, *Contact: "Computer Dance"*, 1974.
Photo: Byron Dalefield.



Reconstruction of Joseph Beuys, (*Telefon S—E*), 1974.

It is hard to imagine an image more revealing than that which appears on the cover of Graham Harman's recent book *Art + Objects*. The two tin cans in Joseph Beuys' *Telephone S – – – – E* (1974)¹, appear placed firmly down on the surface of the book. As if sitting in mutual defiance of their entanglement with the length of twine that connects them, they seem to make the likelihood of brokering a connection as improbable as accessing the *thing-in-itself*.

Yet there is something troublesome about the metaphorical encapsulation of Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) in a tin-can-telephone - something which nags at the thread of logic that Harman unpicks for us in his text, a text that becomes frayed as perhaps it did for Harman himself, who acknowledges that he was hesitant to publish the book because «something in the argument felt wrong for reasons hard to identify» (Harman 2020, 3).

Despite being literally blindfolded, the same sense of metaphorical withdrawal that silences the *tin-can-telephone* does not appear to trouble the performers on the cover of *Points of Contact* – the catalogue accompanying an exhibition on the work of Jim Allen, Len Lye and Hélio Oiticica (Allen et al. 2011).² Here, in an image of Allen's artwork *Contact* (1974), a group of near naked performers, their vision impaired by heavy black rubber masks, search for each other using parried transmitter and receiver devices. While constrained by their sensory deprivation and distracted by the intermittent noises emitted from these devices, they seem, unlike the muted cans in Beuys' work, insistent about their accessibility and hopelessly entangled in their inter-relationality. Although many aesthetic questions arise here, the nagging doubt that lingers in Harman's mind does not find further sustenance in Allen's work. In the hollow ringing of an empty tin-can we find the echo of doubt – the persistent ringing of feedback from philosophies a pocket-call to itself.



Details from VHS. Jim Allen, *Contact*: "Computer Dance", 1974. Videographer: Bruce Barber. Courtesy of Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision.

If the comparison between one of the most influential artists of the post-war period and a relatively obscure³ New Zealand Post-object artist seems improbable, we need not look much further for a clue to connecting the two works than the date of the works -1974: a

¹ This work is given different titles by different sources. This appears to be because of translation and because of the use of a reverse E. Following the inscription on the work it is referred to here as *Telephone S – – – – E*.

² While this essay takes its title from the catalogue, it is seen as no small coincidence that Harman uses it as a section heading in Chapter Five of *The Quadruple Object* (Harman 2011, 72).

³ While Allen is little known outside of Australia and New Zealand, as a recipient of the NZ Arts Foundation Laureate Icon Award, he is recognised as an influential figure in the New Zealand world (Arts Foundation 2015).

time when conceptual art was arguably at its zenith. But more significantly, Post-object art's emphasis on ideas and events rather than things themselves is, as Christina Barton et al point out, directly comparable to practices that were elsewhere «called 'post-minimal', 'conceptual' or 'arte povera'» (9). By inference, we can extend this to include a debt to Fluxus and the work of Joseph Beuys⁴. However, while we will return to the pedigree of Post-object Art later with regard to Harman's unpacking of *formalism*, its framing here in regard to Beuys' *Telephone S — — — — E*, is not simply synchronic.

As implied above, *Contact's* parried transmitter and receiver devices are mirrored by the acronym *S — — — — E*, the title of the work that is also painted on one of the cans in reference to the German *Sender [Transmitter] und Empfänger [Receiver] (Defl)*⁵. However, while the function of the tin cans is mirrored by the trans-ceiver pairings in Allen's work, this only serves to draw our attention to apparent differences in the approach taken towards *theatricality* in the two works. In an attempt to salvage *formalism* from the wreck of post-modernist anti-formalism, the term *theatrical* is necessarily given nuanced meaning in *Art + Objects* (Harman 2020, x). As this circuitous argument provides insights that allow us to understand how object oriented aesthetics thinks it can ontologically embrace both a performed action and passive object, it is necessary to spend some time outlining Harman's argument vis-a-vis the work of art critics Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg. This will be done with the assumption that, in the context of this publication, the reader is already familiar with the key principles of Object Oriented Ontology but may not have read the newly released *Art + Objects*⁶.

But before embarking on this task, it is important to position this essay in which readers may already have detected a performative disregard of academic conventions. As a second-generation Post-object artist, *vicariously* influenced by Allen, I am first and foremost concerned with the practice of art. This signals a significantly different agenda from Harman's goal of making philosophy «useful to artists» by re-purposing art criticism (Harman 2020, 166). Such aims, as Greg Hainge points out in his reflection on the ways in which art history becomes the subject of philosophical inquiry, tend to enfold the work of art in «historically contingent forms of thought and discourse» while forgetting that they aren't dealing with «the work of art itself in any raw or direct form» such as is found in practice (Hainge 2016, 137). (Correcting myself then: it is an *image* of tin cans that appears on the cover of the Harman's book). This is something we should not forget in our discussion of *Art + Objects*, as the Art Historical method risks overmining the very *literalism* Harman seeks to dissuade us from. For artists, this is no trivial matter: while philosophy, criticism and art history are indeed of interest to artists, the necessarily *reflexive* method these disciplines employ allows theory to slip gently from the *reflective* grasp of practice as it withdraws from immediate us⁷. This point is well made with regard to the work of art by

⁴ Although there is little evidence of direct contact between NZ artists and Beuys – Andrew Drummond being one exception to this, the influence of conceptualism in NZ was «informed by a small but steady flow of visiting artists from Britain and North America» (Barton et al. 2011, 9-13). This is not to say that Post-object Art emerged in the same way as conceptualism but rather that it arrived at similar «ways of making meaning [that] are now more or less standard throughout the art world» (Barton et al. 2011, 13).

⁵ Although the *E* painted on the can is typically flipped to stand for *Empfänge*, this is a very singular and rather limited reading.

⁶ For an introduction to the basic principles of OOO, Harman provides a summary of OOO and art in Chapter 1, *Art + Objects*, (Harman 2020).

⁷ The distinction made here between *reflexive* and *reflective* methods is derived from Rudi Dallos and Jacqui Stedmon who distinguish between the use of the terms in clinical therapy. They use «reflexivity to refer to the act of looking back over, or reflecting on, action» and «reflection to refer to the spontaneous and immediate act of reflecting in the moment». This is a useful distinction to make with regard to recent discussion of practice-based research by the likes of Barbara Bolt (Bolt 2006).

Barbara Bolt, when, following a familiar Heideggerian argument, she extends the problem of enframement to the representation of art by other methods (Bolt 2010) – an argument with affinities to Harman’s call for a ban on *literalism* that will be addressed later (Harman 2020, x).

Without getting ahead of myself, though, I return to the objective of this essay – that of returning the complement and asserting the proprietary nature of art by writing as a practitioner concerned first and foremost with practice. If OOO is to be useful to artists then the way in which art is practised needs to be of primary concern – more so, I suggest, than the *beholden* art object, especially one read exclusively through an art historical lens. Although the point of entry to this discussion has been the work of Beuys and Allen, this does not negate a commitment on my part to *contemporary* visual arts – although we are hard-pressed to find such a commitment in *Art + Objects*. Is the question then not just how OOO can be useful to *contemporary* artists, but how contemporary artists can be useful to OOO? Of course, the takeaways are not just for OOO as, by extending the reading of the transceiver pairing in Beuys’ work, the question of aesthetics as first philosophy is raised.

Don’t hang up! (Contortions)

One of the reasons, I suggest, for Harman’s appeal outside of strictly philosophical fields is his ability to communicate complex ideas succinctly. Even those who have watched one of his many lectures online will have a sense of how his ability to connect with an audience couples with his command of the subject to construct a persuasive narrative. Although his books, too, tend to unfold with a similar sense of surety that typically comes from a clarity of purpose, it is easy to lose track of this in *Art + Objects*. Any sense of lingering doubt that Harman may have had about publishing the book perhaps resides as much from the slipperiness of Fried and Greenberg’s terminology as with Harman’s own contortions over art and *object* relations: Harman puts one arm around Fried’s self-professed anti-formalism⁸, while embracing Greenberg – the archetypal formalist critic – with the other, and conjuring up his own *weird formalism* behind everyone’s backs at the same time. Given the convoluted nature of the argument, it is thus helpful to keep in mind the unifying principle that guides Harman as he manipulates Fried and Greenberg: that the *withdrawal* of the Real Object, which sits at the core of OOO, implicates the accessibility of surface qualities – qualities found in the Sensual Object, that are our only point of contact with the Real Object (Harman 2011). Harman’s reading of Fried and Greenberg should then always be made with this purpose in mind: the purpose of developing an *indirect aesthetic* (Charlton 2019).

As Greenberg is closely associated with the work of Abstract Expressionists painters, he is often seen to *advance* the flatness of the surface above pictorial content. In as much as he criticises academic art for its «tendency to take the medium of an art too much for granted» and presents modernist painting as «orienting itself to flatness as it did to nothing else», this is perhaps understandable (Greenberg, 1961 and 1980). However, as Harman is well aware, «the significance of flatness for Greenberg is always that it plays the role of deep background» (Harman 2020, 104). Thus flatness – the essential quality of Modernist painting if not sculpture⁹ – doesn’t exist in isolation. Rather, it is seen to withdraw beneath

⁸ While Fried is typically considered a formalist along with Greenberg, Harman citing Fried, asserts a separation between the two (Harman 2020, 49).

⁹ Writing on *New Sculpture*, Greenberg links «*construction-sculpture*» to abstract painting: «Under the modernist ‘reduction’, sculpture has turned out to be almost as exclusively visual in its essence as painting itself». What

the surface of even the most unassuming mark. The inference is clear if not stated outright by Harman: in as much as flatness is «unique and exclusive to pictorial art» (Greenberg 1961) it is a Real Object. As the Real Object of flatness withdraws beneath the surface of the mark, it is only the mark which we have direct access to – a mark which is, as such, analogous to the Sensual Object¹⁰. This is the so-called *revenge of the surface* by which absolute flatness is never realized (Harman 2013).

Harman argues that, with the Real Object-Sensual Quality dynamic, there is an interdependence between an object and its quality in an artwork which «hinges on the interplay between content and ground» (Harman 2020, 85). In the case of OOO aesthetics, this interplay is mediated by the *beholder* of the artwork who must «step in to replace the vanished real object» (Harman 2020, 35). As mediator, the *beholder* thus becomes an essential but separate constituent of an art work that they can never exhaustively grasp (Harman 2020, 44-45).

Taking up the metaphor again, then, we see how well Beuys' tin-can-telephone serves as a stand-in for the mediated conversation between artwork and audience, one in which there is never direct access to the person on the other end of the line, only their voiceprint on the surface of the receiver. In as much as the metaphor becomes the media,¹¹ it assumes a more significant role here than simply manifesting «the tension between a thing's underground reality and its sensual profile» (Harman 2005, 102)¹².

While Harman established the grounds for OOO's treatment of metaphor in *Guerrilla Metaphysics*¹³, its function in regards to aesthetics is developed further in *Art + Objects* through the formalist approaches of both Fried and Greenberg. As the means by which one object merges with the other, metaphor is understood by Harman to be more than just a poetic device and becomes a fundamental means by which the split between Real Object and beholder of an artwork is resolved. In contrast to *literal* knowledge of a thing, metaphor is an incomplete gesture that merely indicates towards something such that the beholder has to go and find it for themselves¹⁴. Literalism, taken as explicit knowledge of a thing, is then the antithesis of metaphor which, being «concerned with properties of things», can never be paraphrased in terms of surface qualities (Harman 2005, 118).

As Harman puts it, the «living force of metaphor» sits in opposition to «the dead determinations of literal speech» (Harman 2005, 121). It forces «us to live a new feeling-thing» (Harman 2005, 109,) one that functions as a theatrical interaction rather than a literal thing. Here, rather than Greenberg's flatness – which gives us a withdrawn Real Object – Fried's *theatricality* adopts a new tone under the influence of OOO, one that connects various threads of Harman's argument together but turns itself inside out in the process, such that we might consider 'hanging up' on the whole business before we really get started.

Literalism, understood here in opposition to *theatricality*, has been aligned with explicit knowledge of a thing in its full and complete sense – a form of knowledge OOO denies us.

he sees as the «self-sufficiency» of sculpture “for and by itself» is a withdraw from literalism equivalent to the that of flatness (“New Sculpture” in Greenberg 2006, 139).

¹⁰ Analogous because the mark is an object in its own right under OOO and should not be undermined.

¹¹ While Harman makes the connection between Greenberg and Marshal McLuhan's slogan, 'the medium is the message', it is not necessary to address this in full here (Harman 2020, 99).

¹² For this reason, the extended metaphor of the phone can perhaps be forgiven as it is employed as a theatrical device in order to put in to practice what cannot be represented by words.

¹³ Drawing specifically on José Ortega y Gasset's theory of metaphor.

¹⁴ Although not addressed by Harman, inference here is made to Heidegger's method Formal Indication as discussed in *Catch | Bounce* (Charlton, 2017).

Through this, literalism has also been treated formally as one and the same as the withdrawn flatness of Greenberg's pictorial ground. Although sharing many of Greenberg's formalist sentiments with regard to Modernist painting, Fried somewhat confuses things by using the term *literalist* to refer to Minimalist art¹⁵, which he criticises for being theatrical. The «Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work» (Fried, 153). The 'revenge of literalism' is, for Fried at least, nothing if not theatrical!

On the basis of this, then, it might not seem necessary to draw Fried into the OOO conversation at all¹⁶. However, breaking down Fried's assertion, Harman finds cause to condemn the literal while selectively defending certain aspects of the theatrical. The bifurcating of the theatrical stems from two separate articles contained in Fried's statement above: «the actual circumstances» and «the beholder». Rather than taking this to mean that the beholder is part of the circumstance *in which* the art work is encountered, «OOO claims they are different things altogether» (Harman 2020, 55). (Although the 'in which' seems to suggest some relational culpability of the beholder in the circumstance of art, we need not get hung-up on this point¹⁷). By separating the *beholder* from its *circumstances* Harman invokes two types of theatricality, one being relational and synonymous with literalism, the other being *absorptive* and contrary to literalism¹⁸. Obviously, any hint of relationality is abhorrent to an ontology commitment to the autonomy of objects as OOO is. Yet Harman needs a way to explain how the theatrical can avoid literal interpretation as he sees this as being essential to aesthetics.

So stripping theatricality of its relationality is vital to the maintenance of an aesthetics consistent with OOO. A relational aesthetics¹⁹ – one in which «every artwork is devoured by the whole of its surroundings» – not only threatens the autonomy of Real Objects but also leads to a literal world in which aesthetics as metaphorical being is necessarily abandoned (Harman 2020, 55). From *Guerrilla Metaphysics* we already understand the generative role that metaphor performs in shattering the literal bond and releasing new tangible objects into the world. So it is of little surprise when Harman reminds us that «the theatrical is essential to aesthetics because it alone is what saves us from the literal: namely, as discussed, by having the beholder RO step in and replace the sensual object SO» (Harman 2020, 65). The beholder's intervention is, however, not a capture-all move, as interactions between Real Objects and Sensual Objects create «freestanding objects in their own right» (Harman 2005, 177). The total independence of this new object, from both beholder and the art object, is significant in that it prevents OOO objects from being assimilated into the monistic totality of their relational surroundings. In art then, metaphor is alive in «the theatrical relation between artwork and beholder», the experience that is the *work-of-[object-oriented]-art* (Harman 2020, 76).

Psychic hotline (Connections)

¹⁵ «[...] Minimal Art - or, as I prefer to call it, literalist art [...]» (Fried 1998).

¹⁶ In fact, it is difficult to find any mention of him in Harman's previous text on art or aesthetics.

¹⁷ As Harman notes, Fried goes on to affirm that «the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation-one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder» (Fried 1998, 3).

¹⁸ To help simplify matters Fried's analysis of a *beholder's absorption* in a work of art – as set out by him *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Fried 1980), is not discussed here.

¹⁹ Obvious reference is made here to the relationality of Nicolas Bourriaud, who, according to Harman, fails to make an «important distinction between the human being as an *ingredient* of art as a privileged *beholder* of it» (Harman 2020, 45).

As theatre, art is work, in that there is work-to-be-done by the beholder in making the artwork. Thus, *work* - vacillating between the material thingness of *what* and the active thingness of *how* – becomes a useful lens through which to return to consider Allen's *Contact* (1974)²⁰.

While Fried would no doubt decry the theatricality of such performance work as a negation of art, OOO has no such qualms (Fried 1998, 153). For Harman, *theatricality* – as a necessary condition of aesthetics – does not preclude «performance art, conceptual art, land art, 'happenings,' interactive installations or other hybrid genres» from being a form of art (Harman 2020, 45). Accepting the comparability of Post-object art and conceptual art, as proposed by Barton, we should then add Post-object works like *Contact* to the list of work consistent with OOO's *weird* aesthetics²¹.

As is often the case with work of this nature, the audience is conspicuously absent in the 1974 photographic documentation of *Contact*²², such that the camera might appear to be the only beholder of the event. In these still images we are constantly reminded of our distance from the work as audience – not only by the framing of the camera, but also by the scaffold that delineates an almost pictorial space that we peer into in order to watch the action. While this is certainly true of the original 1974 performance, the *still* photographic documentation of the 2010-11 reenactments of *Contact* differ subtly²³. Here, rather than maintaining a respectful distance, the camera penetrates the frame, gets in close, cropping off heads and arms in a rather ad hoc manner as if we – the beholders – are part of the performance itself. This, I suggest, is due to the affordances of digital technologies that make it possible to export high resolution still images such as these from video footage – something not possible from the grainy VHS footage taken of the original performance²⁴. More significantly, however, the 'up-close' nature of these images points to an often-overlooked aspect of these performances.

²⁰ As discussed in *Catch | Bounce* following Heidegger the «work-of-art is the totality of the *what* and the *how* of artwork, artist and audience interactions» (Charlton 2017, 129).

²¹ *Art + Objects* concludes with a chapter entitled "Weird Formalism". While not alien to Harman's other writing, Harman qualifies the use of this technical term which he takes from H. P. Lovecraft to be a kind of formalism that «pertains neither to object nor the subject, but to the unmapped interior of their union» (Harman 2020, 11).

²² *Contact* is in fact a three-part performance comprised of Computer Dance, Parangola Capes and Body Articulate. In order to save us from lengthy descriptive explanations of these work commentary here is limited to Computer Dance due to its connection with Beuys's Telephone S-----E (1974). While we do see the audience huddled in the shadows of the doorway to Part 3- Body Articulation, they are clearly banned from the theatrical arena demarked by plastic covering the walls and floor and are incidental to the performance.

²³ In 2010 the Govett-Brewster Gallery, New Plymouth, NZ, staged the first re-enactment of *Contact*, including, *Computer Dance*, *Parangola Capes* and *Body Articulation*. The work was subsequently shown at Art Space, Auckland, 2011. I was involved in a technical capacity in both re-enactments as acknowledge by Allen in *The Skin of Years*, 2014.

²⁴ Still images were also taken of the 2010-11 reenactments but the photographer was tasked with a purely documentary role and also not considered part of the performance.



Details from VHS. Jim Allen, *Contact*: “Computer Dance”, 1974. Videographer: Bruce Barber. Courtesy of Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision.

In the preparations for the 2010-11 reenactments – to which I was party – Allen’s instructions to the camera operators, Peter Wareing and Daniel Strang, were to ‘*get involved*’, be close to and ‘*part of the action*’. It can reasonably be assumed from the archival VHS footage that the same was true of Allen’s instructions to Bruce Barber – a student of Allen’s at the time but also a key figure in Post-object art (Allen, 2011)²⁵. Here, the grainy unedited footage is even more telling, the shots even closer: more ponderously invested in the videographer’s own experience in the work, the camera wanders around, often focusing on small details that have caught the filmmakers’ attention:

Tracing a leg ... a torso ... they are there suddenly ... alone, in pairs ... blocking ... there is no time to observe freely, while sound ... what is it? I lose it, ... O Pauline ... in their social ... social or personal lives ... one and a half ... order to which he has been added ... the same elements coming up again and again but moving around, altering relationships ... not necessarily ... possibilities ... all important ... bodies half ... this is the beholders site.²⁶

The camera seems to have no real interest in distancing us from the work in order to produce definitive documentation. The videographer is coexistent with the work.

²⁵ In the course of writing this paper I ask Allen about this and he confirmed that his approach and Barber’s was the same (Allen & Charlton 2019).

²⁶ This paragraph appropriates text from Wystan Curnow’s treatment of Barber’s *Mt Eden Crater Work*, (1974). It parallels Curnow’s position as an art critic in which, like the camera man, he assumes a position within work – becoming absorbed in and absorbing the reader in work by making language work. Curnow’s text is included in the documentation of Barbers work in *New Art* but also, more recently, in the *Critics Part* (Curnow et al, 2014, 49-53).

As Allen's briefings to performers were generally verbal it is impossible to know exactly what they were but, in my experience, his approach is consistent with that of Barber's written scores from the same period as published in *New Art: Some Recent New Zealand Sculpture and Post-object Art* (Allen, 1976) and, more recently, the focus of the exhibition *Bruce Barber: Performance Scores* (Cleland, 2015). Here, in Barber's "Procedural Notes and Descriptions of Roles" for *Whatipu Beach Performance* (1973), the cameraman is instructed to «move as freely as possible through the performance area», and is also identified in the list of performers (personae) as «an active element[s] of the performance» (Barber in Allen 1974).

While explicitly identifying the videographer as performer, Barber frames the relationship between performer and audience as a *coexistent* experience within a social activity:

Although I may use the words 'performer' and 'audience' in reference to my work, I prefer to see these terms as [...] exchanged for the notion of 'active' and 'passive' participation. Both performer and audience, being considered participants, must co-exist within a given space (Barber in Allen, New Art).

While anticipating the sort of social art practices that are now more mainstream in contemporary art, Barber, and arguably to a lesser extent Allen, was evidently less motivated by an interest in relational form than he was in the psychic experience of the individual within that context:

I believe I am working to a position where paradoxically... in the act of overloading or the deprivation of sensory (physical) and intellectual experience, I am thereby enlarging my own and others' capacity for sensory and intellectual stimulation (Barber in Allen 1976).

While the psychedelic aspirations of this quest for an alerted consciousness are realised through a variety of mechanisms in Barber's work, it is most clearly embodied in the reoccurring *persona* of *The Blind-master*, the hooded or blindfolded character at the centre of the *Whatipu Beach Performance* and the *Mt Eden Crater Performance* (1974)²⁷. Despite the persistence of this *persona*, the character's signifying function in the works is scarcely addressed. What commentary there is tends towards the descriptive – as it does in the conversation between Barber, Allen, Kerin Lyons and Guy von Sturmer in *New Art* – which simply emphasises that form here is fundamentally experiential rather than representational, theatrical rather than literal.

²⁷ The character of the blind-master appears in different guises in other works by Barber: "Since *Mt Eden Crater Performance*, the "Blind Master" has not been lost sight of. He's become, in his metamorphoses, Barber's epidermis whose task with a bucket of water and two dead fish required him to negotiate a tricky obstacle course. He was the blind-folded, sleeper-footed traveler in *Like a Bat Our of Hell* (1975), and the petty offender/artist who was locked in the stocks in the City Gallery for 48 hours (*Stocks and Bonds*)" (Curnow, 69).



Details from VHS. Jim Allen, *Contact*: “Computer Dance”, 1974. Videographer: Bruce Barber. Courtesy of Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision.

While *The Blind-master* is not identified as a character in *Contact*, given the close working relationship between Allen and Barber at the time there is reason to treat the masked performers in *Contact* in a similar way: the pungent rubber masks’ unyielding resistance to light forcing performers to attune themselves to and become absorbed in the other sensory experiences afforded by the work. Indeed, the rubber masks are not the only element in *Contact* intent on probing the revelatory aspects of psychedelic experience. The light sensation of the nylon lines dangling from the scaffold on naked torsos, the blasts of heat from flashing spotlights around the perimeter of the space, and the amplified beat of a metronome marking time as do the ellipses in the above text ... all adding to the disorientation of the performers/readers/holders, challenging them to focus on the task at hand.

As anticipated earlier with regards to literalism, this conception of *absorption* is central to Harman’s understanding of theatricality, but also key to Fried’s rejection of theatricality. Coexistence, in the sense that it is understood by Post-object artists, means to be absorbed in the work theatricality in the terms defined by Harman. On the other hand, *absorption*, for Fried, is understood both in the pictorial sense of the «image’s absorption in itself» – one that excludes the beholder – and in the experiential «relationship between painting and beholder» (Fried 1980, 50-92)²⁸. As our focus here is on the connection between Object Oriented Ontology and Post-object Art, we can forgo further in-depth discussion of Fried’s interpretation, and simply note Harman’s summation: «What he [Fried] presents is less a conflict between painting and beholder than between *absorption* (which yields a pictorial closure that excludes the beholder), and *theatricality* (in which the beholder is supposed to become directly involved in the painting)» (Harman 2020, 80).

Party Lines (Participation)

It appears, then, that the coexistence of participants in Post-object Art performances is largely consistent with Harman’s treatment of theatrical absorption in that it locates «the autonomy of art in the union of beholder and work [...]» (Harman 2020, 176). That the artist as performer is immersed in their own psychedelic experience to the extent that the audience as beholder is effectively usurped, does not threaten the ontological premise of withdrawal. In fact, as Harman points out, *theatrical absorption* allows for a «much wider

²⁸ Noah Holtwiesche provides a relevant and succinct summary of Fried in this regard: «Absorption means on the one hand the organization of pictorial elements, of sight angles and emotional involvement of the depicted persons in a way that excludes the beholder as a point of reference. On the other hand, this seclusion of the depicted scene can also be accomplished by allocating to the beholder a position within the picture, thus absorbing him into the scene» (Holtwiesche 2010).

range of genres to be treated as isolated», and is thus aesthetically consistent with OOO, including, it seems, those «involving explicit participation by the artist or beholder» such as we find in the cited Post-object art works (Harman 2020, 176).

However, while we might imagine a vast cavalcade of eager participants jostling for position as they line up behind the artist/ beholder, Harman places a caveat on this, making a «distinction between the human being as *ingredient* of art and as a privileged *beholder* of it» (Harman 2020, 45). While this distinction is made as a way of resisting relational theories of art, it confounds the previous supposition that the artists can be both beholder of their own work and participant in it. In differentiating between humans who are participating in an artwork (*ingredient*) and those who are experiencing it (*beholder*), one denies the participatory intent of Post-object artists such as Allen and Barber whose primary concern, it seems, is with enlarging their own experience as much as, if not more than, others. In which case, when one insists on differentiating between the circumstance of *ingredients* and the absorption of the *beholder*, one begins to unravel artistic process in a way that paradoxically precludes the theatrical absorption for all beholders. Awkward contortions are required to take artists out of these works and still have anything left to behold.

At this point we might well follow Harman and opt to dismiss *Contact* as simply an example of «junk performance» art without the need to reject the entire genre of Post-object Art out of hand (Harman 2020, 45). Such a response would however seem to be motivated more by a desire to uphold the fundamental principles of OOO than by any real necessity. The conflation of the artist and beholder does not per se warrant such a response when there are alternative possibilities to consider.

Addressing this issue briefly with regard to Jackson Pollock's 'action paintings', Harman notes that in videos of him painting, Pollock «appears to be concentrating intensely» and «is clearly *painting* not acting out some personal trance...» (Harman 2020, 113). But, Harman argues, this does not mean that Pollock is an action-artist in the same sense as Beuys is, because his paintings can be separated from him in a way that Beuys' performances cannot²⁹: performances such as Beuys' *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), in which the artists lived in a New York gallery with a wild coyote for three days, can be understood as a performance because someone «witness[ed] it *even* if it were only Beuys himself» (Harman 2020, 113. My emphasis). Although Harman's reading of both artists is perhaps debatable, there is the faintish hint of the possibility that the experience of the artist alone might be enough to constitute an art object in its own right.

Although bewilderingly contradictory to previous statements *vis a vis* artists as ingredient, this is helpful to the cause of Post-object Art because, contrary to Harman's rejection of Fried's *circumstantial absorption*, it again indicates that the artist can be both part of the circumstance of the work and the beholder of it at the same time. Just as they are in the cited Post-object Art works, it seems that participant/artists can be immersed in their own psychedelic experience while also bearing witness to it as an audience – perhaps even the only audience. Other than saying such performative events are «immediately converted into objects in their own right» that can then be beheld by an audience, Harman does little to clarify what the participant/artists might do to achieve such a 'quantum superposition', which, as Karen Barad explains, does «not represent mixtures of particles with determinate properties. Rather superpositions represent ontologically indeterminate states...» (Barad 2007). As a metaphor for absorption, in which the beholder and the artwork are spliced

²⁹ A performance, he continues, is only understandable as an art experiences if it is «more than its components and deeper than their current effects» (Harman 2020, 114).

together yet maintain their autonomy (Harman 2020, 67-68), superposition seems to be an apt way to think about the artists/ beholder paradox³⁰.

Mobile Calls (Super-relations)

The indeterminacy of such a superposition implies that artists, much like Schrödinger's Cat, are indeterminate: either an artist or a beholder depending on who is observing the artwork. While such thought experiments might be revealing, they should not, as Erwin Schrödinger was keen to point out, be taken literally with regards to material practices: «Reality resists imitation through a model» (Schrödinger 1980, 328). What we have is, at best, a «blurred model» of the world, in which the method of making a representation and the representation itself are as entangled with each other as are the artist and beholder here (Schrödinger 1980, 326). Given that thought experiments are a type of metaphor, one might imagine that Schrödinger would have considerable sympathy for Harman's rejection of literal representations in favour of metaphors.

Although recounted in different terms, this is also the point that Donna Haraway makes with regard to the splitting of subject and object when she says that «vision is always a question of the power to see» (Haraway 1988, 583; 585). Haraway's metaphorical use of 'vision' as an active agent in the construction of knowledge, is critical of techno-science's objectifying tricks that, she says, necessarily assume a transcendent position. Haraway, like Schrödinger, suggests that vision provides only a partial perspective. To behold is to accept that knowledge of something is always situated in somebody and is «not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object» (Haraway 1988, 583).

Such impaired vision can never, of course, be taken as absolute or literal knowledge as it is, following Schrödinger, a poor imitation, one that requires an OOO beholder to metaphorically fill in for the withdrawn (real) object. The position of the absorbed beholder is thus surprisingly consistent with Haraway's relational critique of knowledge in that the withdrawn object resists the potential of total knowledge³¹. Each beholder's engagement with an object is made metaphorically discrete through the union of the Real Object and beholder which creates a new autonomous object that is itself withdrawn. The resulting indeterminacy stems from the *agency* of the beholder in relation to the withdrawn Real Object rather than being inherent in the object itself.

The awkwardness of this is of course that «situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource» (Haraway 1988, 593). Hence the superposition that the beholder assumes in OOO is equivalent to that of a «material-semiotic actor»: a performative agent who is actively engaged with the production of «objects of knowledge» (Haraway, *Simians* 208). Given that such «objects materialise in social interaction», they are inherently relational and theatrical in nature (Haraway 1988, 598).

At the mere suggestion of a parallel between OOO and philosophies of relational, I can practically hear Harman yelling down the other end of the phone as, well before the publication of *Art + Objects*, OOO's abhorrence of relationality was clearly evident. From

³⁰ In developing Fried's notion of absorption Harman draws on Robert Jackson's to make a distinction between *fusion* in which two things are melded together as one, and absorption, in which are partially spliced together while remaining distinct and detachable (Harman 2020, 67).

³¹ While it might be argued that the inaccessibility of the withdrawn object infers a degree of transcendence that is the antithesis of *situated knowledges*. This is discredited on the basis of agency being the preview of the beholder. Any representation made are made by the beholder and not by the withdrawn object and are thus inherently partial. A *superposition* is thus not one of transcendence but of descent into withdrawal.

accounts of the secret inner life of Heideggerian tools (*Tool Being*, 1999), to the dismissal of Whitehead's 'self-enjoyment' (*Prince of Networks*, 2009), and an assault on scientifically motivated materialists – of which Haraway might be considered one (*I Am Also of the Opinion that Materialism Must be Destroyed*, 2010), Harman has been consistent in asserting that the «throbbing whole» induced by relationality is not the solution (Harman 2016).³² While the 'ontological softening' apparent in *Art + Object* appears to call a ceasefire that is itself worthy of discussion, I don't intend to reignite ongoing materialist arguments here as this is not my purpose. Rather I want to try and understand how the common ground identified in the socialising of the objects clarifies ways of thinking about object oriented art practices.

Landlines (Points of contact)

Focusing again on the issue of representation is our starting point here as it helps to clarify how practice functions as a mode of knowledge production that does not require the absoluteness of literal knowledge. Earlier, representation was paired with literalism as an epistemic mode – one opposed to metaphor which incites the beholder to become absorbed in the artwork. As such, representations – albeit that they are, like *The Bind-master*, visually impaired – have literal meaning, in that they are «always a meaning for someone or something» – a second-hand paraphrasing that robs the object of its autonomy (Harman 2020, 53)³³.

Paralleling this, Barad – mentioned earlier in regard to the indeterminacy of superpositioning – suggests that the idea of representation is vested in a «belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent», implying an independence of that which is represented and the practices of representation such that «there are assumed to be two distinct and independent kinds of entities ...» (Barad 2007, 804). So, just as representation necessarily infers a subject-object relation, so too does «the literal amount[s] in effect to the relational» (Harman 2020, 53). By virtue of their relational ability to paraphrase, representations function as explicit knowledge of a subject.

Perhaps surprisingly, there is therefore a broad overlap between Harman and Barad³⁴ with regard to the nature of representation. To be fair, Harman does not use the term representation directly, adopting instead in his discussion of Fried and Greenberg the term «depicted shape» to refer to the «outlines or elements in a given picture» (Harman 2020, 85 & Fried 1998, 24). My assumption here, then, is that representation is inherently literal in its claims to knowledge of a subject. Harman's rejection of literalism in *Art + Object* thus asks some searching questions about the nature of the relationship between an object's Real Qualities and its Sensual Object in OOO's Quadruple Object framework³⁵.

In order to maintain their autonomy, Real Qualities are revealed through the tension of *eidōs*, (appearance), and Sensual Objects (Harman 2011, 99-102). As «vital and never-visible traits» of Real Qualities, Sensual Objects – revealed over time as Sensual Qualities – can be said to be representations (Harman 2011, 101). The autonomy of the withdrawn Real Object is maintained in this way. As Real Objects are always *represented* by Sensual Objects, OOO can be portrayed as a representational ontology. But, paradoxically, as knowledge such representations are also a «literal paraphrasing of a thing by its qualities ...»

³² To qualify this Harman explains that «the phrase 'materialism must be destroyed' is meant as a provocation for thinking, not as a literal call for eradication» (Harman 2010, 774).

³³ By either undermining or overmining (Harman 2020, 26).

³⁴ And indeed, many other new materialist thinkers not mentioned here.

³⁵ Again, as stated earlier, it is assumed readers are familiar with the *Quadruple Object* as set out by Harman.

(Harman 2020, 30)³⁶. Thus representation, taken as a *subject's* or beholder's knowledge of an object, is, confusingly and despite Harman's «ban on literalism», an essential condition of OOO! This is because Harman cannot do away with representation altogether as he needs it to maintain the conflict between what is withdrawn and what is present. While the troublesome contradictions that emerge are far from convincingly resolved by Harman's aesthetic construct, they afford further comparisons that can be used to inform us about the nature of Object Oriented art practices.

Be this as it may, Harman's treatment of representation is intended to be distinctly different to that of Barad's who seeks a *realism without representation*,³⁷ one which acknowledges the situated agency of practice and «shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (...) to matters of practices, doings, and actions (Barad 2007): actions through which subject and object, artist and artwork are inherently entangled with each other. However, rather than follow Barad in her critique of scientific practices here, it is more directly relevant to draw on Barbara Bolt who similarly seeks a materiality without representation – one framed specifically in terms of artistic practice³⁸.

Bolt's argument is not only more directly related to the conception of aesthetics presented in *Art + Objects*, but usefully builds on the same Heideggerian metaphysics that are key to the formalisation of the *Quadruple Object*. However, Bolt's approach to the paradox of relationality and representation is significantly different to Harman's, allowing us to test the assumption of withdrawal in ways that may be useful to both art and philosophy.

The key to understanding the point of contact between Bolt and Harman centres on the manner of our practical engagement with the world that Bolt calls *handlability*: «our concrete dealings with things in the world, rather than our abstract thinking about the world» (Bolt 2010, 13)³⁹. This, of course, stems directly from Heidegger's tool-analysis and the mode of a thing's being in the world. As tool-being is so foundational to an Object Oriented conception of Objects, it is well represented in Harman's work and likely needs little foundational explanation beyond that outlined briefly in *Art + Objects* which also serves to position Harman:

Here [in Being and Time], Heidegger gives us a more detailed version of his tool-analysis. A hammer is usually not noticed, but silently relied upon as it works to help us achieve some more conscious ulterior purpose (Harman 2020, 17).

Heidegger's chief lesson is widely said to be as follows: prior to any theoretical or perceptual access to things, we deal with them through a set of unconscious background practices, one that is holistically determined by our total social-environmental context. But there is a serious problem with this interpretation, and OOO first arose in the 1990's in direct opposition to it. For one thing it should be clear that our 'practical' contact with things is no more exhaustive than our theoretical or perceptual awareness of them (Harman 2020, 18).

³⁶ That such literal representations are inherently *inadequate* paraphrases of objects – withdrawn or otherwise, is mute given that the act of representation is arguably an act of substitution not duplication.

³⁷ Drawing on Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening*, 2010.

³⁸ In Bolt 2010 – perhaps surprisingly, does not refer to Barad directly, opting instead to draw on Donna Haraway. As suggested above Barad's theorization of the *indeterminant superposition* and Haraway's reading of *vision* as “god trick” of infinite illusion address the question of representation in similar ways but emphasizing the agency of *situated knowledges*.

³⁹ A term Bolt takes this term from Levinas.

Heidegger's tool-analysis is not just a new theory of practical reason, but the demonstration of a noumenal surplus beyond all praxis no less than all theory (Harman 2020, 19).

In contrast to this surplus, Bolt, perhaps making a more conventional reading than Harman, takes Heidegger's analysis of *ready-to-hand* as an affirmation of praxis and a *form* of knowledge production through which we come to know the world. Despite making her own contribution to the critical framing of Heidegger (Bolt 2014), Bolt's work is likely less familiar to readers of this text. The approach taken then will be to expand on Bolt's treatment of handlability as a way of informing the function of practice in regard to the already defined problem of representation⁴⁰.

Praxis, the «mutual reflection between practice and theory», Bolt suggests, assumes primacy over literal knowledge, by way of being *ready-to-hand* (Bolt 2010, 65). Praxical knowledge is thus already in and of the world. One might say that, unlike representation which stands back to envision the world with literal clarity, praxis is theatrically absorbed in its own psychedelic experience. It is precisely because praxis is situated and implicated in its own subjective experience that it cannot provide a literal representation of the world - one that we typically take as knowledge. Or, paraphrasing Harman, because knowledge is always knowledge situated in someone or something it loses objective autonomy (Harman 2020, 53). While Bolt and Harman concur that the nature of representational knowledge is a situated paraphrasing of a thing, Bolt's reading is that praxis is a form of knowing distinct from and prior to the situated knowing of one who represents or «sets the world before him as an object» (Bolt 2010, 106). Admittedly Bolt does not directly state the type of knowledge praxis affords. However, following Paul Carter, she makes a case for *methexis* as an embodied and participatory form of knowledge production that goes beyond Heideggerian Being (Bolt 2010, 135-142; 125)⁴¹. Carter develops his treatment of the Greek *methexis* – meaning participation – in the context of Indigenous Australian culture where it takes on the performative function of affording a permeable passage between the divine and the human plane: one that is 'real' (Conford in Bolt 2010, 135-136). (Real in this sense is taken to mean truth in the nonmenial sense). Drawing on Levinas, Bolt also suggest access to, or knowledge of, a noumenon of sorts: «And it is precisely because handling does not follow upon representation that handlability is not simply 'presence' [*présence*] (vorhandenheit) on which a new property is grafted. Handlability is entirely irreducible» (Levinas in Bolt 2010, 49). While it is debatable if we can take irreducibility to mean access to the thing-in-itself, it is clear that Bolt sees handlability as allowing us to come nearer to the character of the thing, such that «We become faced with the thing-being of the thing» itself (Bolt 2010, 109).

By comparison Harman argues that the mission of art, like philosophy, ought to be understood as a «cognitive activity without being a form of knowledge...» (Harman 2020, 30). Harman's allowing for knowledge to be obtained from *artworks* «as a kind of side-effect» is arguably different to Bolt's treatment of praxis, in that it proceeds from the art object rather than emerging simultaneously with art object (Harman 2020, 30). This seems to be the case «even at the initial production stage when the artist is usually the only

⁴⁰ *Ready-to-hand* (Zuhandenheit) and *present-to-hand* (Vorhandenheit) are defined as modes of being in the well know passage on tool-being of in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 2013, 69). For further discussion of Heidegger in relation to OOO, see Harman's *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenology to Thing*, 2007 and *Tool-being*, 1999.

⁴¹ Carter develops his treatment of the Greek *methexis* – meaning participation, in the context of Indigenous Australian culture where it takes on the performative function of affording a permeable passage between the divine the human plane: one that is «real». (Conford in Bolt 2010, 135-136). Real in this sense is taken to mean truth in the nonmenial I sense.

beholder» (Harman 2020, 69). The concern, inferred by this, is that Harman – perhaps unduly influenced by art criticism – displays a tendency to instrumentalise process and enframe art⁴². As an alternative, Bolt suggests that: «Process lifts us out of the molar field of instrumentalist logic into the molecular field of the logic of practice» (Bolt 2010, 188).

Bolt's initial discussion of praxis here is perhaps a little misleading as she is in fact more committed to practice than praxis. Perhaps in the context of validating practice-led research within academic institutions, this is an understandable accommodation to make. It should not, however, be allowed to obscure her central thesis that it is necessary to go *beyond representation* towards a «performative logic of practice» (Bolt 2010, 8. My emphasis). Bolt's claim that theory comes to knowledge firstly through practical handling of the world rather than through contemplative reflexion on it, is taken to mean that we come to know the world in the midst of our dealings with it, rather than through representations of it (Bolt 2004, 1). As an artist, this seems to reflect the experience of making more accurately than theoretical or historical analysis, which tends to take ownership over both the art objects and practice.

Courtesy Calls (The Care and Allure of Practice)

Returning to Allen's *Contact* (1974) briefly, we see how the theatricality, or performativity, of the work embodies Bolt's approach to practice. Unlike the version of Beuys' *Telephone S – – – F* that is held in Tate's collection – destined to only ever be handled via the antiseptic touch of white cotton gloves – the transmitters and receivers in *Contact* are sweaty with practice: the labour of the work-of-art becoming an artwork. The near naked bodies shape themselves around the matter of the work, find form in the entanglement of technology and flesh. Immersed in the psychedelic experience of handability, the work becomes *known* – worlded in the possibility of its Being. What is *known* is not what is represented – photographically or otherwise. What is known, is known by a beholder/performer/artist/participant truly absorbed in work. *Blind-masters* of their own labour, participants know not as subjects do of objects, but as participants do of communities: «situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular» (Haraway 1988, 590).



Details from VHS. Jim Allen, *Contact*: “Computer Dance”, 1974. Videographer: Bruce Barber. Courtesy of Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision.

⁴² See Bolt's discussion of «the Equipmental-being of the Work of Art» (Bolt 2010, 115-119).

But what is this knowing of practice? Can any more even be *said* of that which can only be known in practice?⁴³ What holds the be-holder in the sweaty grip of becoming, compelling, beyond all logic, that they return again to grasp what cannot be seen? Such *allure*, Harman tells us, is the function of metaphor, as well as aesthetics, such «that we somehow become attuned to the inner ingenuousness of things», without «interfering with the usual relation between a thing and its qualities» (Harman 2005, 141)⁴⁴.

Allure, of course, occupies a key position in OOO as a «term for the fusion of withdrawn real objects with accessible surface qualities» (Harman 2011, 104)⁴⁵. As the tension between Real Objects and Sensual Qualities, it is a special sort of interference pattern⁴⁶, or link, that occurs only in special circumstances such as artworks and metaphors, when beholders are *theatrically absorbed* in the becoming of work. But, despite the potential of *allure* to inform the incitement of practice, Harman is adamant that it gets us no «closer to this shadowy realm» of Real Objects, «since it plays out entirely in the realm of relations, not that of the things themselves» (Harman 2005, 143). Given that the relational socialising of objects was earlier equated with the performative agency of Haraway's «material-semiotic actor», continued insistence on the absolute inaccessibility of Real Objects, again, seems unjustified.

This point aside, *allure* is still perhaps the key to practice, due to its role as an *element* in *vicarious causation*⁴⁷. Indeed, as Harman says, elements such as *allure* help provide the qualitative notes of objects (Harman 2005, 171). Thus *allure* is clearly instrumental in practice and is seen to set a tone for handable relations, one comparable to Bolt's use of the term *care*. By virtue of the comparisons made earlier, Bolt and Harman share a common interest in the theatricality of art as that which transcends the knowability of representation though Heideggerian-like interactions with the world. However, in the way they reflect the tone of such interactions, *allure* and *care* suggest different approaches: the nature of *allure*, on the one hand, is generally reflective of the 'combative' stance necessitated by the resistance of withdrawn objects⁴⁸. As illustrated by Harman's choice of terms, objects are «broken up», «hijack[s]ed or enslave[s]d», «dammed or stunted» at this «volatile point of intersect[ion]» where, through «trials of strength», they «struggle to make indirect-contact» (Harman 2013, 103, Harman 2005, 171, Harman 2013, 113, Harman 2007, 2, Harman 2013, 171). «The depth of Philosophy» is, after all, best «judged by the importance of its

⁴³ The irony of writing about practice does not escape me any more than it does Bolt who recognizes that “the illusions I make, the analogies I draw, the examples and figures of speech I employ, situate me firmly in the regime of the represented” (Bolt 2010, 41). Her description of writing which follows this quote is startling close to my own – referred to by her as a *performative disregard of academic conventions* (Bolt 2010, 43).

⁴⁴ For clarity, I have limited the examples of *allure* that Harman provides. These otherwise include any category of 'charm' such as humor, the «hypnotic experience of repetitious drumbeats or machine movements, as well as the cute actions generally undertaken by small animals or children, or by strangers in new contexts who misfire slightly in copying the locals» (Harman 2005, 143).

⁴⁵ I note here a reference back to fusion as absorption commented on in endnote 27.

⁴⁶ I note in passing the relationship of Barad's analysis of superpositions and concept of diffraction although this is beyond the scope of this current essay.

⁴⁷ For clarification on the function of *allure* in causation see Chapter 10, “The Root of Vicarious Causation”, Harman 2005.

⁴⁸ I suggest, following Yuk Hui, that while such conflict is inherent to Western philosophical understandings of *techne*, it is not universal. Alternatively, the radical separation between the world of gods and the world of man initiated by Prometheus can be reconciled as the metaphysical task of «seeking and affirming the organic unity of the two», perhaps though matters of concern rather than those of conflict (Hui 2018, 20). Although this calls into question the underlying assumptions about ontological withdrawal this argument is seen as a parallel argument and not developed further here.

enemy», Harman surmises (Harman 2007, 3)⁴⁹. *Care*, on the other hand, is seen by Bolt as a concerned dealing with the world that characterises modes of production in which the «relations of responsibility that characterise artistic practice» are seen to be «co-responsible for bringing art forward into appearance» (Bolt 2010, 53; 188). In *care* there is not any sense of the resistance that allure commands – no unwillingness, only an exuberant *intensity*⁵⁰ of beings mutually absorbed in practice.

Hoax Calls (Sincerity, Care and Ethics).

In making this comparison we should, however, be clear that while Harman links *allure* to *sincerity*⁵¹ meaning that it might easily be mistaken for *care*, it is in practice a very different form of *absorption*. *Sincerity* is a form of *absorption* that means taking things seriously in themselves at all times without forming any sort of union with them⁵². Or, as Harman puts it – to act with sincerity «is to touch a thing without fusing into it» (Harman 2007). Such is *sincerity a proximate*⁵³ *practice*, that it can be mistakenly seen to *care* for objects by taking them seriously in and of themselves. This is the grounds on which Harman argues that *sincerity* has an ethical dimension (Harman 2007).

Allure, on the other hand, is more specific and «occurs only in special experiences» such as we find in the ‘charms’ of metaphor and art (Harman 2005, 142). *Allure* then is surely a pejorative form of *sincerity*, one that, through the very nature of withdrawal, must be combative or perhaps disingenuous in its affections for objects – meaning that it cares not for real objects it knows not of: «In allure, there is a combat between the object and itself ...» that serves «as a kind of primitive atom-smasher for exposing the simplest workings of relationality to view» (Harman 2005, 148).

In this, the difference between *allure* and *care* becomes vibrantly clear. *Care*, as described by Bolt following Heidegger, is found in the practice of our «concernful dealing with the tools and materials of production» (Bolt 2010, 52; 53). Through the practice of such *care* artists and beholders, as co-participants, assume «an ethical responsibility to listen to art» (Bolt 2010, 90). They set aside subject-imposed preconceptions and «go to the work of art and ask what or how it is» (Bolt 2010, 90). *Care*, we might say, operates with the affected vision of a Blind-master who, like an artist, moves only in response to ‘objects’ rather than

⁴⁹ For those that might be concerned about this selective depiction of Harman as a combatant the point is confirmed by Harman in no less inflammatory terms: «The point is worth making, since this vision of holistic interactions in a reciprocal web, this interweaving of texts and contexts, this blurring of boundaries between one thing and another, has held the moral high ground in philosophy for too long. It is generally viewed as more open, diverse, tolerant, and pacific than the supposedly “reactionary” model of independent things» (Harman 2007).

⁵⁰ With reference to the discussion of *intensity* and OOO in *No More and Less: The withdrawal of speculation*, (Charlton, 2019).

⁵¹ While connected neither should be confused with *intentionality* in the Husserlian sense. *Intentionality* which, by comparison, is an objectifying act that, like literalism, is ingenuous because it regards objects as ideal units rather than independent entities (Harman 2011, 20-34).

⁵² Reading Levinas, Harman defines sincerity for us: «sincerity is nothing less than his name for any reality at all: everything is what it is, and does not pass elsewhere by means of relations; each point of reality stands in itself, candidly being just what it is» (Harman 2007).

⁵³ Harman extrapolates on Levinas suggesting that «Proximity is another name for sincerity or illeity», the latter being a more technical term for sincerity that is dispensed with here for reasons of clarity (Harman 2007).

stepping in to tell them what to do: It Imposes a vision on them which, as we know, comes only in the form of representation. Such partial sight does not illicit sympathy, however. While *care* is more compassionate towards objects than allure, being that it is not at war with them, it does not proclaim sympathy for them as this itself is an act of alienation. In art practice, *care* is the work-of-art that is neither a mastery which asserts clarity over the nature of objects, nor a deferral that denies responsibility for them. *Care* is a master blinded by the 'glare'⁵⁴ of ethical practice in a way that Bolt describes as the shedding of light *for* rather than *on* matter (Bolt 2010, 125).

Such concern, Bolt suggests, offers «a different conception of visual practice and visual aesthetics», one that is premised on «an ethics other than the ethics of mastery» (Bolt 2010, 190; 75). Whilst clearly alluding to an alternative ethics of representational knowledge – discussed earlier in regard to both Haraway and Barad, Bolt offers little more in terms of clarifying what such practices might include beyond being mere 'concernful' dealings⁵⁵.

It is, however, clear from the above discussion that the aesthetics that Bolt derives from *care* is very different from that which Harman extrapolates from *allure*. Both *allure* and *care* have been presented as forms of theatrical absorption, but these have been shown to have different ethical consequences. For Harman, *allure* stems from the unresolvable struggle to know withdrawn real objects. *Allure* maintains an ethical interest in that it is a tone invested in the aesthetic form of relations between real and sensual objects: one that operates in the context of the theatrical interplay between surface and pictorial content.

Bolt's *care* is similar but different, in that while it is concerned with relations between things it focuses specifically on the approaches handability makes in practice. Unlike OOO's *allure*, the tone of this approach is not confrontational. Rather, *care* exhibits ethical responsibility through an intimate involvement with objects. Interpreting Carter's *methexis*, Bolt treats participation as a willful blindness to subjects/objects distinctions – one that promotes *care* as a form of aesthetic practice ethically invested in participatory theatrical events.

The point we arrive at here is that both *allure* and *care*, performing as opposing aspects of aesthetic or ethical relations, achieve a similar outcome: art as theatrical formalism. The question we return to then is, following Harman's stated intent, which aspect proves most useful to *contemporary* artists. In considering this, while the way in which art is practised needs to be taken into account, art practice should not be treated as some sort of litmus test for either *allure* or *care*. Such an approach would hold art practice sacrosanct, making it immune to change. How then are we to determine the value of OOO to practice?

Answering machines. (The purpose of contact).

The point of contact is always live. The call of practice is never met by the tone of an automated response: '*I'm not home right now ...*'. Practice is *hot*, Bolt tells us, and contact is a sweaty business, one that cares enough to perform the actions art cannot name (Bolt

⁵⁴ Bolt takes the metaphor of 'glare' from the Australian sun-light to deterritorialize the relationship between knowledge and subjectivity (Bolt 2010, 123-135).

⁵⁵ Instead, as part of the research group iDARE, she gets drawn into the art-as-research dialogue that simply points to the ethical tensions between the *know-how* of artist practice and the *know-what* of institutional compliance (Bolt 2010). As valid as critiquing the impact of 'compliance ethics' on the privileged liberties and freedoms of the «aesthetic alibi» undoubtedly is, I have no intention of engaging in such debates here (Bolt et al 2017, 4).

2010, 150-186). It 'interferes' with bodies to psychedelic affect, without recourse to representation⁵⁶.

Representation, as we have seen, is a vicarious form of contact: '*you have five new messages...*'. But it leaves no greasy fingerprints on the surface of form as it keeps content at a distance from such nefarious activities. Representation is, one might say, a wolf dressed in a prince's clothes⁵⁷: while it may 'dress up' as knowledge, it adopts a tone of authority that deserts practice as it holds subjects at a distance. Again, Bolt reminds us: «the regime of representation produces violence» (Bolt 2010, 21).

The ontological socialisation facilitated by OOO does not pass as practice, in that through *allure* it maintains a distance between subjects and real objects and thus can only persist as representation. The *allure* of a superposition is still that of representation – a thought experiment violently resistant to presence. Representation does not pass as practice any more than a voice message that leaves you on hold - '*you are next in line*'. The *allure* of representation is a one-way conversation, asymmetrical in affect (Harman 2010). This makes it clear that, snowcloning Harman, *allure* is not the solution (Harman 2016). Not because it fails to meet the litmus test of practice but because it fails the metaphysical test of representation that OOO set down for it.

Not standoffish in the same way, *care* holds open a dedicated line to objects: effectively, the phone is off the hook and someone is always listening in. The purpose of contact is not to maintain distance, remain aloof and separate from other things, but to be symmetrically open to revealing knowledge in the psychedelic experience of practice. *Care* is the solution to representation's *allure*, one that holds knowledge in practice without weaponising metaphysics and reducing matters of knowledge to questions of semblance.

If philosophy is to «prove useful to artists» it will *not* be by «pointing to traditional ideas» that represent art as an interminable struggle against withdrawal (Harman 2020, 166), but by recognising that art is a *careful* practice – one that is near naked in absorption with the matter of concern.

Call back (An epilogue to practice)

As an artist writing about philosophy there is a sense of hesitancy about making assertions as I have above: one slips between the covers of a book such as *Art + Object* as if entering a sovereign territory without a passport. Philosophy, though, seems to hold no such reservation about colonising art, as evidenced by Harman's 'illuminations' (Harman 2020, 166)⁵⁸. Perhaps this is simply the natural purview of philosophy, but what Harman offers artists is an open invitation to return the compliment by shining the light of practice on philosophy in the hope that it may «generate new ideas that prove useful to [philosophers]» (Harman 2020, 166). As a 'call back' then, purely within the context of *Art + Object*, I want to *briefly* raise some questions about aesthetics as first philosophy through the lens of the above discussion.

From Levinas, Harman takes the real question of *being* (metaphysics) as that of substance and causation (Harman 2007). But rather than seeing this as a matter of ethics, he takes it to be a matter of aesthetics because the key problem of metaphysics for him has turned out to be: «how do individual substances interact in their proximity to one another?»

⁵⁶ Interferes in the sense of interference patterns which combine rather than oppose.

⁵⁷ With reference to *The Prince and the Wolf: Latour and Harman (Latour)*.

⁵⁸ If not art then aesthetics, being a branch of philosophy, is matter of long standing philosophical concern.

(Harman 2007). Proximity – as absorption – is of course for OOO a question of the war against withdrawal. Hence aesthetics, not ethics, is first philosophy.

In the body of this essay we have seen that the combative nature of *allure* is no answer to representation – a point which paradoxically suggests that as a «paraphrasing of a thing by its qualities», OOO remains under the constraints of representation (Harman 2020, 31). *Care* on the other hand, while also a practice of absorption that takes substance and causation to be the foundations of metaphysics, is not one of conflict but one of equal participation that assumes «an ethical responsibility to listen to art» (Bolt 2010, 90).

By the same logic of absorption, through which *allure* is the solution to questions of substance and causation, *care* is seen to perform the same aesthetic task without being shadowed by the paradox of representation. Contrary to Harman, however, «the depth of a philosophy [need not] be judged by its enemy» (Harman 2007, 3). *Care* maintains OOO's commitment to aesthetics as first philosophy but with a different tone – a proviso which recognises that in resisting representation, aesthetic *care* must take the form of practice.

This leaves us with a paradox perhaps even greater than the allure of *Art + Objects*: a new metaphysics-of-practice and an art of ecological-aesthetics, not objects, that leads to the proposition that practice, *not* aesthetics, is first philosophy.

Dedicated to Jim Allen because *sometimes other people's ideas can be interesting.*

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