The Obsession with Objects
Relational Art and Objecthood as Farce

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What is actually going on when objecthood suddenly reappears as obsession, as a component of art's currently most fashionable hypes?

The obsession with objecthood first appeared in the guise of tragedy, the tragedy of modernist art, as put forward by its pathetic warrior, the art historian Michael Fried. Conceived as an apology for modernist painting and sculpture, his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" involuntarily marked its definite decline. In the spirit of Fried's own militaristic rhetoric of victory and defeat, one could say that his essay was an indication that modernist painting had indeed lost the war to the emergence of "theatricality" in art. For Fried, minimal art's "specific objects" – and he was not even concerned here with the radical performative and interventionist techniques of the 1950s and 1960s as developed by the Fluxus and Situationist movements – were the markers of theatre, of a "literalist art" that served as nothing short of a "negation of art." the past 46 years we have experienced countless discourses on the immaterialisation of art from Lucy Lippard to Jean-Francois Lyotard, the post-Fordist appropriation of this immaterialisation, the recurring reappearance of performative encounters in radical activist art practices, and their domestication under the label of relational aesthetics. What is actually going on when objecthood suddenly reappears as obsession, as a component of art's currently most fashionable hypes: Speculative Realism and Object Oriented Ontology?

We suspect a certain complementarity between the two major theoretical obsessions of the contemporary art field over the past few decades: relationality and objecthood. It appears that their relationship is one of strict opposition (on the one hand, the in-between, the exchange and the infinite flows of relationality; on the other, the strictly confined and finite shape of the object). Actually, we observe a certain hidden complicity between the two apparent opponents in the reproduction of the dichotomy of subject and object and its old hierarchies.

Obviously, relations are not only of interest to relational aesthetics, but also to theories of networks and dynamic economic market analysis researching on questions like: How does one thing or movement relate to another to yield particular, ideally predictable results? Such is the logic of simple causality, of relations as connections with attributable value for the terms they link. If relations are of common interest one may wonder why they are so often reduced to their mere functioning rather than their operational qualities. One may be reminded of Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) and the critiques thereof. While Bourriaud proposed thinking of aesthetic propositions as constituting situations in which social relations could emerge, his critiques have focused on rejecting the network of artists and institutions profiled in his examples.

In the critiques of *Relational Aesthetics* one network often replaces another to supposedly stimulate different effects. However, Bourriaud's critics never wonder what a relation might actually enable other than its quotidian association of connecting things or subjects.

This becomes even more puzzling when we realise that *Relational Aesthetics* contains a 30-page section on Félix Guattari's "aesthetic paradigm", which was first published by Bourriaud in 1994 in the journal *Chimères*, dedicated to the memory of the late Guattari (including contributions by Anne Querrien, Pierre Lévy and Isabelle Stengers).

After the so-called "winter years" of the 1980s, in which society and politics were characterised by a claustrophobic conservatism, Guattari embarked on his last writings on relational and machinic thinking His attempt was to constitute an ethics and aesthetics of expression in language, art, psychoanalysis and socio-political practice including virtual and mental universes of value co-emergent with the process lines of human and non-human existence. His term *chaosmosis* defines such a processual and heterogeneous complexity cutting across material and immaterial strata of life. Guattari considered relations to be the productive force of life. At the same time, a relation is the actual entity's self-sustaining force of time as much as it resonates in relation to other entities. Thedisagreements about relations as externalised connections or internal (narcissistic) withdrawal eventually disappear as long as the conceptual and pragmatic embrace of relation's force and tendency is not reduced to links between previously unrelated things.

Bourriaud, probably working through Guattari's insistence on virtual ecologies, understood that this pragmatic experimentation requires a shift toward the emergence of actualised expression or enunciation: Relationality as flux and as a vibrating middle would be reduced when conceptualised as relations proposed by different individuals involved in a participatory practice or a setting of "relational art".

Guattari, however, is not only relevant in the area of relational aesthetics and a non-network-centred conceptualisation of relations. His work also influenced contemporary political, economic and aesthetic thinking about things and objects. In last years, we have observed the essentialisation of objecthood, when Object Oriented Ontology emerged and was affirmed in the art field. This process was similar to the reductionist decontextualisation of Guattari's work in pro and con discourses regarding relational art. This is not simply the result of art market actors being attracted to products that are easy to resell, but also a theoretical flaw, which simplifies the issue at stake in Guattari's machinism .

As Michael Fried observed, the distance that specific objects of minimal art create can resemble that which we observe between human beings. The denouncement of anthropomorphism (which Fried discussed in relation to both modernist painting and minimal art) is here reiterated, inasmuch as the objects of Object Oriented Ontology, as adapted by the art field, are of interest to the various discourses in art as well as the market that is so clearly focused on personalities and their respective objects.

While the stakes that Fried and the Object Oriented Ontology disciples propose seem to be in clear opposition, their main difference is that today, through repetition, objecthood becomes a farce, at least in how it is applied in the art field. Perhaps poison can once again serve as a cure: What Fried called perversion or a "corrupted literalist sensibility", or even more inventively, an "infectious theatricality" necessarily returns as a monstrous and infectious practice in the obscure guise of Sensual Materialism, where material sensibility seeks to thwart the logic of anthropomorphism as well as the fetish of objecthood. Here the relational machinism seems to become materialist again – an impersonal and excessive materialism being processed through life's sensible matters, always relationally ahead of itself instead of being slothfully confined to mere objects.

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