

Graham Harman. *Architecture and Objects*. University of Minnesota Press 2022. 208 pp. \$100.00 USD (Hardcover 9781517908522); \$24.95 USD (Paperback 9781517908539).

Graham Harman's book, *Architecture and Objects*, consists of an Introduction and five chapters. As stated in the Introduction, "this book is guided by the double question of architecture's relation to philosophy on the one hand and art on the other" (xiv). Chapter One therefore examines three important philosophers for architectural discipline, focusing on how their thoughts have influenced central disciplinary debates between form and function. First, Heidegger has been attractive to numerous architects and theorists. Yet, Harman points out that they tend to emphasize subtle experiential effects related to material, temperature, light, atmosphere, and so on; as a result, architectural phenomenologists are oftentimes criticized for paying too much attention to what Harman called "charm" (16) and drifting away from form/function debates. Second, Derrida is often associated with deconstructivism in architecture,¹ which challenges modernist doctrine that form is the natural outcome of function (Sullivan's form follows function) and highlights the inherent discontinuity between them. The result is two loosely related domains in their own self-referential interplay: the function/ mis-function in practices, and the formation/ deformation of structure. Third, Deleuze exerts his influence on architectural theory by destabilizing the manifest form of objects, returning them to the primordial status of becoming: a dynamic field of individuation in which the agency is semi-autonomous and immanent to the process itself. Despite various attempts to appropriate these philosophers, Harman concludes that "the most glaring point that unifies the three is that none of them attempts and articulation of reality in profundum" (71).

Therefore, from Chapter Two onward, Harman endeavours to introduce a new theory of reality, and articulates its implication for art and architecture. This theory, developed under the banner of his Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), holds that "reality is not directly available either to reason or to the senses," it evokes "the good old je ne sais quoi," a formulation associated with Kantian "sublime,"—too intense or too fully real, and cannot "be translated into visible renderings without distortion" (57-58).

Part of Chapter Three functions to "ensure that all readers of this book have some idea of what the object-oriented standpoint is" (74). Harman said that OOO is one branch of speculative realism, emphasising that "realism asserts only that something exists independent of us" (75). That something need not be restricted to matter or to ideas, it may take radically different forms. In this way, Harman distances his position from any forms of metaphysical materialism or metaphysical idealism. The well-known fourfold structure of object-quality tensions is then reintroduced: real objects and sensual qualities (vertical tension), real objects and real qualities (causal tension), sensual objects and sensual qualities (horizontal tension), as well as sensual objects and real

¹ Deconstruction is understood differently in architecture and Derrida's thought, as Harman suggests "Philosophers are generally aware of the existence of Deconstructivist architecture, which in their minds is closely linked to Derridean deconstruction." (18). In Harman's analysis, deconstructivist in architecture is so named mostly because it drew from Russian Constructivism and yet constituted "a radical deviation from it." (21)



qualities (eidetic tension).² Thus understood, reality consists of complex objects, only a small portion of them can be partially accessed by humans, and only as a particular thing encountered through emerging relational structures or processes within the sensorial realm.

Even a particular thing, however, remains vulnerable to the so-called overmining and undermining. Undermining explains an object reductively in terms of its small components (a hammer is not the sum of atoms as it can lose lots of atoms yet remains the same hammer). Overmining, by contrast, explains an object superficially in terms of its consequence (what it does can change while what it is remains the same). Both strategies obstruct us from proper access to this thing and convert it into some other qualities. Closely related to these reductionist tendencies is Harman's critique of literalism: "Literalism was defined as the process of mistaking an object for a bundle of qualities" (86). In other words, literalism "reduces objects either downward to the qualities of its pieces or upward to the qualities of its effects" and forecloses any way "of meeting the object on its own terms" (90).

Before moving on to the above reality theory's implications for art and architecture, it is necessary to give some boarder intellectual contexts. Harman offers that speculative realism fractured into "rationalist versions granting priority to mathematics or natural science (Meillassoux and Brassier, respectively) and non-rationalist versions for which thought is just another product of reality rather than an ontologically unique knowledge-bearing position (Iain Hamilton Grant and OOO)" (76). Harman argues against rationalist versions of speculative realism, intending to abolish the privilege of the human-world relation, namely, the belief that reality is merely constructed by human using the power of thought—the so-called correlationism. Following Latour, Harman accuses modernism of creating this divide between the two poles of world and thought: "the point is the thought/world pair is a compound no different in kind from the hydrogen/oxygen bound that gives us water," both "amount to new realities with their own new properties." (80)

Turning to the implications for art and architecture, Harman offers a preliminary rethinking of the form/function debates in architecture. One of Harman's central theses of this book "is that in their traditional sense, the architectural notions of form and function are both overmining terms" (5)—both concepts tend to explain objects in terms of what they do—"it is therefore possible to replace the form/function pair with that of reality/relation" (45). In this reformulation, "reality" must be understood as "hidden" yet can partly turns into relations. In this sense, form is conceived as the intrinsic structure of things, "the reality of a thing apart from any of the relations which it engages" (44). The "reality of form in its own right," Harman emphasizes, is in opposition to "most

² The horizontal tension, or sensual objects-sensual qualities (SO-SQ) tension, is explained with Husserlian phenomenology. It concerns a sensual object's multiple appearances across different contexts and profiles. Eidetic tension, or sensual objects-real qualities (SO-RQ) tension, can be understood through *eidōs*, or eidetic essence—an object's essential structures isolated through the procedure Husserl called imaginative variation. The vertical tension, or real objects-sensual qualities (RO-SQ) tension, can be illustrated from Heidegger's tool analysis. One attends to the presence of a hammer's sensory properties primarily when it breaks down or is no longer ready-to-hand; otherwise, these properties tend to withdraw. Finally, the causal tension, or real object-real qualities (RO-RQ) tension is about the properties without which the object would not be what it is; this tension, explained by Harman with Leibniz, is quite difficult to describe because both sides are beyond direct access unless approached indirectly when translated into the sensual realm.

utilitarian function” (44-45). Function, nonetheless, should be conceived as broadly defined “relational function.” It is “not just to the narrowly practical results of a thing but also to any of its relations” (44-45). Moreover, this broadly defined relational function “can be de-relationized (or “zeroed”) by being treated as a self-contained unit” (45). The form/function debates thus turn into an ontological tension between withdrawn reality and its relational manifestation.

Building on the above, the final two chapters (Chapters Four and Five) go further to rethink art and architecture. Two propositions deserve emphasis. The first is that art can exist without humans. According to him, the familiar art-beholder relation is but a specific aesthetic configuration that does not exclude other possible relational structures that may also be deemed aesthetic. What then, would an art without humans look like? Harman’s example is a boombox powered by a solar battery that continues to play a recording: “despite the physical removal of this work from any probable human beholder, the work still fits within the parameters of known forms of conceptual art” (97). In such cases, objects’ sensuous qualities encounter one another without mutual exhaustion, hypothetically these are aesthetic relations, and they form a conceptual art to be discovered by humans.

The second proposition is “the cellular structure of art.” Harman emphasizes the metaphorical operation of art, arguing that metaphor functions as a bridge between real objects and sensual properties. Beyond this, Harman proposes the fusion of beholder and artwork can itself become a third, higher-order object. When the viewer is absorbed into the work, they form a compound that constitutes an aesthetic world, a theatrical envelope that is no longer continuous with the external, extra-aesthetic world of the viewer’s practical, worldly relations. Harman thus upholds aesthetic autonomy and formalism (in Kantian sense). The beholder-artwork compound signifies the authentic aesthetic experience that is anti-literalism. Here, it is precisely the beholder that stands in to prevent the artwork from being undermined or overmined. As Harman notes, “reality can intrude upon the cell from either side” and nullify the compound (120). Beneath the cell lies that which can compartmentalize the artwork into constituents, and above the cell are the wider and more complex realities into which the artwork enters.

However, such an authentic aesthetic experience is relatively rare. Oftentimes the overt political and social contexts intermingle as the message art conveys. These social and political registers mark the withdrawal of the theatrical effect and are symptomatic of literalism. It is at this juncture that the key difference between architecture and visual art emerges: if “visual artwork is already ‘impure’”—that is, never fully exempt from relations—then architecture is even more impure. In addition to aesthetic relations, architecture inevitably partakes in networks of various functional relations: “The added relational elements of architecture make it slightly more exotic form a formalist standing point” (120).

From the reviewer’s perspective, Harman consistently mobilizes architectural resources—whether theoretical discourse or design examples—to demonstrate his philosophical propositions rather than to interrogate architecture on its own terms. For this reason, the book reads as a continuation of Harman’s previous philosophical projects, while suited less to theory, history, and criticism (HTC) units within departments of architecture. For instance, Chapter Two engages

Vitruvius, Sullivan, Chambers, ultimately concluding that “all of this is helpful and inspiring, and makes a fine fit with OOO’s model” (70). In Chapter Five, Harman argues that the method to “de-literalize” form is to move upward, or holding elements together, whereas the corresponding method of “zeroing” function is to move downward, or differentiating relations according to context. A range of architectural sources are deployed for these reflections on “architectural cell,” yet how the sources lead to the argument may require further clarifications, and hence this part seems like Harman’s preparation for another future book.

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