

COLLISION

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Aesthetic Histories

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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ABSTRACT

This Collision explores the relationship between Object-Oriented Ontology theory, the "aesthetic experience" of a contemporary artwork (Iris Haussler's *He dreamed overtime* from 2012) and the creeping hand of fiction. OOO is a useful theory to apply to contemporary art, as it charts a philosophical return to all things as objects, rather than their relations or networks. It is also timely for understanding the changing nature of multi-media art, wherein experience, interactivity, spectatorial agency and contingent narratives are key.

KEYWORDS

Object Oriented Ontology, aesthetics, art writing, semi-fiction, flat ontology reality

The House on the Hill: Art Experience and Fictions

Prudence Gibson

This is a rejection of the hierarchy of criticism, as a system of removed expertise or authoritative didacticism. Instead, it is an inquiry into the experience of art and a tendency to lean towards fictional elements, when the aesthetic experience begins to overwhelm. The main tenets of OOO's flat ontology are equality, non-subjectivity and a grasping of the real. Fictive elements may not be true but they are real.

Art has become more participatory and performative. These changes in the fundamental characteristics of art experience mean that an expanded reality, where all objects exist on a flat ontological plane, is evident and writing needs to match this. The main question posed in this Collision, but left unanswered, is whether there is philosophical room for an excursion from art experience into semi-fiction?

• The House on the Hill •

Recently I disembarked a small ferry and stepped onto the listing wharf of Cockatoo Island, in the middle of Sydney Harbour. I pushed through the rain and wind, struggling to keep control of my flimsy pink umbrella, and headed for a little house at the top of a hill. The house was of white fibre-board with banks of studio windows. From outside, it looked warm and inviting. There was a strong smell of “art” as I sidestepped a man with a heavy Drizabone, in order to cross the threshold. The arty smell was wax, turpentine, paint and paper. The floorboards creaked, the weatherboards sighed, the windows whistled and the dripping taps cried. I had to resist a strong urge to pat the door jamb in sympathy, so unhappy was this run-down house. It was a wrinkled old man of a house, a putrid sickly reminder of unfulfilled love.

The house was an art work.¹ The exhibition was a biennale.² The island was the art site. Each room of the house told parts of a story. Strange rock-like relics, found in the caves of the island and first thought to be fossils, were exhibited around the house. Documentary information, lying on a bench, explained (to any spectator willing to fossick) that the relics belonged to a ranger, Ted Wilson, who had fallen in love with the caretaker’s daughter. There were busts of her imagined, re-created body lying on workbenches and a small room was full of wax models ready to be cast up. There were x-rays of a necklace buried beneath an old oak tree outside the house. This, the evidence showed the spectators, was where the couple had to bury a talisman of their love because they were star-crossed and could not be together. There were maps and diagrams of where the couple met for their passionate trysts.

This house, this artwork, was an archaeological shrine to lost love, beckoning the spectator to participate and to make her own narrative. Even though the participants of the story and the ranger were no longer around, the house seemed to live on in a melancholic malaise. It still had a faint pulse. It was a research museum, persistent in its process of becoming and un-becoming. Dusty, old and full of curiosities, it was a cabinet. As spectators arrived and wandered from room to room, hearing half-stories from other spectators and a Sydney Biennale warden, their imaginations were piqued. From its elevated position on the hill, we could

stand on the front verandah and see the many other installations and sculptures scattered across the island for the biennale and notice they were objects too, as were the old buildings, the docking bays, the crumbling wharf and other wandering art lovers, drenched with rain. This attention to the other artworks and other things made clear that this particular object, the house, had morphed into a true story, then into a massively multiplied fabrication, then into a new aggregated truth. This story was outside usual thought because it had launched into fiction, into non-reality, in a collective construction of half truths.

The house on the hill provided a number of object-oriented pluralities. There were the wax body parts, the room of curious collectibles, the casts abandoned in the bathroom: these were the upheavals of lost or star-crossed love. There was also the relationship between the spectators, as they walked furrow-browed around the house, unsure if it was an artwork, a prank, a reality show or just an abandoned home. Even though all these elements or objects were close to one another, they did not touch. OOO theorist Graham Harman explains this as withdrawal, where real and sensual things exist only as they are, irrespective of us.³ They affect each other but only through vicarious causation, where an effect is caused but without touch.⁴

There were the stories spectators told each other as they came and went, creating new narratives. A man stopped me by placing his hand on my arm and whispering, "ask about the x-ray!" There were the substances of natural origin, such as rock and plant relics from the island which, in an OOO context, exist as objects which might be actants in an event anterior or posterior to human existence.⁵ There were the digital documentations, such as a laptop with research information, x-rays and blueprint plans of the island. Then there was the force, the mood of the humans walking within the space. All these elements converged during the time I was there. All these elements were independent entities in an Object-Oriented Ontology.⁶

The most important key was that the artwork functioned without spectators too.⁷ It reminded me of Negarestani's oil, described as a sentient lubricant in his philosophical novel *Cyclonopedia*. The vitality of non-human things develops historical and political stories in new ways, tinkering with untruths and playing with complex ethics through para-narrative.⁸ The concept of vital non-human objects is where the experience of the art triggers a series of events (causation), even events that occurred in the past.⁹ The viewing becomes an event which lasts

throughout an enduring length of time and space, which mobilises fiction (imagination) and provides a view, if not from the outside then at least from the periphery.

In the context of Object-Oriented Ontology, an off-shoot of Speculative Realism,¹⁰ this state of withdrawing is standard.¹¹ In OOO, the agency and equality of things – all things, including the artwork house, wax models, strange woman, page of poetry, spectators – are massively expanded, democratized and given independence.¹² All interactions are indirect. Relations and networks are becoming ever more complex in this globalised digital age, and there is the danger that they have usurped or eclipsed the relevance of objects. OOO restores an interest in the artwork as a vital object, offering multiple contingent narratives. We already perceive that the world acts upon us. OOO further suggests that the world is acting upon us but also acting independently of us or despite us, with or without us. Even then, there is still room for the human. Lingis' idea of instrumental connections relates to Timothy Morton's causality as aesthetics: the act and action of the event or happening creates an effect.¹³ Morton sees aesthetics as a place of real illusions. This is to acknowledge the mystifying nature of things and also to understand the reality of cause and effect as bound up with this. Morton, in *Realist Magic*, sees regular events as aesthetics. He sees the motion of a saw through wood and a worm oozing out of wet soil, in fact any action, as an aesthetic: "the aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension."¹⁴

As I left the Biennale art house that soaking day, I watched a woman struggle with her umbrella whilst her coat flapped open with each surge of wind. She had dangly earrings shaped like crosses and inlaid with bone, and as she finally conquered her wet weather gear, I saw a sheet of paper fall from her pocket. Even though I called out to her, she couldn't hear, so heavy was the drumming rain by this stage. There was something about that woman. She was a mother, a daughter, a wife, a grandmother. She was one of those people so crippled by love that it snakes away, twisting into a monstrous version of eroticism. I was afraid of her. I stuffed the paper in my pocket, hoping to catch her and return her work, but knowing I wouldn't, because she trotted down the hill and straight onto a ferry bound for the city, even before I had managed to extract my own pink umbrella from the messy pile near the door.

I stepped off the porch and took two steps from the house. I had to push hard against a sucking feeling from behind. A malevolent draught of wind? A strangely specific gust? I soon arrived safely under the wharf

shelter about ten minutes later, waiting for the next ferry to arrive. I pulled from my pocket the piece of slightly wet paper the woman had dropped. It was some kind of prose poem. The style reminded me of the *Site Recite* monologue written by video artist Gary Hill.¹⁵ It read:

The familiar house dampens the day, with mouldy patches of tea-coloured moisture. Stains of past darkness edge through the worm hole up ahead, snake across ceilings and walls. Those red-eyed fiends are always watching me. How can I smell the dankness when I have no nose, no sense of reality? If a tin roof echoes the falling rain and the drum of reverberations travels up from my feet, will you still love me?

Patterns of tomorrow rumble around this house, where passions are stopped by heavy water and the rage of forgetting will never cease. These feelings spread, sensations chase fields of possibilities – memories of the smell of your neck, the soft hair on your thighs. But I can't wait forever and the pain in my side is too sharp. Cross that threshold of queasy fear and take the chance you've always wanted.

Fly to another place where all are the same and everything is different. It's better not to question the contingencies of change for they are weaker than the wind and kinder than the rustling leaves. I can see the fluttering colours of the more-than-human in the long house down the hill but I will never understand the false modesty of a virtual world, where love is only skin deep.

I folded the page neatly and tucked it into my zippered purse. I jumped on board the next tiny ferry and bobbed and scaled and nose-dived the harbour waves, all the way back to Circular Quay, wishing I knew the woman who wrote the prose poem, even though my instinct was that she was dangerous.

• Notes •

¹ Iris Haussler, *He dreamed overtime*, Cockatoo Island, Biennale of Sydney, 2012.
http://www.haeussler.ca/iris/he_dreamed.html.

² 18th Biennale of Sydney, Cockatoo Island, 27 June - 16 September 2012.

³ Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), 114.

⁴ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 91.

⁵ This is a development of ancestral things, objects which Quentin Meillassoux discusses in his book, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 20.

⁶ Graham Harman is the originator of OOO, having coined the term in his 1999 thesis on Heidegger, which was later published as *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002). Graham Harman, Tim Morton (*Realist Magic*), Ian Bogost (*Alien Phenomenology*) and Levi Bryant (*The Democracy of Objects*) have since become some of the major OOO theorists.

⁷ Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2012), 7.

⁸ Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008.)

⁹ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 169.

¹⁰ In 2007, Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, and Iain Hamilton Grant participated in a conference entitled *Speculative Realism*, at Goldsmith's College, University of London, April 2007.

¹¹ This refers to the separation of objects from their qualities: Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, 212.

¹² The capacity of any entity, human or otherwise, to act in the world. This is not moral agency or collective will but a basic instinctual function of all beings, with the result of causing an effect, which is the creation of a new thing.

¹³ Alphonso Lingis, *The First Person Singular* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 28.

¹⁴ Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013), 4.

¹⁵ Gary Hill, *Site Recite* (a prologue 1989), video, 4 minutes. For transcript, see: George Quasha and Charles Stein, *An Art of Limina: Gary Hill's Works and Writings* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2009.)

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