



# Terror, Trauma, and the Thing at Ground Zero

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Unveiled on the tenth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum attempts, in the most literal sense, to concretize the materiality of public remembrance. Designed by architects Michael Arad and Peter Walker, the memorial opens with a pair of one-acre inverted reflecting pools, symbolizing the void left by the collapse of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers. Each pool is accentuated by a manmade waterfall, the largest such fixtures in the United States, whose cascading rhythms suppress noise from the surrounding cityscape, creating a somber sanctuary. To further the monument's visage of serenity, landscapers peppered the remaining six acres of the Memorial Plaza with approximately 400 sweet gum and swamp white oak trees that rain shade over bronze plates lining the parapet walls of the reflective pools, on which the names of 2,983 victims are inscribed.<sup>1</sup> Taken in its entirety, the memorial divests visitors of the easy bifurcation of nature and civilization and, instead, uses negative space to render self-identification uneasy and ambiguous. To borrow a

term from ecological theorist Timothy Morton, guests are revealed as *strange strangers*, concurrently marking and marked by the unbounded being of their surroundings in an ongoing process of contingent affirmation.<sup>2</sup> In radicalizing the contingency of relations between all things extant at the 9/11 Memorial, human and nonhuman, this essay will engage in an object-oriented reading of the tribute, ultimately proposing that the 9/11 attacks were traumatic not just for the loss of life they incurred, but the aesthetic dissensus that was wrought on the American ontological imaginary.



Juan Carlos Cruz. 9/11 Memorial (South Tower Pool) at Night. Creative Commons.

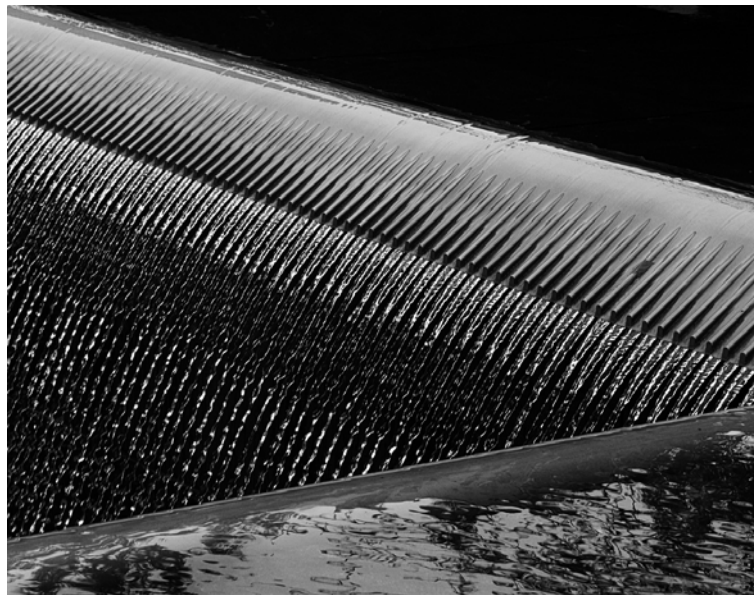
## • Noospherology versus OOOsphereology •

Peter Sloterdijk likes spheres. For this German philosopher, spheres are “thought-figures” that represent an epistemological shift toward “animated, interpersonal, surreal space,” whereby relations within traditionally neglected spaces, such as a maternal wombs or metropolitan apartment complexes, are mined for their anthropogenic pregnancy.<sup>3</sup> In reconstructing the metaphysics of being from the vantage point of space, Sloterdijk compellingly contends that much of modern metaphysical inquiry

denies the encounter of space and time in the constitution of being by valorizing temporality at the expense of architectonic excavations. At the same time, however, Sloterdijk's line of thinking remains fundamentally anthropocentric, suffering from what the speculative realist Quentin Meillassoux calls *correlationism*, or the idea that philosophers may only access thinking and being as they are correlated to one another, disavowing any reality external to this perpetual linkage as inaccessible.<sup>4</sup> Growing from the Kantian transcendental ideal of objects conforming to the cognition of their perceiving subject, correlationism poses a problem for theorists attempting to think through the actuality of events like 9/11, which portend grave consequences for affected populations, both animate and inanimate. Specifically, in abrogating knowledge of reality outside of the circular thinking/being dyad, correlationist philosophical trajectories recuperate within and subsequently reify conscious human experience, marking claims about being as always already characterizing being-for-anthropos, rather than being-in-itself. Thus, though Sloterdijk's spherology provides a useful corrective to theory's (and particularly political theory's) disregard for the spatial dimension of spatiotemporality, it could be adequately described as *noospherology*, given its limitation of spherological inquiry to the sphere of human thought, relation, and agency.

In contrast to correlationist and anti-realist philosophies, object-oriented ontology (OOO) proposes that all relations distort their relata in the same fundamental manner, thereby equalizing the ontological playing field on which all entities are situated.<sup>5</sup> Founded by Graham Harman, object-oriented philosophy upholds the principle of *anthrodecentrism*, whereby post-Kantian transcendentalism is rejected in favor of the idea that objects exist independently of human consciousness and are incapable of exhausting one another's inhaled, or *withdrawn*, potential.<sup>6</sup> In radicalizing finitude to the extent that all objects, conscious or otherwise, are incapable of perfectly translating objectal relations into complete knowledge of the objects involved, OOO holds that the qualities perceived or manifested by an object at any given spatiotemporal locus are, themselves, products of objectal agency. In other words, writes Levi Bryant, qualities are not tantamount to an object's potential, but "acts, verbs, or something that an object does."<sup>7</sup> Blue, by Bryant's reasoning, is not something that the 9/11 Memorial's reflecting pools are or a quality that they possess. Instead, the pools' color is an agential act committed within a particular set of relations and topological deformations, or what Bryant designates a *regime of attraction*.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, these conditions admit not just putatively "real" objects (champagne glasses, manatees, and

Air Force One) to the plane of ontological being, but any entity that obtains existential independence of human consciousness. Ergo, fictional objects, like Harry Potter or Pikachu, make the cut, creating a pathway for re-ontologizing 9/11 semiotic simulacra and textual formations deployed in their remembrance. In so doing, OOO, like Sloterdijk, takes seriously the need to think through space and time, emphasizing what might be called *OOOspherology*, in which objects generate their own dynamic spatiotemporality at multiple scales, rather than existing within a purely Euclidean spatial framework.



Tolka Rover. 9/11 Memorial. Creative Commons.

### • Watch Out for Colliding Entities •

Drawing a line between objects and events, one can say that while the events comprising 9/11 are not fully objectal, the coded signifier “9/11,” on the other hand, exists autonomously and enacts material effects that do not depend upon any single being for predication. Baneful objects, therefore, are theorized alongside their benign counterparts. It is important to note, here, that OOO does not compel specific normative claims. Instead, it speaks only to ontological foundations and substance

metaphysics. Signifiers that have been critiqued as aesthetic simulations, linguistic nihilism, or explosions of normative force within the space of abjection are shown to be fully agential things-in-themselves. In the case of the assault on New York City's skyline, 9/11 came to represent militarized nationalistic myths: that everything had changed, terrorism posed the greatest threat to democracy, and collective trauma bestowed upon the United States citizenry a revitalized sense of self. Alternative ways of coding the 9/11-event were suppressed by the 9/11-signifier, cleaving space for the production of new objects (Department of Homeland Security), relations (security checkpoints at airports), and ways of managing relations (mass deployment of banoptic surveillance systems) meant to maintain the state's homeostatic equilibrium and arrest the becoming of entities that challenge the ability of the state – itself an object – to matriculate through space and time.

Rather than denounce the reality of 9/11 as an event recursively correlated to a perceiving subject, object-oriented thought holds that the 9/11-signifier exists independently of any given subject position, despite the limited verisimilitude of its discursive spawn. By extension, one can conclude that the ideological liquidation of 9/11 imagery terminated the reflexive potential of such signifiers as *a priori* politico-aesthetic instruments, contravening the performance of (il)liberal security regimes by dissolving the intimate coupling of essence and appearance. If recognition of the Other is always a recognition of the self inside the Other, then in the 9/11 event, Americans were faced with the projection of humanity into a nonhuman alterity, as familiar objects – planes, mortar, steel – became momentarily uncanny, escaping the full measure of anthropocentric dominion. Unfortunately, the emancipatory objectal potential released by 9/11 was almost immediately ensnared within the semiotic world of the 9/11-signifier, mediatically replicated and dispensed to homogenize traumatic affect under a martial umbrella.

In Bryant's regime of attraction, manifested properties only remain in a constant state when the conditions under which an assemblage of objects interact remain the same over time.<sup>9</sup> To explain the agential colonization of one object by another, one could posit the complementary idea of a *regime of detraction*, whereby one object, or assemblage thereof, commits ontological violence upon another object by falsifying the colonized object's enacted potential, negating its primary inhered power, namely the possibility of becoming. Critiquing the appropriation and instrumental redirection of a nonfictional object's agency by a fictional

object, a process I've elsewhere termed *superimposition*, requires a move away from the rapturous *hyperrelationality* that magically conflates all objects into an endlessly interconnected aggregate. And this is precisely the gesture that the 9/11 Memorial attempts to make.



Tom Hannigan. The 9/11 Memorial. Creative Commons.

## • The Object of Space, Time, and Memory •

Put simply, hyperrelationality connotes the idea that everything is related to everything else, infinitely and recursively. In the United States, hyperrelational thinking is most explicitly pronounced in the holy trinity of liberal governance, composed of God, commodities, and the Constitution. This three-in-one triumvirate forms the core of liberal ontopolitics, in which being is propounded by quasi-meritocratic capital accumulation, said to be the highest aim of human life. Not even skyscrapers are exempt from capital divination, for what more are corporate towers, after all, but the end of a populace's efforts to exploit industrial objects and labor in pursuit of political exceptionalism and the ability to touch the face of God? Ironically, hyperrelational objectal assemblages, by definition, curtail motility and agency, since complete interconnection renounces the ability to break with old relations and craft new ones, such that action always exists for-everything. The trauma of 9/11, it follows, stems not just from

loss of life or destruction of property, but also from the unmasking of hyperrelationality as a barbaric meta-aporia about signification that incites ideological utterances to normalize its assertions of power at multiple distances from the event, grinding all objects into a single, deified relational scheme.

When they are materially displaced, security fictions, mementos, rubble, and rubble-cum-artifact all evince an agonistic space of translation between entities noncompliant with predetermined epistemic arrangements. Preserving the reality of such an encounter necessitates an acknowledgement of the nontraversable spatiotemporal gulf within which objects relate. As in Einstein's theory of general relativity, which demonstrated that gravity is the objectal warping and curvature of spacetime, objectal encounters involve a distortion of relational space, that subset of general space in which aesthetic sensibility is repartitioned as an affirmation of radical difference. The point is that, in the case of the 9/11 Memorial, each of the objects involved in memorialization – from the placards to the trees to the people – subverts preordained exegesis of what meaning is or should be, recasting becoming as an ontopolitical negotiation of an object's spatiotemporally common withdrawn being as it relates to itself, other objects, or larger assemblages of which it may be a part.<sup>10</sup> Granted, the 9/11 Memorial was born out of the same sense of statist suffering that the fictional 9/11-signifier seeks to uphold. Gazing into the gaping voids amidst the concrete jungle of lower Manhattan, however, one is made keenly aware that the substantiality of ontological difference precedes epistemological knowledge of an event, as the artificial familiarity of the event in question is washed away by the waterfalls flowing into the reflecting pools. What is left is the concurrently horrifying and sublime feeling that when the Twin Towers crashed to the ground in 2001, the centrality of human agency fell shortly thereafter, leaving both in a state of processual ruin.



## • Notes •

<sup>1</sup> Details contained in this description come from the National September 11 Memorial and Museum's website: <http://www.911memorial.org/memorial>. Accessed July 3, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Sloterdijk's characterization of spherology is derived from *Bubbles: Spheres, Volume I: Microspherology* (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2011), as well as "Against Gravity," an interview conducted by Bettina Funcke that was published in the February/March, 2005 issue of *BookForum*, in which he states, "Even German semantics plays a role in my choice of terms, since between Goethe and Heidegger the word sphere is employed as an approximate synonym for the circle of life or world of meaning and of course this already goes a ways toward accommodating my search for a language appropriate to animated, interpersonal, or surreal space."

<sup>4</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay On the Necessity of Contingency* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Graham Harman proposes the equalization of all metaphysical relations as a radicalization of Martin Heidegger's famous tool analysis. In his groundbreaking work on the subject, Harman claims that Heideggerian readiness to hand (*zuhandenheit*) indicates the withdrawal of objects from both practical and theoretical action, meaning that the reality of an object cannot be exhausted by practical usage or philosophical investigation. Thus, for Harman, objects "never encounter one another in their deepest being, but only *as present-at-hand*: it is only Heidegger's confusion of two distinct senses of the *as* structure that prevents this strange result from being accepted." See Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Being* (Peru: Open Court, 2002), 2 3, emphasis original.

<sup>6</sup> Specifically, object oriented ontology's anthrocentric project downplays the prioritization of the human world correlate in Immanuel Kant's Copernican Revolution, whereby reality is only epistemologically accessible through cognitive structuring, reducing philosophy to an asymmetrical exploration of how humans engage with reality, at the expense of reality itself. In maintaining the Kantian insight that relations distort their relata, however, object oriented ontology extends the phenomenological limitation of finitude to all objects, human and nonhuman. See Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (London: Zero Books, 2011), 44 47.

<sup>7</sup> Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 89.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>10</sup> An object's withdrawn being is "common" in the consistency of its capacity for becoming across time and space. While an object will change as it undergoes internal and external relations, its capacity for becoming and differentiation is, in my view, an unmitigated potential that precedes action and appearance. In other places, I have called this *differential becoming*, describing difference as a positive effect of objects mapping their own spatiotemporality and the fundamental power of objects existing equally on an immanent plane of being.

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