http://social-epistemology.com
ISSN: 2471-9560

A Response to Sheldon Richmond's Review of *Architecture and Objects*

Graham Harman, Southern California Institute of Architecture, graham_harman@sciarc.edu

———————————

Harman, Graham. 2022. "A Response to Sheldon Richmond's Review of *Architecture and Objects*." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (12): 36-41. https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7q0.

SERRC
Social Epistemology Review & Reply Collective
11 (12): 36-41. 2022
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7q0

Here I would like to respond briefly to Sheldon Richmond's "The Inner Life of Objects," which describes itself as a critical review of my book *Architecture and Objects* (Richmond 2022; Harman 2022). His review is by no means bitingly critical, and is certainly not malicious. Nonetheless, it is my impression that Richmond trivializes the ideas in my book by making them seem banal and toothless, downplaying their provocative character.

Consider the final few sentences of Richmond's review:

> [I] conclude that the new stuff in Harman's book is the thesis: architecture has an aesthetic that includes reality checks for structural stability and safety. It is common sense. Unfortunately, common sense swiftly goes into hiding from us when we confine our thinking to the inner life of [our] own schools of thought as fetish objects (28).

Richmond is certainly correct that if this were the central claim of my book ("architecture means aesthetics plus structure and safety") then it would not be very interesting. With the further implication that I am treating my own school of thought as a "fetish object," he harks back to his own opening paragraphs, which makes it sound as if object-oriented ontology (OOO) were some sort of empty pedantic exercise. In what follows, I hope to show readers that it is quite a bit more interesting than that.

Commodity, Delight, and Context

Let's begin with a word about Richmond's assertion that I merely make the commonsensical claim that architecture is a combination of aesthetics plus structural stability. Unfortunately, he fails to provide any context for how this issue arises in the book. In the first place, any discussion of the history of architectural theory has to speak of Vitruvius, a contemporary of the first two Caesars and author of the oldest treatise on architecture we have (Vitruvius 1960). Sir Henry Wotton's famous 1624 English translation of the work says that architecture must take into account "firmness, commodity, and delight," his rendering of the Latin *firmitas, utilitas,* and *venustas.*

These days "firmness" is usually a topic for structural engineers rather than architects, even if students of architecture continue to receive training in the area of structural soundness. But by and large, architects have turned their attention instead to "commodity" and "delight," the ancestral versions of what are now usually called "function" and "form." This terminological pair is the central concern of my book, which in fact says very little about structural stability. Richmond does share the following quotation from my book: "Architects may learn from philosophers, but they can also push back, as when [Peter] Eisenman retorts to [Jacques] Derrida that his perpetual hedging … [is] of little use to the architect, who is asked to make something that will not collapse and kill its occupants" (Harman 2022, 34). But this is a peripheral passage, one that merely attempts to defend Eisenman in passing from Derrida's finicky objections to the architect's use of "chora" and other terms in ways of which the French philosopher disapproves (Eisenman 2011). To repeat, my book is concerned very little with "firmness," which plays much less of a role in architectural theory today than it did in the time of Vitruvius. Let's turn instead to the pair of function and form, which is really the primary topic of *Architecture and Objects*.

As noted in the book, it would not be inaccurate to say that modern aesthetic theories can generally be described as either basically Kantian or basically Hegelian in spirit. In his late-career classic *Critique of Judgment,* the German philosopher Immanuel Kant set forth what might be the most influential theory of art ever written (Kant 1987). His theory can be summarized by saying that it treats artworks as basically *autonomous*. What this means is that an artwork is self-contained, rather than holistically interrelated with its socio-political context or with the biography of the artist. It is to be judged in a calm, disinterested way by "taste," meaning that the personal emotions or feelings of agreeableness evoked by the work are not of aesthetic relevance. The autonomy of the artwork also means that it should not be judged according to its prose intellectual meaning, but solely as a self-contained aesthetic experience. Taken together, these are the chief principles of what has come to be known as aesthetic formalism, for which Kant can be called the chief philosophical inspiration.

We can contrast this with Hegelian aesthetics, often influential on the political Left, which treats artworks as both ingredients and symptoms of a wider historical context. A painting or architectural work can never be seen as just freestanding independent objects, but must be taken as spiritual expressions of the total culture from which they emerged. And far from being impenetrable to the prose formulations of reason, artworks must be regarded as germinal expressions of some concept or other. It really boils down to this simple opposition: do we view artworks as self-contained capsules able to freely travel across space and time, or do we view them instead as localized faces of a broader whole?

Kantian Heirs

Personally, I tend toward the Kantian or formalist view, for the simple reason that artworks—like any other sort of object—never dissolve completely into their surroundings, but are able to travel fairly well into unexpected contexts without losing their identity altogether. Nonetheless, there are serious problems with the foundation of Kantian aesthetics, as I contended in the book *Art and Objects,* the predecessor to the new book critically reviewed by Richmond (Harman 2020).

I approached this topic by considering the thought of one of Kant's most significant present-day heirs, the American art critic and historian Michael Fried of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Fried is temperamentally opposed to what he calls a "theatrical" tendency in art since the 1960s, or roughly the "postmodern" period of the discipline (Fried 1998). In historical terms, Fried develops this intuition in a trilogy concerned with the development of French painting from the mid-1700s through the 1860s, which could be termed the prehistory of pictorial modernism. Fried finds an ally in the French philosopher and encyclopedist Denis Diderot, who was also one of the pre-eminent art critics of his day (Fried 1988). The painters who most interest Diderot (and initially Fried) are the "anti-theatrical" ones who depict figures so absorbed in their activities that they risk no forbidden interaction with the beholder of the painting. Examples given include a painting of St. Augustine and his audience absorbed in a sermon given by that great figure; a group occupied with grammar lessons; a boy carefully blowing a soap bubble; the tense construction of a house of cards; and finally a painting in which the drawer of a desk is

11 (12): 36-41. 2022
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7q0

pushed out toward the front of the canvas, as if deliberately excluding the "theatrical" involvement of the beholder.

So far, Fried seems to be finding nothing but supporting evidence in French painting for his own anti-theatrical proclivities. Yet he is far too honest an author to overlook mounting pieces of counter-evidence. For instance, in such a prominent eighteenth-century painting as Jacques-Louis David's *The Oath of the Horatii,* it is hard to know whether the overall impression is anti-theatrical or full-blown theatrical. In one sense both the militant oath-swearing men and weeping women in the picture are too absorbed in their own emotions to notice the beholders who view them, yet in another they are nothing but a pack of histrionic drama queens. Fried notes other paintings that are ambiguous on this score, and even admits that his and Diderot's desired anti-theatrical separation of beholder from painting is a "supreme fiction" (Fried 1988, chapter 2), in the sense that there would be no art without someone to view it.

Fried pursues the theme further in the remaining two books of the trilogy: *Courbet's Realism* (1990) and *Manet's Modernism* (1996). In the former, Fried makes a compelling case that Courbet breaks down the beholder/artwork (or at least artist/artwork) distinction by painting himself into his own canvases. In the latter, Fried emphasizes the "facingness" of Édouard Manet's inaugural modern paintings, both in the sense that there is often a central figure (frequently a naked woman) staring directly at us, and in the related sense that the entire painting seems to lose internal depth and focus instead on pushing itself in our direction.

The unexpected lesson of Fried's trilogy, then, is that painting—and by implication, all art—contains an irreducible grain of theater. And this has severe consequences for Kant's theory, since it suggests that whatever the autonomy of the artwork might mean, it cannot consist of mutual separation between artwork and beholder. Instead, just as water consists of both hydrogen and oxygen, so too does art require a constitutive hybrid of work and viewer. Yet this does not spell the end of autonomous art, just as the fusion of hydrogen and oxygen does not mean that water merely dissolves into a wider holistic context. What it means, instead, is that art is a compound or hybrid entity that requires both the work and the spectator as separate chemical elements. This has immediate implications for formalism, which has too often been dismissive of art forms that do not observe the basic parameters of Kant's theory: for instance, all of the openly theatrical and conceptual genres that emerged from the 1960s onward. The lesson of Art and Objects is that these postmodern forms of art need not be a threat to aesthetic autonomy, and hence need not dissolve artworks into their socio-political and biographical contexts.

In turn, this forces us to reconsider Kant's highly negative attitude toward architecture (Kant 1987, 191). Kant is rather suspicious of any kind of beauty that seems to be contaminated with ulterior motives. For instance, the beauty of a human body is not quite pure, since our appreciation of it is likely to be tainted to some degree by lust. Likewise, the beauty of a horse probably suggests speed and reliability, both of them practical values rather than strictly aesthetic ones (Kant 1987, 77). When it comes to architecture, the fact that it must always somehow be *useful* leads Kant to think that it must always be an inferior form of art.

Whereas the American architect Louis Sullivan famously declared that "form ever follows function," (Sullivan 2014) Kant seems to hold that form must always be devoid of function, if it is not to render beauty impossible. We have now arrived at the central topic of *Architecture and Objects*: the form/function distinction itself, for which the book offers a new interpretation.

Rethinking Form and Function

The reason object-oriented ontology (OOO) cares so much about autonomy is that objects cannot be dissolved into their relations with our mind or with anything else. Whatever the uses to which a hammer is currently being put, there are infinitely many other possible uses that are not currently being tried or will never be tried. When two inanimate objects collide in empty space, they interact with only a limited number of each other's properties: to take a famous example from classical Islamic philosophy, when fire burns cotton it does not interact directly with the cotton, but only with a fairly limited cotton-image that excludes all of the properties of the cotton that are irrelevant to fire. It is for similar reasons that OOO is more drawn to Kantian than to Hegelian aesthetics.

If we proceed by always relating an artwork to its historical context, we can effectively just cherry-pick our favorite aspects of that context: as happens for instance with Marxists and their perpetual focus on the economic conditions of production in any given era. But an object is not just an economic product, just as it is never only a psychoanalytic symbol or even just a symptom of the male gaze. Instead, an object is simultaneously all of these, and many other things that none of these theories can ever hope to exhaust. An object must exist before it enters into relation with others—here I disagree with Karen Barad (Barad 2007; Harman 2016)—and an object in its own right can never be reduced to its sum total of effects on other things—here I disagree with the late Bruno Latour (Latour 1999, 127).

In brief, the goal of *Architecture and Objects* is to rethink the key architectural opposition between form and function in autonomous terms. Even in the case of form, this has rarely if ever been done. When people speak of architectural form, what they always seem to mean is the "visual look" of a building. But this conception of form is inadequate, for any number of reasons.

In the first place, our sensory experience of a building always involves more than vision, and includes sound and smell no less than conceptual factors. Second, there is no privileged vantage point from which we can ever claim truly to have captured the form of a building, even if certain views of an edifice are especially well-suited for postcard images. But most importantly, as pointed out by the young Peter Eisenman among others (Eisenman 2004), the experience of a building is more kinetic than visual. It is not instantaneous like a sculpture, but unfolds over time like a novel or film, and for that reason architecture involves memory. Yet this does not mean that an architectural work is merely a sum of memories, since no set of experiences or memories can ever exhaust the reality of a building. Instead, the human experience of a structure is, at best, an allusion to the object it experiences. Rather than the outward visual form of a building we must seek its "deep form," which is one that can never be literalized in any specific view or any prose description.

SERRC
Social Epistemology Review & Reply Collective
11 (12): 36-41. 2022
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7q0

Beholding Art

The search for an autonomous or de-relationized idea of function might initially seem hopeless: after all, as Kant himself noted, a building always relates to ulterior purposes and therefore seems to be inherently relational. But to this I say both yes and no. For while it is true in the obvious sense, it also proved to be true that the beholder's interaction with a painting is inherently relational, yet "beholder plus painting" turned out to be autonomous from all other surrounding factors anyway. So it is with architecture. We need only consider Aldo Rossi's classic book *Architecture of the City,* with its important pages critiquing what Rossi calls "naïve functionalism" (Rossi 1982). His argument is that many buildings eventually have functions different from their original ones: my current employer, the Southern California Institute of Architecture, now occupies a building in downtown Los Angeles that was originally a freight rail depot. Moreover, there are also many purely monumental structures that never had a clear purpose at any stage of their existence. Rather than form following function, Rossi seems to say, functions turn out to be by-products of pre-existent form.

A more contemporary example in my book comes from a fine piece on the architect Rem Koolhaas penned by the critic Jeffrey Kipnis (Kipnis 2013). Kipnis speaks here of Koolhaas's failed competition entry to design the Tate Modern museum in London. The critique made by Kipnis is essentially that Koolhaas's design, while spectacular in certain respects, was more an infrastructural project than a strictly architectural one: designed merely to allow for mass circulation of as many people as possible through an edifice that had no necessary link with the idea of an art museum. Yet it seems to me that Kipnis's critique, while extremely perspective, wrongly draws a negative lesson from the project. For it seems to me that with this project Koolhaas discovered a point of entry into a de-relationized version of function or program. By abstracting from any *particular* function—as emphasized by his proposed reduction of the famous Tate smokestack to a mere skeletal remnant—Koolhaas offered a sort of functionality deeper than any momentary use, much as Rossi suggested in his earlier book. Ironically, this means that Koolhaas designs a "purposiveness without [specific] purpose," which the anti-architectural Kant defined as the essence of art itself (Kant 1987, 33).

Another way of putting the point is as follows. Formalist art criticism, for all its virtues, fails to maintain a plausibly permanent gap between the artwork and what surrounds it, especially the beholder of the work. This might seem to put aesthetic formalism into terminal crisis. Yet architecture was never able to thrive under the conditions of high formalism, due to its innate functionality, as seen from Kant's dismissive attitude towards it. But in a positive sense, this means that architecture *by necessity* is better able to face the theatrical mandate of post-formalist art, because there is simply no way for architecture to escape the theatrical weaving together of form and function. What this means is that architecture, more than any art form today, is best equipped to lead philosophical aesthetics in a new direction.

References

Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Eisenman, Peter. 2011. *Written into the Void: Selected Writings, 1990-2004*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Eisenman, Peter. 2004. *Eisenman Inside Out: Selected Writings, 1963-1988*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Fried, Michael. 1998. "Art and Objecthood." In *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews,* 148-172. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fried, Michael. 1996. *Manet's Modernism, or the Face of Painting in the 1860s.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fried, Michael. 1990. *Courbet's Realism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fried, Michael. 1988. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Harman, Graham. 2022. *Architecture and Objects.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Harman, Graham. 2020. *Art and Objects.* Cambridge: Polity.

Harman, Graham. 2016. "Agential and Speculative Realism: Remarks on Barad's Ontology." *rhizomes* 30. doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/030.e10.

Kant, Immanuel. 1987. *Critique of Judgment.* Translated by Werner Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Kipnis, Jeffrey. 2013. "Recent Koolhaas." In *A Question of Qualities: Essays in Architecture,* edited by Alexander Maymind, 115-145. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Latour, Bruno. 1999. *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Richmond, Sheldon. 2022. "The Inner Life of Objects: A Critical Review of Architecture and Objects." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (11): 26-28.

Rossi, Aldo. 1982. *Architecture of the City*. Translated by Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Sullivan, Louis. 2014 [Revised Edition]. "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered." In *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings,* 202-213. Eastford: Martino Fine Books.

Vitruvius. 1960. *The Ten Books on Architecture.* Translated by Morris Hicky Morgan. Mineola: Dover.