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Episode: Architecture and Objects with Graham Harman (Art after Nature 3)
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Intro

Graham Harman: Architecture is the first encounter we have with reality, and we usually think of architecture as meaning buildings. But of course architecture shapes the entire environment.

Caroline Picard: In philosophy, in art, in architecture, maybe, there's this constant tension between wanting to press forward and forge new ground and also revise or undo the past.

Giovanni Aloi: There's a very important notion there about processing time that we are no longer allowed to engage in because of the way in which the rhythm of life is propelling us to bypass the reality of what used to be thinking just twenty years ago.

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Aloi: Welcome to another Art After Nature podcast with me, Giovanni Aloi, and Caroline Picard. It's a great pleasure today to have here with us Graham Harman, who certainly needs no introduction, and yet here we are. Distinguished professor of philosophy and liberal arts program coordinator at SCI-Arc, Harman earned his BA from St. John's College-Maryland, his MA from Penn State University and his PhD from DePaul University. He is the author of nineteen books, most recently *Art and Objects*, published by Polity in September 2019, and *Artful Objects* from Sternberg. Graham is the 2009 winner of the AUC Excellence in Research Award, and in 2015 he was named by Art Review as the 75th most powerful influencer in the international art world. In 2016 he was named by The Best Schools in their alphabetical list as one of the 50 most influential living philosophers. It's great to have you here with us, Graham, in occasion of the publication of your book for the Art After Nature series published by University Of Minnesota Press.

Picard: Thinking through object-oriented ontology (OOO) and the work of architects such as Rem Koolhaas and Zaha Hadid to explore new concepts of the relationship between form and function, this is the first book on architecture by the founder of object-oriented ontology, OOO. *Architecture and Objects* deepens the exchange between architecture and philosophy, providing a new roadmap to OOO's influence on the language and practice of contemporary architecture and offering new conceptions of the relationship between form and function.

Aloi: Before we talk more specifically about your book, Caroline and I would like to know a little bit about object-oriented ontology today. How far do you think it has gone at impacting the contemporary philosophical landscape? What about its relevance today? And especially what about the controversy, the pushback, the resistance that so strongly still persists?

Harman: There's been a lot of influence of object oriented ontology, OOO, in an interdisciplinary sense. I'm just finishing up coadvising a PhD dissertation in Europe. For instance, it's applying OOO to understanding the work of the late Spanish architect Enric Miralles. There was a conference held at a business school a few years ago on the influence of OOO on organization studies. So it's somewhat liturian, in that sense — popping up in all kinds of different disciplines: art and architecture, of course, since I now work in an architecture school. In philosophy, that's been less the case, because philosophy is still very much dominated by this conflict between analytic and continental philosophy, and OOO doesn't really fit in either of those baskets, even though I come from a continental philosophy background myself. So in philosophy you're still seeing some activity at the fringes by only a few adherents in each camp. It's stronger in the interdisciplinary network of disciplines outside philosophy. The kind of pushback we get really varies depending on the fields, depending on what the ruling discourse is in the field. So, for instance, in architecture there's a group of enthusiasts, but a lot of the pushback comes from one of two different camps. One of them is the Deleuzian camp that dominated for a whole generation of its own and maybe resents somewhat that OOO has come in and taken over parts of the discourse. And so there's some pushback from those people. There's also pushback from another wing of architecture that is somewhat tired of philosophy having an impact on the discipline and want to focus on disciplinary craft issues and are tired of this long string — [Martin] Heidegger, [Jacques] Derrida, [Gilles] Deleuze — of philosophers since the late 60s/early 70s that have been impacting their discipline a lot. That's an area where the pushback varies depending on which camp you're hearing it from. In other fields, for instance, there's a lot of political critique of OOO in the sense people will claim, falsely, that there's no politics built into OOO, which isn't really true. There's been more written about politics than people think. It's simply not what they mean when they say politics. These days in the humanities and social sciences when people say "politics" — maybe also in the arts — what they mean is "what already-recognizable form of the left are you signing up for?" because it's assumed, in advance, that we all need to gather together and denounce capitalism and blame it for everything including the degradation of the environment. And of course there's some truth in that. But the modern left, as we know it, is a product of modern philosophy, which is what OOO critiques. I've written about this quite a bit: the fact that modern political theory — in both its left and right versions — comes out of an interpretation of human nature, and the state of nature. It's generally the leftists who think that we're nice and we're corrupted by society, and it's the right that thinks that we're naturally evil and there needs to be a crackdown to stop us from abusing each other and engaging in violent insurrection. I think what's wrong about that is that it assumes that politics is something sui generis, simply arising in the human sphere, and it's not. Inanimate objects play a much greater role in politics than people are willing to admit, starting with geography, but then going far beyond geography to things like tools.

Picard: There's a few points in your book where you describe how it makes sense that architecture and philosophy have a friendship or a dialogue because in a way they both create or frame — I don't know if those are the right or the words that you would use — reality where they they try to create depictions of reality and then those frameworks are interactive, to some extent, whether it's a philosophical framework that you're using to engage with the world or a city building that you're navigating. But it seems in both of those depictions there is a latent politics that is constantly activated by people engaging with the subject.

Harman: Yes, my friend David Ruy was the first one I knew who put it that way in my presence. He said architecture is the first encounter we have with reality. We usually think of architecture as meaning buildings, but of course architecture shapes the entire environment, sometimes including things as basic as rivers and forests and how they appear to us, and yes, that's the point where architecture meets philosophy. They are both basic statements about the nature of reality, what's important about it, how it is accessible to us. You're right that there is a political aspect to that always. It just seems to me that these days people are too quick to reduce everything to the political, just as some scientistic philosophers are too quick to reduce everything to its underlying material, and this actually gets into what I was talking about with formalism in the book — the need to talk about things to some extent non-relationally, as self-contained — not that anything's ever totally self-contained, but that things are partially self-contained and they don't simply dissolve into some holistic atmosphere that's either political or something else in character.

Picard: Well and that's something that I was thinking about, too, in terms of how you point out that even the most in situ artwork, for instance, or architecture — even though they are contextualized — there’s a way where we say the architect or the builder or the viewer or the artist is selecting certain aspects of the environment to focus on and relate to rather than the entire context.

Harman: Right. I think what I was talking about there is I was pushing back in that case against the notion of site specificity, which of course has been a big notion in the art world for a long time, and it is always an issue in the architectural world, because a building is supposed to fit in its site. And here's where I took the side of the formalists a bit. I should back up a step here and talk about the fact that formalism was a big concept in my book *Art and Objects* a couple of years earlier, that this coming book develops in the field of architecture. Formalism can mean different things in different fields, but it always means that there's a certain self-containment of the thing being talked about, so a formalist approach to art, of course, would try to downplay the social-political context of the work, the biography of the artist or the author, and so forth. That shouldn't be pushed too far, because works do interact with other works around them. Harold Bloom made his whole career off talking about how writers are in rivalry with past writers, and there's definitely a sense in which that's true, that nothing exists in total isolation. But when you call a building site-specific, for example, it's never totally site-specific, because every site is almost infinitely complex. I see this when I sit on juries for student architectural work at SCI-Arc. Students are always very selective about what aspects of the site they choose. So if they have a site next to a river, certain students will make the river the focus of the building, and certain students will more or less downplay it and just put it off to the side. And so you're always making choices about your context and your site, and I've just estimated maybe a half dozen aspects of your sites are what you're going for. So it's not this all-or-nothing alternative of either an artwork is completely self-contained or else it's dissolved into this holistic web that includes the entire universe ultimately, but that artworks — like all other objects — are somewhat selective in terms of the the aspects of their environment that they're either capable of responding to in the first place or that they choose to respond to, just like the fact that humans and dogs inhabit the same worlds, but our specific sense apparatuses have different ranges of things that we can detect, that other animals cannot. Dogs obviously have a much better sense of smell than we do. You go to a restaurant, you come home, your dog is smelling your lips. I'm glad humans don't have that ability, but it's one of the things that makes dogs what they are.

Aloi: Graham, you seem to have a tendency in your articulation of object-oriented ontology to pretty much constantly look for what's not fashionable, like you focus on what's not fashionable. I remember you wrote an essay in which you applied object-oriented ontology to art. It was one of your early works and you focused on [Paul] Cézanne, who was probably one of the least popular artists in the context of contemporary conversations. And I also remember that you spent quite a substantial amount of time focusing on [Clement] Greenberg, who is probably one of the least popular figures regardless of his persisting influence, and now formalism. You know these are all topics and figures that have now been relegated to the background of contemporary conversations, and I wonder about what it means for your articulation and theorization of object-oriented ontology to build upon these sort of forgotten or nonfashionable pillars.

Harman: One thing is that I don't worry so much about that, because the fashions will change. I do it in philosophy, too, by the way. I make significant use of Aristotle, who is the currently most unfashionable of all the great philosophers, because nobody likes talking about substances anymore; everybody likes talking about holistic interactions, and [that] everything's in flux all the time. I think this is largely just because if something's out of fashion, it's probably currently underrated if it's of a certain rank. You know, Cezanne is obviously a great painter whether in or out of fashion now, and so if they're out of fashion, it's probably because the current environment is not equipped to appreciate what they brought us. But that always changes. The next generation it could flip, or it could go into some new configuration. And anyway, I don't think in those terms. I just go towards what interests me and let the chips fall where they may. In the case of Clement Greenberg, who I know has been badly unpopular since the emergence of pop art, at the latest, I simply find him to be an extremely powerful writer who had points to make that we forget at our own peril. And I find myself going back to him again and again in a way that I don't feel myself drawn to even some of the very significant critics who are more in the center of things today — whether it's Rosalind Krauss or or Hal Foster, people who have a lot of interesting things to say — I just feel more of a vibe with Greenberg. Obviously, he could be very harsh, but he's also a wonderful writer — I'd say one of the best of the 20th century. There are a lot of things I think wrong with his approach to art, but there are some lessons there that we're not getting from anybody else right now that I think we need to to recall, and the same in philosophy with Aristotle. So it’s not a conscious set of decisions that leads me to those sorts of figures, but maybe there's a pattern; maybe it's that one of my ways of thinking is looking at things that have been left behind but not fully exhausted.

Aloi: Yeah, I think that there seems to be a pattern, and I think I'm interested in how that shapes object-oriented ontology to be such an original lens through which we can understand everything around us. But at the same time, it’s what maps your inquiry. I think it's not a little aspect, it's not an irrelevant aspect of how object-oriented ontology is shaping up. It’s defining in positive ways, according to me. I always look at object-oriented ontology as a tool that is necessary because it does things that other philosophical kinds of approaches don't do, and that's also perhaps one of the reasons why it keeps doing what others don't do, because it bubbles up from a different ground.

Harman: One of the things that I find reassuring is the fact that OOO growth has been slow but steady, which Warren Buffett would call a value stock. It’s offering something that nothing else is offering, and it's going to increase over time. Occasionally we get people calling us a trendy fashion, but that just isn't what the record shows. The record shows a slow but steady growth in popularity of OOO as more people discover it, and people are finding value in the things we’ve written, and it’s a growing corpus.

Aloi: Yeah I agree with you 100%, and I love it that this is also a very unpopular metaphor that you've chosen in order to map what's going on. There'll be lots of people tuning out immediately as they hear a comparison between a philosophical stream of thought and the market. But that’s great.

Harman: Philosophy always has to push back against the pieties of its time, even when there's some truth in the pieties, and these days anti-capitalism is the leading piety, and so I do enjoy the shock value sometimes of bringing in business metaphors, banking metaphors. And yeah I think, to go back to your earlier question about how I pick unfashionable people, well again, you're buying low. If you're buying Aristotle or Cezanne stock, you know it has value, but it's currently low, so you're getting a good deal. But no, that wasn't my conscious process, but that's another way of looking at it.

Aloi: I am loving this. You've got a nose for business there, for philosophical business, we could say.

Picard: Fashion or no, I guess I sort of want to take Greenberg more seriously, at least in the context of this book. Greenberg seems really interesting to me as somebody who suggested that painting died, and that's something that the legacy of painting has had to deal with since. I mean I remember — I wish I could remember who wrote the article — but there was this amazing article that I read when I was in art school that was like, following Greenberg everyone decided that — and you know abstract expressionism — everybody decided that painting had died. They buried it. They had a big ceremony. Every ten years they exhume the body of painting [and] decide whether it's dead. It's dead. They bury it again, and so on. It seemed like, in this book, Graham, you were suggesting towards the end that maybe there is a similar point in architecture where suddenly there's this question about what architecture can do next, post-collage. I don't mean to kind of jump straight into the tail end of your book, but I thought that there was an interesting relationship or correspondence to Greenberg as a presence in your book who says, “painting’s dead,” and it's clearly not dead, and then this kind of dangling question at the end of your book as to whether or not anything new or more can be done with architecture.

Harman: I think usually something more and new can be done in any field. It's just that people get tired, and it takes a spark of innovation to see where to go next. I went through graduate school with people saying that “big Philosophy” with a capital P is over. It's only going to be applied and focused on small problems. I've never believed that. You're admitting your own lack of imagination if you say something like that. There are plenty of directions for architecture to go in now; I'm just simply not the one to do it. It has to be architects who decide where to go next. All I can do is offer commentary on where we've been, what some of the philosophical implications of it are now, and where it might go next.

Picard: But also my sense was that was also part of the interest in mapping out this dialogue between architecture and philosophy, is to show how it's a generative relationship for both fields, potentially.

Harman: Potentially. In practice, philosophy has taken very little from architecture in return. But as I argue in the book, that's because philosophy has been stuck since [Immanuel] Kant in this idea that there are two basic kinds of things in the universe: human thought and everything else. And that's not a situation in which philosophy is going to be equipped to learn much from architecture. Also something that occurred to me simply while I was writing the book is that obviously there's a long interaction of philosophy and architecture if you go back to Plato's influence in the renaissance, and Kant and [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich] Hegel in the 19th century. But really the golden age of architecture drawing on philosophy has happened since the early 1970's until roughly the present. I think that's connected with the gradual collapse of modern architecture — I mean, not that modern architecture is not still with us — but the collapse of the ideology of modern architecture, that everything is supposed to be functional and expressive rather than historical and so forth. It's really when that dominant influence of modernism and architecture began to slip a bit that architects turned to philosophers — first Heidegger, then Derrida and Deleuze — all of them making interesting contributions to the discourse. I suppose OOO is the fourth in that sequence, but we're still pretty early and we'll see where it goes next.

Aloi: Graham, can you tell us more about how the idea of object-oriented ontology and architecture came about in the context of the book that we're publishing, but also more in general in the journey of object-oriented ontology? I remember that, for instance, many years ago, I can't actually put my finger on it, it's probably around 2011/2012, you gave a talk at the ICA in London, and it was one of your early talks about contemporary — well, it was modern art at the time — you were talking about readymades, and it was one of the early moments in which you were expanding into art and and perhaps even already containing the germ of architecture. So I was wondering about that trajectory, and if you could tell us a little bit about how it led to the book that we're publishing with you.

Harman: Yes, in both of those cases I was brought into those worlds by others — the art world and the architectural world. Art started a little bit earlier. The first time I realized we were having any sort of impact at all on the art world was this show by Joanna Malinowka in New York in 2010/2009, somewhere in there, that was called Time of Guerrilla Metaphysics, a reference to the title of my second book. That was a widely reviewed show and she was interviewed about it. I followed that simply because I was surprised that we were having an impact that quickly in the art world of that magnitude. Architecture probably started a few years later, and there was one stray invitation I had to the AA in London in 2007 by Theo Lorenz and Tanja Siems, and that was an interesting colorful experience in its own right. But the sustained engagement with architecture happened in the beginning in fall 2011 when David Ruy, who was a St. John's classmate of mine — I know Caroline also went to St. John's, so a lot of St. John's energy here on the podcast — David Ruy was an old classmate of mine who I'd lost touch with for – oh geez

— over 20 years. We were never especially close. We knew each other [and] played saxophone together sometimes. I knew he'd become an architect and I wrote to him about it. Never heard a response; apparently he never got my letter. But then he showed up for a series of lectures I gave in New York in the fall of 2011, and that's when he started telling me, you know your philosophy is really possibly important for architecture, and I asked him how. That was news to me. Finally I took his word for it, and I asked him for some reading advice. I think I asked him for ten classic works and ten modern works on architecture to read, just because twenty books — or even fifteen or sixteen — that's not enough to master a field, but that's enough not only not to make a fool of yourself in a field, but also to be able to profit from overhearing conversations and things like that. Fifteen to twenty books in a field is enough to know your way around [and] what the main controversies are, if you're choosing the right books. So he gave me that. I've since prepared similar lists for philosophy, since whenever I tell this story, people ask me for philosophy lists of that sort. But that's all it takes to get started. Then you get the bug, once you've read that much. You want to keep reading more and more. And so I spent a lot of my time now in the SCI-Arc library just reading more architectural theory and history. And then eventually in 2016 it was time to leave Egypt. My wife got a job in America. We moved back to America. I tried commuting to Egypt from America for a year which was impossible. I'm probably the only person who's ever commuted from Iowa to Cairo, Egypt, ever in the history of humankind. So then I started asking around, and this thing at SCI-Arc came up, so I became a full-time architecture school employee, which means I'm not teaching architecture classes, because I'm not allowed to — liberal arts has to teach nonarchitectural content according to the accreditors — but it means I'm hearing lectures all the time, I'm having conversations all the time. I've got a library that's architecture heavy, and that's where this book came from. It's the fruits of my first cycle of six-seven years at an architecture school. We'll see how long it lasts. But I don't expect it to be my last book on architecture. And then, of course, it also fit with art and objects as an extension of that.

Picard: Again, related to architecture and objects, within OOO — and maybe you can talk a little succinctly about these delineations — but between OOO, my sense is that there's a fourfold system of relations that are sort of at the central tenet of the philosophy. And my sense was that, again, from reading your book, this corresponded really elegantly with architecture, which has an exterior impression; there's functional elements, formal elements; there's a whole interior experience that has to be accounted for.

Harman: Sure, you mentioned this fourfold structure, and where that comes from is OOO grew out of what was originally my PhD thesis on Heidegger at DePaul. Of course what Heidegger is most known for is this idea that being hides or withdraws behind beings, in the plural. Being is that which is mysterious. It's that which can never be made present. It can be hinted at, whether through poetic language or through moods. So Heidegger is an explicitly antirationalist philosopher: whatever becomes present to our mind is not reality itself. There's a bit of Kant in that, obviously — the thing in itself. And that's opposed by the whole Hegelian tradition and also by the phenomenological tradition from which Heidegger himself came — Edmund Husserl — that we focus on what's given to consciousness. With Heidegger we focus on what's not given to consciousness, because there's this rumbling depth behind everything we're conscious of. So that's the basic Heideggeriam distinction that everyone knows about. A lot of people assume that that's all OOO is doing. One recurring critique of OOO in the architectural world is that we're just saying that objects are mysterious and they have variable outlines and that's not enough to be a design theory. Okay, fair enough, but that's not what OOO is really about. OOO is also about adding this the second crossing axis that comes from Husserl, which is the difference between an object and its own qualities. This goes all the way back to Aristotle in a certain form — the idea that Socrates and Socrates sitting and Socrates standing are all the same thing, because Socrates is a substance, and whether he's sitting or standing is an accident. That just sounds like kind of boring, old middle-aged metaphysics, except that then Husserl brought that into the realm of appearance, [the idea] that I look at an object, and I'm always only seeing one [of] what he calls an adumbration of it. I'm seeing a lemon or an apple just from one side; I'm not seeing all aspects of it. I'm seeing it in a specific mood from a specific angle in a certain amount of sunlight. And so what phenomenology is about for Husserl is trying to strip away all the accidental features of a thing and reach the essence of it. [The] difference between Husserl and Aristotle is that for Husserl, there is no real substance; there is no real world. The world that we see and the world itself are one in the same world. And then Heidegger complicates that by saying no, it's not. The world that we see is something that is never commensurable with the real world. The real world hides or withdraws. So what OOO is really about is the fact that there are two kinds of objects, two kinds of qualities: there's the real, which is the hidden one, and then there's what I call the sensual, which is the one that we can encounter directly. And see if [you have] two kinds of objects — real and sensual; two kinds of qualities — real and sensual; and then you also have a loose relation between objects and their own qualities. This is really the key to OOO — the fact that an object and its qualities are in a very tense relation. People are in different moods every time you see them. You can paint things a different color every time, every day, if you want; they're still the same thing. Since you have two kinds of objects and two kinds of qualities, there are four possible tensions: you can have a real object in tension with its real qualities, a sensual object with its sensual qualities, a real object in tension with its sensual qualities, a sensual object contention with its real qualities. You can study all four of those, and the name that OOO gives to that study is aesthetics. Aesthetics is a broader term, not just for art, but for any kind of tense relationship between an object and its qualities. So aesthetics becomes the core of OOO, not in the sense that we think everything's an artwork or that we think everything is just decorative, but in the sense that the object quality tension that lies at the basis of aesthetic experience is actually the basis of all reality for triple OOO. So yes, in that book, as well as in the art book, and in my book on [H.P.] Lovecraft, the horror writer, I've tried to talk about how those four tensions play out in given genres of arts.

Picard: But there's a part, for instance in this book, where you talk about how architecture doesn't have the same need to withdraw as, say, artworks, which I thought, yeah, somehow maybe a building is able to represent those tensions in variation somehow more immediately and constantly than, say, a painting.

Harman: I was probably talking about that in the passage on time where I talked about how a painting — yes, you can look at a painting for a long time and keep discovering new elements — but there's a sense in which the whole painting is given to you at once. For formalists like [Michael] Fried, that's essential. For them, the key to avoiding what they call theatricality is the fact that the artwork is given in an instant. Fried is very critical about Tony Smith's experience of driving down the unfinished New Jersey turnpike, which Fried calls totally theatrical. I think he goes a little far on that. But I would agree that painting is, in a sense, given instantaneously. A sculpture may be a little less so. But architecture is more on the side of literature and cinema in the sense of requiring the time. You have to let the time unfold to experience the artwork. In literature, but especially in cinema, you have to let that time unfold in a specific order at a speed that's not chosen by you. If you're watching a film, you have to sit there and watch it in the amount of time that it runs. I suppose you could pause it and go take a break, but ideally you should really let it run through without a break. [With] literature, you're meant more to pause more often — maybe read it over the course of a few weeks — whereas with architecture, what's different there is you can reverse order. You can walk through a building. The architect may suggest the way you're supposed to go through a building, but you don't have to follow that in most cases. There are different ways you can go through the building. So architecture is, in a sense, an experience of memory, that you are holding different experiences together in a certain sequence. So the form of a building is not instantaneous; it's diachronic. That's something that makes architecture distinct from a lot of other arts. That's one of the things I was talking about. There's also the fact, of course — which for Kant disqualified architecture as a fine art — the fact that architecture is useful, because, of course, for Kant, the artwork has to be completely self-contained. It can't refer to anything outside itself including the pleasure of the viewer in seeing it. He puts architecture just above the creation of water fountains as being a very low form of applied arts. In my book *Architecture and Objects*, what I tried to show is that, of course, you can't remove all function from architecture. It would just turn into glorified sculpture in that case. But what you can do is derelationize the use of architecture. You can derelationize its relations, which sounds paradoxical, but I mentioned in the book there are a couple of different ways you could do that that have already been discussed by others. One of them is Aldo Rossi, one of the most influential architectural theorists of the ‘60s. His book *The Architecture of the City* is in many ways, a critique of what he calls naive functionalism — the idea that a building should be visually expressing the function that it has. What Rossi says there — and of course, he's working in an Italian context, and it's no accident that he's Italian, because in Italy you're surrounded by history everywhere, and it still functions as part of everyday life there in a way that it doesn't in most countries — and he points out that lots of buildings change their function over time, and also a lot of buildings never had a clear function. A monument is a good example of that. Monumental architecture is the condition of an architectural work that doesn't have a specific function but somehow still serves to organize the space of a city. The city is built around the monument, rather than the reverse. So it’s like this antifunctional black hole lying at the center or near the center of cities, these monuments. There isn't really a function for the Washington Monument even in an American context. There is, I mean honoring George Washington I guess, but that's not really mostly what it does. What it mostly does is just this weird monumental thing that organizes all the space around it. So that’s one way you can, so to speak, withdraw the function of a building from its function. The other way comes from this very interesting article that Jeffrey Kipnis wrote on Rem Koolhaas in which he's talking about Koolhaas’s failed entry for the Tate Modern Project in London. Kipnis says he's glad Rem lost that competition, because it would have destroyed architecture as we know it. Kipnis’s reading of that building is that it was mostly an infrastructural project. It was simply designed to bring as many people through it as conveniently as possible in the smallest amount of time possible. So it's not really architecture. And of course, Kipnis belongs to the formalist camp that Peter Eisenman leads, and so Rem Koolhaas is, in some sense, their enemy. Sometimes, at least, they like to read Rem as a program-oriented architect who's simply trying to fulfill an interesting function with his buildings. There's a whole counter tradition that reads him as a formalist in disguise, but I'll leave that for another time. What Kipnas points out is that the Tate Modern design by Rem Koolhaas didn't need to be an art museum. It's functional in this very abstract way that doesn't even refer to the specific use for which the building was meant, which he sees as another sign that the destruction of architecture is underway in this design, whereas for me that means, oh that's great. He's creating a function that is not tied to any specific function. So it's a nonfunctional function. It's a nonrelational relation. Kipnis says in this other metaphor I like, which is where he says that Rem Koolhaas — I don't remember — [is using a] machete or something. He's hacking away at the design brief, hacking away the skin and the muscle until only the nervous system of the building is left. And think that's a wonderful metaphor — violent though it is — that Rem is creating this abstraction of what a building should be in this case. So that's another fine example of a nonrelational building that still, nonetheless, serves a relational function. That's really what the book is about — trying to derelationize both form and function in architecture — because form and function have been the two main terms in architecture arguably since [Marcus] Vitruvius, the earliest architectural writer we have, but certainly since the mid 1700s when Carlo Lodoli first started talking about form and function as two separate aspects of every building. Then it became key to modernism with the idea that the form should simply express the function, and [then there was] the associated pushback against that by postmodern architects. But I was trying to come up with a nonrelational conception of both form and function in the book.

Aloi: And Graham do you have a sense of, or can you envision, how object-oriented ontology might impact architecture in the practical realm?

Harman: To some extent. The interesting thing is that architecture — kind of like philosophy — is a field usually dominated by old people. So the generation I'm seeing now — my own generation, and the one younger, who have picked up some triple [OOO] ideas — are still in the early stages, not people who have piled up a lot of commissions yet. Maybe some here or there. The people who are being hired are still people like Frank Gehry, who's over 90 now; Rem Koolhaas who's got to be over 70; the late Zaha Hadid, who was in her mid 60s when she died, I believe. And so it's older people usually who are actually building this stuff and shaping our urban environments, and these of course are not people influenced by OOO, they were already professionally formed when I showed up. So [there] maybe twenty or so years before we see whether or how much OOO architecture is out there. There have been some things that have gone up: Michael Young's apartment complex in Mexico City — he credits OOO with some of that; some of Mark Foster Gage's work, Tom Wiscombe, and others who have drunk deeply at the OOO fountain. It just remains to be seen how successful those various careers are [and] how influential they are, but there are plenty of articles already about how one would go about doing these things. To speak about Tom Wiscombe's article — I think it's called *Discreetness, or Towards a Flat Ontology of Architecture* — he talks about three different ways that you can point to OOO-like tensions in architecture, and all of these three, interestingly, were known in previous architecture. They just weren't given the theoretical significance they have now from an OOO standpoint. One of them is you can raise a building on a plinth so that it's somehow decontextualized, separated from its environment. That's a well-known architectural strategy. There is what Wiscombe calls the "objects in a sack" method, where you have a kind of loose outer envelope that only hints at what the interior forms are, and then he also has what he calls tattoos, which is where the surface patterns of the building are out of joint with the underlying structural logic, so you're reintroducing a tension between the inside and the outside. But then there's also Mark Foster Gage, who doesn't focus on the depth dimension at all — which people assume is necessary to OOO — but it isn't, because you can still have tensions on the surface between the ornamentation and its specific qualities. So there are lots of different ways you could go about using OOO methods in architecture as in the visual arts.

Giovanni Aloi: It sounds like here, too, you were playing the long game where we're returning to your market analogy — waiting for architects to grow older and really put OOO to good use. Reminds me of [Marcel] Duchamp. I was just thinking about that. You know, I think one of the most original aspects of Duchamp's approach to his practice, his art, was this notion of not making work for today's audiences but for audiences that might come up fifty to sixty years from now. And then, of course, the trajectory of his career proved him right, because it's during the ‘60s — not when Fountain was first placed on a pedestal — that he became Duchamp. It's just all that process and waiting, procrastinating, planting seeds and waiting for them to germinate that I think made him who he became.

Harman: Quite remarkable. One index of that is the fact — I wrote an article once where I pointed this out — that if you go through [Clement] Greenberg's collected criticism — and Greenburg wrote about everything, he went to every show [and] wrote about everybody in the art world — up until 1968, I believe, there were only two mentions of Duchamp in his entire written outputs, and then of course starting in 1968 he becomes very vehement in denouncing Duchamp. So it just shows how Duchamp's status changed. He became someone Greenberg had to fight back against as an enemy, whereas for all those decades he simply wasn't I guess until the late ‘50s/early ‘60s when [Robert] Rauschenberg and the others brought Duchamp back in. Now I read something else that I think is true, which is today [that] many artists would rank Duchamp higher than Picasso as influence, which is remarkable when you consider that Picasso was an all-time prodigy [who] dominated the art world for decades. Duchamp was considered kind of a prankster at the time. Now Duchamp is the one who's rated higher. It's really remarkable.

Aloi: Yeah, I agree with that, too. I think it's partly because of the way art — contemporary art — is taught in art schools. You know students are directly and indirectly bombarded with Duchampian notions, whether they are overt or whether they are embedded. But I think once students come to grips with the notion of what a readymade is, it's over. You know, they've entered a new — actually it's not over; it begins. They've entered the new dimension of art making, art thinking, [and] processing what their practice can accomplish. I don't think Picasso quite did that in his career in terms of opening doors. But, of course, there's so much there.

Harman: I also want to follow up on what you said about playing the long game. In a way that's true, except I don't know about Duchamp. In my case, it's not a game. In my case, it's simply that I'm often not as impressed as others by the most recent trends in any area. I think I often want to anchor myself in what I consider the most recent classic in a discipline, and in my own case, that was Heidegger. You know, for all the bad things about the man, I simply was never convinced that even the things that happened in France in the ‘60s and ‘70s ever quite reached the level that that Heidegger was at in terms of raising the real philosophical questions. Coming out of St. John's, I didn't have this ultra-contemporary education; I had an education that emphasized classic texts from ancient Greece to the present, and that gave me a good resistance to fashion, I think. Simply go back and look at what's the most recent thing that you're sure is rock ground. In the case of philosophy, for me, that was Heidegger. Whatever bad things you can say about Heidegger — and there are many — that is rock-solid bedrock that you can build on. Yes, there are things worth finding in Derrida, [Michel] Foucault, Deleuze. But I'm not going to be too distracted by those. It's going to take a while to go beyond the solid bedrock that Heidegger gave us. So it's less playing the long game than simply my belief that history is a long game, that things happen more slowly than people want to realize sometimes, and so patience is needed, [and] also the fact that fashions can turn around very suddenly. We've had this Duchampian art world now since the 1960s in some sense. Is that just going to cumulatively continue forever and just continue to develop in that same direction? I think it's unlikely. I think it's more likely that certain neoclassical elements are going to spring up in unexpected form. Certain formalist elements will spring up in philosophy, too. I think some of the older stuff is going to come back, like substance. The fact that people make fun of substance is a concept now, but Aristotle, [Thomas] Aquinas, [Gottfried Wilhelm] Leibniz — that's a pretty impressive historical axis. I don't think substance is going to disappear. I think it's going to come back, and OOO sees itself as part of that historical trend.

Picard: For some reason this makes me think — so when I was reading your book, I picked up on a few phrases that I loved where it would be like, primitive shapes or archetypal solids, which just made me imagine — I don't know if this is the case — but it made me imagine that one of the things that architects have to struggle with a little bit, which seems similar to artists and maybe similar to philosophers, is that you have to somehow negotiate these original building blocks, whether it's like Euclid, like Euclidean shapes, or the Renaissance masters, or you know, whatever. So that was another moment that I laughed: when there was this description of the blob and how amazing the blob is as this pre-pre-shape concept.

Harman: Yeah, that's Greg Lin's contribution to architectural form. The critique I would make of that is that it's too much like the pre-Socratic apeiron on this idea that reality itself is this blob-like thing that broke into pieces later, or will be returned to this blob in the future. The problem with that is: why do you ever go from the blob to having lots of different pieces? You just end up with these creation myths, kind of like the ones you get in pre-Socratic philosophy, whether it's mind made it spin really fast and break into pieces like Anaxagoras, or Pythagoras said the blob inhaled the void and created these bubbles in it. That's what I worry about with all these theories, that individuals are derivative. The world itself isn't carved into individuals, just the mind somehow breaks it up into pieces. I don't think that works.

Picard: Maybe just because we're talking about those fields, but in philosophy, in art, in architecture, maybe, there's this constant tension between wanting to press forward and forge new ground and also revise or undo the past to find a new beginning or point of departure.

Harman: We're all building on what came before, and the past is continually reinterpreted, and anytime someone claims to do something completely new, it's never true. But that also doesn't mean that there's nothing new under the sun. There are plenty of new things under the sun, but they often involve recombining things in new ways. Not just as a collage, because it has to work, also. You have to put pieces together from the past that work. I certainly feel that way in philosophy. This is why I went back early to Aristotle. Lately I've been going back to the Medievals, because I think people like Aquinas and [John Duns] Scotus have a lot to teach us. In

Egypt, I got back into Medieval Islamic thoughts, from which I learned an immense amount. There's always more in these works than people suspect there is. That's why they've lasted a long time. I think philosophy risks losing something when it tries to be too ultra-contemporary in its concerns. We talked about this, about playing the long game, which I've said isn't really a game, it's just the way I see history as working. Not necessarily everything that happens is an important shift in trends.

Aloi: I guess, Graham, there's a very important notion there about processing time, digestion time, that we are no longer allowed to engage in because of, perhaps, the way in which social media is shaping our thinking or just the way in which the rhythm of life is propelling us to bypass the reality of what used to be thinking just twenty years ago. Another consideration that I think is important is that I think sometimes from an American perspective, as far as I have experienced that, Europe gets lumped in as a homogeneous cultural reality.

Harman: Right. It can. I wanted to add, though, that when you said some people say the time for patience is over, I would agree in many political areas that that's the case. So the most dramatic example in the United States being police violence against Black Americans. The time for patience is well passed on that, and so there are issues like that that you can find where patience is the wrong word. But anytime you get close to the theoretical side of things, patience is required, because a lot of these radical, new philosophical theories coming out really aren't always as radical as they think they are. For instance, you have a lot of people today saying you need to think of everything as being in flux and constantly changing instead of being static substances. This argument goes back to ancient Greek philosophy; the idea that everything's in flux has actually been one of the cliches of the 20th century to today. It's always been the opposition camp there since Berggson, at least. I'm not saying it's only a cliche. There are arguments to be made on that side as well. But it's something that Aristotle was already dealing with in his works. And so the idea that somehow you're immediately politically liberated if you think that everything's changing all the time and nothing has any stable identity, no, that's not an urgent political thing. That's one camp in a philosophical debate that's been going on for millennia. It's not immediately liberating in a political sense. So if there are political problems where the time for patience is passed, those are going to be dealt with on a level that isn't necessarily bolstered by any particular ontological theory. You can be for or against substance and still think police violence against Black Americans has reached outrageous levels and needs to be stopped now. So I don't think that you're going to find any inherent guilt for Western philosophy in that, except insofar as you could say Western culture has always been a white-dominated culture and so forth, sure. But I don't think that invalidates reading Aristotle and Kant.

Aloi: I guess it's part of a broader question that also has very much been present in conversations about art, that this is an association between the person and the artwork and also parts of the thinking of an artist that don't align with our expectations or the work of art and how we negotiate these differences. I think we haven't gone very far in finding plausible solutions. It feels to me that the argument bubbles up and dissipates depending on what inflames a conversation, and we tend to go around in circles. I think that the question that is raised here is very important. Of course, it was the same question that was raised by the death of the author that never seems to be addressed in any kind of connection to that very important question. I think it would be much easier to use a platform — once again to your point of not throwing away everything that has been already laid down in order to build upon it. I feel like sometimes there's very little building happening in some conversations of the kind that we are entertaining now. But I'm also in agreement with you, Graham, that there is a response moment in which perhaps the response is an overreaction. And again I say that in the acknowledgement that there is an urgency to changing certain realities. But at the same time, we still need to, I think, negotiate that urgency with the need to think thoroughly and also to engage in ways that are productive and perhaps more fair, perhaps more aligned with the demands of a future that needs to see us all together, that needs to see us all like working together and thinking together in ways that we haven't actually experienced yet.

Picard: I had a question as a sort of tail-end question. This goes back to your book *Architecture and Objects* and also touches on Giovanni's original question about metaphors. I was really interested in the regular return to water as a metaphor, as an example, because it seemed interesting that it reoccurred and also especially in an architecture book where the few times that I've talked to architects they say that water is one of the main things that concerns buildings; you always have to account for where the water goes. So it seemed like in a book about architecture, that seemed intentional to me.

Harman: Well, water interests me for two reasons. One is it's the classic example of an emergent reality that's not reducible to the hydrogen and the oxygen. Hydrogen and oxygen are both gasses in their free state, and they both fuel fire. Water's a liquid in its natural room temperature state and extinguishes fire. And so that allows you to make the argument for emergence that water is more than the sum of its component elements. It's also, of course, as you know, the beginning of Western philosophy and science. Thales of Miletus said everything's made of water. I wasn't actually thinking of the architect interest in it. I was thinking of the philosophical usefulness of it to fight reductionism — the idea of reducing things to their tiniest pieces as being what philosophy should do.

Picard: I just loved it as a return, because we're sort of constantly talking about these concrete material structures, and then it's like, and let's think about water again. And, of course, because of its anatomical structure, and how it becomes a new thing once combined. But it also seemed like an apt presence. Thank you so much, Graham, for meeting with us and [for] your lovely book.

Harman: Thanks for having it in the series.

Aloi: Thank you so much, Graham. It's been such a great pleasure to talk to you today, and we very much look forward to your book, *Architecture and Objects*.