

**THE  
ESTRANGED  
OBJECT**

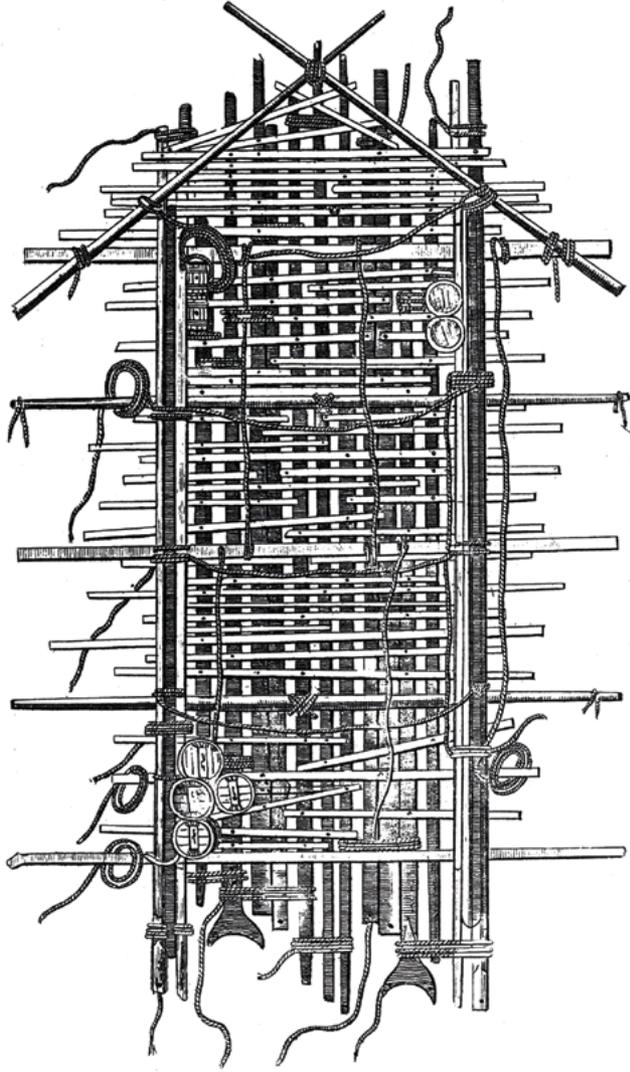
**YOUNG & AYATA**  
**KUTAN AYATA**  
**MICHAEL YOUNG**

**THE  
ESTRANGED  
OBJECT**

**TREATISE**

# Contents

<u>Introduction:</u>	5
The Nature of the Real	
Rhett Russo	
An Aesthetics of Realism	19
The Morning Cleaning	22
Estrangement & Objects	29
Aesthetic Regimes of the Sensible	32
Speculative Objects	39
Realism and Medium Specificity	47
Photography and Estrangement through Absorption	53
The Parafictional and Medium Promiscuity	65
One or Many Mediums	76
<u>Young &amp; Ayata:</u>	
1. Drawings	79
2. Objects	85
3. Buildings	91



Alexandre Corréard (1788–1857), plan for *The Raft of the Medusa* at the moment of its crew's rescue.

## Introduction: The Nature of the Real

Rhett Russo

The challenges associated with depicting the real have played an important role in cinema, literature, art, sculpture, and philosophy, but have yet to be fully exploited by architecture. Nonetheless architecture shares many of the same ontological predicaments with these other arts—the introduction of iron, the invention of photography, and the Industrial Revolution are a few examples of crucial developments, which have significantly challenged classicist doctrine. The realist painting of the 1850s, in particular works by Gustave Courbet, confront the viewer with the realities of labor in a new way. With Courbet, reality is presented through the tensed body of the kneeling peasant in *Sifting Wheat* (1854) or the brokenhearted embodiment of the *Wounded Man* (1854). Similarly, the emaciated travelers depicted in the *Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19) emerged from Gericault's careful practice of painting dead corpses—and seizing the opportunity to speculate on the aesthetics of historical events. These unusual practices formed the core in the developing aesthetic category of the “real.” As Michael Fried has remarked, the content of realist painting presents a particular challenge for historians, due in part to the shift in emphasis toward depicting the “everyday,” but also because its resultant strangeness dislodged it from the framework of classical aesthetics. Historically, realist art manages to present an alternative image of the state by foregrounding the actions of the worker and the individual artist. This is important to understanding Michael Young's interest in Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2000). It stems from the role that aesthetics plays in rendering a political situation visible. This infers that a message is not added, but rather that it is the core of the object itself. In a similar way, Vermeer's realism introduces a slightly different mode of existence, a reality in which the model and techniques used to depict the scene remain mysteriously hidden to the viewer. The effects of the lighting, color, and perspective in his paintings are so unprecedented that the world he depicts transcends the real. What is important to recognize here is the overwhelming capacity of a fictive work of art to draw us in so convincingly that we accept it as real. Without reason, this is what exceptional realist art does. As with Vermeer or any other extraordinary artist, this is no small feat. In a similar way, the discussions in this book are strategically formulated around questions concerning the nature and aesthetics of real objects.

It is necessary to acknowledge the important influence of

Graham Harman in this discussion. Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology has enlivened the discourse in philosophy through his introduction to objects as primary sources of knowledge. This introduction has opened up the possibility for an alternative form of thought that could prove to be as significant for the arts as empiricist doctrine is for the sciences. Harman's philosophy challenges the foundations of causality and the reductionist tendencies that focus solely on understanding objects through their qualities. In contrast to phenomenology, which relied on human interactions, Harman's philosophy reveals a series of strange consequences, including the observation that objects interact without us. This may seem strange, but it presents an opportunity to break free from that phenomenological tradition, which defines knowledge solely from the point of view of human interactions. If we consider the consequences of the object placed at the core of Harman's ontology, it may offer us a profound means to reassess what architecture can do. Consider the vast number of influences in architecture that can be traced back to objects, machines, plants, animals, or even textiles. The reverse, of course, is also true: if we consider the way in which the real qualities of architecture interact with other real objects. Consider, for example, how the real qualities of the Colorado River touch the sensuous qualities of the Hoover Dam. By leveling the status of all objects, Harman turns a subtle observation into a set of ideas with profound implications for aesthetic theory. For Young & Ayata, as well as many of their contemporaries, it has elevated the status of the object while validating their suspicions that the relationship between objects and their sensuous qualities cannot be attributed to the rational activities of tools or techniques. For Harman, the fact remains that every object has a dark core that cannot be accessed, and his metaphysics asks us to consider the real object—the thing itself—alongside its qualities.

The conversations that follow occur between the architects and educators Ferda Kolatan (su11), Jason Payne (Hirsuta), and David Ruy (Ruy Klein). They each offer their own reflections on the importance of realism, or more precisely, the opportunities that realist thought holds for architecture. This exchange is anchored by a slightly more difficult and often overlooked question. What is a real architectural object? It is difficult to imagine an answer that does not begin with a list of qualities. It is an unusual question, in that it implies that we address the real state of affairs in the present. More importantly, it asks us to reflect on the reality we desire the discipline of architecture to embrace. Through their work and pedagogy, this group of architects actively develops responses to this question. They continue to pursue the real in pursuit of architectural knowledge, as well as the multiple strains of aesthetic realism that have been carefully curated here by Michael Young.

## Weird Realism - David Ruy

Rhett Russo (RR): Your interest in nature and technology has taken a turn recently. By accepting that the real includes technology, politics, nature, and geography, among other things, you have managed to situate architecture and urbanism in a place where it is no longer posited solely in the service of these other aspects of life—but instead in a place of equal importance. In other words, realism opens the door for architecture to be equally “real” and to carry on real interactions. This is most evident with your *Bioprinter* project—in which you developed a 3D printer that can print real flesh. It serves as a reminder that architecture is an equal player in the world of creation and it maintains a bizarre yet real relationship to technology, politics, and nature. At the same time, do you feel that the real has a way of bringing the concept of the future much closer to the present?

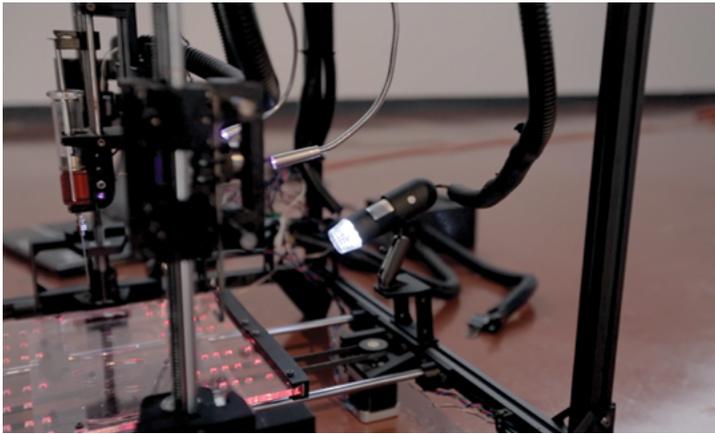
Given the relatively small consideration that has been given to realism in art history it is slightly ironic that contemporary discussions surrounding realism have taken on such philosophical importance. What is it about realism that continues to make it such a relevant topic?

David Ruy (DR): There's nothing worse for an architect than the phrase, “That's not realistic.” That simple phrase can be a shorthand for so many things: it's too costly, it looks structurally unsound, it won't work with the program, no one will know how to build it, etc. However, the most interesting version of why something seems unrealistic is this one: “It looks weird.” In other words, the proposed architecture doesn't reflect how reality should look.

Ever since the publication of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, but perhaps long before that, we've had reasons to doubt the mind's ability to possess absolute knowledge. Even in antiquity, Plato described our fate as one where we're stuck in a world of shadows, doomed to never see things as they actually are. What's interesting to me is that this has never been fully digested by our practices—all of which are built on assumptions about what constitutes the real. This is where philosophy becomes very valuable for questioning some of these assumptions. We will always have to assume some things about the real, but sometimes, our assumptions become too static and unproductive. Sometimes we need the real to change.

RR: I have heard you remark that the real is a representational problem, whether it be a piece of literature, a film, or a building—each are the products of speculation. How might the real offer us an opportunity to reset the importance of our discipline?

DR: If in fact we have no access to the thing itself, whatever



Ruy Klein, *Bioprinter*, close-up of machine during operation.

er we think the real is pertains more to how we think the real should look, rather than what it *is* in an absolute sense. Because of this, there is a representational problem with regard to the real, and this is where I think architecture emerges at its best. There is no other human practice that is so much about the problem of the real. Architecture is the first thing that tells us what reality looks like.

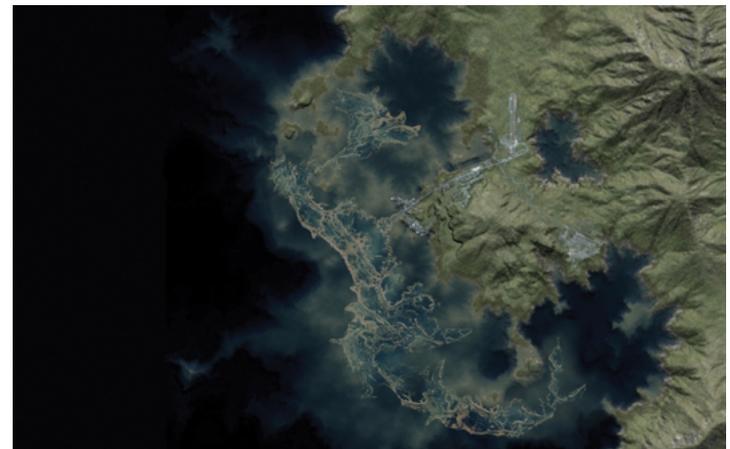
What I think we need is weird realism. We need an architecture that is completely devoted to the problem of the real, but one that is aware of its uncertainty. In the sixties, when utopian architecture was privileged, I think the strategy was very different. The strategy was to locate the radical architectural project in the world of the not-real, and from there, throw rocks at the real. The intent was to construct new fantasies, believing that reality had become intractable and impossible to confront. The new fantasies would form new desires, which would then subvert the real—our actions would change. It is no coincidence that Lacan had such a huge influence during that time. I think this strategy fails during late capitalism for two reasons. First, late capitalism depends on constructed fantasies to distract attention away from what is instrumental. The perpetual construction of utopias is already a condition of our real. The strategy has been thoroughly appropriated by governing institutions. Second, and more importantly, the construction of fantasies, or the not-real, assumes that the real is concrete, when the real is actually abstract. I think this is an unintended consequence of utopian strategies. They strangely reinforce the real that we already know.

RR: Pragmatism played an important role in shaping architectural theory over the last decade. It was a different form of

realism, which was closely aligned with stabilizing architectural practice and the everyday possibilities that new technology brought to the business of making buildings. It enabled a framework for addressing a “normal” form of architectural practice that operates on a global scale. Is there a dark side to everyday realism?

DR: Given the failures of utopian architecture, the response cannot be a surrender to the normal, the everyday, or a critical anti-aesthetic practices. Some believe that it is best to accept the constraints of “real” practice and somehow do good from the inside (like an inside job bank robbery). I think this kind of idea overestimates the power of architectural intelligence to construct Trojan horses and ironically underestimates the power of architecture to directly produce a strange real without subterfuge. But more importantly, such a turn towards a naïve realism has the same problem as utopianism, in assuming that there is a concrete real.

Like a person you’ve known for twenty years suddenly acting strangely, leading you to think, “I don’t know who this person is,” architecture at its best can only interface in a similar way with the real. My favorite moments in architecture have always been those astonishing times when I thought to myself, “Wow, I didn’t know the world could do that.”



Ruy Klein, *TE-1*, Bristol Bay, Alaska.

# Amended Reality Or Learning from Cinema how to move beyond Facts - Ferda Kolatan

RR: Realism played an important role in shaping cinema, especially after World War II. In contrast to realist painting, in which the painting is a fixed repository of things, the history of cinema shaped itself around the camera and the cut. In this regard, the real in cinema is inherently formulated around a partial and incomplete view of the world. When it comes to the real, which other distinctions do architecture and cinema have in common?

Ferda Kolatan (FK): In a series of interviews, Werner Herzog characterizes his approach to documentary filmmaking with a distinction between *fact* and *truth*. Facts, he argues, are found in phonebooks. Neatly organized lists of names and numbers, verifiable data categorized for easy, immediate, and unambiguous consumption.

Then he asks: "But will those facts about Mr. Smith tell you what he dreams at night?" Herzog continues to state that "in order to escape the banality of facts, I play with them through invention, imagination, and fabrication in hope of penetrating a deeper stratum of truth."

It is clear that Herzog is not interested in representing quantifiable reality. His realism neither excludes opinion nor speculation, and stands in stark contrast to the realism of Direct Cinema, an arm of the genre Cinema Verité, whose proponents count among the most ardent critics of Herzog's work. For them the guiding principle of documentary filmmaking should adhere to the fly-on-the-wall maxim, demonstrating a deliberate disengagement of the filmmaker from his subject. Here, only the running camera, unimpeded by any external or fictitious influences, is entrusted with the capture of reality, while Herzog's documentaries are characterized as manipulated (and thus manipulative) pseudo-realities and genre-breakers. I can detect these division-lines in regards to the nature of the "real" in architecture as well, particularly in regards to questions concerning technology.

RR: How do we counteract the emphasis upon an empirical world view, the one that you characterize as the world of facts, as well as the emphasis on technology, from neutralizing other forms of artistic knowledge?

FK: I think we need to move toward an ethic, in which the real becomes (re)associated with the object rather than with objectivity. We also need to challenge the widely held belief that the

real in architecture manifests itself pre-dominantly through causalities. Direct Cinema, I would argue, maintains a realist paradigm solidly anchored within correlationist thinking, which echoes back to the days of the Enlightenment. For instance, the subject-object delineation is strictly linear and seen as a necessary prerequisite for the representation of the real. If left alone, an object will behave more truthfully and therefore one needs to sneak up on it in order to catch an accurate depiction of the real. The very definition of what is real in Direct Cinema is thus placed on objectivity rather than the object. This becomes further evident in the claim that the camera as a non-subject can deliver a more truthful, undistorted reality of the world and that technology corrupts the real only if directed by human intervention. Otherwise it maintains neutrality.

RR: How can we initiate a new synthesis in the arts and sciences?

FK: This problem is an old one in our discipline. It seems as if every generation has to redefine the answer to this particular question. Synthesis in the context of design cannot mean subservience or causality. Again, Herzog shows a path as his approach seems not only contrarian but downright anarchical within the neatly categorized world of humans, objects, and technology, as championed by Direct Cinema. He counters the accusation of mixing facts with fiction with this: "For me the boundary between fiction and documentary simply does not exist. They are all just films." Simple yet essential, this sentence clarifies that for Herzog the *object is always the film and the film is always real*. The translational plane of filmmaking, with the author (subject) on one side and the subject (object) on the other while technology mans the middle, does not exist in Herzog's world. Instead, a new object (the film) is created without a binding relation to either the narrative of the author (fiction) or the perceived factual reality of the object. Fittingly, Herzog describes his narrative approach as an *intensification* of facts, a speculative take on reality with no room for discriminatory or patronizing acts towards *different kinds of real*. In Herzog's work it is not a contradiction to ponder about Mr. Smith's dreams through the means of realism.

RR: You have used the term "amended reality" to characterize the real. In your work, especially with the Corallines series, it is remarkable how an amended and open view of the object affords you precision. It serves as a reminder that reality is a weird mixture of instrumentality, close observation, and imagination. From your perspective, what kind of amendments do we need to make when it comes to shaping a realist discourse for architecture and urbanism?

FK: As you point out, Corallines deliberately seeks to establish a real, which strongly draws from multiple sources at once,



su11 architecture+design, Coral/ines, 2012.

where the imaginary or fictitious qualities are neither treated as a precursor to the final design nor as a subjective or stylistic move by the author. Rather they have become fully absorbed by the objects, or the object has become its fictitious qualities. This approach of amended reality is not limited to scale and can serve as a counter-model for the correlationist view in architecture and urbanism, as well.

The architectural object can no longer be viewed as either an exclusive expression of the author's creative genius or a factual condition, which exhausts itself in relational translations (be they cultural or technological). Moreover, *facts* in architecture, and even

more blatantly in urban design, have long served to undermine any serious investigation into the nature of architectural objects by declaring them inconsequential or even non-existing. This thinking has further enforced late modernist stereotypes regarding technology (either savior or destroyer of worlds), nature (either resource or conservancy), and design (either individualistic expression or problem-solver). The real in these dualisms is always caught in a netherworld of human construction, caged in by *reason*. We need to break through this barrier.

In Herzog's film "Cave of Forgotten Dreams" the subject is the Chauvet Cave with its paintings that date back 30,000 years. The object, however is a filmic representation of a place that is only partially accessible to humans, such that the narrative of the movie has to fill in the blanks through speculative descriptions of the unseen. And yet it is precisely this layering of representational means, from the visual to the imaginary, which manifests a deeper and more faceted reality of the cave. What is missing from the movie, because it cannot be shown, does not appear as a fault, a problem, or incompleteness. Rather, and strangely, it makes it more "whole," more real.



su11 architecture+design, Coral/ines, 2012.

## Is Pluto Real? - Jason Payne

RR: When discussing realism one of the objects that you have turned your attention to is Pluto. What does the pursuit of deep space reveal about the elusive nature of objects?

Jason Payne (JP): Even before Pluto's official discovery at 4:00PM, February 18, 1930, by Clyde Tombaugh at Lowell Observatory, the question "Is Pluto real?" had been asked. The question of a ninth planet that might exist beyond the orbits of Uranus and Neptune might have seemed a fool's errand for anyone convinced by the extents of real vision, since nothing had been seen beyond the eighth planet, despite close inspection, since 1846. Planets, big and bold as they are, cannot hide if they are really there. But when the positions of Uranus and Neptune seemed slightly off course to Tombaugh's employer, Percival Lowell—enough so for him to construct an observatory to search for an elusive "Planet X"—the quest to find the rogue planet began. A project, one could say, of astronomical speculative realism. Nevermind that the calculations Lowell and Tombaugh relied upon to predict a ninth planet were actually incorrect, that Uranus and Neptune were where they should have been, even without the existence of Pluto. The mere suggestion of something else, an object just beyond our grasp, is enough for some to pursue the work of making things real.<sup>1</sup>

This early history of Pluto's discovery is now well-known, the answer to the question "Is Pluto real?" is definitively, "Yes." But the history of its discovery continues to unfold, over time. In the case of Pluto, as with some other objects, discovery stretches and turns and sometimes doubles back.

RR: Regarding Pluto you have said: "Pluto is the 'broken tool' of planets, per Heidegger's broken tool analogy, extended by Graham Harman. It is the one that refuses to behave as it should." Harman's analysis demonstrates that we don't consider the thing at hand until it breaks. In that moment we are confronted with the real object. So what happened with Pluto?

JP: Roughly fifty years after Pluto's discovery, the question concerning its realism shifted to a more pointed one: "Is Pluto a *planet*?" Unlike the first, so full of wonder, this second period of questioning became more wary, darkened by the suspicion that something was not quite right. Born of a handful of odd characteristics revealed over time about this darkest, coldest, farthest "planet"—an eccentric orbit off-kilter with those of the other eight, a scale far smaller than its gas-giant neighbors, and more generally, its

resistance to visual capture by whatever advanced telescropy we might turn its way—astronomers began to challenge its categorical status as planet. Scientists try to avoid "category error," with the same care practiced by linguists and philosophers, because of its compounding of negative consequence: misunderstanding squared. Doubts increased in 1978 with the discovery of Charon, a satellite orbiting about Pluto roughly half its size. This was *very* strange given that every other moon in our solar system measures far smaller than its host. Weirder still, the center of mass (barycenter) of the two objects lies between both (rather than within the larger body, as is the case with the standard planet-satellite model), qualifying Pluto–Charon as a binary planet, a compound object that is one made of two.<sup>2</sup>

Until—and except for the fact that later still—four more objects were found to participate in this entanglement of matter and orbit trespassing across not only Neptune's ellipsis, but also through any resolution we might have as to what this object was in the first place. In 2005, the satellites Hydra and Nix were discovered; then, more recently, we discovered another pair, Kerberos in 2011 and Styx in 2012. Aptly named for characters and features of our own mythical underworld, these finds only continue to frustrate any understanding of what Pluto is, was, or will be. In our solar system nothing seems darker than Pluto, an object that recedes all the more despite our attempts to see it. That is what makes it so real. Pluto forces us to always look at it for *itself* rather than as a caricature of our idea of a "planet." Pluto's "brokenness" as a planet, like Heidegger's/Harman's broken tool, refers to this continual resistance to easy categorization, easy seeing. It does not mean we will ever succeed in seeing Pluto for what it really is, but rather that this object insists that we try, because it offers no alternative.

From here, the question shifts again, from "Is Pluto real?" to "How real *is* Pluto?" More real than Jupiter or Mars, it would seem. A simple thought experiment reveals how this works: reading these two names—Jupiter and Mars—provokes in most of us an immediate and reflexive mental picture of the king of planets and the red planet . . . and not much else. Such longstanding imaginings of these two objects, reinforced through centuries of re-telling in elementary school textbooks, folklore, science fiction, cartoons, popular music, NASA, *Cosmos*, and elsewhere, forecloses on most of what is really there, a pernicious misdirection made all the worse for its ease of consumption. How real are these simplistic descriptions we lapse back upon in the same way, over and over? Jupiter is no more a king

<sup>1</sup> Alan Stern and Jacqueline Mitton, *Pluto and Charon: Ice Worlds on the Ragged Edge of the Solar System* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Further still, Pluto and Charon are tidally locked to one another, each facing the other without change as they rotate about themselves. This is the only known such case in our solar system.

than Mars is red<sup>3</sup> so they seem hardly real at all. They are all only empty signifiers. “Pluto,” on the other hand, conjures hardly any such fantasy: it is what it is, whatever that is.

Other objects are like this too, some of them closer to our own disciplinary interests. Disco balls, for example. Perform the same thought experiment here and a similar dumbing-down occurs, a displacement of the object’s integrity with pale representation, hardly equivalent despite appearances. Everyone knows what a disco ball looks like, so much so that we almost never look at the real thing anymore. Why would we need to? Are they not all the same?

RR: There is a particular attitude toward detail in your work which has always impressed me. It is prevalent in your *Raspberry Fields* project and more recently with the disco balls. It’s the persistent access of the abstract through the oddities of the real. This extends well beyond signs and signifiers. Pulling it off requires firsthand knowledge of the material, belief in the real object, and an acceptance that oddities are unpredictable. Would you agree?

JP: If Graham Harman’s “weird realism” is something that, through detailed description, becomes as real as things in our own world even though it actually is not (as in H. P. Lovecraft’s alternative worlds) then objects like Pluto might be something like *real weirdism*: things that actually exist in our world but sound like science fiction. One is the inverse of the other but at some fundamental level the distinction makes little difference. The terms “odd” and “oddity” have special meaning to me and have always exerted a powerful influence over my work. Even the words themselves are odd. The problem of the disco ball mentioned above, for example, plays heavily in a collection of recent projects called the *Planetesimal* series. The disco ball, conceived as an object of such delightful perversity, suffers badly now, a victim of overwhelming cultural indifference. To see one is to see them all, a sad state for something so unique. Where did its oddness go and might we find it again? The projects in the *Planetesimal* series ask these questions, with an impulse toward revitalizing the object, making it new and strange once more. First we designed a set of five disco balls modeled after asteroids in our solar system, each having its own irregular shape (Fig. 1). Upon seeing the finished objects hanging in space we realized that, while successful in estranging the object from certain expectations, it was still very much a disco ball. This led to increasingly aggressive attempts to wrest it from moorings, first through a series of renderings (Fig. 2), and then in physical projects for exhibition. Each iteration challenges conventions of scale,

<sup>3</sup> Mars’ reddish glow as seen from Earth is a function of the way we see light reflected upon its thin, hazy atmosphere, an effect observed for thousands of years. In fact, Mars’ surface shows a variety of colors—butterscotch, tan, brown, and green—none of them red. Crimson planet aficionados need not despair, however, for according to recent measurements Pluto is probably red! Or pink. . . . Estimates as to the precise hue of Pluto are, at present, uncertain.

context, and finish associated with the disco ball in search of that moment the object slips away—real again for its weirdness.



Fig. 2. *Planetesimal Series I* (Hirsuta, 2012).

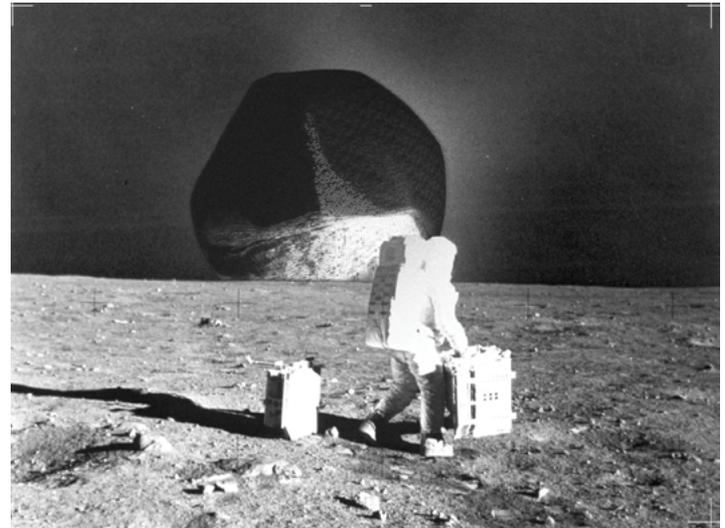


Fig. 1. Pluto and Charon. NASA/Space Telescope Science Institute (Jan. 1, 1997).



Harmen Brethouwer, *Model 2-4 (Bibelots Series)*, 2010. Photo by: Joris Lugtigheid.

## An Aesthetics of Realism

We commonly view realism as naïve (naturalistic reproduction) or insincere (illusionistic spectacle), at its best often historiographical (mid-nineteenth-century French painting) or subject focused and media neutral (documentary photography). Architecture tends to consider realism seductively superficial or deliberately deceitful, rarely critical or methodologically sophisticated. Criticality requires unmasking hidden agendas and exhibiting artifice. Architecture can achieve this through revealing a project's economic and political conditions, laying bare material assembly, or clarifying design logic informed by contingent relations. These critical exposures all deploy a degree of abstraction, which is believed to work free from the prejudices of realist illusion, through processes particular to medium-specific constraints. In the critical mode, aesthetics assume the status of an automatic outcome, the byproduct of policies, practices, and techniques. A project's initial aesthetic motivations are held as a suspicious imposition from outside, from above and from undisclosed assumptions, ingenuous or nefarious.

These scenarios bespeak the erroneous equation of realism with representational verisimilitude, and realism with reality. Realism, as an aesthetic agenda is epitomized by a tension between reality and its representation. This tension resonates as powerfully now, as when it first manifested in mid-nineteenth century France. Paintings by Gustave Courbet and others looked no more accurate than those that came before; in many ways they were stranger, in a more pronounced manner. Realism derives its aesthetic from an artwork's qualities of estrangement, as it seeks to defamiliarize the quotidian and open the everyday to alternate, unconventional understandings. Jacques Rancière describes these processes in terms of as to how the redistribution of sensible information creates new political constituencies.

Although modernity has long considered artistic abstraction anti-representational, and as such, a principal critical tool against the seduction of pictorial illusion, the

aesthetics of realism recast abstraction as a defamiliarizing technique. In light of its potential to reduce, fragment, or deform figural likeness—thereby increasing the tension in representation—abstraction emerges as an extension of realism, not its antithesis.

Architecture, more than other art forms, erroneously equates realism with reality. Architects do, after all, build real places with materials to provide structure and enclosure for real people involved in real events. But, to label these aspects of architecture “realism”—when they are simply architecture’s actuality—results in aesthetic confusion. Architectural modernism assumed that truth in materials produced a realist tectonic aesthetic. This conflated ethics and aesthetics, reality and realism, and generated a moral and/or economic contingency—what critics regard as architectural design’s social/political basis. To restrict aesthetics, however, to representing political ideologies leaves little room for resistance. Realism is most vital as an aesthetic agenda when it calls attention to the differences and tensions between reality and its representation, moments through which aesthetics redistributes sensible information. This treatise inflects issues of aesthetics and questions of realism relevant to architecture today through examples drawn from the fields of art and philosophy, in hopes of unlocking implications of realism as an aesthetic of estrangement across media. Through realism, contemporary artistic practices in multiple media, loosely defined as parafictional, generate an “aesthetics of doubt,” opening up newly emergent political implications.

Three categories of projects undertaken with my design partner Kutan Ayata, in the practice of Young & Ayata, complement these aesthetic-historical explorations. The design collaborations our studio has pursued for the past six years, comprising drawings, objects, and buildings, constitute the primary aesthetic research informing the basis of our arguments.

I owe the development of this treatise, the themes and ideas that follow, largely to discussions that I have been privileged to share with a group of architects and educators, including Ferda Kolatan, Jason Payne, Rhett Russo, and David Ruy. I am indebted to them for their provocations, questions, and contributions; I would especially like to thank Rhett for the wonderfully speculative introduction.

## The Morning Cleaning

Jeff Wall's photograph *Morning Cleaning*, *Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona*, at first glance, seems to be a rather straightforward image of the cleaning of a building's interior surfaces in the morning. The title says as much, and in a mundane gesture, refers to the building by its official organizational moniker—rather than the Barcelona Pavilion, the name it circulates under in architectural circles. But this treatise does not begin with this image for the activity it represents, or for its architectural content. *Morning Cleaning* is a wonderful place to begin because its everyday realism is exceedingly strange.

This photograph depicts the interior of the Barcelona Pavilion, designed by Mies van der Rohe and Lily Reich in 1929, destroyed, then reconstructed in 1986; Jeff Wall took the photo over a period of twelve days in 1999. The photograph looks through the main sitting room of the pavilion—with its golden onyx wall, red curtain, black carpet, and white chairs—toward the exterior reflecting pool, which features the Georg Kolbe sculpture *Dawn*. The light suggests the time is early morning. The primary action depicted is a man cleaning the glass wall between the sitting room and the reflecting pool. As with many of Jeff Wall's photographs, it is printed on transparency and backlit through a fluorescent light box. The dimensions of the final art object are extremely large, eleven-feet wide, by just over six-feet high.

The scale and proportions of the physical support of an artwork are conditions crucial to defining its medium. When compared to painting, fine art photography is traditionally printed small, and is often viewed up close, or even when in book format, as a private experience. In contrast to this, *Morning Cleaning* is huge—intended for public display, like a grand historical narrative painting. However, the content is obviously different; instead of a mythological or religious event, we find a simple quotidian activity. The man cleaning the windows has his back to the viewer, ostensibly absorbed in his task, provoking the feeling that we are looking in on

a reality we usually ignore, which ignores our presence in return. This aspect of the primary action gives the photograph the quality of an authentically realistic appearance. The temptation is to interpret the photograph as a literal shot of a rather normal event. At the same time, the viewer knows that something is not quite right. It could be the scale; it could be the resonances of certain colors within composition; it could be that the photo is exhibited in an art gallery. Whatever prompts his/her initial concern, the viewer is asked to look closer.

Upon looking closer, the photograph begins to subtly disturb the realism it initially seemed intent on capturing. One odd condition revealed is that the entire image, at all depths, is perfectly and evenly in focus. This is not possible with the use of lenses—whether with our own eyes or those of a mechanical camera. If we research Wall's process, the answer is available. Though the shot feels singular, it is actually a digital composite of many photographs. This compositing removes the blurred depth of field that would typically occur in an evenly detailed image. Because Wall exhibits these photographs at such a large scale and illuminates them from behind, every detail is given equal weight, minimizing the glare of reflected light as the viewer moves. This evenness of detail draws out associations regarding the tactility of the hand, its realism closer to that of physical objects than optical projections. These tensions productively extend the viewer's engagement with the artwork as a real object in the world, as well as a photographic image.

Extended attention reveals a further surprise. Blurring does exist in this photograph, only it is not produced through lenses or exposure. The blur in the photo is created through sharply focusing on real suds of soap on the glass wall. Clarity of vision through these soapsuds becomes incrementally less from right to left, placing the Kolbe statue in a field of translucent blur. Thus the only two figures in the photo enter into the relation of a photographic depth of field: the prime figure focused, and the secondary background figure blurred. Blur through depth is one of the more



Jeff Wall, *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona*. Transparency in lightbox, 187.0 x 351.0 CM, 1999. Courtesy of: the artist.

specific characteristics of photography as a medium. In this particular instance, the effect is created through the real-life effects of soap on glass, as orchestrated through the digital post-production of the photo-composite. Wall's photograph reveals this manipulation slowly, through means of the viewer's extended engagement.

Another strange condition in the photograph is due to both the direction and color shift of sunlight between inside and outside. This occurs in a glass pavilion, commonly understood to draw continuities, rather than differences, be-

tween interior and exterior. The photograph, though, portrays the inside in a warm hue, while the outside is cool. This could be due to the color of the stonewalls, or it could be an effect of the warm glow of early morning light. The difference between inside and outside light, however, is significant enough to warrant doubt. On closer inspection, a slight difference in the sun's angle across the image adds weight to this observation. As with manipulated blur effect, this apparently instantaneous photo of a singular event is actually a composite of different days, allowing the artist to push color and light around its composition in a manner closer to that of painting.

Thinking back now on the title of the photograph—*Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona*—it is clear that all these themes already exist in the title: the temporality of “morning” as hue, the chemical blur and resulting sharpness behind “cleaning,” and the pragmatic business of the building as an institution maintained by labor. These themes are the familiar practices of everyday life, but here also help describe photography as a medium. There is a tension between the objects photographed and their sensible qualities, a defamiliarization, which leaves the viewer with a feeling that there is something to doubt in terms of the reality represented by the image.

This reading of *Morning Cleaning* also serves as the point of introduction to three positions in contemporary philosophy and aesthetics: the arguments of Jacques Rancière, Michael Fried, and Graham Harman.

Over the last forty years, the French philosopher Jacques Rancière has speculated extensively on the political implications of aesthetic shifts. The crux of his argument is that changes in aesthetic agendas redistribute sensible information, allowing new communities to form. For Rancière, the nineteenth-century aesthetic movements of Romanticism and Realism are responsible for the conditions that disrupted the previous neoclassical academic regime and established the current one, under which we continue to work. Three resultant aspects follow: first, content depicted was opened to the description of the vulgar everyday, a challenge to the academic constraints of genre.<sup>1</sup> This challenge included the abuse of conventions in size and proportion that each genre used to bind content to its public reception. Second, the legibility of genres came with compositional conventions, which organized proportion, hierarchy, symmetry, and harmonic balance. These conventions allowed painting to be read as art. Beginning with Romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century and gathering its strength in the later Arts and Crafts movement, decorative motifs from the “practical arts” began to dismantle the idea that an art work was made legible only through classical composition.<sup>2</sup> Toward the mid-nine-

teenth century, under the label of Realism, a more casual, less formal organization of the canvas was developed, which focused more on description than narrative (But never was Realism a simple reproduction of visual resemblance, as we will see in our discussion of Gustave Courbet.). Third, the material and technical production of art began to assert itself through its manufacture, challenging the split between intellectual and material tasks.<sup>3</sup> This manifested as an attack on the smooth-glazed surfaces of academic art, on which no stroke or tool mark was visible. The new aesthetic began to express materiality and its mode of application, techniques which brought the artwork’s real-world presence in tension with the illusions of the depicted image.

These three tactics, at the level of content, composition, and technique, produced “an aesthetic regime in the arts that is a different articulation between practices, forms of visibility and modes of intelligibility.”<sup>4</sup> They disrupted the standards of critical interpretation, changed methods for teaching art, and initiated new historical research that began to include non-classical references, as well as psychological and perceptual responses. A number of political implications can be drawn here regarding the institutions surrounding the education, display, publication, criticism, and consumption of art. But for the present conversation, it is best to focus on the defamiliarization of realist conventions, which set in motion a shift in aesthetics.

Jeff Wall is one of the artists discussed at length in Michael Fried’s 2008 book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, and the preceding description of *Morning Cleaning* is directly influenced by Fried’s analysis. The manner in which an artwork overcomes its literal material existence is a primary theme of Fried’s art critical career. It not only structures his attack on what he describes as the theatricality of minimalist art in the 1960s, but also serves as a thread he then traces back from Diderot to Courbet to Manet. For Fried, the key point is that it is not enough for an art work to expose its medium; it must overcome its literal objecthood.<sup>5</sup> When these arguments are directed toward

photography (a mechanically assisted medium that indexes reality) all hell breaks loose, and we have the extremely provocative suggestion that photography needs to overcome its literal objecthood both through the medium's representation *and* through its depiction of reality. This tension is what Fried terms "absorption" and its existence is what allows Fried to align contemporary photography with a history of painting. Later in this treatise, I will discuss a wonderfully disturbing thread leading from absorption to "parafiction"—which offers provocative insight into the shifting stance of criticality after modernism. The suggestion is that an absorptive aesthetic triggers an estrangement of realism and leads to critical reflection based neither on irony or other distancing rhetorical gestures. This is part of the reason why I will argue that the aberrant realism of contemporary photography has become so provocative for architectural aesthetics.

The last piece of the puzzle is provided by the philosophical movement Speculative Realism, specifically, the Object Oriented Ontology of Graham Harman. One way to describe a Jeff Wall photograph is to assert that it sets in play a tension between an object and its qualities. For example, in *Morning Cleaning*: there is too much equal focus; there is something odd with the placement of the light; the blur is both too controlled and too localized. For Harman, the aesthetic dimension of reality is only noticed when tensions between an object and its qualities are triggered. To Harman, the world becomes "real" through these tensions. The objects of the world sleep in a background of habitual use until they enter into emergent relationships as objects, such as after one breaks a tool. In line with this thought is a connection between Rancière's distribution of the sensible and Fried's aesthetics of absorption. From here on, the word "estrangement" is used to describe this tension between objects and the qualities that allow one to become aware of the real as a mediated construction—or more accurately, aware of the representational conditions of realism.

## Estrangement & Objects

Estrangement's history is tied to Freud's use of *unheimlich*, and as such refers to "the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners. Suddenly becoming defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream."<sup>6</sup> Anthony Vidler has written extensively and brilliantly on this psychological phenomenon in his book *The Architecture of the Uncanny*. As Vidler points out, "for the modernist avant-gardes, the uncanny readily offered itself as an instrument of 'defamiliarization' or *ostranenie*; as if a world estranged and distanced from its own nature could only be recalled to itself by shock, by the effects of things deliberately 'made strange.'"<sup>7</sup> Defamiliarization was also one of the "Six Concepts" that Bernard Tschumi introduced to "celebrate fragmentation by celebrating the culture of differences, by accelerating and intensifying the loss of certainty, of center, of history."<sup>8</sup> For Tschumi, this disruption was tied to shifts in technology, media, and aesthetics. "In many ways, the [a]esthetic experience according to Benjamin, consisted of keeping defamiliarization alive, as contrasted to its opposite—familiarization, security."<sup>9</sup> These were tactics associated with deconstruction and its challenge to the conventional, the traditional, the superficial.

Estrangement, as it is used in this treatise, describes an aesthetic effect bound up with notions of realism and the familiar. However, there are three characteristics associated with the term that will be modified here: one, its dependence on a psychological state; two, its presence in art as a "shock" aesthetic with potentially cathartic healing or ameliorating powers;<sup>10</sup> and three, its essentialist connotations. As stated above, estrangement delineates the aesthetic qualities that emerge from tensions between reality and representation. Estrangement is not necessarily solely tied to the repression of a prior psychological state, but instead can reference genre conventions in art or one's uncontrollable reactions to bodily sensations. Furthermore, as an aesthetic effect, estrangement needn't always deliver a shock to the observer; it can also produce an allure, a strangeness that draws one in, rather than alienates. This extension or intensification of

aesthetic engagement produced through an artwork is then not always shocking, healing, or negative in its associations. Lastly, estrangement does not reveal the true essence of an object or condition. It alters and intensifies an aesthetic relationship between things, but does not by necessity reveal a deeper or more essential truth.

Implied here, as well, is the notion that estrangement is a qualitative effect, rather than an action; an artist cannot deploy “techniques of estrangement.” Estrangement may be the desired result, but there is no recipe to guarantee success. All one can do is acknowledge estrangement when it happens and try to describe the qualities around its emergence. This is the difference between “estrangement” and “defamiliarization,” the term introduced into literary techniques by Victor Shklovsky in 1925. Defamiliarization can be taught, it is medium specific, and it involves a deep understanding of the codes and conventions that have built a medium into its contemporary condition. A defamiliarized artwork can lead to an aesthetics of estrangement, but it can also remain within a trite academic game of legibility and ambiguity, or as Anthony Vidler suggests, descend into caricature.<sup>11</sup> This is why, despite the fact that criticism often speaks to an artwork’s techniques, its ultimate evaluation is through its aesthetic effect.

A second term that requires clarification is “object.” Object architecture is often affiliated with championing iconic building, ignorant of relations to site, use, and cultural/ecological context. These are monuments largely thrust on populations, which rarely offer returns, in terms of positive social improvements. An ethically responsible architect would design not for the *object*, but for the *event*, in all of its cultural and natural relations. Others have problems with objects for different reasons. Michael Fried, for instance, is against literal objects because of their temporal theatricality. His major argument against Minimalism in his 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood” is that the artwork literally becomes an object, no different from all the other things that surround us in our environment. These two points explicitly direct

much contemporary discourse away from “the object” as the focus of responsible, advanced architectural discussion (estranged or not). Yet I still insist on the term. In a blunt statement, as architects, we design objects. We may speculate on the events they will engender, we may test and evaluate their performative effects, we may hope for future relations and judge success on those terms, but in the moment of design, we create objects, and need to be able to treat them as such. Secondly, this does not mean that objects have no relation to the world and sit as paperweights on a desk. In fact, all objects emerge out of relations with other objects, but cannot be reduced simply to these relations. Architects speak of the doorknob, the enclosure skin, the building, even of the city, as objects. The isolation of something in order to consider it in relation to other objects is a necessary aspect of design. It helps clarify relations and decisions.

There is an ontological aspect implied as well, as one may have imagined given Graham Harman’s philosophy. For Harman, reality is built out of objects. An object may be understood through its relations, which then bind multiple objects into new hybrid aggregates, but there is always more to objects than their relations, especially those between them and our human perceptual and conceptual systems. Objects exist outside of their relations to humans; they withhold certain aspects of their objecthood from our understanding. In Harman’s terms, objects withdraw from each other, constituting a reality that we can never fully access. Much of what contributes to the aesthetics of realism is the allure of strange objects that appear familiar, but reveal themselves to be something other after a period of further attention. To understand what creates these effects is to focus attention onto representation itself, as an object between objects.

## Aesthetic Regimes of the Sensible

Jacques Rancière posits that changes in the political are predicated on shifts in aesthetics. His narrative outlines three major regimes in Western art practice. The first is the *ethical* regime, which is attached to classical antiquity. The second is the *poetic*, or representational regime, which runs from the Renaissance through Neo-classicism. The third regime is the *aesthetic* regime, stretching from the movements of nineteenth-century Romanticism and Realism until today.<sup>12</sup> Each new regime does not completely replace the previous, but rather opens up alternate aesthetic conditions. All three regimes are still alive in some manner.

Rancière describes these shifts as redistributions of sensible information, which trigger and allow new social/political communities to form around categories of aesthetic difference. In the poetic regime, the key issue was the clarity of narrative intent, through which the artist handled the conventions that structured relations between method and interpretation. These conventions were classified into codes of decorum and character as a hierarchy of genres, from grand historical narratives at the top, down to the still lifes at the bottom. Each genre had a scale and proportion for their support canvas, which related directly to the space of display and the role the artwork played in public viewership. These genres further developed structures of composition that enabled narrative legibility of poetic content through conventions that held the painting to a model of balanced beauty.<sup>13</sup>

Romanticism attacked this entire structure. No longer was a legible planar organization the prime focus. Instead there were investigations into extreme sensational movement (J. M. W. Turner), vernacular decorative pattern (Ruskin), and extremely detailed description (the Pre-Raphaelites). This also opened up alternative subject matter, often drawn from reality itself (Flaubert), the vulgar everyday (Courbet), or moods and associations far from the beautiful (Poe). If the subject of the artwork was free for the artist to choose, then quality of subject could no longer determine

aesthetic quality. These changes sponsored novel aesthetic investigations, under auspices of the sublime, the grotesque, the melancholic, the comic, the erotic, the horrific, the banal, the strange. This resulted in an explosion of post-beauty aesthetics:

This supposed dismissal of subject matter first presupposes the establishment of a regime of equality regarding subject matter. This is what 'representation' was in the first place, not resemblance as some appear to believe, but the existence of necessary connections between a type of subject matter and a form of expression. This is how the hierarchy of genres functioned in poetry or painting . . . for abstract painting to appear, it is first necessary that the subject matter of painting be considered a matter of indifference. This began with the idea that painting a cook with her kitchen utensils was as noble as painting a general on a battlefield...The equality of subject matter and the indifference regarding modes of expression is prior to the possibility of abandoning all subject matter for abstraction. The former is the condition of the latter.<sup>14</sup>

It was necessary for an artist to freely choose the content of an artwork before it became possible to paint a "non-representational" abstraction. Though it has already been noted that the content painted was often of a vulgar reality, it remains important to comment that this change in content occurred simultaneously with a change in compositional and material techniques. Eventually described as abstraction, this techniques were at play well before the dawning of twentieth-century modernism.

If is often stated that French Realism was initiated by Gustave Courbet in the middle of the nineteenth century. Michael Fried's reading of Courbet's painting *A Burial at Ornans* is also, in many ways, a wonderful analysis of the shift between Rancière's regimes:

Gustave Courbet, *A Burial at Ornans*, 1849-50.

The disruptiveness owed much as well to the affront offered by Courbet's Realism (the capital "R" apparently came into use around 1855) to prevailing canons of taste, most importantly to the classical tenet that art worth the name involved far more than the exact reproduction of natural appearances. The notorious *Burial at Ornans*, with its enormous dimensions, deadpan portraits of local notables, flouting of traditional compositional principles, and brutally physical application of paint, epitomizes that affront.<sup>15</sup>

The scene depicts a rural burial in the provin-

cial town of Ornans, where Courbet was born. The painting is dominated by a burial procession, which includes mourners, clergymen, pallbearers, choirboys, and other figures from the community gathered for the ceremony. In the extreme foreground one can see an open grave and a dog. The right side of the canvas consists primarily of the mourner's procession moving in two rows from left to right in the background, then from right to left in the foreground. The left side of the canvas focuses on the casket and religious figures. The open grave is placed at the bottom center of the canvas, though it is cut off by the bottom

frame. Two rocky plateaus with sandy shear faces exposed inform the background, and a valley cleaves them to the left of the canvas. The physical dimensions of the canvas are enormous, ten feet and four inches by twenty-one feet and eight inches. The scale of the painting suits a historical grand narrative, but the theme is from neither Ovid's *Metamorphosis* nor the Bible—rather one of a mundane peasant burial. Finally, the paint is left rough and textured, making its physical presence an unavoidable aspect of the painting.

The works of Courbet during these few years and in particular *A Burial at Ornans* (1849–50) are crucial moments in French realism. This label reflects the concern with the representation of the everyday in a non-idealized, matter-of-fact frankness. But as Michael Fried argues in his book *Courbet's Realism* (1985), the painting is much more artificial in both its allegorical meaning and compositional technique than any naïve representation of reality “as found” might be. A bluntly expressed pigment (a crucial stepping stone toward the abstraction of modern art) frequently interrupts the painting and exists in fundamental tension with the painting's pictoriality. The texture claims its materiality on the picture plane as something to look at, not something to look through. Additionally, many interpretations claim that this crude texture spills out into the composition as an aggregate of additive parts rather than a harmoniously balanced whole.

Fried takes issue with all of these standard interpretations. He argues that the painting is far from un-composed; instead, its composition is a conscious attack on classical conventions. There is a slow serpentine procession back and forth across the canvas that Fried describes as setting up a rhythm of collective drift.<sup>16</sup> This lateral movement also adds a low, oblique depth that compresses the space of depiction toward the picture plane. There is very little chiaroscuro, foreshortening, or other aids; the figures seem to not have enough space between them to physically exist.<sup>17</sup> Signifi-

cantly, Fried points out that Courbet painted the work in an extremely tight space, where he could not stand far enough back to take in the entire scene.<sup>18</sup> In areas of the painting, such as in the accumulated black dress of the mourners, there is a loss of contour between individuals that blurs into a textured darkness, something much more tactile than optical.

The tension of the textural mass is punctuated with doubles or pairs that one could not possibly find naturally occurring.<sup>19</sup> The handkerchiefs of the mourners, the distinguished gentlemen in the foreground, the top hats, the choirboys, the hands of the pallbearers, and the sharp punch of red in the clergymen are all strange pairings that occur across the field. Also obscure is the manner in which the figures in the painting turn away from the canvas, away from the viewer, even away from each other. These figures refuse to address the viewer—it is this attitude of disinterest that allows Fried to build an interpretation where the figures become surrogate painters/beholders absorbed into the painting.<sup>20</sup> For Fried the question of the facture, or expressed pigment and technique, is not a literal distancing of the painting (and its materiality) as an object in the world, but a desire for painting's corporeality to be engaged. All of this is to say that the beholder of the painting becomes equal to the painter, not through a recessional point of view, but instead through the corporal merger into the medium. This absorptive effect is why the serpentine lateral rhythm, the oblique pressure on the picture surface, the material facture, and the disinterested body positions exist. The purpose of this neither exposes the medium, nor offers a critical foothold, but instead extends and intensifies engagement.



Harmen Brethouwer, *Celestial Collectible*, 1997. Photo by: Bob Goedewaagen.

## Speculative Objects

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object.<sup>21</sup>

This quote from Viktor Shklovsky's "Art as Technique" provides a link between the ideas of Jacques Rancière and Graham Harman. Shklovsky's argument is that the form poetry is experienced as poetry, exactly when it defamiliarizes the normal conventions of linguistic expression. Poets do not create new imagery; they combine known imagery into formations that allow them to be perceived differently.<sup>22</sup> Examples offered by Shklovsky include shifting subjective voices, precisely describing an object to avoid the proper noun, and fragmenting the temporal narrative to develop overlapping juxtapositions.<sup>23</sup> These techniques extend and intensify attention in the reader as the qualities described in language become clear, but the object upon which to affix them remains elusive. In effect, these techniques take the conditions of reality and direct our aesthetic attention onto what was previously assumed familiar.

Graham Harman wants to base philosophy on objects. Most philosophies either undermine an object by stating that it is not as real as the smaller pieces that compose it, or they "overmine" an object by defining it as a construct of the cognitive faculties with no reality of its own outside of human consideration.<sup>24</sup> In both of these positions, the object is seen as a fiction, and our interest in such can be criticized as naïveté. For the "underminers," reality occurs in relations between analyzable parts. For the "overminers," reality occurs in the relations constructed by humans. From Harman's perspective, both directions expose a problem that exists in post-Kantian philosophy, termed "correlationism" by Quentin Meillassoux.<sup>25</sup>

Instead of human relations, Harman posits that objects themselves exist as a fundamental condition of ontology. Objects enter into relations with each other through representation. It is not that relationships do not matter in Harman's philosophy; it is just that it is the *qualities* of objects that define the relationship, not the relationship itself that defines the object. Any relation between two objects will only reveal certain qualities between the two; each will always have other aspects that remain hidden or withdrawn from the other. These withdrawn qualities are what Harman terms the Real Qualities of an object.

Harman posits aesthetics as the fundamental means through which objects relate to each other, and articulates four aspects of objecthood. There are Real Objects and Real Qualities, and Sensuous Objects and Sensuous Qualities.<sup>26</sup> In Harman's ontology, reality is built out of the fissions and fusions connecting these four poles. They create a philosophy that speculates by applying realism to aesthetics, often producing extremely weird outcomes.

These four categories produce many philosophical implications. For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on two kinds of aesthetic tension that Harman identifies occurring between objects and qualities: confrontation and allure. Fundamentally, confrontation operates through fission between a sensual object and its sensuous qualities, effectively fragmenting and multiplying those qualities. Allure operates through the fusion of an object with qualities that it does not possess, generating tension between the real object and sensuous qualities through tentative allusions.<sup>27</sup>

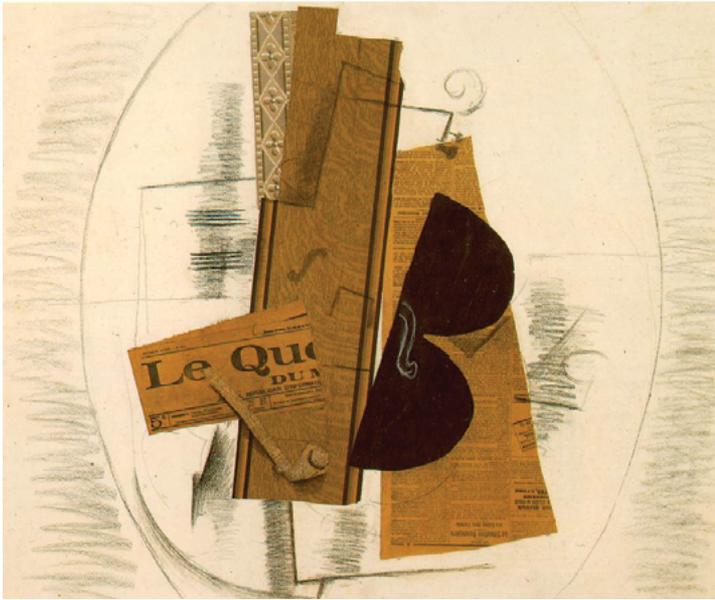
Harman delivers helpful examples in his book *Weird Realism: H. P. Lovecraft and Philosophy*. Confrontation is related to fission and fragmentation of an object's qualities. Harman describes this aspect in Lovecraft as "language overloaded with the gluttonous excess of surfaces and aspects of the thing,"<sup>28</sup> and "numerous bizarre or troubling features of a palpable thing are piled up in such excessive number that it becomes difficult to combine all these facets

neatly into a single object."<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere, Harman describes the quality of confrontation as almost cubist in character.<sup>30</sup> There are too many qualities for the object—this excess begins to challenge its singularity, and provoke relations and associations with other objects.

Harman associates allure with fusion, and the tensions produced by an object which has qualities that do not typically belong to it. Again Harman provides examples from the writing of H. P. Lovecraft, referring to allure as: "loose qualities trembling at the surface of perception, announcing their bondage to some deeper hidden entity that can only vaguely be named,"<sup>31</sup> and "the gap between the ungraspable thing and the vaguely relevant descriptions."<sup>32</sup> Allure is more elusive than confrontation, as it primarily operates through allusion, almost as if it were a description that said one thing and then immediately negated it and insisted that it was also its opposite. It is not an excess of qualities at work here, but specific qualities that are not quite fully bonded to the object. Harman characterizes these allusive gestures as "de-literalizing," which becomes an important connection to the work of Michael Fried. "Something over and above the literal combination of things."<sup>33</sup>

This pairing of confrontation and allure complements Shklovsky's argument about defamiliarization. Sometimes the artist needs to disassociate qualities that are too well established in order to instigate an aesthetic experience. This fission allows these qualities to be associated with other objects, fusing them into a strange realism experienced as an intensification of aesthetic attention.

The years 1913 and 1914 saw the patenting of the Maison Dom-ino by Le Corbusier (in all likelihood *the* seminal object of defamiliarization for modernist architecture), as well as the introduction of two major twentieth-century art forms. The collage and the ready-made are two of the most debated disruptions of modern art; in our current discussion, they serve as prime examples of confrontation and allure.

Georges Braque, *Violin and Pipe, Le Quotidien*, 1913.

Collage produces defamiliarization through the fragmentation of original source material recombined into new objects with multiple conflicting qualities. The transformation is material, formal, and cultural. Collage introduces fragments of the everyday world such as newspaper, trash, and photographs, to call attention to the surface of an artwork in a manner previously unseen. The surface becomes littered with real objects that combine to form an optical organization that counters this literal material. Again we see echoes of French Realism and the introduction of the everyday at both the level of source and materiality (Kurt Schwitters). The collaged material creates a perceptual tension between the real flat and the illusory depth. The viewer knows that the newspaper glued to the canvas is flat, it appears flat, but in this new context, it is part of a flickering three-dimensionality produced both by the materiality of the objects and the compositional structuring of the picture plane (Picasso, Braque). Collage also demands strange figures. The art of concealing and revealing the seam where disparate elements meet allows collage to build hybrid objects (Max Ernst, Kit-bashing). These newly formed objects have, in Harman's words about confrontation, "excessive qualities." Nothing is able to be simply reduced to its parts.

Marcel Duchamp, *Bottle Rack*, 1914.

The discourse around the ready-made, or the appropriated object, is trickier. Marcel Duchamp's unassisted ready-mades are evidenced in Joseph Kosuth's 1969 essay "Art after Philosophy" as the birth of a conceptual project that no longer asks, "What is Painting?," but instead questions, "What is Art?"<sup>34</sup> Only the critical task of reducing art to the conceptual question of its ontological basis qualifies as acceptable resistance. Aesthetics become "conceptually irrelevant to art,"<sup>35</sup> and are seen as linked to expired mediums. Rosalind Krauss argues that this strand of conceptual art ushers in the "post-medium" condition, where the "idea of art," not aesthetic effects, becomes the central question.<sup>36</sup> Kosuth's placing the point of this origin on the unassisted ready-made would seem to limit its availability for the current discussion. What I would like to suggest is that Kosuth appropriated this "appropriated" object for a particular use; I'm stealing it back.

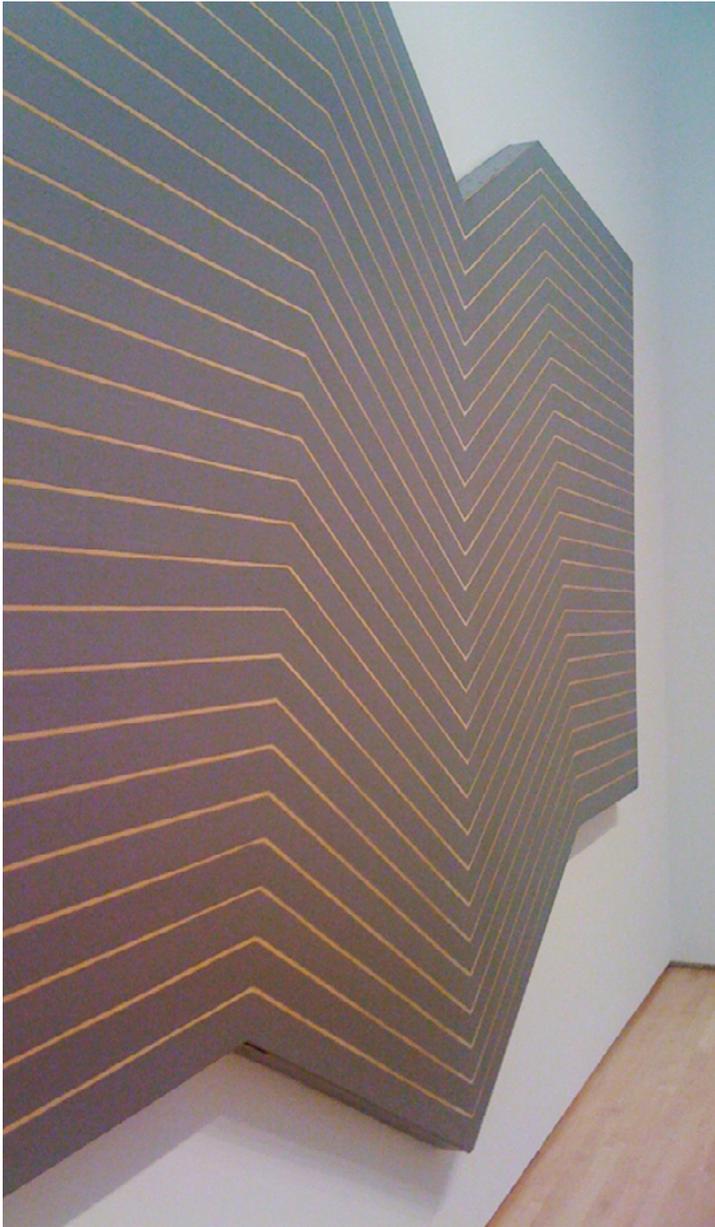
This treatise considers two very different conditions of the ready-made as an example of allure. First, the object's undeniable excess aesthetic, in terms of its literal object-hood. This is a tension generated between the everyday real object and its sensuous qualities. The art object may be subject to selection (by the artist) and framing (by the institution), but this does not negate the fact that the aesthetic response is also conditioned by the object's own material assembly. As common as the objects Duchamp chose may be, it does not negate the aesthetic effects they generate, which strain our typical understanding of these objects. (Aspects of this are very similar to Graham Harman's use of Martin Heidegger's analysis of tools). Many of the arguments surrounding Conceptual Art exemplify "overmining." These arguments state that the conditions of art are not found in its objects, but *only* through the relations that humans establish with them. This leads to a second crucial difference of this treatise. This text does not ask, "Is this Art?" Instead, it queries, "Is this Real?" Harman provides an interesting distinction. Humans have no access to the real object; it is always withdrawn both conceptually and sensually. The real object is always hidden. The ready-made provokes this tension. These objects begin to collect qualities and attention that they do not commonly possess. This creates an aesthetic experience that initiates doubt about the reality of the thing itself. This reframing proposes that the *problem* of aesthetics is more fundamental to the construction of an ontology than deciding if an object is or is not art. For this discussion of realism and estrangement, it proves more interesting to follow the fluctuations of the real, rather than the fluctuations of the category of art.

The tensions of confrontation and allure play an important role in realism. These techniques and their combination of multiple realities become crucial for understanding contemporary photography and the parafictional. These two art practices produce their aesthetic tension not through the revelation of their construction, as in modernist collage technique, but instead, through construction's varied concealments. This results in a collage art that is closer to Harman's

allure. It also requires one to focus on mediation rather than medium specificity. The practice of kit-bashing, for example, operates as a three-dimensional collage technique; it appropriates found objects and defamiliarizes them into a hybrid object that is judged primarily on how it conditions the real. At their best, these constructions present a strange combination of confrontation and allure.



Dionysus Cho, Anne Ma, and Daniel Nguyen, *Kitbashing*, from Mark Gage's seminar at the Yale School of Architecture, Spring 2014.

Frank Stella, *Adelante*, 1964.

## Realism and Medium Specificity

There are two primary classical traditions centered on the mediation of reality, or Mimesis.

**Mimesis 1:** The representation of one object occurs through the medium of a different one. The primary form for this mediation is *painting*, where colored pigments represent sunsets, flesh, and flowers. Realism's effects are provided through the verisimilitude of sensory qualities. This tradition is attributed to Plato and his fear of the artist's ability to deceive the public through artificial images that only appear real.<sup>37</sup> It is also the underpinning structure for what Rancière calls the ethical regime.

**Mimesis 2:** An internally coherent set of representations logically relate to each other. The primary form for this mediation is *literature*. The effects of realism are provided through the coherence of cognitive structures independent of any relation outside of their ordering principles. This tradition is attributed to Aristotle and his attempts to claim art's importance, not as a deception, but as a parallel reality, in which culture could play out its fears and desires.<sup>38</sup> This is also the foundation for what Rancière calls the representational, or poetic regime.

Both mediations view realism as a cultural construct. The first determines it dangerous in its ability to confuse the senses. The second sees it as harmless in its complete artifice. It follows that in this second tradition, a great emphasis is placed on understanding the systems that a specific art practice deploys. Aristotle would write on both poetics and rhetoric as detailed examinations of the structure of language and its ability to construct convincing, persuasive, and affective mediations. The marriage of this tradition with the critical reflexivity of Kant is an important framework for the arguments of "medium specificity" twentieth-century art criticism.

It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered “pure,” and in its “purity” find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. . . . Realistic, naturalistic art had disassembled the medium, using art to conceal art; Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting—the flat surface, the shape of the support, and the properties of the pigment—were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Under Modernism these same limitations came to be regarded as positive factors, and were acknowledged openly.<sup>39</sup>

This quote is from Clement Greenberg's 1960 essay “Modernist Painting.” These ideas have inserted themselves deeply into the backbone of modern art practice and criticism. For many, there is an underlying assumption that modern art is a critical art and must comment in a self-reflexive manner on its processes and medium. Each art must focus on what differentiates it from others, and in identifying these limitations, expose the artifice of the support, which in turn becomes a platform for the critical stance. Abstraction was a necessary outcome of laying the medium bare.

If we read a little further though, we realize that even for Greenberg this is more nuanced than an outright conflict between abstraction and realism. On the page following the above quotation, Greenberg suggests that, “The Old Masters had sensed that it was necessary to preserve what is called the integrity of the picture plane: that is, to signify the enduring presence of the flatness underneath and above the

most vivid illusion of three-dimensional space. The apparent contradiction involved was essential to the success of their art, as indeed to the success of all pictorial art. The Modernists have neither avoided nor resolved this contradiction; rather, they have reversed its terms. One is made aware of the flatness of their pictures before, instead of after, being made aware of what the flatness contains.”<sup>40</sup>

The critical distance comes prior to the aesthetic engagement. Here, Greenberg seems to suggest not the radical break with the past that is associated with modern abstraction but a continuity of concerns. It also introduces the idea that there is a necessary tension in pictorial art between the literal and the illusory. This may not require abstraction, as Greenberg will briefly note that, “Modernist painting in its latest phase has not abandoned the representation of recognizable objects in principle. . . . Abstractness, or the non-figurative, has still not proved to be an altogether necessary moment in the self-criticism of pictorial art.”<sup>41</sup>

Michael Fried picks up on exactly this line of thought in Greenberg's argument. In “Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons” (1966), and then again in “Art and Objecthood” (1967), Fried identifies the success of the artwork not through the simple exposé of its literal support, but in the unresolved contradictions it sets up between the literal object and its depicted qualities.<sup>42</sup> The early paintings of Frank Stella place the depicted shape in direct relation to the shape of the frame. This produces a literal repetition of the frame internally on the canvas—a repetition interpreted in two very different ways by Michael Fried and Donald Judd. The following is an excerpt from a joint interview of Stella and Judd conducted by Bruce Glaser in 1964.

GLASER: Frank, your stretchers are thicker than the usual. When your canvases are shaped or cut out in the center, this gives them a distinctly sculptural presence.

STELLA: I make the canvases deeper than ordinarily, but I began accidentally. I turned one-by-threes on edge to make a quick frame, and I then liked it. When you stand directly in front of the painting it gives it just enough depth to hold it off the wall; you're conscious of this sort of shadow, just enough depth to emphasize the surface. In other words, it makes it more like a painting and less like an object by stressing the surface.

JUDD: I thought of Frank's aluminum paintings as slabs, in a way.<sup>43</sup>

The literal aspect of Stella's art will be used by Judd in some of the earliest arguments for minimalism, in support of the object with no illusory content, a move away from the mediums of painting and sculpture and into what Judd will term the "specific object." ("I thought of Frank's aluminum paintings as slabs, in a way.") In many ways, Judd is taking the next step in accordance with Greenberg's self-reflexive criticality by denying all illusion to the point where the categories of genre and medium themselves are eliminated in favor of objects.<sup>44</sup> The artworks become more focused on literal objects and at the same time they reveal a nuanced, phenomenological experience.

Fried makes these exact two issues the battle ground on which to attack minimalism as theatricality, and ultimately, not art. Minimalism moved art off the wall and into the space of the world, constructed its objects with the methods of modern industrial manufacture, and demanded the movement of the viewer's body in space. For Fried, the literal object has no qualities beyond its material existence and any art effects are the arbitrary creation of a subjective observer. Fried supports Stella because he "makes it more like a painting and less like an object by stressing the surface." Fried opposes the art of Judd, Robert Morris, and Tony Smith because they do not respect this tension. "Like the shape of the object, the materials do not represent, signify, or allude to

anything; they are what they are and nothing more. And what they are is not, strictly speaking, something that is grasped or intuited or recognized or even seen once and for all."<sup>45</sup>

There are potential problems with Fried's inability to see the allusive and illusive qualities in Judd's minimalism, qualities which Rosalind Krauss explicates as in excess of the literal.<sup>46</sup> Whether one agrees or not with Fried's readings of minimalism is not the issue here. What is relevant to this argument is tracking a lineage through medium specificity and minimalism, back into realism, and then forward into contemporary photography.

Fried moves from his critique of minimalism to the eighteenth-century writings of Diderot, then into a discussion of Gustave Courbet in relation to French realism. For Fried, the tensions that he finds active in the paintings of Stella, also occur in Courbet. Neither of these painters' works can be reduced to their material facts, nor can they be overwhelmed by the subjective construction of experience. This creates a fundamental tension that allows the beholder to become absorbed into the artwork. This line of contradiction between the facts of the material medium and the qualities of pictorial content is of obvious importance to the current argument. It should be clear that there are relations to Harman's tensions between objects and qualities, and that Fried resists "undermining" and "overmining." A medium for Rancière, on the other hand, necessitates a "surface of conversion: a surface of equivalence between the different arts' ways of making."<sup>47</sup> He expands:

For painting to be destined for flatness, it must be made to be seen as flat. For it to be seen as flat, the links that connect its images to the hierarchies of representation have to be loosened. It is not necessary that painting should no longer 'resemble' it is sufficient for its resemblances to be uncoupled from the system of relations that subordinate the resemblance of images to the ordering of actions, the visibility of painting to the quasi-visibility of the

words of poems, and the poem itself to a hierarchy of subjects and actions.<sup>48</sup>

The type of painting that is poorly named abstract, and which is supposedly brought back to its own proper medium, is implicated in an overall vision of a new human being lodged in new structures, surrounded by different objects. Its flatness is linked to the flatness of pages, posters, and tapestries. It is the flatness of an interface. Moreover, its anti-representative 'purity' is inscribed in a context where pure art and decorative art are intertwined, a context that straight away gives it a political signification.<sup>49</sup>

There is an implication here regarding the "medium specificity" argument. For Rancière, the main distinction between "modern" art and its predecessors is not figurative vs. abstract, or illusion vs. criticality, but instead poetic ideal vs. vulgar reality, or narrative action vs. descriptive tension. The art of the aesthetic regime opens new explorations through realism, both through the inclusion of everyday life as content and the "redistribution of sensible information" available through the medium as a material object. Abstraction is not "the abandonment of figuration, but the conquest of the surface."<sup>50</sup> Greenberg's reduction of painting to "flatness and the delimitation of flatness" is typically interpreted as the canvas surface and the shape of the frame. Rather, what if this reduction is instead understood as flatness and the representation of flatness? Abstraction becomes the result of the tension between reality and its representation, a method to defamiliarize form that will privilege the reality of the medium. Here, abstraction becomes an extension of realism, not its antithetical position.

## Photography and Estrangement through Absorption

"Is not a mechanically produced artifact of the sort just described closer in essence (closer ontologically) to an object than to any kind of representation?"<sup>51</sup>

The question of realism in representation for both the arts and sciences was radically transformed by the arrival of the photographic image. Photography introduced a method for the production of images that involved only the intermediaries of a lens, a shutter, light, and chemicals. The human hand and all of its manipulations, conventions, and assumptions could be removed from the discussion. This can be understood as a change in the very nature of objectivity, as discussed by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison. After the advent of photography, to be objective in image making demanded the removal of the hand of the artist. Image making became a mechanized process.<sup>52</sup>

This new mechanical objectivity produced by photography in the sciences differs from the aesthetics of realism. For at least fifty years prior to the invention of photography, a great deal of realism's photographic attributes (a loose composition; a casual, cropped foreground; minute detail; etc.) were under exploration in painting.<sup>53</sup> The first art photographers trained as painters, and they viewed the work of photography as part of a painterly tradition. These important factors remind us that photography did not arrive already formed as a new medium to challenge painting, but instead grew out of a particular tradition of aesthetic conventions. As photography developed, however, it began to define itself as a mode of image making significantly different from traditional methods of representation. These differences would not only prove important for photography, but would also force painting to address aspects of its medium in new ways. Issues such as color, support, and technique soon gained greater importance than the drawn contour of formal resemblance.<sup>54</sup>

Photography poses a distinct challenge to Michael

Thomas Demand, *Bathroom*, 1997.

Fried's life-long argument against the literal object and its theatricality. Photography is mechanically produced (re-produced) through the physical/chemical indexicality of the luminously captured image.<sup>55</sup> As Roland Barthes reminds us, photography tells us that this aspect of the image literally existed in the past; *this* image is a record of *that* fact.<sup>56</sup> Even more problematic for Fried, photography involves posing, more than any other art form—the theatrical falseness that people and environments “put-on” when addressing the camera. Furthermore, photography's medium is unclear. Is it light? Is it a camera? Is it a chemical reaction? Lastly, photography becomes a key tool through which conceptual art begins to problematize the mediums of authorial expression and the institutions that legitimize them. These questions force Fried to redefine his field of play, as he reworks and expands his argument throughout *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008).

Fried identifies several different examples from contemporary photography that produce the anti-theatrical absorptive aesthetic he located in Gustave Courbet and Frank Stella. A partial list of photographers includes: Jeff Wall, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Rineke Dijkstra, Thomas Demand, Candida Hofer, Thomas Struth, and Hiroshi Sugimoto. For Fried, the changes that have occurred in contemporary photography are threefold. First, the photographs he is interested in are printed extremely large for display on the wall, rather than in the pages of a book or in portfolio for private viewing, rendering these photographs similar in scale to paintings. This is another example of a “genre-bash,” in line with Courbet's painting of the everyday at the scale of the historical narrative.<sup>57</sup> Second, by becoming like paintings, these photographs take on what Fried calls “the problematic of beholding,” which situates them within discussions of theatricality and anti-theatricality.<sup>58</sup> The images often exhibit a “documentary” feel; in fact, the disinterested attitude of their subjects, often looking or turning away from the camera, which Fried also identified in Courbet, is one characteristic that many of these photographers share.<sup>59</sup> Third, within this realism, each of these photographers has found a manner

in which to challenge the relation between the reality photographed and the artificiality of the constructed image.<sup>60</sup> This occurs in a different manner for each artist, but there is always a tension between the real, as denoted by the image, and the techniques of production, found in the photo's staging or in its postproduction, which work to "[establish] the photograph as a representation."<sup>61</sup> These processes are increasingly digitized, and typically not broadcast as expressive form. Instead, they are hidden within the construction of the image to challenge the photograph as a mechanical recording, a "fossil" of the real.<sup>62</sup>

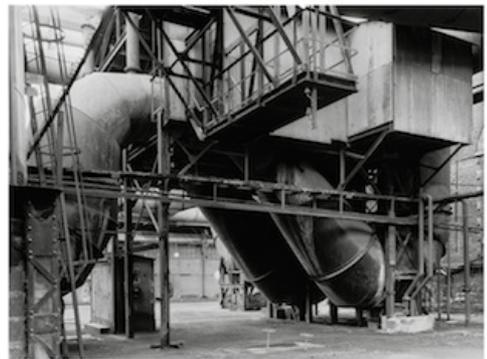
The literal objecthood of photography should be problematic for Fried's argument. Because of the indexical nature of photography, we trust photos to record reality in a manner that we would never expect or trust in a painting. Photographs are literal objects both at the level of the non-pictorial artifact, the so called "fossil" produced by a chemically stored reaction, and the level of objects captured as pictorial images. This combination requires Fried to revise his opinion on objecthood. He distinguishes between "good" and "bad" objecthood, specifically in relation to the photographs of James Welling and the industrial typologies of Bernd and Hilla Becher.

But the concern in Welling's photograph with the specificity of this particular two-by-four, with its individual history and identifying nicks and blemishes, comes out the other side of minimalism and or literalism into the world of real and not "generic" objects, to use a philosophical distinction that has the virtue of locating the issue of theatricality within the larger problematic of philosophical skepticism. (From this point of view, the trouble with Donald Judd's *Specific Objects* was that they were never specific enough.) Another way of characterizing Welling's focus on the two-by-four might be to speak of an interest in real as opposed to abstract literalness or even in "good" as distinct from "bad" objecthood, understanding by the first term in both oppositions qualities pertaining

to objects that can only be revealed or manifested in and by the art of photography (no "good" objecthood *tout court*).<sup>63</sup>

The distinctions that Fried makes here are interesting, given questions in the previous section on medium specificity—when it comes to literal objects, as revealed by the medium of photography, the "good" is aligned with the "real," and the "bad" with the "abstract." What seems to be suggested here is an adaptation of the medium-specific argument to the particularities of photography. Photography, Fried argues, can provide a razor-thin line, in which a set of particular pictorial details of the world are extracted and allowed to enter into aesthetic contemplation. It is as if the artistic use of photography requires the object as photograph and the photographed object to have enough similarity such that their slight differences scream in aesthetic tension. In considering the Bechers' *Typologies* series of industrial objects, Fried finds that the photographic technique interferes just enough to allow one to notice the world of objects in this heightened manner.

The isolation and "silhouetting" of the individual objects, the consistency of the lighting, the duration of exposure of the black-and-white film, the choice of an elevated viewpoint that enable the object to be photographed head-on and also allows some (but not too much) indication of its rootedness in a particular spot, the sameness of the format and framing, and finally—crucially—the organization of nine, twelve, fifteen, sixteen, or more photographs of a single type of object in three or four (occasionally even five) rows within a single frame so as positively to invite the sort of spontaneous, largely freeform but at the same time "structured" or "directed" comparative observation, based on the perception of similarities and differences (similarities first, then differences), that makes of the objects



in the Bechers' photographs something other than things "which you just have to look at."<sup>64</sup>

As already suggested, the aesthetic experience of estrangement in relation to realism happens after or through absorption in the artwork. This position is counter to mainstream modernism, which holds that criticality is only available through a conscious distancing of the observer from the artwork. This distance allows the viewer to treat the artwork objectively. It can be produced through abstraction, through the process, through the exposure of the medium, through the ironic wink, or through self-referential autonomy. Jeff Wall's photographs do not fall under this tradition. These photographs often appear to be strictly documentarian, insisting on a common reality. However, as discussed above, these photographs are artificial at every level.

Wall suggests that he understands his work differently than from that of the high modernist project he was educated in. "I've always felt that good art has to reflect somehow on its own process of coming to be. I have never really been convinced that this reflexivity had to be made explicit, though . . . I've always thought that if the work is good it will automatically contain that reflection, but you won't be able to see it immediately. It will flicker into view in some subtle way."<sup>65</sup> Wall is after a criticality that has everything to do with the medium, but he also suggests that it does not reside in the critical exposé of the medium laid bare; the tension can occur at another level, within what Fried would describe as, an absorptive aesthetic. Elsewhere Wall describes this desire in relation to his light box display technique: "This is greatly facilitated by the lighting technology used to make the piece, which itself induces a kind of primal specular fascination or absorption which is in some ways antithetical to the conditions of reflective and artificial estrangement indispensable to the unhappy lucidity of critical modernism."<sup>66</sup>

The qualities in Wall's photographs can be understood as containing a tension similar to that Graham Harman describes as the aesthetic of allure. There is something *off*

in these photographs that alludes to a not-exactly-factual photograph of the objects depicted, in which the real objects are withdrawn from clear or easy description. The viewer is always left feeling it is real, but also in doubt: Real in which world?

The work of Thomas Demand seems to initially share similarities with Jeff Wall's images. He photographs common, even mundane, environments. The images are printed at a large scale, with an even attention to detail across the field. The content appears to capture a real place, but again, something is not quite right. It is here that Wall's and Demand's procedure part ways. A procedure for Demand's work might sound something like the following: appropriate a photograph of an anonymous real-life place from an often tragic news event; build the scene as photographed full-scale out of paper and only paper; take a photograph from the same angle as the original photograph; destroy the paper construction; and exhibit the new photograph with a straightforward descriptive title. The aesthetic condition in Demand's work occurs in recognizing the strangeness of the reality that is actually photographed. The paper constructions are real material, real assemblies, but are artificial in their suggestions of apparent form, materiality, and place. The telling aspect is detail missing at a certain resolution. There are no labels or signage, but there are small, hard-to-detect imperfections in seams. The result is that it looks somewhat fake, yet it is a "real" fake construction of a photograph of an actual place in the world. Demand's work is an example of abstraction as an extension of realism. It produces estrangement through the abstract defamiliarization of reality.

As opposed to Jeff Wall, there is little to no digital manipulation. Furthermore, the constructions are based on real documentary photos of real places and real events. There is no compositional construction of a fake scenario, yet Demand builds everything out of paper, fake representations to the real materials at every level. This only makes the interpretation of intent stranger, for the intentions of the artist are not in the composition, but in everything else. The only ac-



Thomas Demand, *Control Room*, 2011.

cidental realities in Demand's work are the traits of the paper as material: a certain flatness of sheen, a slight warp to the edges, and the particularities of the non-composed event as photographed by someone else. Realism takes on the problems at every level, engaging its representational artificiality.

## **The Parafictional and Medium Promiscuity**

The contemporary practices of parafiction and counterfactual history work around interests in the aesthetics of estrangement. These practices make interventions into reality through the full engagement and expert manipulation of mediations to intensify the problems that exist in representing the real. Parafiction introduces a false condition, and then exploits all possible mediations to engender its possibility. Counterfactual history takes the facts of history, switches one fact through the application of a "What if?" question, then plays out the implications of this adjacent reality. Both operate through the production of what Caroline Jones calls, an "aesthetics of doubt."<sup>67</sup>

Carrie Lambert-Beatty provides an instructive description of the parafictional:

It does not perform its procedures in the hygienic clinics of literature, but has one foot in the field of the real. Unlike historical fiction's fact-based but imagined worlds, in parafiction real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived. Post-simulacral, parafictional strategies are oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust. Simply put, with various degrees of success, for various durations, and for various purposes, these fictions are experienced as fact.<sup>68</sup>

One of the things to note about parafictional art is that it is not medium specific, but medium promiscuous. These artists use found images, found objects, digitally manipulated photography, film, video, animation, furniture, food, product design, websites, publication material, gallery spaces, street spaces, architecture, etc.<sup>69</sup> Characteristic similarities between many of these artists include their use of a combination of cutting-edge digital media, appropriated architecture, and a "documentary" photographic style. Their mediations often focus on our every-

Heide Hatry, *Organa aurantiaca locustarum*, 2012.

day—the ways in which we are surrounded by a background reality experienced in a state of distraction. These artists intervene in these spaces and produce just enough tension for the viewer to begin to doubt the reality of what is being presented, and by extension, begin to doubt other mediations that occur outside of the artwork, in their everyday life.

Parafictional art operates within a legacy that owes its roots to a combination of the collage's concepts and techniques, and the appropriation of the found object. Jones even suggests that photography is a form of appropriation, where the image is "taken" from one reality and then used for the purposes of another.<sup>70</sup> As an example, Heide Hatry's flowers exist as photographs, but they also denote a real sculptural construction artificially collaged out of real animal organs, tissues, and flesh.<sup>71</sup> The mediation initially produces an aesthetic tied to flower photography, which has the romantic and erotic associations of beauty across many cultures. On closer inspection however, there is something wrong—a little viciousness, some hairy edges, a coloration problem, and figural deformations, that leads the viewer to ask what produces this strangeness. On discovering that flowers, as the sexual organs of plants, are material constructions made from the sexual organs of animals, there erupts contradictory aesthetic responses. Disgust, horror, and repulsion are tempered and soon shift. Hatry's flower photographs exemplify Graham Harman's category of allure. These objects generate visceral revulsion, but never stop being flowers or possessing that initial association with beauty, through the genre of flower photography.

The quickest way to pure beauty in photography is by photographing flowers. Using the proper techniques, flower photographs can be made extremely appealing, "almost as good as the real thing." But that "almost" represents the last veil separating the two-dimensional representation from the three-dimensional, fragrant (usually) original. Heide Hatry's photographs, however, reverse the ontological functions. As virtual flowers they are closer to real flowers in the pho-



Heide Hatry, *Aures cenrorum, linguae gallinarum, antenna barbi*. Dallas, TX, 2011.

tographs than they are in reality, so that the veil of photography functions to conceal what they're made of and to deceive us about their nature. Yet we enjoy being fooled, especially when the constitutive material is so biologically antithetical to what we think we're seeing. What is a flower petal after all? What can you do with it, besides crush and boil it for its aromatic oil? Otherwise it has a purely aesthetic function—for the flower as well: to attract pollinators to the plant's sex organs inside. Hatry has made a further transformation by taking objects that have other real functions and turned them into faux aesthetic objects. The sheer act of imagination fascinates.<sup>72</sup>

Hatry's work challenges the relations between figure, materiality, and articulation. Another investigation into these themes can be found in the career-spanning project of Harmen Brethouwer's objects. Every object is of one of two shapes, either a flat square or a three-dimensional cone.<sup>73</sup> These two objects are stand-ins for painting and sculpture, respectively. Although every artwork has the same form, each object is articulated differently, through material and ornament/decoration. The articulations span techniques and motifs from the entire history of craft, through every culture, every technology, and every material available. The project would be akin to the appropriation of all man-made artifacts and art styles. There is an object made with the extreme delicacy of Art-Deco silver filigree techniques, a three-dimensional object constructed with a minimum of material, requiring an extraordinary expenditure in time and craft. There is an object digitally printed with ground eggshells; the object that appears egg-like is thus digitally printed out of itself. There is an object decorated with four different flowers: peony, lotus, chrysanthemum, and orchid. The decorations painted on this object reflect research into how each flower might be improved by biologically altering it into a new species, which would correlate its visual representation more directly to its symbolic meaning. There is an object made from the droppings of the nine animals which a traditional Chinese dragon is based on; the



Harmen Brethouwer, *Dragons and the Eight Treasures*, 1997.



Harmen Brethouwer, *Untitled*, 2013. Photo by: Will Thom Studio.



Harmen Brethouwer, *Dragon's Dropping*, 2006.



Harmen Brethouwer, *Looking for Dragon Droppings*, 2012.



Harmen Brethouwer, *New Egg*, 2004.



Harmen Brethouwer, *The Last Marble*, 2013. Photo by: Sylvain Deleu.



Harmen Brethouwer, *Crystal Cone*, 2003.



Harmen Brethouwer, *En Filigrane*, 2005.

object is made literally of dragon shit. Brethouwer's "project" is the collection of these objects, which as a set estrange articulation from form.

In order to experience and comprehend his art work, it is essential that one know what the object is made of and how the material has been incorporated. *Dragon's Dropping*, for instance, is not just a cow pat having a curious title—all a conceptual artist would need to put an idea into action, so to speak—but it is a compound powder composed of the droppings of the nine different animals that, according to ancient Chinese, made up a certain type of dragon, the long. Brethouwer puts the powder in a loam casing, molded into the imaginary shape of a dragon's turd, like a relic in a reliquary, thus touching on a Roman Catholic tradition. Partly taking an imaginary fact literally, then playing around with it, seeking out the limits of the possible and the impossible, eventually uniting all this in a work of art.<sup>74</sup>

These objects are minimal in major ways. They appear as simple reduced forms, but are the outcome of years of rigorous research into their specific shape and proportion. They are serial in their repetitive production of identical forms, yet each is different in the most extreme manner possible—decorated, crafted, and exotic in material. Traditional craft practices tie material, method, and form, to an ornamental or decorative effect. In Brethouwer's work, these relations are questioned. Any decorative craft material can articulate the same form, and the formal object is then rendered potentially useless. The objects Brethouwer creates can sit in many different environments and realities, from the gallery to the mantle place. They are almost mundane, everyday decorations—almost kitsch. They are also almost fine art sculpture in its most abstract purity. Brethouwer quotes Robert Morris: "The size range of useless 3D things is a continuum between the monument and the ornament."<sup>75</sup>

Parafictional art is not "post-medium," as described by Rosalind Krauss in *A Voyage on the North Sea* (1999). Krauss sees the post-medium condition as an extension from conceptual art and minimal art of the 1960s, often involving installation art, institutional critique, and the rejection of medium specificity related to traditional art genres.<sup>76</sup> As mentioned above, the major problem with the argument of conceptual art, for this discussion, is that all aesthetics are suspect. Although it is true that parafictional work descends from these conceptual premises and uses multiple mediums to create social and political critique, there is a crucial difference at work. In the parafictional realm, aesthetics is not seen as a condition that must be suppressed to ask a conceptual question, and the conventions of mediums supply the rule sets for opening an aesthetics of doubt. These artists exploit every possible medium available to intervene in the real and redistribute sensible information.

The Belgian photographer Filip Dujardin creates architectural images by collaging photographs of other architectures. His images are in many ways the opposite of Thomas Demand's in terms of procedure, but share a similar disruption of the real. Dujardin's work in his series *Fictions* starts with a rough digital model, the way many architecture projects begin today. He then brings in photographs of real buildings that he maps onto these surfaces. The difference between these images and most architectural renderings occurs at the level in which he reveals their artificiality. The images are meticulously constructed, with the details of seams completely erased. The compositing into environments is entirely believable. The material qualities and textures of aging and decay are rendered completely plausible. The fiction of these constructions is revealed in two different ways. The first occurs at the level of the overall figuration. The cantilever is just too much, or the conflict of masses too contorted for inhabitation. A second moment of doubt is raised by the inner-articulation of the image. A roof repeats too many times, floors are missing behind the façade, or the windows have been completely removed from a cityscape. These tensions between figure and articulation are architectural questions, even if Dujardin is not an architect.



Heide Hatry, *Spisulae solidissima*, *cilia cervorum*, *oesophagus caprae*. 2012.

There is just enough astray in the work to make the viewer doubt its reality. There is also just enough to engage an aesthetics of realism. The project of the parafictional can be understood as an investigation into the aesthetic estrangement of realism, as it extends into the entire sensorium of our mediated relations. This requires a complete mastery of media, not to rarify its specificities or critically undermine its artificiality, but to use it to establish the possibility of redistributing the information that it contains. The estrangement *is* the redistribution. In the best examples of this work, the viewer begins to doubt more than just the artwork itself; they begin to question other moments that claim to represent reality, extending the effects of the artwork well beyond the piece itself, and into a world that includes architecture. This art is rarely ironic. It may be comic, grotesque, or erotic, but all of these aesthetic reactions require engagement, not distancing.

Parafiction is an antidote to vanity. It changes you, leaves you both curious and chastened. It also forever changes one's interface with the media, art, museums, and scholarship. The difference is a certain critical attack, but one that should be differentiated from models of criticality as skepticism. Rancière talks about a "poetics of knowledge" as opposed to "critique as suspicion." Something like this attitude takes shape, I think as a post-parafictional alertness to the possibility of play. (Rancière's poetics of knowledge, like the parafictional, "gives value to the effectivity of speech acts.") Art Works, lectures, books, exhibitions, and of course journal articles: they shimmer slightly, possibly plausible, plausibly possible.<sup>77</sup>

## One or Many Mediums

As often noted, architects do not make buildings; they create representations. Architectural representation consists of drawings, renderings, verbal instructions, photography, numeric calculations, simulations, text, models, etc. Recent years have also seen the adaptation of film, animation, and other new media modes of technology. From our stance in the early-twenty-first century, it seems a folly to preach that one type of architectural mediation is more real than another.

There are few that would disagree that architecture uses a multitude of these media to create its designs. What is overlooked is that each of these different media also implies a different specificity for the discipline. When architects argue the importance of the drawing, or the diagram, or the photo-realistic rendering, or the assembly detail, they are arguing about more than what technique is the most crucial to representation. They are arguing over where the medium specificity of architecture lies, where criticality lies, where architectural modernity lies. When the attempt is made to reduce architecture to a single medium, it is most often the finished building that holds the trump card. It is at this point that another mistake at the intersection architecture and realism occurs: the confusion between reality and its representation.

Architectural arguments that rely solely on built reality conflate realism with the pragmatics of building. As stated in the introduction, this confusion posits ethics as the cause and justification of aesthetics. The aesthetics of architecture become the result of its programmatic function, its material assembly, and its economic constraints. Program, construction, and economy are crucial factors of any architectural project. But, if these are seen as the sole generators of aesthetics due to their pragmatic reality, the discipline of architecture runs into deep problems. To address each in order: program functions change over a building's lifetime, often against the original intentions of a space's qualities, and often producing interesting results through this shift. The expression of construction is as much about what is concealed as it is about what is revealed—

its truth is an aesthetic desire, not the other way around. Lastly, the reality of economic constraints for much of the built environment centers on enhancing profitability; a world built for profit only is a world that quickly becomes homogenized through capital. The aesthetics of realism for architecture cannot be collapsed into the pragmatics of building, but must maintain tensions available in questions of estrangement.

This treatise proposes that architecture be considered a multi-medium parafictional project. There is no single medium upon which to base the specificity of the discipline. Architecture should exploit its entire available media to propose ways in which the world can be made other. Since these mediations are all tied into conditions of the future environment, the questions of relations between representations and reality are crucial. The examples put forward by parafictional work all play within these tensions, but never allow them to crumble into a simple confusion of reality with its representation. The aesthetic dimensions of these projects make it such that doubt is always present regarding the reality represented.

The ideas introduced by Michael Fried in relation to contemporary photography are an important complement to the doubts engendered by parafiction. For Fried, these photographs become art not through traditional critical distance created by the medium's revelation. Instead, they are direct, everyday realist photographs. Their aesthetic strangeness occurs after the absorption or engagement in the artwork. This idea is quite compelling for architecture. At its base level, architecture is about inhabitation and the city. If criticality can occur after engagement in the experience of architecture, not before as an ironic wink, then the possibility of aesthetics redistributing the sensible is much stronger and stranger. Architecture does not have to broadcast its unique difference—all it may need is suggest a doubt, raise tension when it enters into the familiar world, and allow reality to reveal itself, in all its aesthetic strangeness.

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