

## From a System of Objects to Speculative Realism

André Gali

*Artifacts can sometimes grow beyond their intended function. Some objects can demand from us a different set of rules in order to handle them. In some way or another, they take on a form of life within our minds. I thought, if commodities could evoke these various types of emotionality in us and construct fictions, then let them also become agents that help enhance our ability to imagine and dream.*

Yuka Oyama, 2017<sup>1</sup>

Objects have biographies and ontologies, they come into being at some point in time and live lives of a certain length: maybe one second or 5,000 years. Through their existence, objects take part in shaping the world both physically and emotionally. For makers, creating and shaping objects to be used and/or experienced is the *raison-d'être*. The objects may 'grow beyond their intended function', as Yuka Oyama describes it in the above quote.

Take a domestic object like a ceramic bowl – say one made from stoneware and raku fired in Japan in the Taishō period (1912-1926). Maybe it was fired in Tokyo in 1916 by Bernhard Leach and later brought to the UK where at some point it ended up in a museum collection. For this bowl to come into being at that specific time and place, many conditions had to be in place. Leach had to be in Japan (which he was), which in turn meant that he had to travel by boat from the UK at some point before the firing took place. And for that to happen, a boat needed to exist, and so forth. In addition to the many preconditions enabling Leach to be in Japan at that exact moment, there were other preconditions enabling the clay to exist: for starters, years of geological processes in advance of the clay's excavation. For the firing to take place, there had already to be a forest to supply wood for the kiln. And so on.

Therefore: In order for the ceramic bowl we imagine here to come into existence, a number of events had to take place. And after the bowl was fired, perhaps it functioned as a soup bowl for many years. And for that to happen, a whole lot of other things had to be in place: a

---

<sup>1</sup> Yuka Oyama, *The Stubborn Life of Objects*, Reflection on an artistic project 2012-2017, Oslo National Academy of Arts, Department of Art and Craft, The Norwegian Artistic Research Fellowship Programme, Oslo (2017), 11.

kitchen of sorts, a stove, a place to eat (table, chairs, floor), someone who knew how to make soup and, of course, the ingredients. And, if we pretend that the bowl ended up in a museum (which is likely), now it serves the more aesthetic function of providing sensory pleasure for lovers of ceramics. In some ways, it is dormant in the 'retirement home' that is the museum. But even for this to happen, a number of events would need to have taken place: first of all, the establishing of a museum with a collection, then a museum curator who chose this bowl to be exhibited, then the exhibition design, the plinth, etc.

We have thus established that this particular bowl has shaped the world in many ways that have unforeseen and unimaginable consequences, but that it also, over time, has been shaped by forces and other objects, some of which are human, others non-human. Furthermore, even though it may seem like the bowl, now in its museum condition, makes no fuss, it still effects the world and the objects around it. It is continuously shaped by the variety of forces and the objects with which it relates.

Clearly then, to set an object in motion in the world is a risky affair; you cannot control how it will be used, misused, abused, understood, misunderstood or handled, or what consequences may arise, be they historical, political, ecological, physical and so on. When an object is out in the world, it lives its own life, is defined by its own agency, the context in which it is situated and by the desires and agencies of other objects (human or non-human). Negotiations are constantly taking place between objects; they enter into relationships and networks, and they are involved in constant processes of becoming.

### **A critique of Kant**

Contrary to what we have learned from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and what is often referred to as Kant's Copernican Revolution (rather than assuming that knowledge is shaped by reality itself, it is our faculty of judgment that determines what reality is for us),<sup>2</sup> there are convincing theories that all objects (human or non-human) have

---

<sup>2</sup> In the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (published in 1787; a heavy revision of the first edition of 1781), Immanuel Kant drew a parallel between the 'Copernican revolution' (when Nicolaus Copernicus showed that earth is not the centre of the universe) and the epistemology of his new transcendental philosophy. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copernican\\_Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copernican_Revolution)) (visited 16 November 2017).

an ontology, regardless of the human psyche or presence (which is the premise of Kant's experience with the world).<sup>3</sup> In fact, Kant's legacy is that we humans perceive there to be an unbridgeable gulf between, on one side, the world, reality or *the thing*, and on the other side, the human mind.<sup>4</sup> This I will refer to as *Kant's great divide*: with it comes the dualisms between subject and object, culture and nature, philosophy (reflection, interpretation) and science (physical laws), and so on. The trajectory that began with Kant's *Critiques*<sup>5</sup> has been pushed to the extreme limit in the hyper-reality of Postmodernism, for instance in the writings of Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007),<sup>6</sup> who describes simulacra and simulation as a total frenzy of images and abstractions that make humans into atoms circling in space, unattached to any reality, relationships or responsibility.

In this essay I discuss *what comes next* – after the erasure of reality, or after its marginalization, and how that relates to crafts. I look into what Jean Baudrillard, Bruno Latour (b. 1947) and Graham Harman (b. 1968) think about objects. Baudrillard, even though he in many ways celebrates the erasure of reality, also points to how relationships between objects define the objects. This, in my view, can be seen as a starting point for discussing Latour's actor-network-theory, which defines objects by their attendant relationships. This theory seems to kick-start a return of reality, for lurking in the shadows of sociology, philosophy, ecology and art theory, reality once more grows strong. A new generation of philosophers is looking into this from a perspective called *Speculative Realism*.<sup>7</sup> Harman, being the most notable of these thinkers, has rewritten key ideas developed by the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). Harman calls objects in the world (human and

---

<sup>3</sup> In Kant's work we find discussions of the autonomous object – or *thing-in-itself* – that exists outside the human perception, but Kant was unclear on the status of the object, and a result was that traditions of interpreting Kant's aesthetics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century related to the object only as the thing-for-me. This is the interpretation I base my critique of Kant on in this essay.

<sup>4</sup> Dualism is of course much older than Kant. A certain branch of dualism is ascribed to Descartes, and this I will discuss a bit later on. Suffice it to say that through his writings, the concept of dualism was reinforced and became influential for the dominant philosophical thinking in modern Europe.

<sup>5</sup> 'The fundamental idea of Kant's "critical philosophy" — especially in his three Critiques: *the Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787), *the Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *the Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) — is human autonomy.' Quoted from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant/> (visited on 15 November 2017).

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, Semiotext(e) (Foreign Agent Series, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> 'Since its first appearance at a London colloquium in 2007, the speculative realism movement has taken continental philosophy by storm. Opposing the formerly ubiquitous modern dogma that philosophy can speak only of the human-world relation rather than the world itself, speculative realism defends the autonomy of the world from human access, but in a spirit of imaginative audacity.' Quote from <https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/series-speculative-realism.html> (visited on 15. November 2017)

non-human) *tool-beings*, and describes his brand of Speculative Realism as *Object-Oriented Philosophy* (or ontology).<sup>8</sup> My point of view in this essay, at least to some extent, is that Postmodernism, as represented by Baudrillard,<sup>9</sup> emphasizes modern ideas put forth by Kant, but also paves the way for the New Realism in Latour's Actor-Network-Theory, which in turn leads to Harman's Object-Oriented Philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

Before exploring the ideas of the thinkers I have mentioned, and before giving supporting arguments for my claims, I want to say something about crafts – after all, this is precisely why I explore the ideas of these thinkers.

### **Don't make art**

In his text *Replacing the Myth of Modernism*,<sup>11</sup> the American studio jeweller and writer Bruce Metcalf warns craftspeople against trying to make works of art. 'Assimilation into art is deadly to craft, and should be avoided', he writes, and goes on to conclude that 'craft constitutes a different class of objects and also springs from a different set of values and a separate historical consciousness'. What interests me in this text is not only how Metcalf describes craft objects as different from art objects, but also that he makes it possible to see that craft objects may benefit from a being read in a way that differs from Kant's concept of the autonomous work of art.<sup>12</sup> But before going further, what does Metcalf mean by 'a separate historical consciousness'?

---

<sup>8</sup> You can get a pretty good idea of Graham Harman's intellectual journey from a devoted Heideggerian philosopher to an object-oriented ontologist in the book Graham Harman, *Toward Speculative Realism – Essays and Lectures* (Zero Books, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> I do not think Baudrillard himself ever used the term post-modern to describe his position, but I feel it is safe to do so in light of his basis in critical theory, Marxism and Structuralism.

<sup>10</sup> Harman often uses the term 'Object-Oriented Philosophy' when referring to his branch of philosophy, but he uses the terms 'philosophy' and 'ontology' as basically the same thing. Ontology is usually understood as philosophy engaged in questions about the nature of being. To Harman, all philosophy concerns these kinds of questions.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Metcalf, 'Replacing the Myth of Modernism', *American Craft*, February/March 1993, vol. 53, no. 1, also available at: [http://www.brucemetcalf.com/pages/essays/replacing\\_myth.html](http://www.brucemetcalf.com/pages/essays/replacing_myth.html) (visited 2 November 2017).

<sup>12</sup> With a grounding in Kant's aesthetics, the concept of the autonomous work of art has become defining for Western modern and contemporary art. In short, the idea is that the work of art should be presented and experienced as transcending everyday life, and be perceived through a gaze that is free from desire. The work should be appreciated on its own terms, not in relation to terms applied by a viewer.

While modernist critics writing in the shadow of Kant (e.g., Theodor Adorno or Clement Greenberg) emphasize the autonomy of the object as the quality that secures its cultural value, craft objects seem to suffer when read in this manner. The way I understand Metcalf's definition, works of craft are not hermetic and autonomous objects; rather, they have four simultaneous identities or definitions:

... craft is usually made substantially by hand. ... craft is medium-specific: it is always identified with a material and the technologies invented to manipulate it. ... craft is defined by use ... craft is also defined by its past.<sup>13</sup>

This seems like an apt set of definitions to me, but the one that I think is most important in the present context concerns their *use*. On one hand, crafted objects relate to designed objects that are mass-produced, and on the other hand, to modern art. Yet as Metcalf points out, design and modern art have particular histories, theories and *raison-d'être* that differ from the history, theory and purpose of the crafts. In my view, the aspect of *use* makes it patently clear that a work of craft is a social product that invites a user to get involved with it in a way that differs from the ways in which objects of art or design are used. We could, in fact, say that works of craft embody social engagement.<sup>14</sup> This is a quality they share with designed objects, even though they are not situated in the same context of production, industry, distribution and consumption. On the other hand, crafted objects also embody a conceptualization of reality or everyday life, just as might be the case for a work of art. But through the concept of *use* – as both actual engagement with the object or engagement with the idea of use – my proposition is that works of craft are both *relational* as well as *autonomous* objects.

In the following, I will not offer a new definition of craft. I try instead to offer a brief reading of objects that emphasizes their relation to a user or public and the understanding of objects in society at large. I couch my reading in a context that extends from French sociologist Jean Baudrillard's critique of Post-War Western culture's expanding consumer society, to the Speculative Realism of the American philosopher Graham Harman. The French sociologist

---

<sup>13</sup> Metcalf 'Replacing the Myth of Modernism'.

<sup>14</sup> In this analysis, I am limiting the concept of design objects to manufactured objects for everyday use. I do not take into account other types of design such as web design or service design.

Bruno Latour can be seen as a 'bridge' between French Postmodern thinking and the new orientation towards reality that we have experienced in recent years. He provides interesting perspectives on the relationship between human and non-human objects, or actors as he calls them. Latour has also influenced Harman, so much so that Harman wrote a book about him. This is why I read Latour in relation to Harman within the context of this text. That being said, Latour also relates to issues that were seen as important to the French thinkers of his generation, and Harman in turn differentiates himself from Latour on some key issues. When presenting the theories of Baudrillard, Latour and Harman, I will also present analyses of selected works by the craft artists Yuka Oyama (b. 1974), Elin Hedberg (b. 1988) and Heidi Børgan (b. 1970), as a way of 'fleshing out' my thoughts.

### **A system of objects**

The quote with which this essay starts is from Yuka Oyama's written reflection on *The Stubborn Life of Objects*, her artistic research project at Oslo National Academy of Arts.<sup>15</sup> Oyama set out to investigate the relationship between herself and five domestic objects – a bag of flour, a handbag, a headdress, a key and a piano – which she chose due to the emotional value they held for her. These objects were then the basis for five wearable sculptures which Oyama called 'encapsulation suits'. They are made from black Polyethylene (PE) sponge – a material used to isolate heat and sound.<sup>16</sup> Considering her background in art jewellery (Oyama studied under the renowned jewellery artist and professor Otto Künzli in Munich) and her interest in the relationships that arise between wearers and jewellery as well as jewellery and the public, it does not seem surprising that Oyama decided to investigate these domestic objects with methods common to performance art. In this context, the traditional subject-object relationship is altered and the objects gain an additional dimension. In fact, the encapsulation suits succeed in showing how objects can be agents that define a given situation and shape human movement. Oyama describes an object as a co-actor in this relationship, but one could also say that the human being is, to some extent, the prop for the object-actor.

---

<sup>15</sup> Yuka Oyama was a research fellow at the Art and Craft Department, Oslo National Academy of the Arts, during 2012-2017. More information on Yuka Oyama and this project are available at <https://www.yukaoyama.com> (visited on 15. November 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Yuka Oyama, *The Stubborn Life of Objects*, 21.

For French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard – possibly mostly known for introducing the concepts of ‘simulacra’ and ‘hyper reality’ into contemporary thinking<sup>17</sup> – objects in consumer culture enter into the same sort of relationships with people as Oyama describes in her project; the difference, however, is that Baudrillard sees the objects as controlling the individual primarily in their capacity as signs. Baudrillard’s initial intention was to do a neo-Marxist critique of consumer society inspired by the Situationist Internationale and Guy Debord, especially his book *The Society of the Spectacle*.<sup>18</sup> Debord’s idea was that human lives are merely fiction staged by media, fashion, design and art, but Baudrillard left this position and eventually developed an understanding of contemporary (Western) capitalist society as being defined by signs and systems of signs, or codes and matrixes.<sup>19</sup> According to Baudrillard, there is no such thing as reality, only simulacra; the copy and the original, the artificial and the real, have merged and are impossible to distinguish from each other.<sup>20</sup>

A book by Baudrillard that has gained increased attention from makers and artists lately, among others from Yuka Oyama,<sup>21</sup> is the first book he published in France in 1968. It was translated into English in 1996 under the title *The System of Objects*.<sup>22</sup> Here we find Baudrillard’s first attempt to analyse and develop a language for discussing the mass-production of everyday objects in an expanding consumer society. He pays a lot of attention to domestic objects and asks two key questions: ‘What mental structures are interwoven with – and contradict – their [everyday objects] functional structures?’ ‘What cultural, infracultural or transcultural system underpins their directly experienced everydayness?’<sup>23</sup> Obviously, the mass production and distribution of consumer objects are not neutral gestures of making functional and/or decorative objects available for people at reasonable

---

<sup>17</sup> In 1983 Jean Baudrillard gained international recognition through the booklet *Simulations* (Semiotext(e) / Foreign Agent Series). Suggested reading for more information on this book - *André Gali: This summer I am re-reading... Jean Baudrillard's Simulations* (Art Jewelry Forum): <https://artjewelryforum.org/articles-series/this-summer-i-am-re-reading%E2%80%A6> (visited 15. November 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, first published in French in 1967, (New York: ZoneBooks, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> In fact, Jean Baudrillard’s texts were the inspiration for the science fiction movies *The Matrix Trilogy* (1999-2003, written and directed by the Wachowskis).

<sup>20</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, Semiotext(e) (Foreign Agent Series, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Oyama refers to the book in her thesis.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, first published in French in 1968, (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

prices; to the contrary, they serve to produce and distribute signifiers of identity (class, culture, taste, etc.), as a way of defining where people belong in a cultural and economic hierarchy in (a mobile) society.<sup>24</sup> Baudrillard held this view at the time he wrote *The System of Objects* because, he said, in (Western capitalist) society, 'there are two entangled social orders – *the order of production and the order of consumption*'.<sup>25</sup> And in the order of consumption, objects function primarily as social signs. Some years later he abandoned the idea of an order of production and the idea that media and consumer products are representations of a (Marxist) material reality. He began instead to explore the idea that there are now only representations, or simulacra – there is nothing real, as mentioned above. What in fact signifies objects in *The System of Objects*, and what matters to us here, is the idea that objects lose their autonomy as objects and gain their value as part of various sign-systems, similar to how a language is structured by words that primarily gain meaning when they enter into relationships with other words in sentences or other language structures.

### **After the orgy of modernity**

Baudrillard's analysis of contemporary society has been of great benefit to me personally, not least when I was doing my master thesis on Andy Warhol's pop persona.<sup>26</sup> But in the context of what we discuss here, I think it is safe to say that Baudrillard has only pushed the idea of the divide between objects and subjects to its final conclusion. He does not see objects as real things; they only exist for him as signs, as representations of things that lack real presence. Objects are copies but not based on anything original. In defining objects as part of a system, the objects gain their characteristics from the relationships in which they appear. This is interesting in light of Bruno Latour and the actor-network-theory, as we will soon see.

---

<sup>24</sup> This is also the subject of Baudrillard's second book, *The Consumer Society – Myths and Structures*, first published in French in 1970 (London: Sage, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>26</sup> André Gali, *Andy Warhol Superstar: On the Artist Myth, Media and Mechanical Theatricality*, thesis, University of Oslo, Norway, 2005. (The thesis is in Norwegian.)



In many ways Baudrillard takes the full consequence of Kant's great divide. But his position reminds us even more of another great grandfather of modern philosophy, the French philosopher and mathematician Rene Descartes (1596-1650), who reduced the whole of reality to human perception when he reached the conclusion that 'I think, therefore I am'.<sup>27</sup> In his path towards this conclusion, Descartes doubted everything that existed – what he believed to be real could, he feared, actually be a dream or a fantasy imposed upon him by the devil. What he could not doubt was the fact that he was thinking – for how could he doubt anything if he did not think? It was impossible for Descartes to understand how the physical world and the mental world could communicate with each other, except with help from God. Only then did he find it possible to re-connect with reality. Like Descartes, Baudrillard reaches the same desolate situation in his thinking. What he believes to be true and factual is merely a mirage – a system of signs disguised as objects. But for Baudrillard it is not the devil who lures the human mind into a dream or fantasy; no, the images of modern media are the culprits – the (over)production of representations and copies, representations of representations, copies of copies, codes and matrixes – and since there is no God (after Nietzsche 'killed him') there is no way back to reality. Baudrillard wrote several of his theories before the Internet was invented, but in many ways he foresaw the simulacra of the always-online computer: in so many ways admirable, but also a sort of endgame for Cartesian and Kantian thinking.

In a fin-de-millennium spirit, Baudrillard's book *The Transparency of Evil* (French version 1990) describes modernity as an endless orgy – a liberation of politics, sex, art and models of representation – and he asks: '*What do we do after the orgy?*'<sup>28</sup>

This question seems to suggest that Baudrillard has a misanthropic view of contemporary society, but in a later interview, he reveals that after the orgy there is *hope*:

What do we do after the orgy of modernity? Is simulation all we have left? /.../ this expression – 'after the orgy' – comes from a story full of hope: it is the story of a man who whispers into the ear of a

---

<sup>27</sup> Rene Descartes reached this conclusion in the book that was published in French in 1637 and translated as *Discourse on Method*.

<sup>28</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (London: Verso, 1993), 3.

woman during an orgy, 'What are you doing after the orgy?' There is always the hope of a new seduction.<sup>29</sup>

### **Readjusting reality**

When encountering Elin Hedberg's metal and wooden works, we as viewers are 'seduced' into engaging physically with the objects. For the exhibition *Readjustment* (2015), she built a shelf structure in the middle of a small room and placed various wooden and metal objects on the shelves.<sup>30</sup> The works were inviting, shaped as vessels or vases, but with no actual function. They seemed to want to be lifted and held as much as looked at. Both the shelving and the objects seemed familiar and strange at the same time; the presentation and the domestic shapes triggered a desire to want to touch the objects, to sense their weight and feel their surface qualities. When experiencing *Readjustment*, our physical engagement was *as* important as viewing the objects, maybe even more so. Oftentimes we were surprised: what appeared to be a vase would not have an opening, what seemed light in weight would in fact be heavy. Structures in the wood and metal also underscored the sensory experience. It could be said about Hedberg's exhibition that she engaged with the vase as a leitmotif, but it was more than that: Hedberg did not create the sculptures primarily in order to depict the vase as an art historical subject. Her works in the exhibition focused more on the user and the user's experience of being in direct contact with the works.

Thinking about Hedberg's works in the context of art theory, I am reminded of the French curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud and his concepts of *relational art* and *relational aesthetics*.<sup>31</sup> Put simply, relational art focuses on human relationships and their social contexts, on establishing relationships more than on making works of art in a traditional sense (as autonomous works to be viewed from a distance). Relational aesthetics points to a way of judging artworks based on the inter-human relations they represent, produce or prompt. However, Hedberg's art draws as much on the specific tradition of metalworking

---

<sup>29</sup> Sylvere Lotringer (ed.), Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays* (New York: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2005), 98-110.

<sup>30</sup> Early works by Elin Hedberg can be found at her website, among them, the exhibition *Readjustment* (2015), which was her master's degree show that same year. It was on account of *Readjustment* that she received the 'Master Student Award' from the Norwegian Association for Arts and Crafts. <http://elinhedberg.se> (visited 20 November 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Reel, 2002).

(silversmithing and hollowware) and the history of the beholder, not to mention the relationship established by objects (human and non-human) when a function comes into play, as on Bourriaud's key concepts. Her works are not exactly functional, but they do relate to shapes and materials we recognize from functional objects. They awaken something in our body and in our hands, something not grounded primarily in our intellect. In fact, the way Hedberg goes about it differs greatly from the approach by contemporary art-theory star Bourriaud, who still in some respects – even though challenging the concept of autonomous art – thinks within the tradition of Kant. Bourriaud comes to relationality in the wake of Kant, seemingly not realizing that relationships always have been part of aesthetic experience, even if not so much in the segment of modern and contemporary art.

### **Actor-network-theory**

These works of Hedberg are not autonomous objects or representations in a Kantian sense, but must be understood in a materialistic way, as evoking immediate reactions located in the body of the viewer. Hedberg's works are all about a material experience, thus challenging the Kantian hierarchy between subject and object. In fact, they make me think of the actor-network-theory conceptualized by French sociologist Bruno Latour.<sup>32</sup>

Opposing the modernist philosophy of Kant and the relativist philosophy of his contemporary countrymen,<sup>33</sup> Latour says that reality consists of *actors* or *actants*. In this reality, non-human objects have ontological status equal to that of human objects. In other words, Latour theorizes the erasure of the divide between humans and the world, and the supposed hierarchy between the human subject and the object. His book *Reassembling the Social – An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (2005) discusses the role of objects:

Much like sex during the Victorian period, objects are nowhere to be said and everywhere to be felt.

They exist, naturally, but they are never given a thought, a social thought. Like humble servants, they

---

<sup>32</sup> There are several authors writing within actor-network-theory, which Michel Callon, Bruno Latour and John Law are the most known. In this paragraph I build my arguments on Bruno Latour, most notably his book *Reassembling the Social – An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009).

<sup>33</sup> 'French philosophy', writes Graham Harman, in his book *Prince of Networks*, 'was merely a collective nickname in the Anglophone mind for Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida' (p. 12).

live on the margins of the social doing most of the work but never allowed to be represented as such.<sup>34</sup>

Objects set us in motion, activate or passivate us at will and define our movements and bodily actions. This they do through their assembled qualities, be they functional, material, spatial, moral and so forth. They instruct other object (in this case people) to act in a certain way. It is worth holding this in mind while reflecting on Hedberg's works, for they highlight the relationship between people and objects. The social life of her objects comes to the fore, and we as viewers become bodily aware of their qualities.

As I mentioned in the introduction, using an imaginary bowl as my example, objects don't just come out of nowhere – in Latourian terminology, they belong to ongoing *networks of events*. As such, the event of a work by Hedberg entering into a relationship with a human actor is preceded by many events, of which the making and exhibiting of the work obviously is included. Where, when and how a work is presented is important to our analysis, because if these aspects were not in place, we as human actors would engage with the work under different circumstances, or not at all. If we were to trace some of the actors who have entered into the networks that made this event come into being, we could start with the work of art and trace it back through the process of making – the work carries, in this respect, a story of its 'birth' and 'life' – and all the things that must be in place for this specific object to come into being. Obviously, material, tools, workshop, skills and a maker must be in place, but for all the various preconditioning actors, there are any number of other actors, events and networks that are engaged. The specific material comes from somewhere, the tools have been made by someone, the workshop was built, and so forth. It would be impossible to trace all these networks, but they are all crucial for the work's existence. The same is true for the human actors who view the work: we also belong to endless networks of human and non-human actors. It therefore seems warranted to say that the actor-network-theory not only challenges the notion of the autonomous object, it challenges the romantic notion of the genius artist (which still is very much alive today) and the post-Kantian idea of the human being as hierarchically superior to non-human actors. Latour's idea of the human actor as on the same footing as any other objects (human or non-

---

<sup>34</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 73.

human, natural or artificial) is fully *post-human*, a term often used about object-oriented ontology, which we will turn to shortly. But before doing so, let's look at a case of how 'autonomous objects' exist in a network.

### **Networks and autonomous objects**

**For Heidi Bjørgan, exhibitions are composed of relationships between objects as much as by objects as autonomous beings or works of art. Bjørgan has established herself as both a noteworthy ceramist and a curator. By blending her artistic practice with curating, she erases the opposition between production (making) and distribution (showing). Most notably, when she made the exhibition *The Story of an Affair* at Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum in 2016 – an exhibition in which she as maker and curator entered into dialogue with the museum's collection – the blurring between her own works, the works of the collection and the exhibition design rendered the exhibition itself as the object of experience.<sup>35</sup> Through the numerous relations established in this exhibition – between the different objects, between contemporary objects and historical objects, and between the objects and their surroundings (the immediate space, but also the museum and the town of Trondheim where the museum is located) – the exhibition became a multi-layered and almost holistic experience. In her making and curating, Bjørgan also explores and comments on traditions of displaying works of craft in exhibitions. Drawing on ideas from film and scenography, she turns the objects into actors in both a theatrical sense and in a Latourian sense as discussed above. Several interesting networks can be traced from this exhibition. One readily traceable connection is to Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum: as a specific object, physically, as a building of a certain size and made from certain materials, and as a carrier of many stories, for instance, those telling about discursive art exhibitions from which the art scene in Trondheim may have benefitted, and all the events leading to the specific works that have been acquired for the museum's collection. At some point in time, the history of the museum is entangled with the biography of the curator-maker Heidi Børgan. This may even be one reason why**

---

<sup>35</sup> For more information on Heidi Bjørgan's exhibition in Trondheim, see Jorunn Veiteberg, 'A Baroque Fairytale of an Exhibition', at *NorwegianCrafts.no*: <http://www.norwegiancrafts.no/articles/a-baroque-fairytale-of-an-exhibition> (visited 30 November 2017).

**Bjørgan decided to become a maker and a curator. As we have seen, all objects serve actively in events that shape the world, and these networks of events are tremendous. Some events may be brief encounters while other may extend across generations, and that which constitutes an object – or actor, which is Latour’s preferred term – are the relations in which it participates. Some encounters between Bjørgan and Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum were reassembled and reactivated in the exhibition, as she returned to objects that mean a lot to her and inspired her in her youth.**

As I mention in the introduction, the philosopher Graham Harman is very fond of Latour and has related his own critique of philosophers such as Kant and Heidegger to Latour’s actor-network-theory. In *The Prince of Networks – Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*,<sup>36</sup> Harman analyses what he sees as Latour’s contribution to philosophy. In fact, he characterizes Latour as ‘a pioneer of object-oriented philosophy’.<sup>37</sup> In Harman’s terminology, this is a branch of philosophy that treats objects as deserving the same sort of philosophical investigation as do human beings. As the attentive reader may have noticed, we have now moved away from sociology – Baudrillard and Latour both have backgrounds in sociology – to philosophy. Harman studies Latour’s writings and discusses what kind of philosophy they present to readers. He concludes that Latour’s philosophy belongs to metaphysics because it deals with fundamental questions about being, existence and reality. Latour’s world, as we have seen, is made up of actors and actants:

Atoms and molecules are actants, as are children, raindrops, bullet trains, politicians, and numerals. All entities are on exactly the same ontological footing.<sup>38</sup>

But, says Harman (after having gone thoroughly through Latour’s development of key concepts in the actor-network-theory), ‘we find little discussion of relations between inanimate entities when people are nowhere on the scene’.<sup>39</sup> Harman concludes, first, that Latour ultimately discusses objects from the perspective of the relation to or the influence they have on a human actor, and, second, that for Latour, objects are defined by

---

<sup>36</sup> Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

relationships more than by having an autonomous reality. This latter point is crucial to Harman's critique of Latour.

### **Object-oriented ontology**

In the book *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*,<sup>40</sup> which Harman has co-edited, you can read that 'the new breed of thinker is turning once more toward reality itself'. While these thinkers may have very different approaches, one common trait is that they 'have begun speculating once more about the nature of reality independently of thought and of humanity more generally'.<sup>41</sup> What the speculative realists turn away from are thinkers like Jean Baudrillard, mentioned above, and other French philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. While their textual and social critique has been valuable, there is a need to go beyond the human perspective and social structure in order to address reality. And as an alternative method for doing critical analysis, the new thinkers offer the methodology of speculation, which they describe as a kind of *pre-critical* approach.<sup>42</sup> This is understood as the kind of philosophical thought that existed before Kant's Critiques – maybe we could explain it as a way of thinking that is more closely associated with a pre-modern way of thinking than that of Derrida, Foucault and Baudrillard. The dualism (subject-object, culture-nature, etc.) of modern philosophy is seen as a 'detour philosophy', and it is in this sense that Latour has claimed that *we have never been modern*.<sup>43</sup>

For Harman, Latour is an important thinker in this turn towards reality, but Harman looks differently at what objects are. In one of his most substantial books, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*,<sup>44</sup> he defines objects through *use*. He explains that objects – *tool-beings* as he calls them – are constantly being used, even when we are unaware of it.

---

<sup>40</sup> Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Chicago: Harvard University Press, 1993). In Latour's book, he explores how a certain concept of dualism, which conceives of the humanities and science as fully autonomous fields and as antithetical to each other, has been defining for the concept of modernity. He states that this dualism – and thus the fundament of modernism – is a misconception of reality.

<sup>44</sup> Graham Harman, *Tool-Being, Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002).

This he derives from Heidegger's tool-analysis in *Being and Time*.<sup>45</sup> I don't have the space to elaborate on Heidegger's view on tools here; suffice it to say that according to Heidegger, we humans use tools in a kind of automatic way, unless they break. When that happens, we become conscious of their existence, and our own. In this way, tools exist *for* humans.

Harman agrees with this view of tools, but he differs from Heidegger when he claims that human objects are not the only ones to use inanimate or non-human objects. Such objects also use each other, and they use humans. All objects are *tool-beings* that constantly use each other, he says, and they are therefore similar to Latour's actors in the way they enter into relationships and networks with each other. But Harman also points out that objects have a sort of substance and autonomy. Objects are agents with a biography, ontology and relationships to other objects – their existence is defined by their *tool-being* – they are *tools* (in the Heideggerian sense) and *beings* or autonomous entities of sorts.

In Harman's view, objects shape each other regardless of any human presence; they have relationships with each other that are inaccessible to humans. We can only speculate or imagine these relationships. Take for instance the relation between a vase and the plinth it rests upon in Bjørgan's exhibition, between the plinth and the floor at Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum, between the nails that hold the plinth together, and so forth. These relationships are most real, but we humans have no direct access to them. Still, they play roles in shaping the world.

## **Conclusion**

The three artists – or makers of contemporary crafts – whom I have discussed here all manifest in various ways the social life of objects. I chose them because their artistic practices help elucidate the thoughts presented by Baudrillard, Latour and Harman.

---

<sup>45</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany, NY: State University of New York). (Published in German as *Sein und Zeit*, 1927.)



In the case of Yuka Oyama, her objects become co-actors on a stage where psychodrama is played out. With her primary media of performance and filmed performance, the agency of objects is set in motion through a psychological framing. Relationships between actors seem to fluctuate, yet at the same time, the objects represent a sort of stability for Oyama (as she explains in her thesis). The objects she chooses to enlarge and to 'devour' the human actors are highly consequential for her project. But the objects exceed her intentions and live lives of their own. Through use, they become animated and thus shed light on their dual meaning: they are actors in their own right, but also carriers of Oyama's projected intentions.

In the case of Elin Hedberg, her objects are seemingly autonomous works of art meant to be viewed from a distance, but when entering the exhibition space, we as viewers are drawn to them (as is often the case for many people in art museums – only we have been taught not to touch the works). The objects reach out to us through their material, form and appearance. Resembling functional objects with vessel shapes, the objects – be they wood or metal – invite us to enter into a particular relationship. This is relational art that does not limit itself to establishing relationships between human actors – as Bourriaud's definition of relational aesthetics indicates – for it establishes relationships between all actors (in a Latourian sense), whether human or not. As actors, we are invited to reflect on the networks that we and the work of art are engaging in, and we enter into a relationship with the work both physically and emotionally.

In the case of Heidi Bjørgan, the objects are set in an environment that emphasizes the relationships established between the objects themselves. At the same time as this is happening, the objects, which demand an autonomous space, also establish numerous networks linking them to historical events, people, institutions, geological events, and so forth. We can use Bjørgan's exhibition as a metaphor: the works enter into relationships with each other, both physically and emotionally, but they also have their individual and autonomous space and agency. In our context, it may seem futile to speculate over the hidden life of these objects, the relations we cannot access, but it is still important to acknowledge the complexity of objects. This complexity extends beyond the maker's control and intention, and beyond mere materiality, function and concept. All objects shape the

world we inhabit, and works of contemporary craft function as specific kinds of objects that embody and shape the material world as well as the emotional world of human objects.

What I have tried to argue for here by referring to Latour and Harman's understanding of objects is that what differentiates contemporary crafts from design and/or art is that crafts seek to engage the viewer bodily, with the object at hand, through use or the reference to use, but that they also engage with the history of the discipline and address the relationship between the human body, the object and the social sphere. Through addressing that relationship, a work of craft also engages in reflection and critical thinking about the social sphere. Put differently, crafts have the potential to offer a bodily experience of the relationship between the human actant, the non-human actant and the social context, as well as asking the viewer (in lieu of a better word) to engage critically and conceptually in the same relationship. As I stated at the beginning of this essay, my aim is not to offer a new definition of crafts – I am completely happy with Bruce Metcalf's definition (which is more detailed than presented here) – but I have dug into the aspect of use to see if it is possible to locate an even broader meaning of it if we add thoughts from Latour and Harman to the discussion. And as we have seen, the concept of *use* is essential to the way Harman understands the object or tool-being. The object is both a tool to be used, and an autonomous agent.