
RESEARCH ESSAY

No *More* and *Less*: The Withdrawal of Speculation

James Charlton

Auckland University of Technology, NZ

james.charlton@aut.ac.nz

In the ten years since the seminal workshop on Speculative Realism at Goldsmiths College (Bassier), speculation has become the new noumenon of the art world: Promising the final fulfilment of the avant-garde dream that would finally emancipate the art object from indexicality, the speculative has held an irresistible appeal for artists (Beech, 1–2). As leader of the pack, Graham Harman’s Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) has become the champion of the cause. Yet, after all this speculation around realism, we seem to have got no closer to the real object of art than we ever where: OOO and its speculative variants, have left artists standing in the studio with nothing but a handful of sensual qualities that, as a symptom of transcendental withdrawal, are of little practical use. Speculation it seems has failed the facticity of practice and threatens to reduce art to little more than an indirect aesthetics. Anticipating the release of Harman’s *Art and Object* in mid 2019, this paper attempts to head off any speculative Greenbergian revitalisation by considering the implications of Tristan Garcia’s intensity with regard to the facticity of practice (Garcia, 2018). Central to Garcia’s ontology, intensity – the difference between what a thing is and what it is not – is seen to resist speculative naivety while informing practice’s need for certitude. Thus, unlike the speculative withdrawal of indirect aesthetic, aesthetics of intensity withhold nothing, and emerge in art practice as the tension between thought and action. Bassier, Ray, et al. “Speculative Realism.” *Collapse*, III, 2007, pp. 306–433. Beech, Amanda, et al. *Speculative Aesthetics*. Urbanomic, 2014. Garcia, Tristan. *Life Intense: A Modern Obsession*. Edinburgh University Press, 2018. Harman, Graham. “Aesthetics and the Tension in Objects.” [Met]Afourism, Midsea Books Ltd, 2018, pp. 11–19. Harman, Graham. *The Quadruple Object*. Zero Books, 2011a. Harman, Graham. “The Road to Objects.” *Continent*, vol. 1.3, 2011b, 171–179. Harman, Graham. *Art and Object*. Polity Press, 2019.

Drawn by their elongated proboscises to the perfumes of the exotic flora populating the *Jardín Botánico*, Buenos Aires, the silver cloaked figures of Eduardo Navarro’s *Polenphonia*, 2018, settle for a while. As if channeling the scent as a musical score, the haunting fragrance of flutes played by the performers flutters by in search of an elusive, ontologically levelled terrain. Following his previous attempts to channel the Pinta Island tortoise (*Timeless Alex*, 2015), collaborate with clouds (*Instruction from the Sky*, 2016) and metaphysically commune with horses (*Horses Don’t Lie*, 2013), *Polenphonia* seems to herald Navarro’s emergence as a key figure in practices concerned with the production of art “that lies outside our own species-centric definition of consciousness” (Kerr, 2016).

Thus, much as artists Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanija can be seen, following Nicolas Bourriaud, to be inextricably associated with Relational Aesthetics, Navarro seems destined to be linked to the speculative proposition of Object Oriented Ontology (OOO). Promising a fulfilment of the avant-garde dream that will finally emancipate the art object from the indexicality of the artist, OOO – Graham Harman’s version of a number of non-correlational ontologies that emerged following the 2008 Speculative Realisms workshop at Goldsmiths College – has come to capture “the imagination of artists and critics” and “dominate the art-world conversation” (Cole 2015).¹ As the new noumenon of the art world, OOO seems – like the scent of a flower – to hold an irresistible appeal for artists (Beech, p. 1–2).

¹ Since ascending the ladder of ArtReview’s *Power 100* list of the most influential figures in the international art world in 2013 (ArtReview, 2019), the immediate fervour around Harman’s work may appear to have plateaued. However, now metabolised by an art discourse with an appetite for philosophical nourishment, there is sustained interest in his work, as evidenced by the steady rise in his Google Scholar citations that have increased tenfold since 2013 (Google Scholar, 2019).



Eduardo Navarro, *Polenphonia*, 2018.

Yet the more exhibitions such as *OOO: Object Oriented Ontology* (2017–18) begin to mainstream Speculative Realist terms like *correlationism* and *hyper-object*, the more Harman's ontology is conflated with other terms, terms reflective of a broader gestalt concerned with rethinking relations between humans and the world.² In fact *OOO* is no more concerned with the Anthropocene than it is with the internet-of-things.³ Pressed into the service of other agendas – as it is by Ben Eastham's appraisal of the *OOO* exhibition as an example of “why ‘things’ are back in vogue in the art world” again (Eastham, 2018) – such exhibitions are superficially emboldened by missappropriated onto-metaphysical arguments. Harman never intended *The Road to Objects* (2011) be paved with material ‘things’ alone, as ontology is fundamentally a metaphysical question.⁴

Any informed consideration of an Object Oriented Art-Object should then take into consideration the metaphysical question of how to engage in an artistic practice beyond human activity. While *Polenphonia*, as an art-object, *may* provide us with an evocative poetic image through which to contemplate the possibility of non-human existence, to snowclone Quentin Meillassoux, *the idea of art can only ever provide us with access to the correlation between artist and artwork, and never to either considered apart from the other.*⁵ Art-marking is thus necessarily correlational. Hermeneutically isolated from the ontological possibility of a non-correlational *practice* through the indexicality of the ‘image’, Speculative Realism seems destined to play itself out in art as ‘naïve realism’ – the speculative proposition of art-making, unmediated by human activity, “that is simply ‘out there’ and apart from us” (Shaviro, 2014, p. 66).⁶

Perhaps one reason for the popularity of *OOO* among a multitude of other speculative propositions⁷ is the succinctness and clarity with which Harman conveys complex philosophical issues to an audience not

² To be fair, though his lecture tours and blog posts Harman's is himself complicit in the popularization of *OOO*.

³ The Anthropocene being concerned with human impact on the environment and the internet-of-things being concerned with network enabled technologies do not inherently address onto-epistemic concerns such as we find in *OOO* regarding access to the *thing-in-itself*.

⁴ “The exact meaning of ‘object’ [...] must include those entities that are neither physical nor even real” (Harman, 2011a, p.5).

⁵ With reference to Meillassoux's statement that “We only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (Meillassoux, p. 5).

⁶ In Philosophy, Naïve Realism is the belief that reality is directly *accessible* to us. But as Shaviro points out, Speculative Realism does not make a case for this. Instead, he says, it argues that “the world in itself – the world as it exists apart from us – cannot in any way be contained or constrained by the question of our *access* to it” (Shaviro, 2011, p. 65). Thus the point made here is that artists seeking a practice beyond human implicitly assume accessibility and as such can be considered to be *naïve* in the realist sense.

⁷ The term Speculative Realism does not represent a school of philosophical thinking *pre se*. Rather it should be seen as a loosely affiliated group “united by their rejection of correlationism” (Harman, 2018, p. 4). *OOO* is but one variant focused on here because of the traction gained by it within artistic communities.

steeped in the philosophical tradition. The object in OOO is oriented towards an ontology derived from the Heideggerian fourfold,⁸ its quadruple structure facilitating a *withdrawal* of the *Real Object* in much the same way that the ‘real’ hammer withdraws from the hand in Heideggerian *zuhandenheit*, or readiness-to-hand (Harman, 2011 & 2002; Heidegger, 1962, p. 103).

It is neither possible nor necessary to expand on Harman’s arguments in depth here, both because as a prolific author, lecturer and blogger Harman is an exemplar at disseminating his own ideas,⁹ but also because other researchers such as Steven Shaviro have done much to expand on Harman’s work.¹⁰ However, for readers not familiar with OOO a concise outline of what Harman calls a *New Theory of Everything*, maybe helpful (2018b): Objects are everything, because any ‘thing’ can be an object, including non-living, artificial, or imaginary objects like unicorns. However, our knowledge of such objects is finite “since the things-in-themselves can be thought but never known” (Harman, 2011b). In line with other Speculative Realist philosophies that reject the notion that objects are *simply* a correlate of your ability to think them, the OOO world is made up of entities that are only ever accessible through their *sensual qualities* the *real-object* – the *thing-in-itself* – withdraws from us. OOO *Objects* are thus *Oriented* to themselves rather than to humans, and are said to operate within a flat *Ontology*¹¹ that refuses to either reduce them to a list of parts or make them accountable to the sum of their relations.

The promise that OOO holds for the emancipation of the art object from human endeavours is no doubt that such flattened ontological fields resonate with practices committed to validating “ostensibly non-artistic phenomenon” as artworks (Harman, 2014). Or even those seeking art forms “uncontaminated by needless entanglement with humans and their conceptual stunts and whims” (Harman, 2018b). Naively perhaps, the final solution to the avant-garde tradition is to liberate art from humans. Regardless of the reason for the art worlds fascination with OOO, Harman himself has remained relatively quiet on the subject of art.¹² It is only with the immanent release of *Art and Objects* in August 2019, that Harman – following Heidegger – seems ready to address *questions concerning art* in any depth.¹³

However, unless the upcoming publication deviates significantly from the stance taken in the catalogue essays, lectures and papers published to date, it is possible to anticipate the essence of Harman’s argument regarding aesthetics. Unsurprisingly perhaps, Harman – who is not one to eschew controversy – is, according to promotional material, set to undertake a rereading of aesthetic theory that will encourage us to view art history in a different way (Harman, 2018c). The motivation to do this stems from the withdrawn nature of the *Real Object* in OOO. As indicated previously, Harman’s *Real Object* – what we might think of as the irreducible *thing-in-itself* – is never available to us. Rather, extending the Husserlian phenomenological tradition,¹⁴ Harman’s *Real Object* recedes so that we only ever have access to its *sensual qualities*.

Thus, with the smoothest of ontological slight-of-hand, Harman inverts Clement Greenberg’s emphasis on the primacy of the ground, to ‘avenge the surface’ and reassert the significance of content (Harman, 2013). The deftness of the trick here, however, is that Harman is not advocating a return to the surface content of ‘academic art’.¹⁵ Rather, he is asserting the interdependence of content and form: “[H]owever important being, the medium, or the flat canvas may be, they need the help of a visible plane in order to achieve anything” (Harman, 2013, p. 73). While joining Greenberg in the celebration of background form, Harman also emphasizes that without content, form is “utterly sterile, [and] incapable of generating anything new

⁸ Itself indebted to that of Husserl and Leibniz (Harman, 2011a).

⁹ As Grant Hamilton notes “Harman is one of the most discussed contemporary writers and thinkers today”. And his “ideas are now frequently discussed by literary critics, by architects, and fine artists”...“Since 2009, [Graham] Harman has published at least one book a year. (Harman, 2019).

¹⁰ For those unfamiliar with Harman’s work *The Quadruple Object* (2011) will be essential reading while those looking for a broader understanding of Speculative Realism may wish to consider Harman recent *Speculative Realism: an Introduction*, (2018).

¹¹ Levi Bryant provides a concise interpretation of Manuel DeLanda original use of the term in the context of Speculative Realism (Bryant, 2010).

¹² Of the many lectures Harman has given to art audiences only a few directly address the question of the art object. Similarly, compared to the total volume of his written output only a few papers such as *The Revenge of the Surface: Heidegger, McLuhan, Greenberg* (2011), Greenberg, Duchamp, and the Next Avant-Garde (2014), *Materialism is Not the Solution* (2014), “Aesthetics and the Tension in Objects.” (2018), focus art. Despite this Harman positions OOO as a philosophy that “has more to do with the arts than the sciences” (2018b).

¹³ Although inference is made here to *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger’s primary text on art is of course *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1977 and 2006).

¹⁴ Harman’s point of departure from Husserl is the rift Husserl creates “between intentional objects and the various intentional qualities” that “cuts of the real world” (Harman, 2011). In this Husserl opens the way to Harman’s *Real* and *Sensual Objects*.

¹⁵ See “Modernist Painting” (Greenberg, 1993).

(Harman, 2014, p. 262). The resulting McLuhanesque¹⁶ ‘manifold holism’, in which form and content influence each other “only through the mediation of the phenomenal world”, enables Harman to establish an aesthetic framework that is consistent with OOO: An *indirect aesthetic*,¹⁷ in which content equates to *Sensual Objects* and form to always withdrawn *Real Objects* (Harman, 2013, p. 73).¹⁸

Inevitably, I have greatly simplified matters here. However, my aim is not to summarise what we know of Harman’s position – it will be revealed to us in full soon enough in any case. Rather, approaching OOO from a position of art practice, I want to ask how the practice of an *indirect aesthetic* such as Harman’s might avoid the hollow gestures and traps of ‘naïve realism’ of the sort mentioned at the outset. The aim, then, is not to refute philosophy; more, perhaps, to abandon naïve speculations about it in art practice.¹⁹

Motivated by my own artistic research practice to engage with non-correlational concerns pertaining to digital ontology, the question of how to transcend the indexicality of the artist has drawn heavily on Heideggerian onto-epistemology. However, while sharing this debt with Harman, the methodological demands of artistic practice test the limits of academic research, highlighting the limitations of an *indirect aesthetic*. Such an aesthetic reflects the philosophical methods by which it is conceived – methods, that because of the ‘withdrawal of objects’, are necessarily speculative.

At the risk of opening up the question of *Speculative Philosophy*²⁰ which clearly sits beyond the scope of this paper, the inherent limitation of speculative methods is that its correlational nature defines a meta-physical distinction between act and form, committing it to an interpretive function that necessarily holds objects at a distance, to the extent that their form is never truly available. In this sense, speculation is opposed to practice which is committed to the form of action rather than the content of ideas.²¹ In the case of a work like *Polenphonia* then, it is, perhaps, methodological demands that render the speculative endeavour of non-correlationism naïve in the hands of practice. To put it another way, an *indirect aesthetic* – one that allows only access to content and never to form itself – is of little practical use.²²

Of course, the aesthetic split between form and content that OOO imposes is not as absolute as I am making it appear.²³ In fact, with regard to the manifoldness of McLuhan’s *tetrad*,²⁴ Harman seems closer to Alfred North Whitehead than he does to Kant.²⁵ So, it is hard to see how Harman can be so dismissive of Whitehead’s ‘radical relationalism’, and yet accepting of McLuhan’s morphology (Harman, 2009 & McLuhan, p. 228). Stephen Shaviro clarifies the cause of this by pointing out that although Harman is indebted to Whitehead²⁶ in his opposition to “philosophies of the potential”, he tends to focus “on the atomistic or discrete side of Whitehead’s ontology” but is not “sufficiently attentive to the dual-aspect nature of” it (pp. 37; 34–35). By this, Shaviro means the process by which “each actual occasion defines its own actual world from which it originates” (Whitehead, 1978, p. 210).²⁷ Causally *concretised*, Whitehead’s objects are both entities and processes and as such are responsible for their own private *satisfaction*, as much as their public demise. Their withdrawn form and their surface content are not divisible by the real and the sensual in the way Harman’s objects are.

¹⁶ Harman equates Marshal McLuhan treatment of the underlying form of media to Greenberg emphasis on the flatness of the modernist canvas (Harman, 2014).

¹⁷ I derive the term indirect aesthetic from Harman’s indirect causation: “Causation must be indirect or vicarious rather than direct and immediate.” (Harman, 2017). See also Chapter 5 “Indirect Causation”, *The Quadruple Object*, (Harman, 2014, pp. 69–81). Harman also makes this connection when discussing aesthetics in regard to vicarious causation in “The Revenge of the Surface: (Harman, 2013). Although not developed here *vicarious causation* seems to signal a *transcendental aesthetics* which – reminiscent of Immanuel Kant – is implied by the term *indirect aesthetic* and positions aesthetics as an *a priori* intuition.

¹⁸ We will forgo complex explanation of the mechanisms of allure between Real and Sensual Objects here and simply note that following Husserl and Heidegger, the Real Object is inherently withdrawn.

¹⁹ See Whitehead, *Process and Reality*: “A system of philosophy is never refuted, it is only abandoned” (1978, p. 6).

²⁰ Speculative Philosophy is “a system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted” (Whitehead, 1978, p. 4).

²¹ This is not to say that practice can’t be speculative but that in such cases speculation is sublimated by practice which remains ontologically committed to form.

²² With reference to Quentin Meillassoux’s definition of *correlation*: “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (p. 5).

²³ As noted earlier the fact that Harman allows for *phenomenal* interaction affords a degree of mediated unification (Harman, 2013).

²⁴ While the structural nature of Harman’s Quadruple Object and McLuhan’s *tetrad* schema appear to be similar and both entail a phenomenological revealing of unobserved qualities, it should be noted that the tetrad is “only applicable to human artefacts” and thus does not form a cohesive ontology per se (McLuhan, 127).

²⁵ Harman is quick to point out, nowhere “does McLuhan say that the entire world is a single, unified medium” (Harman, 2013, p. 73).

²⁶ See Harman (2009).

²⁷ Whitehead’s term for this is *concrecence*: “the process in which the universe of many things acquires an individual unity in a determined relegation of each item of ‘many’ to its subordination in the constitution of the novel ‘one’” (Whitehead, 1978, 211).

Following Whitehead then, *form*, rather than being something withdrawn and inaccessible, does not sit in opposition to content. As a process philosopher, Whitehead²⁸ employs an “economy of *self-enjoyment* and *concern*” (Shaviri, 20), that requires a *direct* practice rather than a *naïve* and *indirect* speculative aesthetic. Whitehead’s obscure prose style aside, *self-enjoyment* – the process of appropriation out of which individual form arises – and *concern* – the affective tone that is the essence of perception – form an aesthetic of abundance that enfolds private form and public content (Whitehead, 1986, pp. 50–52. 1967a, p176; 180). In practice then, *objects* do not withdraw into private ontic shells of their own pleasure as they do in *OOO*. Rather, they are abundant in the relationality of the world: the otherwise withdrawn forms of *self-enjoyment* are constantly emerging and perishing in the *concerns* of world.

The question for practice, then, is not “how to get something new and different from an impoverished list of already expressed properties” (Shaviri, p. 39). Rather, it is how to concretise something “from the ‘boundless wealth’ of possibilities that already exist” (Shaviri, p. 39). This seems to be the essence of how Whitehead understands the aesthetic ‘adventure’ of art: the practice of an *intensity* that finds *jouissance*²⁹ in attempting to concretise background form with surface content (1967, pp. 265–272).³⁰ As a mode of *prehension* – or uncognitive apprehension,³¹ – *intensity* is found in *any* “process of self-creation” by “which an entity grasps, registers the presence of, responds to, or is affected by another [concretised] entity” (Whitehead, 1967a, p. 25. Shaviri, p. 29). As such, the “intensity of sensitive experience stands out as an *ultimate claim of existence*” (Whitehead, 1978, p. 16 [my emphasis]). Although, as Judith Jones argues, *intensity* is a “decisive component” of Whitehead’s speculative ontology, “the relative absence of a detailed systematic study of ‘intensity’ [...] is a bit puzzling” (Jones, p. x; 9).³² However, in terms of practice, intensity functions as a primary consideration of causation: sitting at the *prehensive* intersection of form (order) and content (disorder), intensity is a practice through which actualities of coming-to-be are satisfied in terms of what they become (Jones, p. 21–22).

What is important to note here in pursuit of a non-correlational art practice, is that *prehension* does not assume a human subject, in that the subjective *aim* of *intensity* is of concern to all entities, not exclusively human. As Shaviri confirms, “for Whitehead, human perception and cognition have no special or privileged status” (Shaviri, p. 29). Thus, intensity is a practice common to all things and is not indexical to the human. Its method signals the potential of an art practice that avoids naïve responses to non-correlational speculations. However, the difficulty of maintaining intensity – of representing everything in terms of intensity – is that “intensity is lost to itself”. At the very moment in which we call something ‘*intense*’, “it is already less intense than is once was” (Garcia, 2018, p. 59).

In contrast to Navarro’s *Polenphonia*, I am reminded here of the *Electric Venus* – the eighteenth century parlour experiment of Georg Matthias Bose, re-enacted in 2009 by artist Arthur Elsenaar. In Elsenaar’s emancipated version, participants are invited to kiss an electrically charged subject. However, at the moment of highest intensity – “the *moment suprême*, a strong discharging spark would jump between their lips. In effect rendering the kiss into a *non-kiss* because the kiss would never really happen” (Elsenaar, 1993). Whereas in *Polenphonia* we have cause to inhale the aesthetic experience, dwelling on it and making it our own, in the *Electric Venus* the moment of *intensity* is fleeting, ejecting us at the pinnacle of desire so that “intensity is lost to itself” in *intensity* (Garcia, 2018, p. 59).

The *jouissance* of this electrifying moment is not lost on Tristan Garcia. Rather, *intensity*,³³ as it is presented in *The Life Intense*, is seen to play a key role in the metaphysics that Garcia originally set out in *Form and Object* (Garcia, 2018 & 2014). Indeed, Garcia traces a modern obsession with intensity using the metaphor of electricity,³⁴ to suggest that *intensity* has replaced aesthetics in contemporary culture: “...what do we find

²⁸ According to Harman’s use of the term we might add in here among others Bruno Latour, Henri Bergson, Giles Deleuze and Michael Serres (Harman, 2009, p. 6).

²⁹ Although aspects of Lacanian use of the term might apply in regard to later Poststructuralist developments, its use here is more aligned with the original French – translated as *enjoyment* – and hence to Whitehead’s *self-enjoyment* as it pertains to *concretion*.

³⁰ Whitehead is not assuming an ontologically correlational position here. Even Harman would entertain this despite his rejection of process philosophies (Harman, 2009). As a quality of *concretion*, *intensity* functions as a qualitative dimension of self-enjoyment and concern.

³¹ Whitehead’s defines *prehension* in this way: “I will use the word *prehension* for *uncognitive apprehension*: by this I mean *apprehension* which may or may not be cognitive” (1967b, 69). And, “Every *prehension* consists of three factors: (a) the ‘subject’ which is prehending, namely, the actual entity in which that *prehension* is a concrete element; (b) the ‘datum’ which is prehended; (c) the ‘subjective form’ which is *how* that subject prehends that datum” [Process and Reality, 1978, p. 35].

³² It should be noted here that although Deleuze draws on Whitehead, Whitehead’s intensity is not a question of magnitude.

³³ When in italics *intensity* indicates consistency with Garcia’s terminology.

³⁴ As the translators explain, the opening chapters of *The Life Intense* present a prehistory of electricity as the foundation of a modern life: *electrical lives* lived by *electric people* embodied in the archetypes of the libertine, bourgeois, romantic and adolescent rocker (RayAlexander et al. in Garcia, 2018).



Still from video: Arthur Elsenaar, *The Electric Kiss* re-enacted, 2009.

most beautiful? The thing which intensely fulfils its being” (Garcia, 2018, p. 8–9). Leaving aside questions of magnitude for sake of brevity,³⁵ *intensity* then seems to be even more significant for Garcia than it is for Whitehead. While *intensity* for Whitehead can be thought of as a process of *self-enjoyment* in which *prehension concretises* entities, for Garcia entities are fundamentally *intense* in themselves: “Intensity is nothing other than the principle of the systematic comparison of a thing to itself” (Garcia, 2018, p. 55 & 10). In this statement, the central question of *Form and Object* with regard to *intensity* becomes clear: what is a thing to itself? In response to this, at the outset of *Form and Object* Garcia enfolds *intensity* and *thingness*, stating that a “thing is nothing other than the difference between that which is in this thing and that in which this thing is”: *intensity* (Garcia, 2010, p. 13).

Of course, in the rebuttal of this statement is the point: given that a thing is the difference between itself and another thing – how is it possible that a thing comprehends itself when “a self-comprehending object would subtract itself from itself and be nothing”? (Cogburn & Ohm in Garcia, 2010, p. xiii). Forgoing any explanation of complex terminology, Garcia’s response is, of course, that it is in the very nature of this contradictory resistance that things are what they are. And, although he does not tell us this directly, this is what *intensity* is: the measure of resistance to a thing being itself; the strength of the electric shock that repels us in the kiss (Garcia, 2013, p. 23).

In contrast to Harman’s object oriented ontology, Garcia’s ontology is, then, one in which there is no *thing-in-itself* – no speculative withdrawn noumenon; only ever the irresistible struggle of a thing being both more and less what it is (not), *intensely*.³⁶ We seemingly have, then, two quite distinct speculative propositions: for Harman, *things-in-themselves* are withdrawn, inaccessible and in-themselves not for us; whereas for Garcia, the very notion of a thing-in-itself is meaningless.³⁷ Both appear to insist on an impractical speculative proposition in that, for Harman, *objects*, being withdrawn, are never truly knowable and so are speculative; while for Garcia, objects, being *intense*, don’t exist as things-in-themselves and thus can only be speculative in nature. The unknown and the non-existent are, it seems, irredeemably speculative and impractical.

Of course, these are complex and emergent metaphysical arguments – ones that, as stated earlier, we do not attempt to reconcile here. Rather, the question is which, if either, might best avoid the sort of

³⁵ Because, objects are never ‘compact’ in themselves, *intensity* serves as a quantitative measure of being. In this sense an object or thing “relates to itself as to *either more or less* itself, but never *equally* itself” (Garcia, 2013, p. 23).

³⁶ As Cogburn explains the apparent contradiction of something being both more and less what it is rest in the contingency of “no-matter-what” which is on discussed here briefly. (Cogburn, p. 97).

³⁷ Garcia comparative analysis of OOO and his ‘own system’ with which Harman in essence agrees, make it very clear that Harman’s use the term “object” and Garcia’s use of the term “thing” are synonymous with the Kantian *thing-in-itself*. (Garcia, 2017 & Harman, 2013).

naïve responses found in artworks such as *Polenphonia*, and support an artistic practice unmediated by human activity?

Despite the apparent allure of OOO, the withdrawal of the 'object' is seen to fail the facticity of practice, reducing it to little more than the speculative function of an *indirect* aesthetics. Practice in-itself can never truly be known if its *form* is withdrawn or indirect, and so the idea of art-making remains indexically committed to thought. On the other hand, following Garcia, if the very notion of a 'thing' is an ontological contradiction, then art as a *thing-in-itself* independent of practice, not only becomes a nonsense but also remains indexically committed to humans. Art practice, it seems, is inescapably human. All else is simply naïve speculation.

But this reading of Garcia rather overlooks the temporal aspect of *intensity* identified earlier in Whitehead's understanding of *self-enjoyment*. Constantly emerging and perishing in the *concerns* of the world, *things*, for Whitehead, fulfil themselves in much the same way that they do for Garcia. In the *intensity* of the struggle to separate form from content – in the resistance of a thing to being itself – things are constantly emerging and perishing in time. Time, rather than being a marker of discrete presence, itself becomes a variable *intensity*, marked by the level of a *thing's* resistance to being itself. Things that are present – *that are "more present: the maximum of possible presence, and not an absolute presence"*, are those that are the most *intense now* (Garcia, 2014, p. 7). There is nothing speculative about their intensity.

To say that things are constantly perishing, as Whitehead does, is not to say that they have stopped existing absolutely, but that they now fade in *intensity*. "The 'now' of the now is simply the one that is the most intense possible: the 'now' of yesterday is a past now because there are objectively more intense 'nows', more present than it" (Garcia, 2014, p. 12). If the question of presence is the question of more or less *intensity* then it is simply not a matter of conjecture. What is most *intense* is now, in practice – all speculation is withdrawn.

As an *intensive* value, practice is no more one thing's than another's. With varying *intensities*, practice depends equally on "that which it comprehends and that which comprehends it", and is a correlate of neither (Garcia, 2014, p. 11). *Intensity* depends on neither form nor content, but simply on being practiced, which is a condition, *no-matter-what*.³⁸

That *intensity* dissipates like the scent of a flower in the breeze is not a problem for practice, any more than it is for other 'things'. In fact, the struggle to make art – to make something that is itself and not something else – is the practice of being *intensely* now. In practice there is only now: maximum *intensity*. We might say, then, that art practice is the struggle with art's resistance to being itself. And that as such, art, which is at its most *intense* in practice, necessarily fades in *intensity*.³⁹ The challenge in making art, then, is not how to make "something new and different from an impoverished list of already expressed properties" (Shapiro, p. 39); rather, it is a question of how to let something be *intense, now*.⁴⁰

Holding fast to *things-in-themselves*, speculation attempts to lay claim to the spark of *intensity* as a thing for humans alone. Inevitably, form withdraws, moving away such that content of diminished *intensity* is naively promoted via an "indirect aesthetic" – one that, in practice, is of little use. The emancipation of art practice from human thought requires no more *and* no less than the withdrawal of speculation. Through such an 'aesthetic of *intensity*', art might be practised as an on-going resistance to being in itself – itself a correlate of human thought. In the end, speculation risks little as it is a contingent form – the exotic fragrance of a flower never seen, only ever thought. Risking everything, practice – the practice of 'aesthetic *intensity*' – puts *intensity* on the line, now, to finally release form from the contingency of speculation.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

³⁸ "Something comprehends no-matter what. This is quantificational; there exists at least one thing that comprehends no-matter what" (Cogburn, p. 97).

³⁹ Elsewhere I have qualified practice as being something practised by both artist and audience (Charlton, 2017).

⁴⁰ While any attempt to foreground specific art practices that operate in the zone of the intensely-now must sit beyond the scope of this paper, Garcia's examination of artistic practices as those which navigate between the potential of *no-matter-what* and the normative power of cultural form is consistent with the suspended potential of *moving-thinking-feeling* that Nathaniel Stern argues is embodied in interactive and 'potentialized' art, as exemplified in works by William Kentridge, Gordan Savičić (Stern, pp 26–29 & p. 208). Stern's contention that "embodiment is performed of the relation, and that interactive installations suspend, amplify and intervene in that relation", is also consistent with my own installation practice that frames the 'object' as a discrete *now* in the work-of-the-audience (Stern, p. 216).

References

- ArtReview.** 2019. "Power 100: Graham Harman." *Art Review*. artreview.com/power_100/graham_harman/.
- Bryant, L.** 24 Feb. 2010. "Flat Ontology." *Laval Subjects*. larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2010/02/24/flat-ontology-2/.
- Charlton, J.** 2017. *Catch|Bounce: Towards a relational ontology of the digital in art practice*. Plymouth, UK: University of Plymouth.
- Cogburn, J.** 2017. *Garcian Meditations*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Uni Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474415910.001.0001>
- Eastham, B.** 4 Aug. 2018. "OOO! The Return to Objects." *Elephant*. elephant.art/return-of-objects/.
- Elsenaar, A.** 1993. *The Electric Kiss Re-Enacted*.
- Elsenaar, A.** 2009. *The Electric Kiss Re-Enacted*.
- Garcia, T.** 2014. *Form and Object: a Treatise on Things*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Uni Press.
- Garcia, T.** 2018. *The Life Intense: a Modern Obsession*. Edinburgh Uni Press.
- Garcia, T** and **Ohm, M.** 2013. Crossing Ways of Thinking: On Graham Harman's System and My Own. *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy*, 16: 14–25.
- Garcia, T** and **Pender, K.** 2014. Another Order of Time: Towards A Variable Intensity of the Now. *Parrhesia*, 19: 1–13.
- Google Scholar.** 2019. "Graham Harman." *Google, Scholar*. scholar.google.com/citations?hl=en&user=G-grK7QAAAAJ&view_op=list_works&sortby=pubdate.
- Greenberg, C.** 1993. Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969. In: *Modernist Painting. The Collected Essays and Criticism*. University of Chicago, pp. 85–93.
- Harman, G.** 2009. *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*. Re.press.
- Harman, G.** 2011a. *The Quadruple Object*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books.
- Harman, G.** 2011b. The Road to Objects. *Continent* 1.3, 171–179.
- Harman, G.** 2013a. The Revenge of the Surface: Heidegger, McLuhan, Greenberg. *Paletten*, 291/292: 66–73.
- Harman, G.** 2013b. Tristan Garcia and the Thing-in-Itself. *Parrhesia*. 26–34.
- Harman, G.** 2014. Greenberg, Duchamp, and the Next Avant-Garde. *Speculations, Aesthetics in the 21st Century*, 251–274.
- Harman, G.** 2018b. *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*. Penguin. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.997>
- Harman, G.** 2019. Grant Hamilton discusses the provocative nature of objects with Graham Harman.
- Harman, G.** n.d. *Speculative Realism: an Introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Heidegger, M.** 2006. *The Origin of the Work of Art*.
- Heidegger, M** and **Lovitt, W.** 1977. *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. Quoria.
- Jones, J.** 1998. *Intensity: an Essay in Whiteheadian Ontology*. Vanderbilt University Press.
- Kerr, D.** 2016. What Is Object-Oriented Ontology? A Quick-and-Dirty Guide to the Philosophical Movement Sweeping the Art World. *Artspace, Phaidon Global*.
- McLuhan, M** and **McLuhan, E.** 1989. *Laws of Media: the New Science*. University of Toronto Press.
- Shaviro, S.** 2011. *Panpsychism And/Or Eliminativism. The Pinocchio Theory*.
- Shaviro, S.** 2014. *The Universe of Things: on Speculative Realism*. University of Minnesota Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816689248.001.0001>
- Stern, Nathaniel.** 2013. *Interactive Art and Embodiment: the Implicit Body as Performance*. Gylphi.
- Whitehead, AN.** 1967a. *Adventures of Ideas*. Free Press.
- Whitehead, AN.** 1967b. *Science and the Modern World*. Free Press.
- Whitehead, AN, Sherburne, D** and **Ray, D.** 1978. *Process and Reality: an Essay in Cosmology*. Griffin, Free Press.

How to cite this article: Charlton, J. 2019. No *More* and *Less*: The Withdrawal of Speculation. *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research*, 3(1): 4, pp. 1–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/mjfar.41>

Published: 18 July 2019

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

]u[*MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 