

What Is Object-Oriented Ontology? A Quick-and-Dirty Guide to the Philosophical Movement Sweeping the Art World

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Pierre Huyghe's *Zoodrama* (2010)

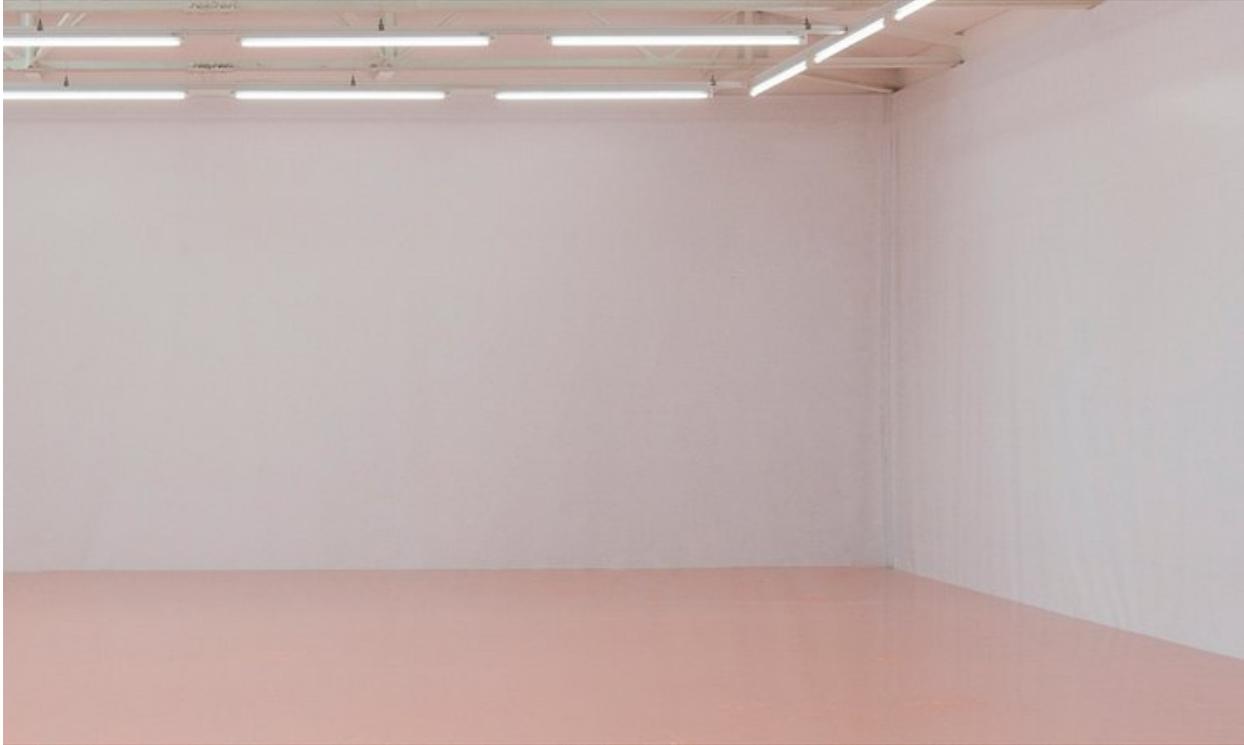
Ask yourself: what does your toaster want? How about your dog? Or the bacteria in your gut? What about the pixels on the screen you're reading off now—how is their day going? In other words, do things, animals, and other non-human entities experience their existence in a way that lies outside our own species-centric definition of consciousness? It's precisely this questions that the nascent philosophical movement known as **Object-Oriented Ontology** (arising from *ὄντος*, the Greek word

for "being," and known to the cool kids as **OOO**) is attempting to answer or at least seriously pose, and they're setting certain segments of the art world on fire.

On some level, this makes sense. Artists, after all, are people who spend their time investing objects with meaning, so the notion that the objects themselves may have something to say naturally strikes a chord—especially at a time when scientific developments are both giving us a better understanding of animal's minds and inching us closer to authentically intelligent machines. The fruits of this kind of thinking can be found everywhere these days, from when the Argentine artist [Eduardo Navarro](#) tried to turn himself into a turtle at last year's [New Museum Triennial](#), to [Pamela Rosenkranz](#)'s decision to fill the **Swiss Pavilion** of the [2015 Venice Biennale](#) with flesh-toned liquid and synthesized baby musk. The odds are, your local **Post-Internet** art exhibition might contain more than a hint of OOO.

For cutting-edge artists looking to lend their work some conceptual heft, Object-Oriented Ontology has become the faddish successor to such previous intellectual trends as structuralism and [postmodern theory](#). However, in an age of [rogue chatbots](#), [dreaming computers](#), and the [Internet of Things](#), not everybody is so enamored with the so-called "object turn." For those left scratching their heads at this philosophical proliferation, here's a quick and dirty guide to this novel movement.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO OOO



Pamela Rosenkranz's *Our Product* (2015) at the Venice Biennale

In short, OOO (and its intertwined companion Speculative Realism) is dedicated to exploring the reality, agency, and “private lives” of nonhuman (and nonliving) entities—all of which it considers “objects”—coupled with a rejection of anthropocentric ways of thinking about and acting in the world. One of the movement’s founders, American University in Cairo philosophy professor Graham Harman, defined these objects in [ArtReview](#) as “unified realities—physical or otherwise—that cannot be reduced either downwards to their pieces or upwards to their effects.”

With this understanding, any “thing” is an object, whether living, nonliving, artificial, or conceptual—an everything-plus-the-kitchen sink approach that gives rise to a near-comical overabundance of lists in OOO writings. In [his critical review of the philosophy in Artforum](#), the Princeton professor Andrew Cole somewhat mockingly describes the theory to encompass “aardvarks, baseball, and galaxies; or grilled

cheeses, commandos, and Lake Michigan.” For OOO, your skin cells are objects, and so are you, and so is the population of the nation you live in, and so is the very idea of a nation.

The crucial point here is that, in contrast to the dominant strains of 20th-century phenomenology that claim things are only real insofar as they are sensible to a human subject, OOO asserts a radical and imaginative realism that not only claims that things do exist beyond the purview of human conception, but that this existence ([defined by](#) Harman as “nothing other than [the] confrontation of an experiencing real object with a sensual one”) is almost entirely inaccessible to our understanding.

It's a brand of materialism that goes hand in hand with what you might call posthumanist egalitarianism, or panpsychism: none of the things you can name can be thought of as intrinsically less real, vital, or important than any other—an ecological viewpoint of existence that rejects any idea of human specialness as simple arrogance. As Harman [writes](#), “The world is not the world as manifest to humans; to think a reality beyond our thinking is not nonsense, but obligatory.”

This idea is closely linked to the OOO rejection of “correlationism,” or the habit we humans have of thinking about things only in terms of the effects they have on us. For OOO adherents, this is a tragically limited worldview that at best precludes our ability to imagine the multiverse of beings, and at worst leads directly to the wanton environmental degradation we witness today. The world according to OOO is one full of beings acting on one another according to their own goals and caprices, motivations that cannot be kenneled by others.

ART AS CHARISMA



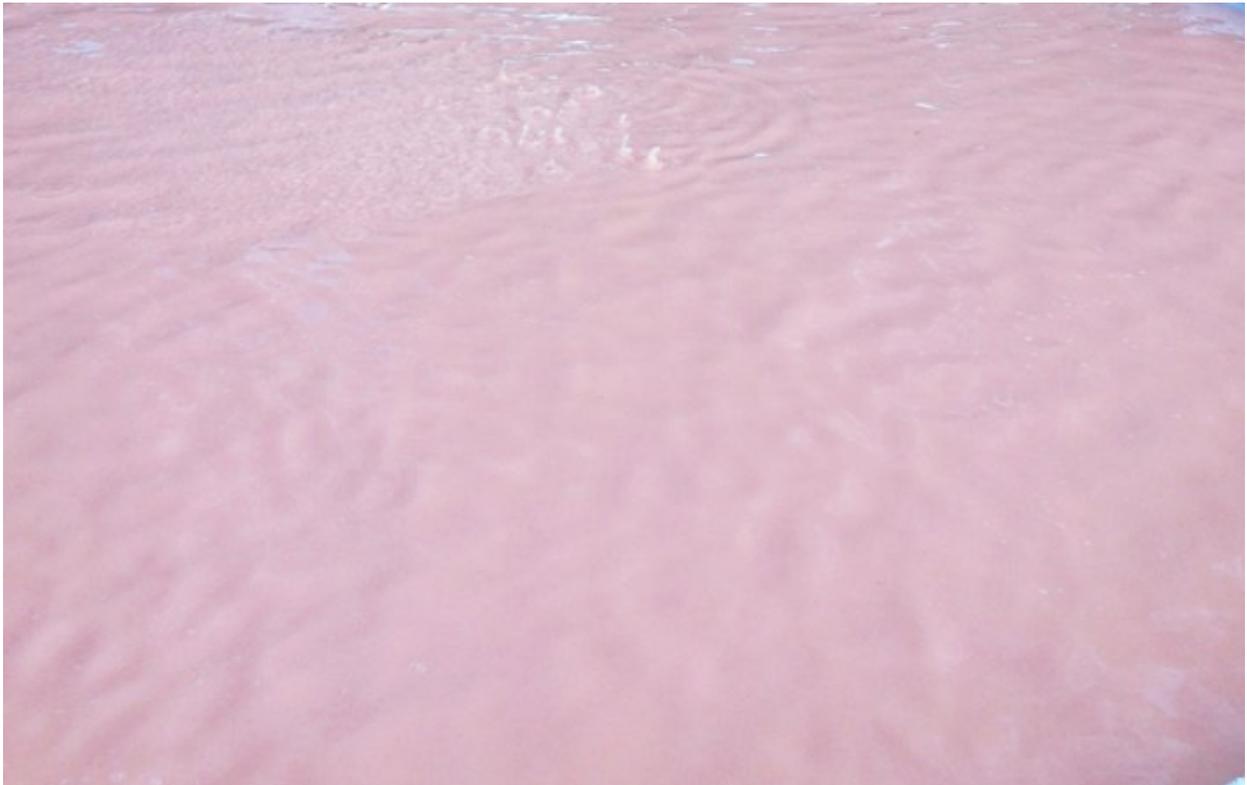
Eduardo Navarro's costume from *Timeless Alex* (2015)

OOO creates some interesting issues when it comes to thinking about art. The default stance of the art viewer looking to read an artwork in terms of its creator's intentions or psychology, or its place in the historical canon in relation to other works, or its specific materials and concepts, or any other traditional criteria would, to an OOO adherent, be little more than anthropocentric hubris. These modes of thought reduce the object to relations with human viewers, a classic OOO no-no.

Instead, [writes](#) Timothy Morton (who stands alongside Harmon as the best-known thinkers in the movement), "an artwork cannot be reduced to its parts or its materials, nor can it be reduced to its creator's life, nor to some other context, however defined ... Art is charisma, pouring out of anything whatsoever, whether we humans

consider it to be alive or sentient or not.” For Morton, the normative modes for thinking and talking about art ignore the agency (which he terms charisma) of the art object as well as its status as a thing that stands separate from (and equal to) all others. The charismatic pull he mentions is the art object acting on its viewers, a property he says all objects possess.

SPECULATIVE REALISM IN THE REAL (ART) WORLD: BABY SKIN



Pamela Rosenkranz's *Our Product* (2015)

In one way of thinking, any artwork from classical sculpture to the latest digital simulation can in some way be used as a proof of concept for this philosophy, insofar as there are no shortage of interpretations one can imagine for the object. That said,

however, the whole idea that artworks exist only insofar as they're available for human viewing and interpretation is entirely opposed to the posthuman perspective OOO promotes. As a result, OOO artworks tend to be more interested in pointing out how objects exist, act, and "live" beyond the realm of human perception, a paradox of sorts given the contrived nature of artworks.

The artist most often associated with these ideas is Pamela Rosenkranz, the young Swiss conceptualist known for her chemically infused performances and installations. Her work *Our Product* from the 2015 Venice Biennale is a typical example:

Rosenkranz covered the Swiss Pavilion's floor with a mixture of various substances (including silicone, Evian water, and Viagra, among others) to create a liquid imitating what the [press release](#) calls "a standardized northern European skin tone," the same color that the release says is utilized in contemporary advertising as "a proven way to physically enhance attention."

Combined with the computer-generated sounds of lapping water, an hormonally-enhanced green wall paint, and a smell that somehow mimicked the scent of a newborn baby, the pavilion became a subtle illustration of a central OOO idea—namely, that all objects (themselves made up of myriad other objects) exert their power over the objects around them, creating the push-pull relationship between viewer and artwork that Morton refers to as "charisma." Rosenkranz

herself [comments](#) of her work: "It seems to live, then again, my team and I try not to get it 'too' alive... an artwork develops its own kind of audience because of the independence it develops."

SPECULATIVE REALISM IN THE REAL (ART) WORLD: TRIPPY CRABS



Pierre Huyghe's *Zoodrama* (2010)

The recent work of [Pierre Huyghe](#) is also cited as exemplifying some of OOO thought, with a focus on more animate objects (read: animals) the theory engages with. In works like his *Zoodram* series, different species of invertebrates coexist in specially designed aquaria, while his free-roaming dog Human has been repeatedly employed for Huyghe's shows in settings from the Pompidou to LACMA. [It's hardly the first time live animals have been used as readymade actors in art](#), but Huyghe's presentation seems to highlight the fact that these "objects" exist in realms inaccessible to humans—the museum's doors close at night, but the crabs don't seem to care. As Huyghe himself has [said](#) of his tanks, "I am interested in the strange relationship and separation between the human and a world. They are not encountering each other."

What's more, by framing not just the crustaceans but the entire contents of the tank they inhabit as an artwork (the glass, the water, the bacteria, the excrement—these

litanies really are inescapable), Huyghe points to the compounded experiences of his materials, who are both acting on and being acted upon all the other objects in the tank (and beyond). To fully comprehend one of his *Zoodrams* you must take into account the entire list of components and their interactions, something human observers are generally unequipped to deal with.

SPECULATIVE REALISM IN THE REAL (ART) WORLD: ED THE TURTLE



Eduardo Navarro performing *Timeless Alex* at the New Museum Triennial (2015)

Eduardo Navarro works with similar ideas in the opposite direction in his 2015 performance piece *Timeless Alex* at the New Museum's "Surround Audience"

Triennial. The piece featured the artist crawling into an (artificial) turtle-skin suit and chicken-wire-frame carapace before meditating in an attempt to inhabit the consciousness of the reptile he imitates. Rather than invite viewers to speculate on the lives of other creatures, Navarro makes an avowedly good-faith attempt to enter those lives himself, slowing his breathing and crawling around on all fours to complete the autohypnosis.

His self-reported identification with his subject took him to strange realms; as he's said in [an interview](#), "When I was doing the performance [I felt] that it wasn't me trying to transform, but a turtle trying to become human." The highly personal nature of this experience points yet again to the private lives OOO asserts—whether Navarro really did enter the consciousness of a turtle remains up for debate.

SPECULATIVE REALISM IN THE REAL (ART) WORLD: HOT PECS



Niels

Betori Diehl's *THE HEAT / scene 2* (2003, bottom screen)

The Berlin-based artist Niels Betori Diehl takes a more abstract approach to the new philosophy in his video work *THE HEAT / scene 2* (2003), currently on view in Beijing's Intelligentsia Gallery's appropriately titled group show "[OOO.](#)" His work

illustrates just how fluid the OOO conception of an object can be: Betori Diehl filmed shirtless men on a hot day from his window in Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin, taking the phrase “object of desire” quite literally.

He’s interested in how the combination of their flesh and his (or the viewers) sexual and emotional proclivities combine to form a new object: desire itself. The close-ups of glistening pecs may call pornography to mind, but although there is a similar objectification of bodies going on, the subject of the works is really the new object (desire) created by the interaction of Betori Diehl’s embodied psyche with those of his unknowing subjects.

OOO OPPOSITION



Pierre Huyghe's *Zoodrama* (2010)

Any new theory or movement is bound to generate some pushback, and OOO is certainly no exception. Critiques from within the art world tend to skip over issues about the validity of these ontological claims—it's hard to disprove someone who argues that objects have hidden agency that is by its very nature beyond our comprehension—and instead focus on the more human, sociological issues that repeatedly rear their anthropocentric heads when talking about artworks.

Writing in [Artforum](#), the critic Ben Kafka is clear in establishing what he sees as the fundamental flaw of these systems of thought: “[OOO] almost sounds like a neat idea, until you pause to consider its ethical implications. ‘You’ may indeed get a kick out of comparing yourself to a speck of flea shit or a solar flare. But substitute ‘you’ for

pretty much anyone else on the planet and you begin to see how dehumanizing ‘posthumanism’ can be.”

J.J. Charlesworth agrees in a scathing opinion piece in [ArtReview](#), writing, “What speculative realism thinks of as its novel philosophical insights—that humans are no exception to things, that there should be no distinction between human and nonhuman ‘actants,’ and that the subject–object hierarchy in philosophy should be abolished—become the philosophical cheerleaders for a contemporary culture that denounces the idea that human beings can—even should—actively reshape the world in their own interests.” These quotations each tackle the same question: what does it mean for people (some of whom are suffering) when philosophers concern themselves with the travails of inanimate objects?

It's a heady question, and one that gets into issues of ethics. In the words of the critic Barbara Johnson ([as quoted by Kafka](#)): “The more I thought about this asymptotic relation between things and persons, the more I realized that the problem is not, as it seems, a desire to treat things as persons, but a difficulty in being sure we treat *persons* as persons.” It’s exactly this kind of anthropocentric humanism OOO seeks to refute, of course. No wonder artists seeking fresh ideas are drawn to this dizzying *mise en abyme* of contemporary philosophy.