Materialism to (Speculative) Realism:
The Objects of Conceptual and Post-Conceptual Art

By

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ABSTRACT

MATERIALISM TO (SPECULATIVE) REALISM:
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This thesis is an investigation which overturns the misconceptions of Conceptual art and its legacies in order to illuminate the movement’s contributions to subsequent art-making and aesthetics. While initially conceived to promote the “dematerialization of art,” Conceptual art instead expanded the rigid definition of art from Greenberg’s modernist aesthetics and explored new avenues of art-making. This thesis reconsiders the medium of language within the work of Conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner and the Post-Conceptual artists Judy Natal and Jung Lee as it overcomes the characteristics of dematerialization. Instead, within the theoretical model of Speculative Realism, art-objects and language can be further understood as ontological and autonomous entities that withdraw from human-access and which only relate to other objects vicariously. Art is thus able to overcome the assumption of a passive, human-dependent object and instead challenges our perception of objects and the interpretations and analyses we derive from their surface qualities.
DEDICATION

For our countless conversations about philosophy, art and theology and to your transcendent presence: to Aracely del Carmen Salazar-Clára.

To Don Raul Antonio Salazar-Sigüenza and our conversations that only exist in dreams.
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I arrived at the program without an art history background but instead with a background in studio art and philosophy. I was uncertain about my place in the department especially among my colleagues which had a greater understanding of art history. Despite this, with each passing day, I soon learned that I was capable of contributing to the discipline in a different way. While I would like to thank the department of Art History and Visual Culture for their warmth, acceptance and to all the inspiring faculty members, there is one person to whom I owe this work and my new-found faith as a future scholar within the discipline of Art History. I would like to thank Dr. Boetzkes for her incredible patience, belief and enthusiasm for my respect and love of theory and this ambitious endeavor. Dr. Boetzkes’s work not only encouraged me to initially apply to the program of Art History and Visual Culture, but also continuously inspires me to work with much enthusiasm and determination.

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INTRODUCTION

A History of the Dematerialization of the Art-Object

Conceptual art and its legacy have been associated with an inevitable dematerialization of the art-object. This supposition was first proposed by art critic Lucy Lippard in 1968. In “The Dematerialization of Art,” she states: “Such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object’s becoming wholly obsolete.” However, I argue that the dematerialization of the art-object—a procedure by which the art-object is eliminated and instead redistributed as immaterial ideas, actions, processes and language—is an inaccurate description of “developments” in art since the 1960s, or more specifically, the transition between modernist aesthetics and postmodern ideals. Though this time period saw a transition from modernist aesthetics to a postmodern paradigm of media, nevertheless, it is clear that Conceptual art was deeply concerned with materiality and with the persistence of objects. This thesis undertakes a reevaluation of the medium of language in the works of Conceptual artist, Lawrence Weiner, and the Post-Conceptual artists Judy Natal and Jung Lee. It demonstrates how these works concretize language as an object, and might therefore be understood through the theoretical model of Speculative Realism, a philosophical movement which considers objects as animate and inanimate, conceptual and physical and in which objects withdraw from human perception.

A gradual reduction of form took place in the shift from gestural abstract-expressionist paintings to Minimalist painting. This transition anticipates Lippard’s claims about the dematerialization of art. In “The Dematerialization of the Object,” Derek Matravers considers

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the two different assumptions behind the claim towards the dematerialization of art.² The first claim is that Conceptual art fulfills a teleological view of art which considers that the exhaustion of painting further propagated the dematerialization of the art-object. The second claim is that Conceptual art was a reaction against Modern art. While Lippard’s claims coincide directly with the first proposition, Matravers, on the other hand, accepts the second claim: Conceptual art was a reaction against Modern art and not a development of Modern art. As Matravers later explains, the problem with the first claim, or to “superficially connect Conceptual art to a historical development is to neglect the political reasons for a change in form.”³

The abstract monochrome and “blank paintings” of Ad Reinhardt (Fig. 1), Yves Klein (Fig. 2) and Robert Rauschenberg (Fig. 3) marked the limits of the medium of painting, and the beginning of a new line of aesthetic inquiry in the spatial arena.⁴ Charles Harrison, art historian and member of the Art & Language Group of Conceptual Artists, explains that the monochromatic paintings or “blank paintings” by Robert Rauschenberg, Yves Klein, and Ad Reinhardt, among others, resemble the ready-made—i.e. a prefabricated object, often a commercial item, that is transformed into an art-object when placed within a gallery space (Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain (Fig. 4) for example.)⁵ Frank Stella’s shaped canvases, such as Empress of India (Fig. 5), emphasize the object quality of the work, so that the painting has

³ Ibid.
⁴ While Conceptual and Minimalist artists were inspired by Reinhardt’s black paintings as marking the end of painting, “Art as Art,” (later taken up by Joseph Kosuth), and his outspoken ideas of the commercialization of art, his work was entrenched in Greenberg’s transcendental notion of art. See, Ad Reinhardt, “Black As Symbol and Concept,” in Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt, ed. Barbara Rose (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1991), 86-88.
become three-dimensional and is more akin to sculpture.\textsuperscript{6} However, while Harrison discusses a transition from painting to object (given the modernist emphasis of exploring the verity of the paint and canvas), his claims against Modern art and the goals of the \textit{Art & Language Group} are more specific. Not only was Modern art aesthetically and materially exhausted, but he argued that it was also “morally and cognitively” exhausted.\textsuperscript{7} For these reasons, the purpose of Conceptual art was to: 1) Establish critiques of Modernist aesthetics, and 2) to establish critiques of the politics of Modern art.\textsuperscript{8} Harrison ultimately concludes that the connection between Modernism and Conceptual art was not a teleological one but was a direct aesthetic response against Modernism that had implicit political reasons.\textsuperscript{9}

In “Specific Objects” (1965), Donald Judd proclaimed the limits of both paint as medium and the rectangular canvas as frame, using industrial materials to propel a move towards three-dimensional space.\textsuperscript{10} Similarly, in his essay, “Notes on Sculpture” (1966), the Minimalist sculptor, Robert Morris asserts that the problem with painting had been structural: “the structural

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{6} Ibid. Donald Judd also states that Frank Stella’s shaped paintings are more akin to objects than paintings. “Stella's shaped paintings involve several important characteristics of three-dimensional work. The periphery of a piece and the lines inside correspond. The stripes are nowhere near being discrete parts. The surface is farther from the wall than usual, though it remains parallel to it. Since the surface is exceptionally unified and involves little or no space, the parallel plane is unusually distinct.” Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” in \textit{Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas}, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 809-813.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{9} “This is not to say that Conceptual Art was in any sense the necessary outcome of Modernism. Rather, it is to assert that the representative critical character of Conceptual Art was established by reference to the epistemological character of Modernist theory, to the ontological character of Modernist production and to the moral and ideological character of Modernist culture, and that the historical significance to be accorded to Conceptual Art is therefore relative to an estimation of the status and character of Modernism in the 1960s.” Ibid.
\end{itemize}
element has been gradually revealed to be located within the nature of the literal qualities of the support.”¹¹ Morris further contends that “if painting has sought to approach the object, it has sought equally hard to dematerialize itself on the way.”¹² In this way, the rise of Minimalism invited a new phenomenological relationship in which the viewer and object became intertwined.

Fig. 1 Ad Reinhardt, *Untitled*, 1960.

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¹² Ibid.
Fig. 2 Yves Klein, *Blue Monochrome*, 1961.

Fig. 3 Robert Rauschenberg, *White Painting* (three panel), 1951.
Fig. 4 Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917, replica 1964.

Fig. 5 Frank Stella, *Empress of India*, 1965.

The reduction of painting to its basic elements was the rationale for the Minimalist art of Judd and Morris. The art-object was not eliminated, rather, painting started to resemble “objects.” Artists began to concentrate on three-dimensional works and the phenomenal experience between object and viewer where meaning is derived from the “temporal and spatial
A further reduction of form signaling “the gestation period of a full-blown Conceptual Art,” is identified by another member of the Art & Language group, Paul Wood in his historical review of the movement in *Conceptual Art* (2002). He says:

> The Minimal object, literal thing in real space, shorn of composition and handicraft, the endgame for the modernist preoccupation with form, went through the looking glass and in no time at all gave rise to Antiform: the work of art as anything, bits of waste, felt, undifferentiated stuff, and even no ‘things’ at all but actions and ideas.\(^{14}\)

Conceptual artists, inspired by Ad Reinhardt, marked the supposed death of painting, the Antiform trajectory of Minimalism, as well as the frequent recoveries of the readymade by artists at this time, led critics like Lippard to suggest that there was a broader impetus for a dematerialization of art, which she associates with Conceptual art.

A year after Lippard’s essay was published, the *January 1-31, 1969* exhibition in New York, by curator Seth Siegelaub and artists Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner presented work that not only challenged the status of art and the role of artists, but also the staging of the exhibition.\(^{15}\) The catalogue of the exhibition, usually used as a guide, or as secondary information for the show, was used instead in the “January Show” as the “real site of the exhibition.”\(^{16}\) The January show had seemingly reduced art to “information,” that circulated through texts and photographs more readily. The apparent reduction of the art-object to “art as idea” as expressed through language, or “information,” was, however, viewed

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\(^{15}\) Ibid., 36.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
somewhat differently by Joseph Kosuth, as he expresses in *Art After Philosophy* (1969):

In assuming a primary cause-effect relationship to “final outcomes,” such criticism bypasses a particular artist’s intents (concepts) to deal exclusively with his “final outcome.” Indeed most criticism has dealt with only one very superficial aspect of this “final outcome,” and that is the apparent “immateriality” or “antiobject” similarity amongst most “conceptual” works of art. But this can only be important if one assumes that objects are necessary to art—or to phrase it better, that they have a definitive relation to art. And in this case such criticism would be focusing on a negative aspect of the art.¹⁷

The reduction of the art-object to language and “idea” by Conceptual art might have answered the call to the dematerialization of the object of Lippard. But Conceptual artists like Kosuth had not so much dematerialized the art-object as elevate the idea above the material or physical product. A mounted photographic enlargement of the dictionary definition of “chair,” a wood folding chair, and a mounted photograph of a chair are the objects and materials Kosuth uses to illustrate his idea in *One and Three Chairs* (Fig. 6). For Kosuth, the material component was secondary and instrumental to the idea. The artwork is thus a matter of idea and intention. The final outcome of immateriality and the anti-object as proposed by Lippard would not only bypass the artist’s intents as Kosuth defines them, but I argue it also misunderstands the role of objects of Conceptual art as conduits for new forms of meaning, a role that perhaps even Kosuth himself does not acknowledge.

Fig. 6 Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965. (1969 installation)

Fig. 7 Seth Siegelaub’s “Xerox book,” 1968, New York.
Language and “information” was popular among Conceptual artists in part for its antiform and anti-aesthetic quality—“the finished product, if any, is of less significance than the procedures that brought the work into being and of which it is the trace”\(^\text{18}\)—and for its reproducibility through pamphlets, catalogues, and books. In 1968, Seth Siegelaub organized an exhibition in which artists Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, and Lawrence Weiner were asked to make a 25-page work on 8 ½” x 11” paper (Fig. 7).\(^\text{19}\) The “Xerox Book,” as it is known, was printed and photocopied, and more importantly for Siegelaub, it negated the aesthetic component (Fig. 8).\(^\text{20}\) The political concern of Conceptual artists using antiform and anti-aesthetic practices promoted an expansion in the definition of art and made it receptive to a larger audience beyond the confines of the institution. Conceptual art was also a reaction against the commodification of the art-object, the commercialization of art more broadly, and the subjective taste of critics inclined to fetishize the physical qualities of art. While it is necessary to understand these merits of Conceptual art, which are attached to a historic transition from a modern to a postmodern arena of practice, and to recognize that it was not simply fulfilling a teleology of reductionism that would find a final resolution in the dematerialization of art, there are good reasons to reevaluate the objects and materials of Conceptual and Post-Conceptual art through the lens of Speculative Realism.

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\(^{20}\) Ibid.
A Return to Objects Themselves

This thesis explores how Conceptual art—understood through Speculative Realism—released the object from the artist’s intentions and viewers’ interpretations. Artists, critics, and viewers, associated with this movement, insist on the dominance of the subject over the subject-object relationship which reduces the art-object to a solipsistic gesture—the belief that “the self is the only object of real knowledge or the only thing that is real.”\(^2\) My interpretation, via Speculative Realism attempts to overcome the assumption that existence and perception are fundamentally generated through correlations. Objects and thereby, art-objects, are not bound to human

perception, but exist in a withdrawn reality of which we can only experience vicariously via metaphor, metonymy, representation or “allure” and which is not completely absorbed by the viewer’s gaze.

I will consider objects in Conceptual art through the examination of the work of Lawrence Weiner. Weiner’s oeuvre, consisting of typographic texts, demonstrates his attention to materialism and the primacy of objects. Language also became a medium used by other Conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, and John Baldessari, and started to be conceived as a system of objects. Language, previously thought to be purely abstract, became concrete as a medium in and of itself. Weiner’s works in language, among the work of Post-Conceptual artists such as Judy Natal’s series, *EarthWords* (1991-2001) and Jung Lee’s series *Aporia* (2010-2012) materialize language, deconstruct intrinsic meanings, and displace the viewer from the object by calling attention to language as autonomous objects whose meaning is impervious to us.

Conceptual art released the object from modernist definitions of medium, form, artistic-practice and aesthetic experience. Language, seen as a medium within Conceptual art was thus able to traverse spatial boundaries in its malleable material form and also in the potentialities created from new relations. In this thesis I will show how Speculative Realism continues to reconsider how objects exist beyond the human purview. Speculative Realism considers objects in their alien reality; how they are animated with a vital materialism. A vital materialism suggests that materials and objects are not “flat,” “hollow” nor “passive” things as we perceive them to be. Objects are entities in tension by the dualism of their concealed reality and their
qualities while not reduced to their qualities or abstracted to impressions of the mind.\textsuperscript{22} Objects are “only defined by their autonomous reality” and also conceal “themselves from relations with other entities.”\textsuperscript{23} Moreover, objects and materials are agents—capable of potentialities and “with their own tendencies” that affect other entities vicariously.\textsuperscript{24} A return to objects and materials is different from philosophical materialism—a metaphysical theory that states that all phenomena and things are composed of matter.\textsuperscript{25} In contrast, Speculative Realism explores objects and materials as irreducible to their parts and instead legitimizes both the molecule and the universe as equally relevant things in and of themselves. Thus, the autonomous reality of objects separate from their environment allows us to reconsider a new version of Clement Greenberg’s modernist aesthetic in which art-objects vicariously point to deeper realities beyond their representation in order to preserve their autonomous reality.\textsuperscript{26}

Objects considered through the lens of Speculative Realism retain their autonomous identity from the viewer’s visual and physical consumption and from the viewer’s analysis and

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{24} The term “agents,” is borrowed from Jane Bennett in \textit{Vibrant Matter}, which has origins with Bruno Latour’s \textit{actant theory} in which an agent, either human and non-human, “is a source of action.” Thus, while the term “object” was proposed by Graham Harman’s philosophy, in this thesis, the terms object and agent are interchangeable. However, while talking about Bennett’s philosophy I shall use her term “agent,” and while talking about Harman’s philosophy I shall use his term “object.” \textit{Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things} (London: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.
interpretation. It reinvigorates an otherwise “passive-realism,” stemming from ancient philosophy, emphasizing awareness of the vitality of things united with an ethical-conscience of all object-beings towards a democratic reality. The “speculative” dimension of Speculative Realism relates to how one might try to think and imagine this realm that exists outside the human perceptual field. Looking at art-objects and their vicarious relation with other objects through the lens of Speculative Realism then challenges our perception of objects and also the interpretations and analyses we derive from objects at the visual plane.

In this Chapter, I introduce the historical context of Conceptual Art departing from Clement Greenberg’s understanding of Modernism. The following study of works addresses the ideas of Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, and Lawrence Weiner. I examine Conceptual art through the lens of phenomenology in order to expose the limits of a phenomenological interpretation of art. Phenomenology was particularly influential in the criticism of Greenberg’s successors, Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss. But the influence of phenomenology begins to loosen from its strict analysis of subject-object relations with the rise of Nicolas Bourriaud’s Relational Aesthetics. I examine Amanda Boetzkes’s argument that this phenomenological interpretation risks descending into a solipsistic worldview. To overcome this, it is essential to reconsider our perception of objects through new theoretical trajectories. Thus, the final section introduces the proponents of Speculative Realism, Graham Harman, Jane Bennett, and Timothy Morton. Through Speculative Realism, I consider language-based Conceptual art as a rethinking of art’s materiality. This thesis will reconsider the objects of art, immaterial and material, as autonomous entities which relate to humans vicariously, reevaluating objects of art as things in themselves and not dependent on our intervention.

In Chapter 2, I examine the works of Lawrence Weiner and his transition from working
with site-interventions and installations to working exclusively within the medium of language. I consider how his transition from materialism, inspired by the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, to the medium of language can be analyzed through Speculative Realism. Weiner’s works generate a speculative approach to the visual experience of art that overcomes sensible perception and reconsiders instead the primacy of the object being expressed. Weiner’s works are therefore still relevant in a post-conceptual society and demonstrate a continued resistance against the proliferation and commodification of images which Conceptual artists attempted to combat.

In Chapter 3, I explore the work of American photographer Judy Natal. Her specialization in the relationship between human intervention and natural landscapes in her series *EarthWords* (1999-2001), and later her ability to capture a withdrawn vitalism within vintage neon signs from *Neon Boneyard Las Vegas A-Z* (2002-2006), brings forth Jane Bennett’s ideas of vital materialism. Working in the different environments of Las Vegas and Los Angeles, Natal’s use of text appears uncanny within the landscape as either the desert wilderness or in a neon boneyard. Natal’s oeuvre explores the ontology of text that presents itself as an object-entity through Speculative Realism that unearths a force within the objects beyond “waste” but informs potential dialogues between landscape and objects.

In Chapter 4, the neon-text installation works by Korean artist Jung Lee present an uncanny presence that evoke melancholy and mystery emphasized further by the wilderness of the North Korean landscape. I consider the traditional Romanticist aesthetic ideas of the sublime in landscape paintings, and reformulate Lee’s works within Timothy Morton’s idea of the speculative sublime. While her works play on the emotional sensibility from the beholder, I reconsider how the neon text-installations instead allude to the withdrawn entity of the
landscape. The landscapes appear uncanny and seem to address the beholder in a way that also alludes to the withdrawn object-world. Finally, I argue, Lee’s oeuvre enables the beholder to consider ecological ontologies.

The aim of this thesis is to examine the theoretical underpinnings of Speculative Realism through visual art beginning with the works of Conceptual art and continuing with Post-Conceptual art. The dematerialization of art, thought to have been achieved by Conceptual art, was a misunderstanding of the novel ways Conceptual artists were using non-traditional materials to generate new possible meanings and relations between other objects. However, my investigation of materiality within Conceptual art and Post-Conceptual art also overcomes the preconceived notions of materiality seen as concrete and reducible. Instead, the theorizations of Speculative Realism allow for a new understanding of materiality within Conceptual and Post-Conceptual art that considers the object relations and the irreducible nature of language as an object in and of itself. If, as Graham Harman says, “aesthetics is first philosophy,” then the philosophical dimensions brought forth by Speculative Realism are integral to the discipline of art and art history. My interpretation of Speculative Realists presents challenges towards the analyses and interpretations within the discipline of art history and instead allows us to reconsider new theorizations of the aesthetic dimension. More importantly, my endeavor in this thesis is to integrate philosophy with the visual arts to present new theorizations of visuality and consider the withdrawn nature of art-objects.

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CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

A Short History of Conceptual Art

In the 1960s, American Conceptual art initiated a political reaction against the commodification of the art-object, and against the formalist ideology led by the art critic Clement Greenberg. Conceptual art responded to Greenberg’s neo-Kantian aesthetics which assumed the universality of aesthetic judgments. Between the writings of Greenberg and the manifestos of Conceptual artists, it is clear that many were preoccupied by the deeply rooted relationship between the materiality of art and its political existence. Greenberg raised formalist art against the cultural degradation of political propaganda and commercial art, as seen in Pop art. For Greenberg, the formal qualities of art called for a transcendental form of appreciation—an art that was pure and autonomous from the lived-world. Similarly, Conceptual art, led by Kosuth, presented a dilemma between individual intention and universal meaning. However, Conceptual art opened new avenues for art-objects and viewer relations. Conceptual art’s guiding principle of “art as the idea,” prioritized the intentions of the artist. Modernism and Conceptual art resolve political interventions by preserving the purity of art. Through an analysis of manifestos and artworks, I will establish the historical context of Conceptual art and address how Lawrence Weiner’s works carry out an experience of the autonomy of art-objects that signals a deep concern with materiality.

Modern art explored the opticality of the medium: the form captured the viewer’s vision,

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isolating it from external distractions, thus retaining the purity of the artwork.\textsuperscript{30} Avant-garde art—innovative ideas and works that push the boundaries of art’s self-reflection—which Greenberg elevated against commercial art in his 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” became essential to constituting modern taste.\textsuperscript{31} By the 1950s, America was the epicenter of art, particularly for the Abstract-Expressionist movement. Yet Abstract-Expressionism was directly rejected by Minimalist and Conceptual artists. Conceptual art in particular started to displace the critical apparatus of Modernism.\textsuperscript{32} By the late 1960s Conceptual art was in the foreground of art institutions, due to influential works such as Joseph Kosuth’s “Art After Philosophy,” (1969), Sol LeWitt’s \textit{Sentences on Conceptual Art} (1967), and Lawrence Weiner’s \textit{Statements}, (1968).

In advocating for medium-specificity, Greenberg renewed Kantian aesthetics and legitimized Modern art as central to criticism.\textsuperscript{33} Conceptual artists, by contrast, reoriented focus on the ‘art-object’ so that the material or final component became secondary to the artist’s instructions and the context in which the work of art was carried out.\textsuperscript{34} However, Conceptual artists and their practices are highly diverse. Although the works of Kosuth, LeWitt and Weiner differ, they are similar in their formulation of the relationship between subject and object, particularly insofar as they give priority to the way in which the subject predetermines the object. Furthermore, these artists show how Conceptual artists dealt with subject and object relations in ways that cause a rupture from Modernist ideology in a society anxious about the political and economic condition. Conceptual art, informed by the rise of protests against the

\textsuperscript{30} Anne Rorimer, \textit{New Art in the 60’s and 70’s: Redefining Reality} (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 2001), 11.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 5-6.
\textsuperscript{34} Colpitt, “The Formalist Connection and Originary Myths of Conceptual Art,” 32.
bourgeois institution of art and the advancement of capitalism, ushered Post-Modern ideas that challenged preconceived “structures” and instead embraced multiple avenues of meaning.

Contrary to the historical criticism that perpetuated a dematerialization of the art-object, Conceptual artists distanced themselves from Modernism by working in new media, in an antiform mode, using industrial materials, materialized language, and performed actions. In this way, Conceptual art propagated an alternative phenomenological relationship to the artwork, which also carried itself into Post-Minimalist works such as Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1981), and Michael Heizer’s *Double Negative* (1969), and the works of Post-Conceptual art such as those I deal with in Chapters 3 and 4.

**Writings on Conceptual Art**

Joseph Kosuth, writer of “Art After Philosophy” (1969), accused Greenberg’s aesthetic model of being purely subjective, and claimed that his criticism amounted to nothing more than personal taste. He states:

Formalist art (painting and sculpture) is the vanguard of decoration, and, strictly

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speaking, one could reasonably assert that its art condition is so minimal that for all functional purposes it is not art at all, but pure exercises in aesthetics. Above all things Clement Greenberg is the critic of taste. Behind every one of his decisions there is an aesthetic judgment, with those judgments reflecting his taste.  

Kosuth’s primary concern was to expose the problems with subjective interpretation that undermine the artist’s intention. For Kosuth, Greenberg’s judgments of taste corresponded to a particular time in history which contradicted other judgments made at a later time. He says: “Throughout history different examples of architecture are praised at different times depending on the aesthetics of particular epochs.” For Kosuth, aesthetic judgments hinder the original intention of the artist. He suggests instead that art should be seen as tautological, that it circles between the idea of art and the intention of the artist:

Works of art are analytic propositions. That is, if viewed within their context—as art—they provide no information what-so-ever about any matter of fact. A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist’s intention, that is, he is saying that a particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art.

The tautological proposition results in a situation in which the artist (subject) governs the meaning of the object and the object materializes that intention as a ‘fact.’ In his criticism of Greenberg, Kosuth adjusts Greenberg’s Modernism by giving priority to the idea rather than the

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38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 165.
aesthetic experience. Kosuth believed that conceptualism, or The Idea, overturned Modernism’s formalism, by “presenting new propositions as to art’s nature.”

Similar to Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain (1917), Kosuth’s One and Three Chairs (1965), demands for a reconsideration of everyday objects viewed in the context of “art”. The chair questions its function now in the context of art and explores its possible meanings as a photostat (a photocopied image) and a printed text of a dictionary definition. Kosuth’s conceptualism is accomplished through the medium of language which corroborates the idea across three different visual presentations. Likewise, Kosuth believed his use of photostats enabled successive reproductions that, contrary to what one might think, reinforces the persistence of the idea despite varying material documentations and exhibition scenarios. Art, for Kosuth, was never bound to the physical plane; art as idea instead exceeded physical restriction, aesthetic subjectivism, and the commodification of art—while a painting can be sold and owned, art as the idea could not (at least, not in its original formulation).

Like Greenberg, however, Kosuth attempted to preserve the integrity and purity of art against commercialism by rejecting external contexts. While Greenberg’s formalism preserved art as autonomous from the lived-world, Kosuth’s art as idea preserved the intention of the artist, making that the real content of the work, rather than the medium of the artwork and the viewer’s aesthetic experience of it. Kosuth follows Greenberg along a similar path and yet in attempting to distinguish Conceptual art from Modernist rhetoric, Kosuth altered the tenets of the

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40 José Luis Liñán proposes that Kosuth’s “art as idea” is an inversion of Greenberg’s formalism and that ultimately, Kosuth strips the art-object of the properties that could have functioned as affirmations or propositions. “Representacion, Concepto y Formalismo: Gadamer, Kosuth y La Desmaterialización de La Obra Artística,” Ideas y Valores 140 (2009): 207. [http://www.academia.edu/4306001/Representacion_concepto_y_formalismo_Gadamer_Kosuth_y_la_desmaterializacion_de_la_obra_de_arte](http://www.academia.edu/4306001/Representacion_concepto_y_formalismo_Gadamer_Kosuth_y_la_desmaterializacion_de_la_obra_de_arte)

41 Kosuth, “Art After Philosophy,” 164.

relationship between the art-object, its intention and its meaning. In many ways, Kosuth was furthering some of Greenberg’s political priorities, but doing so through an entirely different model of art-making. Greenberg had elevated formalism against the industrialization and artificiality of kitsch. Kitsch, for Greenberg, represented the effects of capitalist and communist societies; the degradation of culture results from the recycling and latency of ideas and art for the purpose of propaganda. Kosuth saw however, that Modern art institutions were actually fetishizing the artwork and that paintings were revered as “high art” by critics, while at the same time they were sold and collected by an elite class. “Art as idea” was a corrective to this problem, and thus Kosuth attempted to separate art from the subjectivity of the formalist perspective. Although Kosuth wanted to bypass the materiality of the art-object, he was unable to rid himself of the material components of the artwork entirely. His use of photography, paper, and everyday objects in his Proto Investigations series of 1965-1967, emphasize the accessibility and redistribution of art-objects, contradicting Lippard’s insistence that there was a drive to dematerialize the object.

Clock (One and Five) (Fig. 9), is made up of a working clock, a photograph of the clock and enlarged dictionary entries for the words “time,” “machination,” and “object.” The series combined everyday objects like the clock in which Kosuth was interested in the way objects and their other representations (photograph and dictionary entries) inform the way the viewer “sees

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44 Terry Smith’s “Propositions,” describes the problem Conceptual artists found with Modern Art, that, “Art-for-art’s-sake precious object art has become a commodity within the neo-capitalist system of exchange, of which the art market is a ludicrously exaggerated and irrational microcosm.” See, Terry Smith, “Propositions,” in Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), 259.
and represents the world.” **46 Visually, the work is similar to Renee Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images* (Fig. 10), Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades and incorporates Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of language-games from *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). **47 Like *The Treachery of Images*, Kosuth’s *Clock (One and Five)* presents the juxtaposition of different definitions for “clock” and the image in which he challenges the relationship between representation and interpretation. Documented and exhibited as a scientific study, Kosuth presents the divergence between image and language presented by accessible everyday objects such as shovels, chairs, clocks and frames. In every different material iteration of the work, the everyday object of the chair such as in *One and Three Chairs* presents its material instability in which it portrays different types of chairs in relation to its definition. Moreover, borrowing from Wittgenstein’s discussion of language and its meaning as defined by its function in a society or culture and instead of its signification, Kosuth further emphasizes the “semiotic instabilities” by exhibiting the same work in different languages (such as another version of *One and Three Chairs* with English and Spanish text) in which the primacy of the idea or the artist’s intention prevails above all (Fig. 11)

![Clock (One and Five), 1965.](image)

**Fig. 9 Joseph Kosuth, Clock (One and Five), 1965.**

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Fig. 10 René Magritte, *La Trahison des Images (Ceci n'est pas une pipe)*, 1929.

Fig. 11 Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs (Una y tres sillas)*, 1965. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.
Other artists also had different ideas about the terms by which Conceptual art could oppose the Modernist institution and its fetishization of the object. The artist Sol LeWitt was in fact the first to give Conceptual art its name. LeWitt wrote “Paragraphs of Conceptual Art” (1967), followed by “Sentences on Conceptual Art” in 1969. In these, “the idea” is conceived as “a machine that makes the art.” He states: “This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless.” LeWitt departs from Kosuth’s authoritative notion of “art as idea,” in which the artist’s intention is the primary source of meaning, and instead allows the artist’s idea to engage and ignite the viewer’s response as well, so that the artwork initiates an interactive process. In fact, LeWitt’s writings seem to counter and critique Kosuth’s model of “art as instructions.” LeWitt celebrates the possibility of “chance” that is present in the production and then exhibition of the work. These excerpts of “Sentences on Conceptual Art” show how LeWitt embraces the viewer’s response and the irrational parts of art-making that separates him further from Kosuth:

1. Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists.
   They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.

7. The artist’s will is secondary to the process he initiates from idea to completion.
   His willfulness may only be ego.

24. Perception is subjective.

25. The artist may not necessarily understand his own art.
   His perception is neither better nor worse than that of others.

28. Once the idea of the piece is established in the artist’s mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly. There are many side effects that the artist

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48 Wood, Conceptual Art, 37.
cannot imagine. These may be used as ideas for new works.

29. The process is mechanical and should not be tampered with. It should run its course.\textsuperscript{51}

Significantly, LeWitt warns that materials can overpower the idea. This is a striking contrast to Kosuth’s disengagement from the object. Although for LeWitt the physicality of the art-object might deter from the idea, the role of the artist is reinstated in discerning the use of materials in a particular work of art. LeWitt explains, that a particularly “good artist” is able to work with materials and keep the viewer’s mind engaged.\textsuperscript{52} For LeWitt, the importance of art lies in the way that it engages the viewer in the delivery of the idea, and does not overwhelm the viewer with expressive forms.\textsuperscript{53} The concern for the fetishization of the art-object separating the formal, the “expressive,” and “perceptual,” from the conceptual, explores the dual nature of the art-object.\textsuperscript{54} While Greenberg explores the relationship between the viewer and the interplay of forms, and Kosuth explores the primacy of the artist’s idea, LeWitt calls for a reconsideration of the art-object as open to other conditions and perspectives that might impact its status and meaning. A particularly relevant example of the plasticity of LeWitt’s works came from John Baldessari in 1972 when he sang LeWitt’s “Sentences” (Fig. 12) on camera, reimagining the manifesto of Conceptual art into a performance piece. Language or sound, as a medium in Conceptual art, can instead be considered as an object in its own right. Following Conceptual art’s methods of deconstruction, Baldessari releases LeWitt’s statements from their initial theoretical context and into arbitrary tunes, using them as a medium to create new dimensions of meaning.

\textsuperscript{52} Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” 15.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 14-15.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 13.
Like LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner explored art through painting and sculptural work before concentrating on ways of exhibiting actions purely through words. In “Statements” (1968), Weiner also blurs the lines of authorship bringing together the artwork and the viewer through the exchange of “the idea:”

(1) The artist may construct the piece.
(2) The piece may be fabricated.
(3) The piece need not be built.

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.

The term “receivership” or “receiver,” connotes the exchange of something, an economy, or the

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transmission of a message. Weiner’s work involves objects and materials as its subject matter, and thereby allows for the viewer (receiver) to receive the idea, a mental object. One cannot acquire the work as one would acquire a commodity in an economic exchange. However, while Weiner does allow for the work to be fabricated and “reproduced,” his emphasis lies in the separation of idea from material component.\textsuperscript{58} Due to this, the work in itself remains meaningful despite countless reproductions in books or pamphlets, or as shown in the gallery.\textsuperscript{59} Weiner’s declarations are powerful because they evoke the inherent exchange of art at the institutional level, but also concentrate on a distinct implication of “exchange” that is not commercial. It is for this reason that Weiner’s works also provide meaning outside the institutional space through site-specific installations in urban spaces of his later 1980s and 1990s text exhibits.\textsuperscript{60} For Weiner, art serves a particular purpose, and it is not to impinge a proposition on the viewer but is instead about the exchange between the material and viewer through the work. He creates statements that are, “empirical realities,” declarations, devoid of artistic bias. The meaning of the objects has an objective status that is transformed in an infinite number of transmissions and translations. Weiner states in \textit{A Translation From One Language to Another} (1995):

\begin{quote}
A stone is a stone. This does not obviate the sensuality of the original object but in translation allows each culture to adapt the object to fulfill their own needs. A translation is really the moving of one object to another place.\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Rorimer, \textit{New Art in the 60’s and 70’s}, 81.
\end{flushright}
The medium of language in these declarations materializes the object without aesthetic and formal prejudices. At the same time their transmission also expands their very confinement, re-materializing and teleporting with each encounter. Weiner’s works are at times self-reflexive of the physical space as in the case of *A 36” x 36” Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall Plaster or Wallboard From a Wall* (Fig. 13). The piece was created and is able to be recreated by removing a 36” x 36” square from the lathing or support wall plaster or wallboard from a wall with the name of the piece positioned beside the square removal. The hollowed square represented the subversive act of the physical destruction of the institutional space of the gallery. But his works also critique the institution of art and the nature of “accepted” art-practices like painting and sculpture by the direct intervention of the gallery space. Other works such as *An Object Tossed From One Country to Another* (Fig. 14), overcomes the physical space encouraging art to exceed the bounds of the institution. Weiner’s art-objects were constituted by pamphlets, books, and declarations. Their composition required grammatical attention, and the ordering of size, font, and punctuation of words. The intentionality of the work was decentered, distributed between artist and reader/viewer.

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62 Rorimer, *New Art in the 60’s and 70’s*, 81.
63 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh suggests that Weiner’s subversive act of carving into the institution’s wall and his other piece “A Square Removal From A Rug In Use” was a way of alluding to painting and sculpture. Weiner paradoxically critiqued the “reductivist formalism” by “negating the ‘specularity’ of the traditional artistic object” through a physical withdrawal. Buchloh says: “Weiner’s two-squares are now physically integrated with both these support surfaces and their institutional definition.” Benjamin H.D Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), 547.
64 Ibid., 83.
65 Although I direct my analysis to Weiner’s linguistic works, it is important to note that Kathryn Chiong analyzes Lawrence Weiner’s films of *Beached* (1970), and *To and Fro. And Fro and To, And To and Fro. And Fro and To.* (1972), concluding that through these works the viewer is decentered: “Importantly, although Weiner structures his work to resist total comprehension, he does not do so in order to mystify the object, but to destabilize or ‘decenter’ our relationship to it…”; see Kathryn Chiong, “Sympathy for Lawrence Weiner (One Plus...).
Fig. 13 *A 36” x 36” Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall Plaster or Wallboard From a Wall*, 1968. Installation view from the exhibition, “When Attitudes Become Form (Works-Concepts-Processes-Situations-Information),” Kunsthalle Bern.

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Fig. 14 Lawrence Weiner, *An Object Tossed From One Country To Another*, 1968. From the catalogue-exhibition, *March 1969*.

Fig. 15 Lawrence Weiner, *Many Colored Objects Placed Side By Side To Form A Row Of Many Colored Objects*, 1982. Installation on the Raas van Gaverestraat 106 in Ghent.
Lawrence Weiner not only embraces the material dimensions of the artwork, he focuses exclusively on material/object relationships. *Many Coloured Objects Placed Side By Side To Form A Row Of Many Coloured Objects* (Fig. 15) represents how Weiner’s pieces reveal the primacy of objects as active materials without stating specific objects.\(^{66}\) Furthermore, contrary to preconceived notions of the “conceptual” in Conceptual art, Weiner describes himself as a materialist concerned with the interactions of objects with other objects.\(^{67}\) On the one hand Weiner’s work depends on the physicality of media such as in pamphlets, books, or site installations, but unlike Kosuth’s *Proto Investigations*, Weiner’s use of medium is not tautological. Works such as *Thrown* (1969), *Beside Itself* (1971), *Put In Place* (1978), and *Ruptured* (1969) do not reference specific objects or their qualities. Language is a collection of many objects that reassemble into different sentences. In following post-structuralism’s deconstruction of words and meaning, the word “apple” in one sentence can mean something completely different in another sentence alongside other words. Similarly, Conceptual artists deconstructed Modernism’s fixed ideas and categorizations of art, medium and aesthetics. Conceptual art exposed the interplay of words and the ambiguity of meaning. Weiner deconstructs systems of knowledge through the ambiguity of objects and their qualities. By making the objects of language the subjects of the artwork in which they do not refer to the viewer’s presence, Weiner decenters the viewer from his or her perspective of the artwork and allows the objects to stand autonomously in and of themselves.

This chapter will proceed to show how the relationship between phenomenology after Modernism affirmed a viewer-dependent interpretation of an object. But there are further

\(^{66}\) Rorimer, *New Art in the 60’s and 70’s*, 83.

trajectories that need to be explored in order to more fully explain Conceptual art.

A Phenomenological Interpretation of Art

Phenomenology influenced the writings of Greenberg’s successors, Rosalind Krauss and Michael Fried. Krauss and Fried offer insight into how the viewer’s embodied experience of objects was understood in the late 20th-century. The phenomenological interpretation of art was particularly important in the writings of early 20th-century French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.68 Fried and Krauss take distinct positions on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology: Fried interprets sculpture as acquainting the viewer with the bodily relationship of “being,” as introduced in Merleau-Ponty’s “The Chiasm” (1959).69 In Fried’s view, the sculptures of Anthony Caro best illustrate Merleau-Ponty’s idea of “the flesh of the world,” or the interconnectedness of subject and object.70 Fried’s influential essay, “Art and Objecthood” (1967), distinguishes Caro’s sculptures from the “theatrical” nature of Minimalist art of artists like Robert Morris and Donald Judd. He explains:

The theatricality of Morris's notion of the “nonpersonal or public mode” seems obvious: the largeness of the piece, in conjunction with its nonrelational, unitary character, distances the beholder—not just physically but psychically. It is, one might say, precisely this distancing that makes the beholder a subject and the piece in question…an object.71

The difference between “presence” and “presentness” for Fried corresponds with Merleau-

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69 Potts, The Sculptural Imagination, 208.
Ponty’s “Paradox of Being.”

For Fried, Minimalist art is theatrical in the sense that the artwork presents itself as another being with “stage presence” and an interior life. He derides it for its anthropocentrism. On the other hand, Caro’s abstract sculptures “overcome theater” by insisting on the separation of the frame of the artwork so that its component parts interact in relation to one another, rather than in relation to the viewer. It is the potentiality of Caro’s mysterious internal gesturing, much like Greenberg’s affinity to Pollock’s drip paintings, that suggests a corporeal association. Robert Morris’ and Donald Judd’s “hollow objects,” on the other hand illustrate Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological “presentness” or the “mode of being” as the flesh of the world or the intertwining of subject and object.

On the other hand, the essay that best demonstrates Merleau-Ponty’s influence on criticism is Krauss’ phenomenological interpretation of art in “Richard Serra: Sculpture” (1986). The essay describes Serra’s oeuvre as “performative” in his experimentation with different mediums. For Krauss, Serra’s early performances could be compared to Pollock’s “action paintings,” for the artworks unify the artist’s psychological process with his automatic and repetitive actions. Serra’s performative work extends into language-based work in Verb List (Fig. 16), and onto his notable site-specific works that facilitated the viewer’s involvement. However, Serra’s role as a sculptor—as Krauss informs us—was indebted to a reconsideration of his earlier work in film. “Flatness,” a Modernist concept, seeped through in his use of film and in his horizontal sculptural works that would appear as pictorial forms against the ground in

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73 Ibid., 253-255.
74 Fried, Art and Objecthood, 162.
75 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 102.
ways that recall Modernist paintings. But Serra’s later sculptural works depart more fully from Modernism by differentiating between a formalist practice of actively manipulating the medium, to producing an embodied experience that interconnects the object with the space, so that the viewer becomes immersed in the object. Thus, the Post-Minimalist artist decentered his or her position from the final artwork and instead focused on a situation in which the viewer experiences his or her inherent relationship with the artwork in a common “phenomenological flesh.” Krauss departs from Modernist criticism by showing how Minimalism initiated a postmedium, or what she calls the “expanded field of sculpture” of the 1970s. She says:

...all sculpture configures the human body...of the human subject: as an image of ideal repose, or of the purposiveness of action, of the centeredness of reason, or the abandonment to feeling. Further, we would have to acknowledge that it does this no matter how reduced it might be in the manner of physical likeness to the human body.

While Minimalism engages in the play of abstract forms as Modernist painting had, Serra’s works such as in Circuit (Fig. 17) embodies a spatial and conscious experience binding “meaning” to the viewer’s relation to the work. The viewing subject and the object intertwine so that the viewer is always conscious of her or his circumstance, or as José Ortega y Gasset describes in his phenomenological work: “I am I and my circumstance.”

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79 Ibid., 106-107.
80 Ibid., 112.
81 “Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia,” or, “I am I and my circumstance,” was famously quoted by José Ortega y Gasset, a Spanish philosopher and precursor to phenomenology in the early 20th-century. See, Meditaciones del Quijote (Madrid: Imprenta Classica Española, 1914), 43. However, as Amanda Boetzkes informs us, while phenomenology in fact resisted meaning from a historical viewpoint and instead emphasized that meaning was derived from the immediate embodied experience between subject and object, the object itself affirms that our interpretations are contextually formed. See, Amanda Boetzkes, “Phenomenology and Interpretation Beyond
the Flesh,” Art History: Contemporary Perspectives on Method, 32.4 (Sep. 2009): 690-711. 
Fig. 17 Richard Serra, *Circuit*, 1972. Installation view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Fig. 18 Robert Morris *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)* 1965 reconstructed 1971, Tate Britain.
In mobilizing an embodied experience of the interconnection between the subject and object, however, Minimalism risked inviting a solipsistic interpretation of the artwork. Solipsistic interpretations arise when works such as Robert Morris’ *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)* (Fig. 18), enable the viewer to be aware of his or her own body at the same time he or she is also aware of the piece. Morris’ work creates an experience in which one is aware of his or her physical circumstance, but also insists on the particularity and locatedness of that solitary position, thus divesting the work of any external perspective or knowledge. Thus, while Krauss understands the phenomenological basis of Minimalism, she enlists post-structuralist ideas to elaborate the significance of that movement. Krauss explores deconstruction, and post-structuralist underpinnings of language in the last passages of Merleau-Ponty’s “The Chiasm.”

Moreover, Krauss’ pivotal essay, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (1979) explores in greater detail the possibility that the phenomenological experience might generate a sense of decentering meaning and perspective. Thus, while Fried condemns Minimalism’s theatricality, Krauss advocates its potential to enact a new Post-Modern paradigm of art. In *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1977) she states:

> This question of language and meaning helps us by analogy to see the positive side of minimalism’s endeavor, for in refusing to give the work of art an illusionistic center or

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84 Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, 209.
interior, minimal artists are simply re-evaluating the logic of a particular source of meaning rather than denying meaning to the aesthetic object altogether. They are asking that meaning be seen as arising from --to continue the analogy with language-- a public, rather than a private space.\(^{85}\)

Sculpture, for Krauss, especially Minimalist art, emphasizes the possible meanings derived from the various relations between viewer and object.\(^{86}\) In “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” Morris’ sculptures demonstrate the malleability of medium, the rupture of form, and the deconstruction of Modernist sculpture. Krauss shows, using structuralist binaries, that the “exclusions” of “not-landscape” and “not-architecture,” at the periphery of “sculpture,” become “positive,” and even feasible expressions that artists like Morris in the late 1960s explored.\(^{87}\) Inevitably, Krauss’ interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology replaced earlier Modernist influences. Post-Modernism and phenomenology in Krauss’ writings insist on a more intimate relationship with art that legitimized the embodied experience, and displaced the artist’s intention and the prevailing authority of criticism.

\(^{86}\) Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, 209.
Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology led to the separation of Modernist from Post-Modernist paradigm of artistic practice. How, then might Krauss and Fried’s phenomenological interpretations of art extend the viewer-dependent relationship with the artwork, to the objects of Conceptual art? Although Conceptual artists fought against Greenberg’s Modernist aesthetics, they were not entirely aligned with phenomenological interpretations of art that deepened the subjective experience of art through the insistence on an embodied and situational meaning. Minimalist and Post-Minimalist works were being created contemporaneously with Conceptual art at the end of the 1960s. Indeed, many works could be classified as both Conceptual art and Post-Minimalist art. For example, Hans Haacke’s conceptual piece, *Condensation Cube* (Fig. 19) can also be viewed through a phenomenological lens. While *Condensation Cube*, alludes to the Minimalist structure of the cube, in an interview in 1971 with Jeanne Siegel, Haacke states:
“A very important difference between the work of Minimal sculptors and my work is that they were interested in inertness, whereas I was concerned with change.”

Hence, the moisture-filled Plexiglas cube changed its appearance—condensation appeared along the walls of the cube which dripped to the bottom—reacting to the changes in light, heat, and the presence of the public in the space. In this way, works of Conceptual art like Haacke’s actually relied on a sense of the lived situation in order to register the transformation of the artwork, as well as the object’s vitality.

Krauss’ “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” ultimately departs from a phenomenological interpretation in order to advance a more diverse understanding of the conditions of interpretation, informed by semiotics and poststructuralism. However, the fundamental reliance of the object’s chiasmic relationship to the viewer, and the risk of solipsistic interpretation that this poses, has continued in different forms. In fact, Post-Modernist ideas simply replace the singular viewer from a solipsistic position, with many more equally solipsistic viewpoints.

In his book Relational Aesthetics (2002), Nicolas Bourriaud continues a phenomenology-inspired interpretation of art-objects. However, he abandons the phenomenological container of the subject/object and reaffirms contemporary artworks as “models of action,” existing in the

88 Jeanne Siegel, Artwords: Discourse on the 60’s and 70’s (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 1992), 214.
social, cultural, and political realms. The subject/object relationship continues the postmodernist expansion towards a communal relationship, brought by a reevaluation of art-objects as a “social interstice” rather than as objects of consumption. Bourriaud explains the interstice as:

a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within this system. This is the precise nature of the contemporary art exhibitions in the arena of representational commerce: it creates free areas, and time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life, and it encourages an inter-human commerce that differs from the “communication zones” that are imposed upon us.92

Art-objects not only inherently reflect in the gallery space the institutional market while pushing the limits of “medium,” they also have the ability to produce intersubjective fields of communication. While contemporary art-objects intertwine with “exchange” as the subject and also the object, the object makes the artist ethically accountable for what viewers “receive.”93 Contemporary art-objects are phenomenologically encountered with each viewer through Post-Modernist ideas. The expansion of medium blurs the lines between all forms of relations, so that art can reconsider relations as aesthetic, and as eliciting encounters in a global scale.94

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91 Ibid., 14-15.
92 Ibid., 16.
93 Ibid., 18.
94 Ibid., 23.
Fig. 20 Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, 1981. Initially installed at Jacob K. Javits Federal Office Building, New York.

Fig. 21 Michael Heizer, *Double Negative*, 1969. Carp Elgin Rd, Nevada.
Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (Fig. 20), and the earlier, *Double Negative* (Fig. 21) by Heizer, explore the relation between the artwork and subject. Because of their immersive quality, the perception of a viewer as both the subject and as part of the work (object) is made possible by the interpretation of a third person viewing x person and the work as interconnected. The “reversibility” between being both subject and object, through our relationship with others in the world,\(^95\) affirms not only that our interpretation of an object’s meaning is dependent on the changing viewpoints,\(^96\) but that meaning is composed from the object’s surrounding conditions as well. As Boetzkes writes, Krauss’ interpretation of phenomenology demonstrates the “asymmetry” of the relation between viewer and artwork. She says:

> The suggestion is not that one cannot presume to know or make statements about the artwork (and the world) because it always escapes our grasp, but rather that, in order to do so, one must first be receptive to that which lies beyond the limits of what one knows... Interpretation is not to make an initial proclamation about the meaning of the artwork (a statement of fact about it), but rather to respond to the demands the work makes of the viewer, particularly how it overturns, upsets or otherwise departs from one’s expectations.\(^97\)

While relational aesthetics proposes an inter-human relation brought by an artist’s “invention of models of sociability,”\(^98\) following the Post-Modernist lens of different meanings, the “malleability” of the art-object becomes more apparent in the addition of a third-person perspective. In Heizer’s *Double Negative*—a land art piece that consists of a long trench in the earth in Moapa Valley, Nevada—the immersive quality of the trench creates the physical

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\(^95\) Merleau-Ponty, “The Intertwining: The Chiasm,” 258.
\(^97\) Boetzkes, “Phenomenology and Interpretation Beyond the Flesh,” 708.
\(^98\) Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 16.
experience of looking at the work, and being looked at as part of the work. Humans, situations, and relations, embody the definition of art similarly in the way performance art recognizes bodies and performances as part of art. For Bourriaud, in the 1990s art expanded the definition of the art-object: aesthetic objects encompass “all manner of encounter and relational invention” that go beyond the limits of mere consumption. Bourriaud suggests not just an expanded definition of “object,” but legitimizes them as something separate, and autonomous, alluding to objects as things independent from our gaze and of relations as things in themselves.

Although a phenomenological interpretation of art reassures one of the important aspects of art—through the mesh of subject/object—art-objects and their meanings are still predicated on our relation to them. Objects demonstrate our limited knowledge of them because they are seen merely as a collection of successive encounters; one never truly absorbs their entirety. Krauss’ departure from Greenberg and Fried explores a transition from her phenomenological influence to later Post-Modernist ideas that stress phenomenology’s instability of meanings through experience. Bourriaud’s phenomenologically inspired interpretation overturns the object as a product of capitalism, towards existing as part of a democratic space that is integral to the formation of relations. Likewise, Boetzkes’s critique of phenomenology demonstrates the limits of the possibilities of interpretations in the embodied experience of subject and object, unless one adopts an ethical position toward the artwork’s impenetrable nature. Phenomenology raises questions about the nature of objects. I shall now argue that the objects are in fact worlds-in-themselves, only *vicariously* experienced, and in need of ethical reconsideration.

99 Ibid., 28.
100 Ibid., 13.
102 Ibid., 35.
103 Boetzkes, “Phenomenology and Interpretation Beyond the Flesh,” 710.
(Speculative) Realism

In “Sympathy for Lawrence Weiner (One Plus One)” (2007), Kathryn Chiong outlines the subject/object relations in Lawrence Weiner’s body of work. More importantly, Chiong observes that Weiner’s displaced objects and displaced subjects:

[create] a kind of voyage-in-place through the distance it carves between ourselves and our intended objects, through a linguistic intervention that suggests that we do not understand what an object is, what it does, or what it looks like other than in singular moments of tenuous connection, in flashes of an almost-encounter that remain different each time.104

While the writings of Conceptual artists demonstrate an inevitable subjectivism, phenomenology on the other hand, while also relying on a solipsistic-perspective, shows us the object as separate from us and as impervious to our gaze and judgment. Chiong’s essay concerning Lawrence Weiner’s attention to object relations informs us that there exists a subjective displacement through his “dispersed” works.105 Artworks, like Weiner’s, also reinforce Boetzkes’ observations on postmedium art. She says: “The destructuration of the artwork and the transition into a postmedium condition appears as the artwork’s refusal to deliver itself to the senses in a totalized form.”106 Thus, Conceptual art presents us with a context in which the object is released into a new understanding of autonomy through postmedium techniques. A dedicated metaphysical study of objects, however, can reclaim their ontological being, removing from

105 Ibid., 341.
106 Boetzkes, “Phenomenology and Interpretation Beyond the Flesh,” 710.
them the stigma of the commodity as a passive object that is used and then discarded. More specifically, Speculative Realism, a philosophical movement concerning a critical reevaluation of metaphysics against a correlationist-view of the world, abandons post-structuralist, Post-Modern, and phenomenological ideas of thought we previously explored because they ultimately fail to consider the object’s autonomous reality. The following writings on Speculative Realism by Graham Harman, Jane Bennett, and Timothy Morton demonstrate how a study of the ontology of objects can dissolve our preconceptions of them in ways that illuminate the Conceptual art movement and its legacies. Integrating the theorizations of Speculative Realism with visual art, we can see how Lawrence Weiner revolutionizes the nature of objects, how they demand distance from us and can be speculated about.

Graham Harman’s “Object-oriented-ontology” (a subset of Speculative Realism), explores the metaphysical existence of objects in relation to one another. The term “object” implies unity, autonomy and independence from its relations. In contrast to the term “substance,” “object” does not simply imply natural or physical entities, but it also does not

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109 “Object-Oriented Ontology” shall thus be abbreviated as “OOO”

discriminate against inorganic and immaterial entities.\textsuperscript{111} Reality is full of objects with an inner core that while not all equally real (a mermaid, for example, is not equally real to a tree), they are equally autonomous objects. Thus, objects exist in a “vacuum state” impenetrable to relations in which the only way to relate to objects is through a vicarious relation.\textsuperscript{112}

Secondly, OOO attempts to explain the object’s impenetrable nature and how we come into contact with them as objects ourselves. Harman suggests that the interaction between objects is vicarious. In other words, objects are related through an intermediary, which ensures that each object preserves its integrity through its withdrawal. The autonomy of the object is never fully absorbed into the entirety of a relation with other objects. The proponents of OOO thought traverse socio-political concerns as well by understanding object relations as a kind of “democracy of objects.” As such, OOO grants art a new avenue in which the creation, existence and interrelation between art-objects prompts an ethical reconsideration of existence. Consequently, the OOO movement has been particularly attractive to theorists in political and environmental fields studying new ecologies which make the theory adaptable to the multidisciplinary field of art.

Graham Harman’s OOO comes from the reconsiderations, insights, and the shortcomings of three different philosophers: Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Bruno Latour. Briefly, let us revisit how these philosophers thought of objects individually and how their ideas

\textsuperscript{111} Traditionally substance or \textit{ousia} meaning “being” was conceived by philosophers as the fundamental or basic building blocks of reality. Objects, by contrast, are neither reduced to fundamental building blocks, nor are they abstracted to mental phenomena such as impressions as in George Berkeley’s \textit{idealism}. \textit{Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy}, s.v. “Substance,” accessed July 10, 2015, \url{http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/substance/#Aca}; See, George Berkeley “An Essay on Motion” in \textit{Berkeley: Philosophical Writings} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 243-268.

\textsuperscript{112} Harman, \textit{The Quadruple Object}, 81.
comprise the beginning of OOO philosophy.

Firstly, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) was the founder of phenomenology and best known for his work on nature and “intentional objects” in *Logical Investigations* (1900-1901). Husserl was interested in studying consciousness or what he termed “intentional acts” and “intentional experiences” that are central to phenomenology in which the subject-object forms a unique temporary bond. While the problem with phenomenology is that intentionality implies the passivity of objects which appear as phenomena to the human subject, Husserl conceives of the object’s unity even after humans perceive multiple perspectives of the same object.\(^{113}\) Husserl terms the stitching of successive perspectives, “adumbrations,” which is done through consciousness. For Harman, Husserl’s philosophy introduces a tension between an object and its qualities (both accidents and essential qualities) by which the object persists despite the many perspectives depending on the viewer’s state and as such. Hence, objects are not their parts or bundles of adumbrations and remain separate from their appearances or perspectives:\(^{114}\) A tree-object persists despite the changing seasons that affect the color of its leaves, or the lack of leaves.\(^{115}\) The tension between an object and its qualities that Husserl introduced enabled Harman to further conceive of an object’s autonomy, the real object itself (concealed inner core) and its sensual and real qualities.

The rift between objects and their qualities continues with the philosophical work of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) in *Being and Time* (1927), a seminal text that was revived again at the end of the 20th-century due to a renewed interest in objects. The German philosopher


engages with the subject of “Being” from a phenomenological standpoint. Although Heidegger separates “Being” from the “beingness” of objects, his attention to objects is nevertheless seen as a significant contribution to the beginnings of OOO. For Heidegger, tools are “present-at-hand” (vorhanden) when they are present in consciousness, while equipment (something in-order-to) is “ready-to-hand” (zunhanden) and which becomes visible through its “ontological genesis” (its use). However, Heidegger considers the discovery of objects as something distinct from their “use” and in which their obscure nature is revealed. He says:

> Beings nearest at hand can be met up with in taking care of things as usable, as improperly adapted for their specific use. Tools turn out to be damaged, their material unsuitable. In any case, a useful thing of some sort is at hand here. But we discover the unusability not by looking and ascertaining properties, but rather by paying attention to the associations in which we use it. When we discover its unusability, the thing becomes conspicuous.\(^\text{117}\)

Harman’s reinterpretation of Heidegger’s tool-analysis and the tension between objects and their qualities destroys an otherwise anthropocentric divide of humans and objects, instead placing both on the same ontological ground.\(^\text{118}\) Objects are separate from their use because they have an inner core that is withdrawn from view.

Finally, Bruno Latour (1947-present) is a philosopher known for co-developing “actor-

\(^{116}\) Roderick Munday, “Glossary of Terms in Being and Time,” March 2009, accessed July 10, 2015, [http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/b_resources/b_and_t_glossary.html#equipment](http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/b_resources/b_and_t_glossary.html#equipment)

\(^{117}\) Martin Heidegger makes a separation between Dasein, also known as “Being-there,” existence, or “Being-in-the-world,” categorizing humans as embodying this identity as action, from beings, or entities, (note the lower-case “b”). *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 68.

network theory,” an ontology and social theory that accounts for the interrelations of actors (human, non-human, non-individual entities) in a network.\footnote{Bruno Latour, “On actor-network theory. A few clarifications plus more than a few complications,” in \textit{Soziale Welt} 47 (1996): 2. Accessed July 10, 2015, \url{http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/P-67\%20ACTOR-NETWORK.pdf}} Thus, actors or actants are defined by their interrelation with other actors so there is no hierarchy between actors but all stand on the same ontological ground.\footnote{Ibid., 4.} Moreover, for science, the terms “actors” and “networks” imply that science should incorporate a study of all actors, human and non-human and their connection with other actors. As a result, such terms as “nature” or “society” become relinquished.\footnote{Bruno Latour, “Networks, Societies, Spheres: Reflections of an Actor-network Theorist,” ed. Manuel Castells, \textit{International Journal of Communication} 5 (2011): 8. Accessed July 10, 2015, \url{http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/121-CASTELLS-GB.pdf}} In a network, action is redistributed among its actors and thus creates a democratic social theory of interrelated actors which all play a part in the action.\footnote{Ibid., 2.} Latour’s philosophy is of imminent objects (concrete and reducible to their relations) which do not withdraw from view because “nothing transcends actuality.”\footnote{Harman, \textit{Prince of Networks}, 16.} Consequently, Harman philosophy is a version of Latour’s actor-network theory ontology in which he not only makes objects irreducible autonomous units, but also conceives of the tension between both the real and sensual objects and the real and sensual qualities as relating vicariously to one another.

Given the different philosophies by Husserl, Heidegger and Latour, and their concepts of objects, the philosophy of OOO marks a departure from the phenomenological interpretation of the embodied experience of Being as presented to us through relations. Instead, OOO shows that the vicarious relation from one object to another forms a new object.\footnote{Harman, \textit{The Quadruple Object}, 116-119.} Likewise, interpretations about the nature of an object cannot be made because of its impenetrability; scientific analysis
despite its array of optical instruments will never be able to fully understand the nature of the object without reducing it to its smallest parts.\textsuperscript{125} Objects also resist abstractions to “consciousness,” psychological phenomena, and transcendental ideas that assume the object’s nature to be experienced or bestowed upon us.\textsuperscript{126} Objects are never exhausted by us, and what we understand as “relations” is also the creation of new objects. Thus, the vicarious relationship the viewer forms with the art-object creates a new object or “internal space” that is distinct from another viewer’s vicarious relation to the art-object.\textsuperscript{127}

In Harman’s speculation of how objects appear and relate to other objects, the separation of objects from their qualities is explained in the following example:

A ripe apple must somehow have the same ripeness, yet it remains the same apple both before and after the ripeness is maintained, meaning that the apple maintains a certain distance from its own qualities.\textsuperscript{128}

In order for an object to remain autonomous despite changes to its make-up, whether through relations to other objects or as part of another network of objects (like an orchard, say) it must exist as itself regardless of the perceiver’s intervention or acknowledgement.\textsuperscript{129} Thus, when we experience objects, we do so vicariously, through their visual allure. Allure is the temporary “deconstruction” of an object, of its parts from a whole.\textsuperscript{130} It is experienced through an

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{128} Harman, \textit{The Quadruple Object}, 76.
\textsuperscript{129} Harman, “Vicarious Causation,” 199.
\textsuperscript{130} Harman, \textit{The Quadruple Object}, 104.
\end{flushright}
oscillation between relation and non-relation.\textsuperscript{131} Allure directs one to the intended image, or “object.” In art, the vicarious relation between the viewer and object is done through metaphor, metonymy, and representation. Similarly in language, allure is dependent on a void in which it transports one object’s qualities to another object as understood through metaphor. In Harman’s example: “My heart is a furnace,” the sensual object of the heart temporarily acquires and displays furnace-qualities to create a new impactful description of the heart.\textsuperscript{132}

Harman’s concept of allure creates the possibility for a new stream of scholarship concentrating on how language—and now also language-based art such as Conceptual art—and the \textit{ghost-objects} that language alludes to are vicariously-experienced. Ghost-objects are those instances in literature and in art in which references transport us to hidden objects or invisible objects that are thinkable and yet intangible. Objects, through their parts and qualities, although never reduced to their parts, nevertheless reform and reorganize objects. An apple amongst the tree where it hangs, surrounded by leaves, or, an apple’s seeds, or an apple among the entire orchard are ontological objects in and of themselves. The reconstitution of an object does not overdetermine or undermine, but instead displays a network of infinite objects through relations (objects) never before considered. Likewise, humans form in the same amalgamation of objects as objects ourselves also withdrawn from view of other entities. Human-beings are not their consciousness, nor their brain, nor can they be explained simply as social-beings. Instead, human-beings are ontological objects that form new objects through relations.\textsuperscript{133}

In a similar vein, Jane Bennett advances a new form of materialism called “vital materialism” in \textit{Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things} (2010) stemming from the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 99.
\item \textsuperscript{132} Harman, “Vicarious Causation,” 215.
\item \textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 116.
\end{itemize}
philosophy of Bruno Latour. Her book raises an ethical consciousness for objects or what she terms “agents.” Agents are entities (human and non-human) with “trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.” Bennett questions human and non-human relationships, critically investigating the imminent foreboding of ecological crises due to our culture’s anthropocentric indifference to agents, accumulating waste and harming the environment. Bennett assesses a materialism that legitimizes non-human entities as ontological agents against a world of excess in a time of ecological concern. She states:

It hit me in a visceral way how American materialism, which requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles, is antimateriality. The sheer volume of commodities and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter.

Bennett strategically reduces the human being to its fundamental material constituents in which her conception of vital materialism initially sparks controversy. Bennett, however, defends a new materialism in the hopes that a common ontological ground for all beings preserves a democratic state of entities. A vital materialism instead accounts for human sovereignty stating that no longer are humans special among non-humans because of a consciousness, a soul, or intellect, but vital material suggests that both human and non-humans are equally vital, capable and ethically responsible agents. Thus, Bennett’s vital materialism does not equate with a reduction or a simplification, but, Bennett counters, the materialism in ourselves and in the rest

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134 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, viii.
135 Ibid., 5.
136 Ibid., 13.
of nature is simply not reducible because of its complexity. The vital materialism that Bennett develops is due to a realization of an agent’s vibrancy that also assembles an argument for OOO: the death of objects rests on a capitalist mentality that is closely tied to an anthropocentric view of the world. The death of the object is coupled with the physical effects of capitalism: the excess of materials as seen in waste and strange weather phenomena, appeals for a reconsideration of the “active power of things.” “Thing-power” raises ethical awareness in its implicit agency: degradation, possession, and objectification are terms no longer exclusive in explaining a disregard of human rights, but all entities, alive or inanimate, possess agency demanding equal rights. The thing-power in the vital materials, on the other hand, can never truly be discarded as one would have done or thought to have done. Instead, thing-power continues to actively effect and act even post-humanly. Thus, the assemblage of vital materials considers both human and non-humans acting in a conglomerate, where “value” is homogenous to all parts of the assemblage. This is illustrated in Bennett’s example of the 2003 power blackout in Canada and the United States. The trouble suffered by both bordering nations cannot be pinned to a simple or single agent. The assemblage of political, social, human and non-human agents is so vast that it challenges questions of responsibility. Instead, because of the various agents participating in a grid, cause and effect and time are blurred within the formation and reformation of an assemblage. The various actors at play reform our conception of the agent, opening us to the infinitude of agents that operate in an interconnected mesh.

138 Ibid., 101.
139 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 6.
140 Ibid., 13.
141 Ibid., 24.
142 Ibid., 34.
The reconsideration of art as vital material suggests that what was once considered a distinction of object and subject, is in fact not completely separate, nor is it phenomenologically bound through experience. Instead, art-objects form in the viewer’s perception in a complex assemblage of active autonomous agents. The complexities of the assemblage do not regress to a one-sided instantaneous experience, but instead it is because of their vitality that materials join and leave: each remains an active ethical agent distorting time, causality, and contingency. An art-object can thus enter an assemblage, meld with other vital materials, possibly becoming so complex that its very nature is not analyzable, nor understood, and the question of agency dissolves in its intricacy. As Bennett explains, the concept of thing-power “will always exceed our knowledge and control,”143 and instead one should accept new possibilities, new sources, and regain awareness of human-nonhuman vitality as imperative to our coexistence.144 Claiming to understand things or agents undermines thing-power, attempts to “possess” the nature of an agent—it is the death of the object. Ethical-awareness on the other hand guides us before entering potentially harmful assemblages.145 Art-objects can thus illuminate possibilities, and potential assemblages of concepts and agents.

Timothy Morton, on the other hand, explores the sublime extensiveness of objects. Morton joins the movement of Speculative Realism with perspectives from literature and ecology. While his work in ecology is concerned with massively distributed objects, or what he terms hyperobjects, such as climate change, his earlier work on “Sublime Objects” (2011), bridges both works in his idea of the Kantian-inspired “speculative sublime.” The speculative sublime is one’s realization of an object’s uncanny imminence, or in other words, the realization that materials join and leave: each remains an active ethical agent distorting time, causality, and contingency. An art-object can thus enter an assemblage, meld with other vital materials, possibly becoming so complex that its very nature is not analyzable, nor understood, and the question of agency dissolves in its intricacy. As Bennett explains, the concept of thing-power “will always exceed our knowledge and control,”143 and instead one should accept new possibilities, new sources, and regain awareness of human-nonhuman vitality as imperative to our coexistence.144 Claiming to understand things or agents undermines thing-power, attempts to “possess” the nature of an agent—it is the death of the object. Ethical-awareness on the other hand guides us before entering potentially harmful assemblages.145 Art-objects can thus illuminate possibilities, and potential assemblages of concepts and agents.

143 Ibid., 14.
144 Ibid.
145 Ibid., 37.

In an interview with Peter Gratton, Morton challenges the notion that language is human-dependent: language is materialized as “bacteria-filled breath moving out of [one’s] lungs, which evolved out of fish swim bladders,”\footnote{147}{Gratton, “Interviews,” 105.} releasing language from its preconceived passive nature. Instead, language can also be thought of in ontological terms, as an object containing other objects and creating other objects.\footnote{148}{Ibid.} Morton, inspired by language as a form of aesthetic phenomenon,\footnote{149}{Timothy Morton, \textit{Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology and Causality} (Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2013), 20.} looks at causality in terms of OOO describing all relations as aesthetic ones.\footnote{150}{Timothy Morton, “Objects as Temporary Autonomous Zones,” \textit{ Continent} 1.3 (2011):149-155. Accessed May 1, 2014. \url{http://www.continentcontinent.cc/index.php/continent/article/view/46}} Causality through OOO terms disintegrates the viewer-object experience, recalling Weiner’s statements of material relations for what they are: objects presented to us (other objects). For Weiner, objects are seen as alien entities: the work does not reference the artist, the viewer, nor does it have any context, but refers simply to statements of the actions of objects, thereby preserving the nature of the object. Inanimate objects are “also doing art all the time, it’s just that we call it causality,” Morton explains. All objects are in some sense a type of “machine...that has causal effects.”\footnote{151}{Morton, \textit{Realist Magic}, 24.} In conceiving art and language as objects through Speculative Realism, objects can be reconsidered in terms of how they provide causal effects. The artist, or writer, or carpenter, to borrow from Ian Bogost, is not entirely eliminated, but instead, the moment objects come into Being, they also exist autonomously, actively coming into presence with other objects.
abandoning its carpenter.\footnote{Ian Bogost, \textit{Alien Phenomenology: Or What It's Like to Be a Thing}, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 93.} Weiner creates art, but decenters the art from the artist. The role of the carpenter is no longer fixed on teleological concerns. Instead, while the carpenter could create objects to suit his needs and meanings, like in the case of tools, objects exist despite their intended creation, and will continue to exist beyond human life.\footnote{Gratton, “Interviews,” 113. Morton goes further into detail about an ecological concern for objects that precisely exist even after our time on earth, continuing to actively interact with other objects. He argues that these hyperobjects are massively distributed showing in one aspect, the limits of human-analysis and understanding, and demonstrating how a hyperobject like global-warming challenges our notions of a thing’s supposed boundaries which demand a reconsideration of ethical-awareness. See, Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).}

Morton speculates on how objects present themselves vicariously. Objects interact with other objects by “transport” and “phantasia.” Objects are not exclusively bound by the physical and material realm. Concepts and ghost-objects are also experienced vicariously as real objects. These methods of interaction translate into the ways art-objects communicate to the viewer. Transport “depends upon a kind of void—the withdrawn reality of the universe of objects—the aspect that is forever sealed from access but is nevertheless thinkable.”\footnote{Morton, “Sublime Objects,” 223.} An object is transported through “references” in the void, like hints to a greater message or the bigger picture. Phantasia “conjures an object,” and comes into contact with another. “Spice,” conjures objects like “ginger,” “basil,” “cardamom,” etc.\footnote{Ibid., 224.} Transport and phantasia, like Harman’s concept of allure, explain how we confront objects vicariously.\footnote{Harman, \textit{The Quadruple Object}, 99.} Speculative Realism liberates objects from a human-object hierarchy and exposes the ontological presence and “thing-power”
(Speculative) Realism and Art

This first chapter provided a specific exploration of 20th-century art criticism and history in conjunction with a philosophical consideration of the art-object through Speculative Realism. Lawrence Weiner’s work can be approached differently through Speculative Realism. Weiner’s works also operate through Harman and Morton’s understanding of vicarious causation, allure, and transport. Ian Bogost explains, “If we take vicarious cause seriously, we believe that things never really interact with one another, but fuse or connect in a locally conceptual fashion, then the only access any object has to any other is conceptual.” In the remainder of the thesis, I approach Conceptual and Post-Conceptual art by understanding “the conceptual” in precisely this intersection with vicarious cause through materiality. Object-oriented-ontology allows me to consider the role of the artist, ideas of creation, art-objects and how they present themselves non-locally to the viewer. Likewise, Bennett’s contribution to Speculative Realism allows me to show how objects raise an ethical-awareness that is essential in the co-existence of objects and in thinking about present and future ecological concerns.


158 Bogost, Alien Phenomenology, 111.
CHAPTER 2-LAWRENCE WEINER:
“LANGUAGE + THE MATERIALS REFERRED TO”

Introduction

Lawrence Weiner’s oeuvre began at a critical time for language-based works in the late 1960s alongside Joseph Kosuth and Sol LeWitt who, not only challenged institutional politics, but also continued to change the way we read art as well. Weiner’s works continue to be relevant today in that among his contemporaries, he continues to exhibit worldwide. Recently his exhibition at the South London Gallery in London, titled All In Due Course (Fig. 22), exemplifies a long trajectory of work and exhibition practices that emphasize the inexhaustible quality of his work. Despite Weiner’s reluctance to being revered as a canonical Conceptual artist, his body of work continues to be politically relevant in a society still bombarded by the pleasure of consuming visual and material art-objects. Weiner’s pieces instead interrupt this automatic need for the visualization of the physical—his works are not contained in a single space, but traverse time and space through language. The physical components consisting of brochures, pamphlets, books, site interventions, and in the most recent case, the temporary tattoos for the London exhibit, make the work not only more accessible and reproducible, but they affirm the language “sculptures” as existing through a precarious physicality. Weiner’s works do not simply reflect objects and their relations in a material world, but reflect a reality of the object world which does not presume a fixed viewer.

In this chapter I consider how the work of Lawrence Weiner introduces a novel way of speculating about art and its boundaries through alternative forms of objecthood and the presentation of objects in an art context. Still influential and pertinent among contemporary art, Weiner’s statements continue to contrast the hyper visuality of objects and language that
characterizes today’s advertisement industry. In many ways, Weiner’s oeuvre demonstrates a continued resistance towards the onslaught of information for consumption—his statements demand the viewer to consider and then reconsider the primacy of the object being expressed. For this reason, Weiner’s work and the philosophical exploration of Speculative Realism coincide with similar ideas about objects, and an exploration of Weiner’s body of work generates a speculative approach to the visual experience of art. My analysis of Weiner’s artworks through Speculative Realism explains important challenges to the discipline of art history—such as the challenge of true knowledge and interpretation in art, the role of the artist as a sole creator of art, and the theorization of the life of the art-object beyond a human purview.

Fig. 22 Lawrence Weiner, Installation view of *All In Due Course* at South London Gallery in London.
As I argued in the introduction, Conceptual art has been misunderstood as a movement that aspired to bring about the object’s demise. However, in this chapter, I want to call attention to the objects of Conceptual art. Positioning Weiner’s works through the lens of Speculative Realism also prompts us to abandon the idea of simply a *materialization* of Conceptual art-objects, but to speculate on the *concealed reality* of art-objects. This important transition from materialization to realism also signifies a transition away from an anthropocentric view of art-objects to a rethinking of reality as such. As Conceptual artists responded against the “clutter” of the world, Douglas Huebler stated: “The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more.”159 Lawrence Weiner, similarly responded with, “I do not mind objects, but I do not care to make them.”160

It is precisely this relationship between “the world” and art-objects that this chapter concentrates on. This chapter analyzes the work of Lawrence Weiner through three different characteristics: “empirical realities,” idioms, and anonymous objects. The first, “empirical realities,” characterizes the work which followed Weiner’s transition from the site installation at Windham College of 1968 to his language-sculptures. This section explores Weiner’s affirmation as a Conceptual artist creating works that exist purely as textual definitions. In the following section, “Mirror Mirror On The Wall Free The Reflection Of Any Reference At All (2005),” I explore a new epoch in Weiner’s oeuvre in which he appropriates idioms. Through these works, I explore language as an intricate system of words that can be reconfigured to elicit new meanings or challenge preconceived idioms such as in *Earth To Earth Ashes To Ashes Dust To Dust* (1970). The final section, “Absence and Presence: Phantasia and xObjects,” I explore

160 Ibid.
works that present anonymous objects. These works do not offer us any information on the object as the subject in question. Works, such as Water Made It Wet (1998), function merely as “place holders.” These characterizations are not meant to be seen as strictly rigorous categorizations of his work; for instance, many works under “Idioms” may revert to “Empirical Realities.” However they do illuminate different facets of Weiner’s approach to language as an object in itself. Finally, the relationship between the world, human perception, and art-objects in the investigation of Weiner’s work allows me to weigh its political, philosophical, and art historical implications to uncover the potential new role of art-objects within the object world.

“Empirical Realities”
Lawrence Weiner, born in 1942 in New York began his career experimenting with drawing and painting, and transitioned to installation and performance work before devoting his practice to producing “sculptures” in the medium of “language + the materials referred to.” Weiner’s transition from the physical presentations of art towards language however, came from the destruction of the Windham College installation in 1968 which demanded that Weiner reconsider the physical and ethical implications of art making. This section centers on Weiner’s transition from physical to language-based works within the counter-movements of the 1960s in which I draw parallels between Weiner’s artistic ideas, Marxist thought, and Speculative Realism to analyze the material works themselves.

In 1968, Weiner exhibited Staples, Stakes, Twine, Turf (Fig. 23) on the lawn of Windham College campus in Vermont. He installed a 70 x 100–foot grid done with hemp wire that was stapled onto stakes that were hammered into the ground. A rectangular 10 x 20-foot space was offset from one corner of the rest of the grid. The piece resulted in a physically engaging site installation that demanded the viewer to integrate physically to the space of the work. However,
the phenomenological piece, ephemeral in construction, was vandalized by the students of the campus. The piece had obstructed the students from using the football field in which the piece had been constructed. The destruction of this piece was a pivotal moment in Weiner’s career—he realized the physical and the ethical implications that a work could have.\textsuperscript{161} For Weiner, the physical manifestation of a work was a physical obstruction that imposed its presence on the viewer’s visual plane.

Fig. 23 Lawrence Weiner, *Staples, Twine, Turf*, 1968. Installation view at Windham College Campus, Vermont.

In the same year, he had produced other “interventions”—works that were performances of their titles often of objects intervening with others such as in *One Pint Gloss White Lacquer Poured Directly Upon The Floor And Allowed To Dry* (Fig. 24). The piece stated exactly what Weiner performed; he poured one pint of white lacquer gloss on Robert and Julia Barry’s kitchen floor in New York. However, despite creating other physical interventions in the same year such as the later *A 36” x 36” Removal To The Lathing Or Support Wall Of Plaster or Wallboard From A Wall* (1969), Weiner also produced *Statements* (1968); a book containing 24 typewritten descriptions of works, only some of which he had actually made. *Statements*, similar to Seth Siegelaub’s “Xerox Book,” functioned as a book-exhibition. It allowed Weiner to develop a new means of presenting work that only consisted of typefaces applied to a wall. In *Statements*, Weiner shifted his role as an artist from creating physical interventions (drawing on paper, installation and performance in spaces), to pushing the definition of art away from the material and physical allowing it to exist through language.
Fig. 24 Lawrence Weiner, *One Pint Gloss White Lacquer Poured Directly Upon The Floor And Allowed To Dry*, 1968.

Fig. 25 Lawrence Weiner, Installation view of codicil (“Declaration of Intent”), 1978. *Lawrence Weiner* in the Renaissance Society at University of Chicago, Illinois.
“Declaration of Intent” (Fig. 25) was the culmination of Weiner’s transition to a novel way of presenting descriptions as art pieces. In “Declaration of Intent,” Weiner establishes the conditions for his works in three important ways. First, Weiner liberates himself from being in the role of constructing the piece: “The artist may construct the piece.” This opens up the debate about authorship and the artist, displacing the artist from the work (a contrast to his abstract-expressionist drawings and paintings, and installation pieces from earlier in his career). In “The piece may be fabricated,” Weiner establishes the possibility of the work being fabricated by someone or something else, thereby redistributing the role of authorship and artist to manufacturers, curators and labourers. One of the other implications is that the means by which the fabrication of the piece takes place and therefore made easily reproducible is open to anyone and anything. Secondly, Weiner liberates art from the confines of the physical and material: “The piece need not be built.” Among his contemporaries, Weiner undertook language as his medium of choice while focusing on the physical world without representing it in and as an object. This declaration of intent recalls “Statements,” in which the exhibition-book contained pieces that had not been realized physically. Weiner had also discovered from his experience of the Windham College installation, that the physical/material representation imposed itself on the space. Language on the other hand, and in the way Weiner used language, through statements, only expressed an empirical reality. Finally, Weiner’s third statement is affirmed by the following sentence: “Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.” Following these earlier works, Weiner discloses a preoccupation with the relationship between art and politics into his work that propelled the rest of his career and methods of presenting his works.
One of Weiner’s most important statements about art further explains his transition from performance/installation works to language sculptures, and the parallel between Marxist thought nearly a century before Conceptual art: “Art that imposes conditions—human or otherwise—on the receiver for its appreciation in my eyes constitutes aesthetic fascism.” Weiner, among other Conceptual artists can be seen as part of a revolutionary movement that disputed the tyranny of capitalism. The counter-culture of the 1960s was a series of subversive reactions against the systems of power of post-war society. Swept up by this generation of thinking, Conceptual artists also sought to overturn Modernism, and the commodification of art. Conceptual art, as a revolutionary movement recalled the concerns of a cultural fixation with fetishism in the commodification of the art-object, taking their cue from Karl Marx’s analysis of the commodity in *Capital* (1867-1894). Marx was concerned with examining the social relations brought about by the production of commodities; history could be understood as the relationship between social dynamics and materials. Marx’s materialism, in his analysis of the fetishism of the commodity, dispels the “inherent” mystical properties inscribed onto objects. While Marx argues that the value of a material/object is a property of a thing—different from exchange-value and use-value “which are attributes of men”—value is in the material thing itself absent from human intervention. Marx states:

> Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: Our use-value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects, is our value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it. In the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange values. Now listen how those commodities speak through the mouth of the economist. ‘Value’- (i.e., exchange value) ‘is a property of things, riches’ – (i.e., use-value) ‘of man. Value, in this sense, necessarily implies exchanges, riches do not.’ ‘Riches’

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(use-value) ‘are the attribute of men, value is the attribute of commodities. A man or a community is rich, a pearl or a diamond is valuable…a pearl or a diamond is valuable’ as a pearl or a diamond.\textsuperscript{163}

After the destruction of the Windham College installation and the publication of “Declaration of Intent,” Weiner avoids an authoritarian role in his works and presents the objects/materials as empirical facts of reality. Weiner was engaged in presenting the observable materials of the universe in their natural state; raw and demystified.

The parallel between Marxism and Conceptual art, and Weiner’s works, is further strengthened by the historical resurgence of a growing system of power. Marx’s \textit{The Communist Manifesto} (1848) and \textit{Capital} (1867-1894), anticipate the pitfalls of a capitalist system analyzed in a time of the industrial revolution in Europe. Marx had witnessed the effects of the exploitation of power, the division between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, and the mysterious value that the commodity assumed in society. Within a century, the United States reaped the rewards of becoming an important capitalist nation; mass culture as an effect, emphasized the mystical element created by capitalist ideology which indoctrinated society.\textsuperscript{164}

Weiner’s practices, ideas, methods of production and exhibition strategies attempted to challenge the supremacy of the commodity. By emphasizing the potential reproductions of his work and absolving himself as artist and creator, Weiner uses the commodity as a way to subvert it from its ties to commercial status and its authoritative power. Instead, the condition of


receivership always rests on the viewer willing to receive and create the work. Like Marx’s
demystification of the object, Weiner’s later work, *Stones & Stones & Stones* (Fig. 26), reiterates
the material/object three times stressing its tautological nature both linguistically and materially.
*Stones & Stones & Stones* reverts back to itself, devoid of any transcendent meaning apart from
the metaphors the viewer might apply to the piece. As Alberro writes in his survey of Weiner’s
works:

> Emphasis on the transparency of execution further removes the work from the realm of
    privileged experience by revealing the labour process, moving it towards an egalitarian
    model of communication. By eliminating a hierarchical structure of meaning, regardless
    of their viewers’ backgrounds, the works’ interpretations become equally valid.\(^{165}\)

Previously, the art connoisseur and critic were revered for their ability to discern taste and
meaning of works of art which was replaced by the primacy of the idea by the artist. Weiner,
however, challenges these previous hierarchical structures of meaning and instead validates the
viewer’s interpretation of the work.

\(^{165}\) Alexander Alberro and Alice Zimmerman, eds. “Not How It Should Were It To Be Built But
While Weiner progressed from installation works to the language-works in \textit{Statements} in 1968, in his later career he became more aware of the specifics of the site in ways that are quite distinct from earthworks and public art of the late 70s and early 80s by Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Christo and Jeanne-Claude (Fig. 27), and Michael Heizer. Weiner’s works do not impose on the viewer unlike the works of the aforementioned artists who traversed into land art physically marking the earth, imposing upon the viewer and creating phenomenological relationships between the subject and object. Instead of obstructing a public space, Weiner presents the relationships of humans to objects through language “as a means of presenting a \textit{mise-en-scène}, a physical reality.”\footnote{Willard Holmes, “A Public Conversation with Willard Holmes,” in \textit{Lawrence Weiner}, eds. Alexander Alberro and Alice Zimmerman. (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), 121.} The site-conscious works by Weiner adapt to the site through each different manifestation. Each manifestation potentially enables multifarious
meanings that depart from the otherwise static and specific to the site works of Post-Minimalist artists.

Many Colored Objects Placed Side by Side To Form A Row Of Many Colored Objects (1979), was shown at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York, and at Documenta 7 in Kassel in 1982 on the façade of the Fridericianum (Fig. 28). It was later installed in Ghent, Belgium along the length of the red brick wall of the Raas van Gaverestraat 106 (Fig. 15). The various manifestations of the piece attest to its adaptability, recalling Weiner’s “Declaration of Intent.” At the Leo Castelli Gallery, the piece was presented as black text on a gallery wall which read “Many Colored Objects Placed Side by Side To Form A Row of Many Colored Objects.” In this manifestation, the work easily alluded to the other works placed side by side in the gallery space. At Documenta 7, the work was installed on the façade of the Fridericianum in German. The work can allude to the orange color of the text against the white neoclassical architecture of the building. The work transcends any single installation space, and through the years, the work
continues to adapt to its temporary site installation. In particular, the Ghent installation showcases the work in a sky-blue colour placed on the top that contrasts the aged and neglected red brick of the former industrial building. The text adapts to the length of the building and draws attention to it. The piece simultaneously draws attention to the site, the text itself, and potential contingencies. The aged bricks are coloured objects that are placed side by side to form a row of many coloured objects. Likewise, Weiner turns the blue text into many coloured objects placed side by side as David Batchelor describes, “It has been said that poetry turns words into objects; Weiner turns letters into objects”\textsuperscript{167} Finally, the work proves its endless adaptability, not simply by its past manifestations but in its future contingencies. The text draws attention to the neglected building, but also to the many possible objects in our reality.

Fig. 28 Lawrence Weiner, \textit{Many Colored Objects Placed Side By Side To Form A Row Of Many Colored Objects}, 1982. Installation on the Fridericianum from Documenta 7 in Kasel, Germany (German Version).

Batchelor best articulates Weiner’s endeavor:

As with all of Weiner’s work, an ethical relationship with a material world is implied: not intrusive, not exploitative, not self-aggrandizing; respectful, restrained, informal and often reversible; generally provisional or temporary; always curious.\(^{168}\)

Weiner’s attention to empirical realities recognizes the ethical implications in creating physical obstructions; the demystification of the art-object, stripping it to its materials and material relations; and in his endeavor to eliminate hierarchies of meaning that would otherwise limit the work to just critics and artists. Furthermore, these subversive ideas also allude to ontological concerns. In particular, Timothy Morton explores the idea of the speculative sublime—reprised from the Kantian sublime, in the encounter between object entities in which the uncanny presence of the object stirs us. Rather than returning to the Romantic notion of the sublime which creates a division between the subject and object, the speculative sublime explains the intimacy between objects.\(^{169}\) Weiner presents things we usually take for granted in which objects overcome their use and reveal themselves as alien entities through the speculative sublime. The alternation of objects, as familiar and uncanny entities, displaces the viewer informing him or her of the ubiquitous object-world.

Weiner’s New York exhibition titled *Displacement* (1991-1992), exemplifies his trajectory from his performance and installation pieces of 1968 and book-exhibitions, to site-conscious works that displace the viewer. *Displacement* (Fig. 29) is an exhibition that epitomizes the phrase “empirical realities” with statements about the conditions of physical elements and materials. *Displacement* undoes objects from their assumed value. Like Marx describes in “The

\(^{168}\) Ibid., 76.
Fetishism of the Commodity and The Secret Thereof,” the abandonment of use-value for the exchange-value of materials separates the material from its place in the earth towards its place in commerce. Weiner attempts to establish a relationship between materials and humans that is more intimate than Marx’s use-value: “My art requires that you take the trouble to look at the relationship of a human being to a piece of stone. Not mystically, not religiously.”  

*Displacement* therefore reacquaints the viewer with material realities but also moves her into a speculative questioning.


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170 “Whence arose the illusions of the monetary system? To it gold and silver, when serving as money, did not represent a social relation between producers, but were natural objects with strange social properties. And modern economy, as noon-day, whenever it treats of capital? How long is it since economy discarded the physiocratic illusion, that rents grow out of the soil and not out of society?” Marx, “Fetishism of the Commodity and the Secret Thereof,” 54.

Consider, for example, the work *Titanium & Lead & Air – Moving Into By Virtue Of Inherent Volition* (Fig. 30). As the title suggests, Weiner is revealing not just matter as such, but matter that is invested with independent movement and dynamism in a way that perfectly exemplifies Jane Bennett’s notion of vibrant matter. Similarly, *Sand & Silver + Ferrous Oxide Having Space By Virtue Of Inherent Movement* (Fig. 31) shows how a space is occupied by the movement between elements and substances whose dynamism is a facet of their irreducible qualities. While Weiner’s attention to materials in *Displacement* seems to deal with processes of becoming as opposed to a static view of reality, the subjects of the statements are written as having qualities that are suggestive of a life and agency.\(^{172}\) This shift from a concern with matter to a full questioning of realism itself arises in an interview with Peter Simek in 2012. As Weiner talks about knowledge, parallel realities, and quantum physics, he suggests that reality or realities are beyond the limits of knowledge and that his sculptures question these relationships between human beings and objects. As Simek asks what Weiner means when he says that our concept of humanity is expanding, Weiner replies:

> We were brought up in a world which was based on Aristotle. Science-wise and everything, that’s really quite exciting and you learn a lot. There was one problem: there were parallel realities. And in a parallel reality, there’s always one reality that’s the prime and the second is always a secondary. And everything’s a reflection of something else. It’s a problem with the Freudian thoughts that were going on about art. You dream, yes, but in a dream, a boy can be a girl, or a dog can be a cat, but you can only dream what you know. In my eyes,

making art is very often about something that you don’t know. And if you look quantum, and you look at the idea of realities, and you look at all of the new theory necessary…\(^{173}\)

Further in the interview, Weiner speculates on the realities of objects themselves: “There is a primacy of each individual object. And we’ll see! That’s the whole point of making sculpture, to present a question in a physical form to people.”\(^{174}\) Weiner sees the role of the artist in society as questioning the relationships between humans to objects, and with the new theorizations of objects and realities, to challenge the way we think about ourselves in relation to objects.\(^{175}\)

Fig. 30 Lawrence Weiner, *Titanium & Lead & Air – Moving Into By Virtue Of Inherent Volition* (Installation view from “Displacement,”1991) at the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.


\(^{174}\) Ibid.

\(^{175}\) Ibid.
Weiner’s empirical realities move beyond materialism and explore the primacy of the object through its relations to other objects. He acquaints the viewer to empirical realities that are a part of but are, nevertheless, distanced from a consumerist culture. Not only does Weiner destabilize the hierarchies of meaning, but his works also destabilize ontological hierarchies between objects and subjects by bringing awareness to the force of those very objects.

Mirror Mirror On The Wall Free The Reflection Of Any Reference At All (2005)

While Weiner’s empirical reality works addressed interrelationships between materials and objects in an object world, I argue that Weiner presents idioms as a method of deconstruction to visualize the instability of language. Weiner does not appropriate cultural idioms, but instead his works are an exercise in how language and letters can be viewed as objects. Weiner’s works on idioms as objects however, poses a visual interruption in the viewer between the idiom and its association. In this way, Weiner can emphasize the existence of language as a material fact.

While Weiner’s works reveal different aspects of post-structuralism and Post-Modernist ideas,
his attention to language, deconstruction, and objects aligns him with ideas that were later developed by Speculative Realism. Specifically, they show an inherent reality within language.

THE SALT OF THE EARTH MINGLED WITH THE SALT OF THE SEA

Fig. 32 Lawrence Weiner, *The Salt Of The Earth Mingled With The Salt Of The Sea*, 1984. Postcard from exhibition.

One example of the dualism between metaphor and object is Weiner’s *The Salt Of The Earth Mingled With The Salt Of The Sea* (Fig. 32). It contains the trite expression: “Salt of the Earth,” immediately tied to religious references. The phrase is polysemous in that it has several meanings. While “The Salt Of The Earth” immediately conjures biblical connotations—firstly a metaphor from “The Sermon on the Mount,” where “salt” is a symbol of “purification”\(^\text{176}\) or

\(^{176}\)“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.” Matt. 5:13 NIVUK; “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Take fragrant spices – gum resin, onycha and galbanum – and pure frankincense, all in equal amounts, and make a fragrant blend of incense, the work of a perfumer. It is to be salted and pure and sacred. Grind some of it to powder and place it in front of the ark of the covenant law in the tent of meeting, where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you. Do not make any incense with this formula for yourselves; consider it holy to the Lord.” Exod. 30: 34-37 NIVUK.
“God’s covenant” — the expression is loosened with the succeeding expression: “the salt of the sea.” More precisely, while the immediacy of the idiom is processed initially by the viewer, the idiom is at once ruptured by the conjunction of the subsequent phrase “Salt of the Sea,” a seemingly matter of fact statement. The effect is a phrase that at once recalls metaphorical references but also of a phrase that simply reports on an empirical reality. The viewer becomes aware of himself (his bias) in the work and at once the objectiveness of the statement decenters the viewer. A statement can thus be read as a series of objects (words) that can be disassembled and reassembled to rupture and displace forms of meaning, which is strengthened by Weiner’s use of capital letters. Weiner uses words as blocks; the result is a visual homogenous continuum that contests hierarchy between the words. Materially, the salt of the sea is salt that inheres in water, whereas the salt of the earth inheres in solid matter. In this work, salt also becomes “matter” on each side of the phrasing.

Speculative Realism can be analyzed as inheriting the ideas of deconstruction, such as attempting to identify a disavowed marginality that is located through binary opposition. Speculative Realism destabilizes humans from the center of ontology and exposes the “inferior” binary conceived to be objects in the human-object binary. If we recall the first chapter, both Conceptual artists and Speculative Realists continued the method of deconstruction by challenging predisposed systems of knowledge. Conceptual artists challenged hierarchies of knowledge and traditional notions of art (i.e. painting, sculpture). In particular, Weiner challenges the traditional concept of art by legitimizing language as a medium. Weiner also leaves the condition of receivership to the viewer, which results in an egalitarian model of

177 “Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings.” Lev. 2:13 NIVUK.
communication that differs from Greenberg’s rigid definition of aesthetics and even Kosuth’s definite model of “art as idea.” Speculative Realism also challenges the problem of correlationism inherited by Immanuel Kant by decentering the human-being from the epicenter of ontology and knowledge of reality. Instead, Harman, Morton, and Bennett restructure reality as a democracy of ontologies by which objects relate vicariously with one another exploring the notions of agency and causality of objects. To further understand the relationship and differences between Weiner, Speculative Realism, and deconstruction, a brief examination of the idea of deconstruction by Jacques Derrida is necessary.

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) was a French philosopher best known for developing deconstruction in the late 1960s. In 1967, Derrida published three books (Of Grammatology, Writing and Difference, and Speech and Phenomena) which demonstrate his partnership of philosophy with language. It is precisely this bridge between philosophy (specifically his critique of metaphysics and the limits of phenomenology) and language that complements the ensuing ideas of Speculative Realism and thus our analysis of Weiner’s works. In particular, Derrida endeavored to demonstrate the instability of meaning and uncover the paradox of identity/presence in Western Metaphysics. The metaphysics of presence advances Derrida’s notion of logocentrism; the belief that language is the essential expression of reality. A metaphysics of presence assumes a stable identity of phenomena to reference; or in other words, the way we perceive the world does not necessarily imply actuality or reality. Derrida observes that language also poses the same problem of the idea of presence; the relation between the signifier and the signified is also unstable through the privileging of the sensible from the intelligible. Thus, meaning or identity is thus deferred.
Following Derrida, I argue that Weiner’s works deconstruct language to reveal the “inferior” binary opposition through metaphor. He also decenters the author and authority in an implicit and yet ambiguous way that demonstrates a conscientious consideration of the impact of his work. Despite portraying a sensible persona through his work in which he states he creates empirical realities and leaves the conditions of receivership on the receiver, his interviews and the works themselves reveal something more. In his site-conscious work *Smashed To Pieces (In The Still Of The Night)* (Fig. 33), the painted letters rest on the World War II anti-aircraft defense tower in Esterházy park, Vienna. In an interview with Benjamin Buchloh, Weiner addresses the work as a metaphor for the context bound structure. The flak towers in Vienna served as large reinforced concrete structures built in 1942-1945. These towers were ordered by Adolf Hitler to be constructed and used as bomb shelters but also contained guns and fire control. The flak towers are a reminder of the city’s relation to the Holocaust and what could have been, after a successful war, an adorned tower in “black marble and the names of the Reich’s fallen inscribed in gold.”\(^{179}\) However, despite Buchloh’s contextual reading of the statement, Weiner insists he was interested with the sounds of things in the night and in the day; that he was preoccupied with how sounds sound different from night to day in cities.\(^{180}\) Only after Buchloh presses Weiner on the relation between the city’s historical context and the work does Weiner admit that while the work might have a metaphor, the work also transcends beyond that single point of reference.


While Weiner’s site-conscious works at first could be considered metaphoric, the works also refer to an infinite “other” illustrating the deconstruction of a stable presence. Through this deconstruction of presence, Weiner displaces the signified from the signifier in which being, identity or the signified is caught in a perpetual state of ‘becoming.’ Instead of the repetitions (either materially or linguistically through production and reproduction) seen as replications without no original (simulacra), the different manifestations of Weiner’s works are more akin to
Gilles Deleuze’ concept of difference:¹⁸¹ For Deleuze, repetition implies “becoming,” to renew, and the refusal of the static being.¹⁸² Instead of x and ~x, Deleuze’s transcendental idea of vice-diction (contrary to contradiction) in Difference and Repetition (1968), is presented as x and dx, in which dx is minimal in relation to x, but it is sufficient for change.¹⁸³ In his exhibition “The Other Side Of A Cul-De-Sac” (2009), commissioned by The Power Plant in Toronto, Canada, Weiner’s works explore both the interior and exterior facets of the building. Such works, More Saltpeter Than Black Powder and Enough [Black Powder] To Make It Explode (Fig. 34) refer to the building’s and city’s historical context as “a former site of combustion, manifested most obviously through its smokestack,” Gregory Burke, the curator of the exhibition, describes.¹⁸⁴ While these particular works reciprocate spatially with The Power Plant and city, other potential manifestations of the work reinforce the potentialities in the realizations of the works. As Dieter Schwartz writes in reference to metaphor and Weiner’s works, they stand as outlines, awaiting to be realized:¹⁸⁵ they are “temporary configurations.”¹⁸⁶ If we take the title of the exhibition as a statement, The Other Side Of A Cul-De-Sac, plays on the limits or impasses in language but alludes to potentialities rather than entropy.

¹⁸³ “In the infinitely large, the equal contradicts the unequal to the extent that it possesses it in essence, and contradicts itself to the extent that it denies itself in denying the unequal.” Ibid., 46.
¹⁸⁴ Gregory Burke, “986 Words Below-The Other Side Of A Cul-De-Sac “ in Lawrence The Other Side Of A Cul-De-Sac (Toronto, Canada: The Power Plant, 2009)
¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 182.
As the works themselves are statements without implications written contrary to an imperative, the infinite potentialities of his works are further fulfilled by the viewer/receiver. While a metaphor is a temporal displacement of meaning, the receiver brings his or her own metaphor as Weiner states in an interview with Isabela Burley of *DazedDigital*:

The whole point of the work is that it puts a material fact out. It has no metaphor. I don't know how someone will react. It doesn't carry a hidden meaning. You don’t miss the point, the point is there. Each individual person comes to art and looks at it. If it doesn't have a metaphor, they will take their needs and their desires and build a metaphor from what they are looking at.\(^{187}\)

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The multiplicity of metaphors engendered by a single work further emphasizes the alterity of language challenging the notion of an absolute truth in meaning. Another aspect of Weiner’s work is translation affirming future contingencies. At the 2013, 55th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale, Lawrence Weiner’s exhibition *The Grace Of A Gesture* (Fig. 35) appeared on the ground floor of the Palazzo Bembo by the Rialto bridge. As part of his exhibition, the statement, *The Grace Of A Gesture*, appeared on five of Venice’s major sources of transportation, the vaporetto, or the waterbus. The installation appeared in different languages (Fig. 36), transporting the work through Venice on the Canale Grande to the Arsenale and Giardini to name a few places. Likewise, the installation was made into temporary tattoos (Fig. 37) which people displayed. The exhibition was complemented with other works from his 1991 exhibition *Displacement* in which the works were translated in Italian to accompany the English version of the works. Weiner’s contribution to the Venice Biennale was a spatiotemporal work that traversed physical location and languages recalling his 1969 work in English and Dutch, *A Translation From One Language Into Another (Een Vertaling Van De Ene Taal Naar De Andere)* installed in Het Spui, Amsterdamn.

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Fig. 35 Lawrence Weiner, *The Grace Of A Gesture*, 2013. Vaporetto installation view from the 55th Venice Biennale, Italy.

Fig. 36 Lawrence Weiner, *The Grace Of A Gesture*, 2013. (Italian Version)
Weiner’s work presents displacements, transportation, and infinite trajectories through the various manifestations and translations. As an object, the language-sculptures have two different stages: The work in itself is not a metaphor but rather an object with causal properties, “turned into a metaphor by society.”\(^\text{189}\) However, while Weiner emphatically states his works are empirical facts about the interrelations between humans and objects, his statements become translations of his observations between humans and objects.\(^\text{190}\) His works present an unequivocal state of translation and movement between object and metaphor: “A translation is really the moving of one object to another place,”\(^\text{191}\) However, it is also a work constantly changing. This relational oscillation of objects is explored further in Speculative Realism.

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\(^\text{191}\) Weiner, “A Translation From One Language To Another 1995,” 130.
In Timothy Morton’s “Objects As Temporary Autonomous Zones” (2011), Morton explores how objects are contradictions whose nature is impervious to our gaze. This notion of the object as a contradiction explores Derrida’s critique of the contradictions and aporias of western metaphysics. Let us briefly consider *The Law of Thought*; a set of three axioms that is the basis for the principles of philosophical logic. Explored in detail by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* and then again notably by Bertrand Russell in *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), the law of thought states the following:

1. The Law of Identity: A: A=A ‘Whatever is, is’
2. The Law of Non-Contradiction: ~(A • ~A) ‘Nothing can both be and not be’
3. The Law of Excluded Middle: A v ~A ‘Everything must either be or not be’

If we refer to Derrida’s deconstruction, his concept of *différance* from the essay “Difference” (1968) challenges the Law of Non-Contradiction. Quite simply, *différance* is homophonous to différence; they both have the same pronunciation. Furthermore, it recalls the French word *différer* that is polysemous; it means both “distinction” and “delay.” “To differ” (distinction) implies “nonidentity;” while “delay” implies sameness; it speaks of the same thing or object being deferred. For Derrida, *différance* becomes an example of what lies at the periphery of Western Metaphysics, it is an example of many contradictions in language and meaning that defeats the idea of absolute reference from phenomena. *Différance* firstly, deconstructs

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phonocentrism; or the belief that speech is inherently more important than writing. Likewise, *différance* also exposes the ambiguity at the intelligible level: it is a type of antonym, “distinction” and “delay,” are both spelled *différer* in French and both contradict the other inherently through meaning. *Différance* in this case deconstructs logocentrism; the belief that language is the essential expression of reality.

In Morton’s analysis of object-oriented-ontology, he challenges a post-Kantian correlationist view of the world which states that human perception is at the epicenter of ontology. Morton reveals the inherent problems with our methods of knowledge, especially in the sciences, as systems that privilege human perception and human ontology to infer about reality. In OOO, the attention to objects as ontological beings as part of a reality that is inaccessible to us, ruptures the law of non-contradiction: “An object is p ∧ ¬p.” An object is autonomous and yet in an object-world it is an object that is part of another. Morton explores an ontological depth through Harman’s example of the coral reef: “A coral reef is made of coral, fish, seaweed, plankton and so on. But one of these things on its own doesn’t embody part of a reef. Yet the reef is just an assemblage of these particular parts.” Thus, an object is not reducible to its parts, and neither can an object be reduced to its whole. Reality is an object-world in which the animate and inanimate, the organic and inorganic, the material and immaterial are autonomous entities.

Language can also be conceived of as a system of objects containing many objects in the same way “poetry turns words into objects.” However, for Morton, an object-oriented-rhetoric, as he describes it in “Sublime Objects” (2011), also positions the metaphor as an object of

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196 Ibid.
197 Ibid., 151.
198 Morton, “Objects as Temporary Autonomous Zones,” 149.
199 Ibid., 150.
delivery, through which we are able to vicariously relate to other objects.\textsuperscript{200} If before through deconstruction, the metaphor was a kind of delivery to other signifiers in which metaphors are caught in perpetual referentiality,\textsuperscript{201} for Morton, metaphor similarly becomes a vehicle towards obscurity: “If we generalize this to the whole of rhetoric, object-oriented rhetoric becomes the way objects obscure themselves in fold upon fold of mysterious robes, caverns, and fortresses of solitude and octopus ink.”\textsuperscript{202} However, contrary to deconstruction’s entropic state, Morton’s notion of obscurity is also a way in which an object preserves its autonomy. In OOO, the withdrawnness of the object does not necessarily present a negative connotation; it is also the means by which we vicariously come into a temporary presence of objects that incites the speculative sublime.\textsuperscript{203} Metaphor in OOO is the bridge between proximity and distance; as Morton later describes in \textit{Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology Causality} (2013), it is the aesthetic dimension, and “the aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension.”\textsuperscript{204}

Weiner presents temporary configurations in his works such as in the synecdoche, \textit{Bits & Pieces Put Together To Present A Semblance Of A Whole} (Fig. 38). These temporary configurations are also part of the contingencies in his works that depart from the deconstructionist ideas of contradiction, formally resembling a Deleuzian differential transcendence. However, it is through Morton’s OOO that the object transcends even Deleuze’ process philosophy.\textsuperscript{205} OOO overcomes an object’s reduction to processes; the “in-betweeness” of one object and another is just another object.\textsuperscript{206} Weiner’s works through the analysis of Morton’s OOO, is the transition from materialism to a Speculative Realism in art. This transition

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{200} Morton, “Sublime Objects,” 213.
  \item \textsuperscript{201} Martin McQuillan, \textit{Deconstruction: A Reader} (New York: Routledge, 2000), 20.
  \item \textsuperscript{202} Morton, “Sublime Objects, “213.
  \item \textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 223.
  \item \textsuperscript{204} Morton, \textit{Realist Magic}, 20.
  \item \textsuperscript{205} Both Gilles Deleuze and Alfred North Whitehead developed material process philosophies.
  \item \textsuperscript{206} Ibid., 174.
\end{itemize}
informs us about an object-world determined by contradiction, and our relation between the proximity and distance of an autonomous and causal object.²⁰⁷

![Image](image.png)

**Fig. 38** Lawrence Weiner, *Bits & Pieces*, 1991. 2003 installation on the Southeast Terrace Wall of the Walker Art Center along Hennepin Avenue in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

**Absence and Presence: Phantasia and xObjects**

Many of Weiner’s works are merely verbs which do not refer to particular objects. In 1969 he created works such as *Ignited, Transferred, Thrown*, and *Ruptured* (Fig. 39). Written in the past tense, the statements refer to anonymous objects (*xObjects*) which were ignited, transferred, and thrown. Simultaneously, the works also conjure an object in the receiver “upon occasion of receivership,” in a phantasmagorical manner. In Morton’s “Sublime Objects” (2011), he describes two distinct methods of vicariously relating to objects: transport; which we discussed in the previous section, a method by which an object is transferred through references

(metaphors) in the void, or from the withdrawn. The second method of vicarious relation is called phantasia: an object is conjured from a void and comes into contact with another object. Similar to Morton’s example of phantasia, in which the word “spice” conjures numerous specific spices, Weiner’s works such as Ignited, Transferred, Thrown and Ruptured conjure numerous objects as well. It is through the absence that a presence is conjured, if only a transitory presence like a sort of phantasm.

Works such as Water Made It Wet (Fig. 40), installed in Kunstfestivalen Lofoten, Norway on the side of a building which faces the water, and later in 2005 on a bridge in Radcliffe, England (Fig. 41), build a consciousness of the site in which it is placed. However, as with some of Weiner’s site-conscious works, when manifested in a book, paper, or wall, the work stands ready to be realized and to incite causal objects. It is through such manifestations in books, and pamphlets that his works stand as objective statements. The absence of the object, an xObject is more evident, placed in isolation from a site and functions like a fragment from a picture that escapes our view.

Fig. 39 Lawrence Weiner, Ruptured, 1969

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208 Ibid.
209 Ibid.
Fig. 40 Lawrence Weiner, *Water Made It Wet*, 1998. Installation in Kunstfestivalen Lofoten, Norway.

Fig. 41 Lawrence Weiner, *Water Made It Wet*, 2005. Installation over the Manchester, Bolton and Bury Canal near Radcliffe, England.
Weiner began to incorporate symbols, most of them mathematical symbols such as plus signs, minus signs, equal signs which also complement his use of parentheses. While these symbols appeared in his exhibition *Displacement* (1991), they complemented the material observations that recalled transmutations between substances found in alchemy. Weiner’s use of punctuations divides or emphasizes text. In *Displacement*, the symbols emphasize the material relationships and transitions between materials that do not imply phonetic notational systems but material equations with the replacement of “and” with “+”.210 His use of other symbols such as lines and parentheses present an absence in his works such as *Placed In the Heat Of The Day*. *Placed In The Heat Of The Night* (Fig. 42), and ( ) (±) ( ) Held Together With Water (1993). Similar to his works from *Displacement*, Weiner’s use of symbols, as Pelzer describes, are used “as mute signs that, while not pronounced, determine a statement's meaning. The unpronounceable is made to act.”211 The spatial graphing in his post 1970s works introduce a further absence that provide a visual element that guide the viewer’s eye in an attempt to conjure these implied yet mute objects.212


211 Ibid., 98.
212 Ibid., 102.
In Weiner’s *The Other Side of A Cul-De-Sac* (2009), while some statements are presented with mathematical symbols, others such as *Enough [Gold] To Make It Shine* appear with parentheses and with the addition of angled lines that appear to radiate from the word by parentheses. The isolation of the word *gold* from the rest of the words is affirmed by the beams that resemble light rays, but also by its distinct font choice. This work, I argue, implicates an absent object. The “light” rays illuminate the key word which joins its predicating statement.

In the catalogue-book of the exhibition, the pictorial works follow the structure of a statement that alludes to Weiner’s 1998 work *More Than Enough* (Fig. 43), installed alongside The Power Plant’s smokestack.\(^{213}\) Similarly, in the gallery-exhibition, each pictorial work was placed beside its companion *More Than Enough* work on the same wall. For instance, *More Silver Than Gold*, precedes *Enough [Gold] To Make It Shine*. The curatorial and design decisions present a different yet cohesive manifestation of his previous work of 1998 to the 2009 exhibition. The correlation between both works, the adapted *More Than Enough* work and the pictorial work, also presents a relationship in which the first work predicates the second work. In a second example of these statement pairs, *More Aluminum Than Lead* (Fig. 44) compares two materials; in this case lead becomes the subject of the next statement: *Enough [Lead] To Make It Heavy* (Fig. 45). The work can thus be read as: *More Aluminum Than Lead* but *Enough [Lead] To Make It Heavy*. The relationship of both statements implicating the other reads as a mathematical or chemical riddle that at once precludes the answer. In *Enough [Lead] To Make It Heavy*, the pronoun “It” is the answer to the riddle which the viewer attempts to solve. The absent object becomes present through the interrelation between the work in the catalogue-book and the one in exhibition. This pattern repeats with: *More Silver Than Gold* (Fig. 46), *Enough

\(^{213}\) Gregory Burke, “986 Words Below-The Other Side Of A Cul-De-Sac,” in *Lawrence The Other Side Of A Cul-De-Sac* (Toronto, Canada: The Power Plant, 2009).
[Gold] To Make It Shine (Fig. 47); More Aluminum Than Lead, Enough [Lead] To Make It Heavy; More Saltpeter Than Black Powder, Enough [Black Powder] To Make It Explode; More Yellow Than Blue, Enough [Blue] To Make It Green (Fig. 48).

Fig. 43 Lawrence Weiner, *More Than Enough*, 2009. Installation on the smokestack at the Power Plant in Toronto, Canada.
Fig. 44 Lawrence Weiner, *More Aluminum Than Lead*, 2009.

Fig. 45 Lawrence Weiner, *Enough [Lead] To Make It Heavy*, 2009.
Fig. 46 Lawrence Weiner, More Silver Than Gold, 2009.

Fig. 47 Lawrence Weiner, Enough [Gold] To Make It Shine, 2009.
The relationship between absence and presence in Weiner’s works can also be analyzed through Marx’s demystification of the object and the subsequent post-Marxist analyses that uncover this juxtaposition in different ways. While in chapter one, I analyzed the preconceptions of Conceptual art as anti-aesthetic, I argue that using Morton’s notion of the aesthetic causal dimension, and Harman’s concept of vicarious causation and allure overcomes the idea of Conceptual art as the anti-aesthetic. More specifically, I argue that the aesthetic dimension and allure are revealed by Weiner’s object-object relations.

In an interview with Lawrence Weiner, Marjorie Welish from *BOMB magazine* comments that some viewers might consider his works as “a withholding of pleasure.”\(^2\) While his works might incite an anti-visual tactic in favor of language, Weiner insists that what he presents is

“the immediate tactile response,” of the interrelation of objects and humans. The visualization in his works is left for the viewer to, upon receivership, materialize and realize. If we recall, for Weiner, the spatial is the means by which an artist forces his or her fascist ideas on the viewer. Thus, Weiner extends visuality to the viewers as receivers in ways that contrast the pervasive visual seduction of the consumer in current visual culture. Nicholas Mirzoeff’s introduction to his book *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, states that Post-Modernism is in fact a visual deconstruction that aims to challenge our definitions of culture in “purely linguistic terms,” disrupting our preconceived notions of reality citing photographer Sherrie Levine as an example. For Mirzoeff, the visual dimension attempts to shatter the belief in “truth” by presenting reality as the “disjunctured and fragmented culture.” This opposes a “textual model of the world,” that, up until the 19th-century, was seen as the “highest form of intellectual practice” contesting the poststructuralist turn in favor of text (Derrida). As Mirzoeff observes in W. J. T Mitchell’s “picture theory,” 20th-century visual culture, on the otherhand, challenges the textual-world.

215 Ibid.
216 Nicholas Mirzoeff, “What is Visual Culture?” in *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 5-9
217 Ibid., 5.
218 Ibid., 5.
219 Ibid.
Fig. 49 Lawrence Weiner, *Things Made To Be Seen Forcefully Obscured*, 1996. Installation on the Veletrzni Palac in Prague, Czech Republic.

At the start of the chapter, I introduced Weiner as an artist who creates works that continue to be relevant. Despite an initial contradiction between Weiner’s textual work, and Post-Modernist artists, I argue that Weiner’s works in fact present, if not mobilize visuality in a spectator who is a lord rather than a serf, contrasting the barrage of imposed conditions in images dictated by capitalist production. In *Things Made To Be Seen Forcefully Obscured* (Fig. 49), Weiner exemplifies the unveiling of illusion, a demystification of the object that recalls Marx’s theory of the commodity. Theodor Adorno, however, later anticipates the effect of mass culture by the distinction between essence and appearance in which the commodity hides its essence and where culture is perpetually caught by a false-consciousness.\(^{220}\) The absence and presence that Weiner attempts to overcome is the illusion and false-knowledge/consciousness

perpetuated by the systems of power which claim to tell us myths about our false needs or desires.221 In this way, Weiner strips art and the object of illusion:

It is not in the best interests of Western society for human beings to understand their relationship to objects on a non-empathetic, non-historical view, but on a reality view, so everything is designed to keep you totally involved in doing the job that journalists are supposed to be doing. You are kept totally involved in the process of forgetting about the fact that perhaps a solution can be found in a relationship to a piece of steel, to red, yellow or orange.222

Weiner’s works appear in contrast to the billboard signs that are part of our routine visual stimulus. The visual desire or pleasure one obtains from Weiner’s works does not follow the repetitive visual model of gaze and consumption. Visually, the statements are horizontal block capital letters usually without periods or commas depicting a continuity of objects critiquing hierarchical “verticalist” thinking in the tradition of artistic visual representation.223 Moreover, Weiner’s works present a model of appreciation that could be analyzed through Jean-François Lyotard’s revival of the Kantian sublime in The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1979). The sublime, for Lyotard, is the unrepresentable: “It must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented.”224 For Lyotard, the avant-gardes are dismantling “artifices of presentation which make it possible to subordinate thought to the gaze and to turn it away from the unpresentable,” citing, Malevich,

221 Peter Uwe Hohendahl, Prismatic Thought: Theodor W. Adorno (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 121.
Picasso and Braque, Cezanne, and Duchamp as challenges to presuppositions of those in power (and furthermore his critique on totalitarianism of grand narratives). Thus, for Lyotard, the Post-Modern aesthetic experience lies in the contradiction of pleasure and pain; “the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept.” Weiner’s works thus challenge the commodification of the object, but also include or infer mute objects, xObjects, presenting this oscillation between absence and presence, of pain and pleasure that create the sublime, an allusion to the conceivable that which cannot be presented.

As a political critique, Weiner exhumes the object from commodification and capitalist control; as an ontological critique, Weiner reinstates the object as the subject of his art, decentering the viewer from a position of ontological-centrism. If in fact the viewer brings his or her own metaphor to the work, it is a temporal presence, one that does not, following Speculative Realism, grasp the reality of the object. Instead, what the viewer grasps momentarily through metaphor, through the phantasm of the xObject is one side of its reality in the same way the dark side of the moon is imperceptible. As Weiner’s work states, As Far As The Eye Can See (Fig. 50); the visual dimension is limited and cannot perceive the object’s unknown reality.

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225 Lyotard’s main criticism in The Postmodern Condition, is how the computer age has transformed knowledge into information that is ultimately legislated by those in power. The problem arises when those in power are also the arbiters of the legitimizing information. But who authorizes the authority figure? He describes this through Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of “language-games.” Ibid., 79. See, Jean Francois-Lyotard, Libidinal Economy (Great Britain: The Athlone Press, 2004), Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G.E.M Anscombe (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2009).

226 Lyotard’s idea of pain, I term absence, is the repression of the concept despite our imagination of it. The Postmodern Condition, 81.

227 Ibid.
The study of the ontology of objects is of a reality without presence but that metaphor elucidates through absence. The play of presence and absence in Weiner’s works, I have argued, is essential to illustrate a Speculative Realist analysis of art-objects. Speculative Realism explains the added dimension of magic, of something ghostly, of beauty, in Weiner’s works. While Weiner’s works have been analyzed post-structurally, through Marxist theory, and even Lyotard’s Freudian analysis of desire, the transition from materialism to Speculative Realism does not completely evade human perception or their relation to the works; rather, it reconsiders perception as limited in grasping reality. Moreover, physical causation between objects is metaphorical and wherein beauty lies. As Harman explains, “If there is something ghostly and
magical about beauty, then this disturbing magic already lies in the heart of physical matter, not just in the privacy of the human soul.”

Conclusion

The trajectory of an artist such as Lawrence Weiner has been central to our understanding of his political ideas drawn from the 1960s that propelled him to demystify the object and consider the ethical implications of its physical presentation. Likewise, his works have informed us of a deconstructionist analysis that ruptures a static meaning distributed among different manifestations of his works, and through the instances of occasions of receivership. His works are spatiotemporal, and as we have discovered, they also present realities that are impervious to perception. If objects are, as Jane Bennett describes, vital materials with causal properties and agency, then Weiner’s works legitimize the object as an entity with ontological status. Works such as A Glacier Vandalized (Fig, 51) reposition the viewer as an object of agency with causal properties, but also as the purveyor of an ecological crisis. In decentering the viewer, his works allow us to become acquainted with the “alien as alien” of object entities, but also exposes our historical anthropocentric view of the world that has caused irreparable affects to the non-human, to the inanimate, to the inorganic. A Glacier Vandalized, thus, also brings an ethical dimension to Weiner’s entire oeuvre and offers a new way to think about his attention to the primacy of objects. Thus, I consider the works of contemporary artists Judy Natal and Jung Lee who, along with my assessment of the ethical dimension of Speculative Realism, I continue to explore objects and their primacy in relation to humans as part of an object-world.

Fig. 51 Lawrence Weiner, A Glacier Vandalized, 1969.
CHAPTER 3: JUDY NATAL- UNEARTHING VITAL MATERIALISMS

Introduction

Judy Natal is an American photographer specializing in human interventions in the natural landscape. Exploring different landscapes from the deserts of Las Vegas Nevada, and Arizona, to the volcanic and geologically active highlands of Iceland, Natal’s photographs incite analysis and reflection of current and future ecological contingencies. Natal’s photographs are central to the discourse of art as a vehicle towards a new awareness of objects. In particular, her works integrate ecological, art historical and ontological points of analysis that present art-objects in a new perspective. I argue that Natal’s photographic projects *Earthwords* (2004) and *Neon Boneyard Las Vegas A-Z* (2006) are Post-Conceptual artworks that continue an ontological consideration of text as an object-entity that was introduced by Lawrence Weiner.

This chapter continues the analysis of language as objects and provides insight into the medium of photography as a means of documenting these object-object relations. In the first section I discuss Natal’s photographic textual installations in *Earthwords* (1999-2001). *Earthwords*, published by Light Work in 2004, explores the dialogue between text and language from found plastic, metal and neon letters from across the Chicago and Los Angeles landscapes. Inspired by the work and writings of land artist Robert Smithson, my analysis of Natal’s works explore the transition from Smithson’s phenomenological work to Natal’s work through the lens of Speculative Realism. Through the ideas of Jane Bennett and Timothy Morton, and Amanda Boetzkes, I explore the ethical implications of Natal’s earth works.

The last section explores Judy Natal’s project *Neon Boneyard Las Vegas A-Z* (2002-2006), a collection of photographs of casino signs unrestored and kept by the Neon Museum since 1996. Natal unearths a vigor within these abandoned objects that at first recalls their
previous place among the Las Vegas Strip. However, the photographs also depict a force within these objects through their integration of landscape and wildlife. This project informs us of the reality of objects that continues to exist after their use by humans. *Neon Boneyard Las Vegas A-Z* also calls us to question the life of objects beyond waste. Evoking the ideas of Speculative Realism, I contrast the objects as symbols of American capitalism with objects as ontological entities.

Metaphor or the (Vicarious) Emergence of Words

![Image](attachment:image.png)

Fig. 52 Richard Long, *A Line Made by Walking*, 1967. Tate Britain.
Robert Smithson wrote: “Language should find itself in the physical world, and not end up locked in an idea in somebody’s head.” Post-Modern art had introduced a variety of materials as artistic mediums, and opened the definition of art to configurations beyond sculpture or painting. The exodus of art from the gallery space and towards the outside world was led by artists like Robert Smithson, Richard Serra, Robert Morris, and Richard Long (Fig. 52) in the late 1970s. These artists traversed public, landscape, sculpture, installation and performance art which made the categorization of their art difficult. In her essay, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (1979), Rosalind Krauss makes a Klein group to map out the expanded field of sculpture made by these artists at the end of the 1960s (Fig. 53). Borrowing from a concept of mathematics and Structuralist linguistics, the Klein group is a logical way of illustrating the relationships within a group which stem from a set of binaries that later expand into a quaternary

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“Sculpture” inevitably overcame the limits of Modernist sculpture, and began to explore the exclusions of *not-landscape*, and *not-architecture* thus redefining “sculpture” through Post-Modern terms. Smithson’s works, for example, are defined by Krauss as *site-construction*, the product of landscape and architecture, and *marked-sites*, the combination of landscape and non-landscape. In a different way, borrowing from Smithson’s site-constructions and marked-sites, Judy Natal revisits Smithson’s ideas of language as a material entity and landscape as a dialectic of materialism through nature in the photographic series of site-constructed language-sculptures. While the scale and forms of land art readily suggests phenomenological interpretations, I argue that Judy Natal’s work, inspired by Smithson’s writings, brings a new level of interpretation. Contrary to phenomenological readings of Land Art, Judy Natal’s work suggests a dialogue between landscape and viewer in which the visual experience is decentered and the presence of the object is always deferred. Natal’s works ultimately demonstrate a transition from a dialectic of materialism to a speculative approach to object realities, where objects have not simply been materialized as metal, plastic or neon letters among the landscape materials of soil, rocks or plants. Instead, beyond their material configurations, the works present object-object relations through their vicarious allure.

Accepting a residency at Joshua Tree National Park, Judy Natal was met with 800,000 acres of grand geological monoliths and wildlife from two desert ecosystems, the Mojave and the Colorado. Over the course of three years, Natal photographed the desert landscape while inspired by Smithson’s writings, and attempted to “create an ongoing dialogue with his work.”

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231 Ibid.
The title *Earthwords* was a development from Smithson’s *Earthworks*. The series of photographs combined recycled signage, plastic, metal, and neon letters, and used the Joshua Tree National Park as her canvas. The predominantly greyscale photographs range from single letters within the landscape to formed words that each exchange with the landscape like a dialogue between two object realities. In the same way that Smithson created site-constructions and marked-sites by collecting, removing, and transferring materials from one site to another, be it a different landscape or inside of the gallery space, Natal likewise collected, removed and transferred into the new location (Joshua Tree National Park) the recycled signage from Chicago and Los Angeles. Both artists manipulate the landscape by transferring, removing, and adding to the site. While Smithson manufactured his earthworks by using bulldozers, physically moving the earth into a specific configuration, Natal adds to the site, introducing new allegorical contingencies, and dialogues between materials.

The series of photographs entitled *Dust to Dust* (Fig. 54), *Beauty* (Fig. 55), and *Death* (Fig. 56) are made up of reflective materials that mirror the desert landscape and the elements of nature as seen in the reflection of the sun’s glares in the letters. As a result of the reflective letters, the photographs present reciprocity between the materials and environment. More specifically in *Dust to Dust*, the photograph presents a background of monoliths where the words “dust to” appear as a reflective apparition without an origin. The photograph centers on the words which appear impressed on the rock formation. The actual material letters are located on the ground placed in such a way that as the light hits the letters, their reflection appears ghostlike.

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on the rock. The relationship between the reflective material and landscape works to displace the material to create reflections, shadows, and semblances in the same way the allegorical behaves as a displacement. Robert Smithson was known to use mirrors in many of his works, especially in his non-sites. In particular, his series of mirror displacements created in 1969 (Fig. 57) displaces the sky onto rocky banks, compost heaps and grassy slopes. The result of such displacements is blue and white rectangular forms (the mirrors) that contrast the red and brown earth colors of the landscape. As Natal works in black and white, she displaces light as opposed to color. In other works such as Dust to Dust, she displaces light from the letter’s reflective surface onto the rocks. In addition to light and colour, Natal adds another element of complexity to the works by displacing culture, or more accurately, the idiom “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

Fig. 54 Judy Natal, Dust to Dust, 2000.
Fig. 55 Judy Natal, *Beauty*, 1999.

Fig. 56 Judy Natal, *Death*, 1999.
As I discussed in the previous chapter, Lawrence Weiner uses allegory as a way to introduce contingencies in meaning, but also as a way to displace the viewer from the presence of an absolute meaning. Weiner similarly used the idiom, *Earth to Earth Ashes to Ashes Dust to Dust* (1970), as a way to decenter the idiom from its “liturgical circumstance” to present instead a transmutation between materials.\(^{235}\) *Dust to Dust, Death and Beauty*, by contrast, displace the cultural onto a material landscape. The allegorical dimension of Natal’s works however, as in Smithson’s works, is imbued with material and object qualities that transport, rearrange and disrupt other materials and objects. As Craig Owens describes in his discussion of Smithson’s works in “Earthwords” (1979):

In allegory, language is broken up, dispersed, in order to acquire a new and intensified meaning in its fragmentation. But if allegory ‘opens up a gulf in the solid massif of verbal meaning and forces the gaze into the depths of language,’ it is because it is in essence a form of writing; allegory ‘at one stroke… transforms things and works into stirring writing’ and, conversely, writing into an object: in allegory, ‘the written word also tends toward the visual.’

Like in allegory, language and the visual similarly present the transportation and conjuring of objects. Language bears object properties. For instance, in the etymological understanding of the word metaphor: in Latin *metaphora* meaning “a carrying over,” and from the Greek μεταφορά meaning “a transfer.” For Graham Harman “allure” is the causal object that “splits an object from its sensual notes,” thereby making allegory and metaphor possible. Similarly, for Timothy Morton, metaphor is an aesthetic object that transports you to another object or confronts you with another object in what he terms “transport” and “phantasia.”

This notion of transportation, dispersal, and movement is reiterated by Ron Graziani in *Robert Smithson and the American Landscape* (2004): “The allegorical as an act of relocation in rearranging material from one site to another was Smithson’s working model…” Having equated language and visuality with transport and movement, Speculative Realism on the other hand remodels our concept of visuality, introducing its limits, and presents the necessary contradiction of absence and presence. As Harman succinctly states, “Allure is the presence of objects to each other in

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Thus, Natal presents various forms of displacement through language, and art-making, surpassing the limits of perception and instead emphasizing an imperceptible ontology of objects.

As perception is overcome through an object’s allure and what Morton terms, the “sublime object,” Natal’s work titled *Sin* (Fig. 58) implements movement beyond its material configuration alluding to an object’s realism. Like in *Dust to Dust*, Natal relocates the cultural concept of *Sin* that is alien to nature. Arranged by using neon lettering, *Sin* appears to light up against the darkness of the photograph. The photograph presents the dark silhouette of the geological landscape where the dusk disappears behind it. A slightly illuminated semblance of a base grounds the illuminated letters that could otherwise be seen as floating ambiguously in the dark background—the relationship between the landscape and words is essential to create reciprocity. The dialogue between *Sin* and the landscape through the neon material transport us

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to images of Las Vegas, which also borders the Mojave Desert and Colorado River, 215 miles away from the Joshua Tree National Park. West of the Joshua Tree National Park, approximately 140 miles away is Los Angeles, home to Hollywood. Coincidentally, another work titled *Hollywood* (Fig. 59) appears in blue and white lettering. Geographically then, the park is bound by two urbanized centers of entertainment where the park stands as a vestige of nature and organic scenery. Natal transports urban sites, and with them culture through idioms, using urban objects such as metal, neon, and plastic signage that contrast the natural landscape. Natal physically merges the urban and wilderness, creates contradiction, creates spatiotemporal relations between two sites, and new forms of dialogue between alien materials. These works, *Dust to Dust, Sin,* and *Hollywood,* demonstrate an ontological presence through the transportation and sudden visualization of other objects that present the uncanny presence of their proximity.

![Fig. 59 Judy Natal, *Hollywood,* 2000.](image)
Fig. 60 Judy Natal, *Falling Water*, 2000.

Fig. 61 Judy Natal, *Language of Smithson*, 2000.
In contrast to the works that present specific words, Timothy Morton and Graham Harman’s concept of metaphor as an object entity is more apparent in Natal’s heaps of letters in *Falling Water* (2000), *Language of Smithson* (2000), *Mirror Trail* (2000), *Rise of Babel* (2000) series. *Falling Water* (Fig. 60) is a photograph in colour that depicts a circular rock formation with an orifice in which letters appear to pour out of it. While the letters themselves are not arranged to convey a textual meaning, the dynamism of the photograph is conveyed through metaphor. At first, the rock formation seems to have been anthropomorphized; the orifice resembles the mouth and the letters coming out represent the metaphor of incoherent speech. While anthropomorphism, finding resemblances in nonhuman ones, can easily get carried away, as Jane Bennett describes in an interview with Peter Gratton, it also has the potential for
“building an ecological sensibility in oneself.”242 In fact, it is through the concept of metaphor and anthropomorphism in José Ortega y Gasset’s phenomenological and aesthetic writings that inspired Graham Harman to conceive of an object-oriented ontology.243 “Ortega y Gasset explains that the real object has two sides, one side is of an image of the object, and that as an image, it is something also subjective; it has a state of subjectivity; has the state of an ‘I.’”244 In this state of ‘consciousness of’ Ortega y Gasset prefers to describe it as a ‘feeling,’ ‘a place of feeling’ or ‘the I’ of the object.”244 In Vibrant Matter (2010), Jane Bennett proclaims: We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world.”245 It is thus a necessary paradox that to combat anthropocentrism, we would need to adopt anthropomorphism in which the viewer instills human-qualities in non-human entities to empathize with them and to combat our own narcissism. On the otherhand, while anthropomorphic language through metaphor could descend to relativism between each person viewing the semblance of one thing


243 “But Ortega takes a second and more radical step, one that was too far ahead of its time in 1914 to leave any lasting mark even on Ortega himself—a step that not only paves the way for his theory of metaphor, but also silently pushes him beyond the familiar boundaries of post-Kantian philosophy. For it turns out that the distance between execution and image applies not just to us and other animate beings, but holds good for objects in general. The pronoun “I,” says Ortega, belongs not just to living beings, “but rather all things—men, things, situations—inasmuch as they are occurring, being, executing themselves.” Harman, Guerrilla Metaphysics, 104. See, José Ortega y Gasset, Phenomenology and Art, trans. Peter W. Silver and Philip W. Silver (W.W. Norton, 1975); José Ortega y Gasset, La Deshumanizacion del Arte 1st edition in Obras de José Ortega y Gasset. (Madrid: Revista de Occidente-AlianzaEditorial, 2006).


245 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, xvi.
to another, Speculative Realism conceives of metaphor as an object through which we vicariously and temporally encounter glimpses of the other object never fully grasping the object entirely.

*Language of Smithson* (Fig. 61) revives Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (Fig. 62), a manufactured coil made out of mud, salt crystals, soil and rocks 1500 foot-long and 15 foot-wide off the shoreline of Rozel Point in Great Salt Lake, Utah. Natal’s *Language of Smithson* is a coil configured by white letters that contrast the landscape in the black and white photograph. While the *Spiral Jetty* has been analyzed through a phenomenological lens, Natal’s oeuvre, but in particular the work, *Language of Smithson*, overcomes a solipsistic tendency in phenomenology in which knowledge of the world and ourselves is informed through the “flesh of the world,” or what Merleau-Ponty describes as the chiasm. In *The Ethics of Earth Art*, Amanda Boetzkes, drawing from Luce Irigaray’s critique of Merleau-Ponty, addresses how “the artwork consistently signals aspects of nature that exist beyond our perception and knowledge of it.”246 For Boetzkes, *Spiral Jetty* invokes “lapses in textual representation and meaning,” by which Smithson suggests the bodily experience in these moments of incoherence and where “sight fails.”247 While Boetzkes’s analysis of the *Spiral Jetty* demonstrates how the relationship between Smithson’s body and the site “disclose a phenomenological connection to the site that overcomes the text’s attempt to cover it,” Craig Owens’s analysis of the *Spiral Jetty* is of a textual representation in which it is “one link in a chain of signifiers which summon and refer to one another in a dizzying spiral.”248 While Owens furthers a textual representation of the work which identifies

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247 Ibid., 90.
multiple texts through a temporal experience of deconstruction, Boetzkes considers non-linguistic visual sensations that disrupt “the coherence of representation.”

Owens proposes a Derridean model of deconstruction and entropy in *Spiral Jetty*. He emphasizes the decentering of a point-of-view and the fragments of photographs, video, and essays that further disperse and also make up *Spiral Jetty*. Through a Derridean reading, Owens relates the fragmentation of *Spiral Jetty* with Walter Benjamin’s definition of allegory. Owens says: “Language is broken up, dispersed, in order to acquire a new and intensified meaning in its fragmentation.” In Chapter 2, I argue that Weiner’s texts overcome the infinite deferral of presence through a redistribution of the relationship between text and object. As Harman elucidates, Derrida mistakenly conflates the being of a thing and the meaning of a thing, in which meaning becomes entropic, or the infinite deferral of presence. Thus, Speculative Realism explains how the deferral of meaning leads to speculation about the reality of objects in which metaphor allows an object to relate to another object.

While a phenomenological analysis of the *Spiral Jetty* reaffirms our place in the world, nature, and its ontological status, is bound to our significance. While Merleau-Ponty does describe a gap between perceiver and perceived, he also contends that a thing is the sum total of perspectives of which the thing is perceived. The object’s inwardness and origin is dependent on one’s embodied experience. As Graham Harman demonstrates in his assessment of the limits of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology:

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249 Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art*, 91.
253 “At the root of all our experiences and all our reflections, we find, then, a being which immediately recognizes itself, because it is its knowledge both of itself and of all things, and
Unfortunately, there is always a human being involved in Merleau-Ponty’s description of flesh, which makes no allowance for any interaction of pine trees with snowflakes when there happen to be no humans in the vicinity. Indeed, he often shows flashes of explicit contempt for any possibility of a world without humans. To this extent, his model of the flesh remains trapped in a philosophy of access that it otherwise helps us to escape.\textsuperscript{254}

In order to overcome the anthropocentric view of the world and regard objects as autonomous beings it is necessary to take these moments in which “sight fails” and our “desire for coherence,” as moments in which objects paradoxically reveal their elusive nature.\textsuperscript{255} Natal’s reinterpretation of Smithson’s \textit{Spiral Jetty}, formed by letters instead of rock and salt crystals, objectively presents how language is materialized with object/material properties. Furthermore, her works also surpass this materialism through their incoherence and inconspicuousness as language sculptures, in which their real being can only then present itself through a vicarious relation between objects.

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{254} Harman, \textit{Guerrilla Metaphysics}, 4.
\textsuperscript{255} “It is not surprising then, that Smithson suggests the bodily experience of \textit{Spiral Jetty} at precisely the places where sight fails. Yet he recognizes these lapses are intertwined with a desire for coherence.” Boetzkes, \textit{The Ethics of Earth Art}, 90.
Similarly, the work titled *Mirror Trail* (Fig. 63) presents the viewer with textual evasiveness and a spatially receding work. The black and white photograph is of an earth mound in which a trail of white letters delineates a trail from the top of the mound to the foreground of the composition. Like a slithering snake, the letters adapt to the location presenting a dynamic composition and portraying different levels of depth. However, the extent to which the viewer textually and visually reads the work is limited to the pervasive depth of the landscape. The work cannot be read entirely, the ensuing letters follow the trail to indecipherability and imperceptibility. Contrary to the illusion of a continuation that would otherwise be achieved by visual forms such as through painting, sculpture and architecture, the textual objects which already present ambiguity in meaning extend the textual and visual rupture of continuity through depth. The eye attempts to conceive of meaning that according to him or her can only be
achieved by seeing the entire picture and reading all of the letters. The letters cannot be read horizontally as one would a text, and instead ruptures any sense of beginning and conclusion; either the work begins from atop the hill and ends in the foreground, or vice versa. Instead, the ambiguity in the trail of letters suggests an absence of textual and visual proportion. The letters become alien entities, ones that escape the viewer’s gaze, and ones that escape coherence. Overcoming the phenomenological limits, *Language of Smithson* and *Mirror Trail* draws attention to a withdrawal from meaning that coincidentally presents the hidden reality of objects as some alien entity.

![B](image)

Fig. 64 Judy Natal, *Rise and Fall of Babel* 1, 2000.
Fig. 65 Judy Natal, *Rise and Fall of Babel* 2, 2000.

Fig. 66 Judy Natal, *Rise and Fall of Babel* 3, 2000.
Fig. 67 Judy Natal, *Rise and Fall of Babel* 4, 2000.

Fig. 68 Judy Natal, *Rise and Fall of Babel* 5, 2000.
In the series *Rise and Fall of Babel* (2000), the black and white photographs depict a tall mound that takes up the entire composition. The division of sky and earth is reinforced by the texture of the ground where a letter (or letters) are situated and blend with the tonal greys of light and shadow. The photographs appear symmetrical at first. *Rise and Fall of Babel 1* (Fig. 64) contains only the solitary letter “B” that is positioned at the center of the mound. As the viewer looks at *Rise and Fall of Babel 2* (Fig. 65), *Rise and Fall of Babel 3* (Fig. 66), *Rise and Fall of Babel 4* (Fig. 67), and finally *Rise and Fall of Babel 5* (Fig. 68), the same mound continuously becomes cluttered with other letters while one uniquely different coloured letter contrasts the rest. As one views the five different photographs in which one visibly sees the accumulation of letters through each consequent letter, the contrasting letter in each photograph spells “Babel” across the five photographs. Natal disperses the visual and textual reading of the works across five photographs. The result is a transition from accumulation to entropy. Beginning with one letter “B,” the mound also accumulates more letters, and by the fifth photograph, the letter “L” becomes part of the entropic presentation of letters that lay scattered like debris among the earth. Likewise, when the contrasting letter in each photograph would appear in the center of the mound, the “L” in the last photograph appears trivially placed among the chaos of the other letters. Thus, the works visually present a rise or accumulation, and the fall or entropy of Babel allegorically. Alluding to “the tower of Babel” in Genesis 11:1-9, Natal similarly depicts the confusion and the scattering of language over the earth creating incomprehension.²⁵⁶ Natal further explores this visual and textual rupture in her take of Smithson’s *A Heap of Language* (Fig. 69).

²⁵⁶ “Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, ‘Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.’ They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that
we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.’ But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The Lord said, ‘If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.’ So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.” Gen. 11:1-9 NIV.
In *Heap* (Fig. 70), a heap of letters lays scattered in the foreground across two photographic frames. The white letters contrast the desert landscape. The composition, like a diptych, presents a visual disruption of continuation only further emphasizing incomprehension, deferral, and visual rupture. Similarly, in *A Heap of Language*, Smithson had drawn a pyramid or a tower of Babel made up of words giving language physical qualities. As Owens suggests, the drawing gives language form and matter, and visual dimension; “synonyms for language are piled up like rubble,” and “lines of print read as stratified layers of verbal sediment.”

While Smithson explores the verbal and the visual interchangeably, the allegorical dimension of the drawing, just as Natal’s photographs, alludes to entropy, or what Owens describes as the “[destruction] of their signifying function.” While Smithson presents language with material properties, Natal presents letters and language as ontological entities that have become alien to the viewer and as things in themselves separate from us that can nevertheless be presented through vicarious relation.

Smithson best describes the dialectic of nature in the following way: “All language becomes an alphabet of sites. The boring, like other works is becoming more and more important to artists. Pavements, holes, trenches, mounds, heaps, paths, ditches, roads, terraces, etc., all have esthetic potential.” Natal’s series, *Earthwords*, has taken Smithson’s writings, works and ideas and presented language as an entity in a new light; one whose being recedes from view and is discovered with Morton’s notion of the speculative sublime. The dichotomy between proximity and distance ensures that ontological objects are preserved; it is through this mysterious incongruity that an object-world also ascends to demand ethical awareness. Within

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257 Owens, “Earthwords,” 123.
258 Ibid.
these sublime objects, and the force of things, the dissolution of an anthropocentric view of the world opens humans up to ethical and ontological questions. As these entities present themselves inconspicuously, humans are overwhelmed by their new position in the object-world, dethroned as the lords over nature to become objects among other causal-objects in a complex and entangled object-world. In the following section, Natal revives abandoned objects in an object graveyard and discovers the continuation of vitality, of being, within waste and ruin.

The Life, Death and Resurrection of the “Spectaculars”

Located in Las Vegas, Nevada, the Neon Museum is the 2-acre property of a non-profit organization that preserves and collects iconic signs. As part of the museum, the 3-acre site, Neon Boneyard, contains additional signs open to the public for a one hour-long guided tour. With more than 150 signs, collected from Ceasars Palace, Binion’s Horseshoe, the Golden Nugget, and the Stardust, the technological and design developments can be historically traced from the 1930s to the present day. In the North Gallery, 60 additional signs from Palms Casino Resort, New-New York, Lady Luck and O’Shea’s make up the rest of the collection. Originally established at the intersection of Las Vegas Boulevard and Fremont Street in 1996, the two-acre campus reopened in 2012 at 770 Las Vegas Boulevard North.260

Gathering the attention for wedding shoots or venues, special events venues, and educational tours, Neon Boneyard also captured the artistic vision of Judy Natal in 2002.261 While the Neon Boneyard collection frequently becomes props for photo shoots, or backdrops for special events, or passive objects in a museum to be analyzed for technological, design, and historical purposes, Natal, however, captures the objects as living and organic entities. Natal

regenerates the objects otherwise bound to burial and lifelessness, highlighting their integration into the sanctuary that contrasts The Strip. Imbued with vitality, the objects, while bound to anonymity, also create new relations, or what Jane Bennett terms “assemblages,” with its environment and what Timothy Morton terms “the mesh.” The signs, once used for commercial purposes, and then abandoned, reintegrate to form temporal bonds with other objects, and form causal relationships as ontological entities.

Similar to *Earthwords* (1999-2001), *Neon Boneyard Las Vegas A-Z* (2002-2006), is a series of photographs that informs a dialectic between objects and their environment in the form of an alphabetical order. To reiterate Smithson’s quote: “All language becomes an alphabet of sites.” As Natal surveys the archeological site, she draws attention to the visual and textual image reversing the way the viewer approaches a photograph. The viewer instead reads the image, and views the text. The text behaves as an object, with object qualities. As Natal states in her previous series *Earthwords*, “This inversion destabilizes traditional structures of meaning-making that inform the relationships between the natural and cultural, the artistic and the linguistic, the image and the word.”

The convening of language as an object reintegrates site-specific materials, and a cultural paradigm. However, in order to understand how objects and culture intermingle, we need to explore the force, or vitality of the objects themselves through Jane Bennett’s study of vital materialism.

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Fig. 71 Judy Natal, *Neon letter B*, 1999-2001.

Fig. 72 Judy Natal, *Neon letter E*, 1999-2001.
Waste, impotent, and always an excess lies on the grounds of the Neon Boneyard. In Natal’s *Neon letter B* (Fig. 71), the letter lays abandoned on the ground where debris accumulates on its side, and clothes hang over it haphazardly as if now used to dry clothes. *Neon letter E* (Fig. 72) sits upright against another sign, and shows a now dilapidated and lackluster quality once belonging to the Binion’s Horseshoe Casino sign. The lightbulbs are broken, others are missing, and pieces of neon tubing are exposed and bowed out of place. *Neon letter G* (Fig. 73) similarly shows the same signs of time and use. The neon letters once lit, belonged to other letters from Jerry’s Nugget sign, once forming an advertisement, the letters are fragments and remnants of a different time. In the late 19th-century, Sir William Ramsay, known for co-discovering the four noble gases with Morris William Travers, isolated the gases (neon, argon, krypton, and xenon) from nitrogen and oxygen. Although at first undetectable with the naked
eye, when trapped in glass tubes and energized with high voltage, they discovered the gasses emitted an eerie glow. In *Neon Boneyard*, the energy and glow once flowing through the glass tubes are now absent, and instead a dullness and frigidity surrounds them.

Jane Bennett recapitulates a Heideggarian moment, where objects become something other than their use. She explains: “the items on the ground that day were vibratory-at one moment disclosing themselves as dead stuff and at the next as live presence…” The hammer, like in Heidegger’s analysis, ceases to be a hammer; it is no longer useful; it reveals itself as something alien. In a similar way, Natal’s photographs reveal an organic and transformative quality, and an anonymity that contrasts their inanimateness and as a means for transmitting capitalist ideology. Likewise, Bennett’s materialism, contrasts their past spectacularity, as a means for something. Natal, like Bennett, reveals an alien quality that transcends the objects for human-use, where the alien-as-alien becomes on ontological object. Bennett, inspired by Robert Sullivan’s perception of a trash-vitality in *The Meadowlands*, states:

> Sullivan reminds us that a vital materiality can never really be thrown "away," for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity. For Sullivan that day, as for me on that June morning, thing power rose from a pile of trash. Not Flower Power, or Black Power, or Girl Power, but Thing-Power: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.  

Bennett’s concept of “thing-power,” on the other hand, positions at once, humans and the inanimate and inorganic on the same ontological ground. Controversially, Bennett also positions

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*264* Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 5.

humans as material entities in order to emphasize a common make-up between all ontological beings. While the risk of describing humans as a material being could descend to human instrumentalization, Bennett attempts to overcome the non-human instrumentalization that has permeated throughout history.\textsuperscript{266} While at first it seems that Bennett is trading in non-human instrumentalization for human instrumentalization, Bennett raises the vital materialism that all things are composed of, and emphasizes the complexity of material interrelationships between all entities and establishes an implicit ethical awareness and responsibility across all beings.\textsuperscript{267}

Natal’s photographs reveal the limits of an anthropocentric worldview, and as Bennett and Morton suggest, an excess of objects consolidates their thing-power, or the extensiveness of objects in a post-human world. Natal’s photographs, thus, continues post 1960s art’s endeavor to expose our relation to the earth, and our assumptions of it. As Boetzkes states in \textit{The Ethics of Earth Art}:

\begin{quote}
Contemporary Art counters two deeply flawed but nevertheless pervasive stances toward the earth: the instrumental view, which seeks to master the planet through an exclusively human-centered knowledge of it, and the romantic view, which holds that we can return to a state of unencumbered continuity with nature.\textsuperscript{268}
\end{quote}

Natal also reveals ontological and ethical implications in the compositions of post-human objects creating causal relations with their environment. Post-human objects not only present a world after humans, or what Morton terms \textit{hyperobjects}, as a massively-distributed and pervasive object which challenges our conceptions of boundaries, like in his inclusion of Natal’s

\begin{footnotes}
\item[266] Ibid., 12.
\item[267] Ibid., 13.
\item[268] Boetzkes, \textit{The Ethics of Earth Art}, 6.
\end{footnotes}
photograph (Fig. 74) from *Future Perfect 2040 · 2030 · 2020 · 2010* in *Hyperobjects* (2013). Post-human objects also refer to the earth’s interrelationship with an excess of objects especially the durability of plastic objects. In “Visions of Eternity: Plastic and the Ontology of Oil” (2013), while Boetzkes analyzes the relationship between plastic and oil as the “permeation of oil into every facet of cultural life,” what is central to my analysis of objects is her criticism of the effects of capitalism through oil and plastic, and how oil “is a cultural and aesthetic mesh that mediates the sensorial field.” In other words, Boetzkes reimagines oil as an object with agency, an object with a force, mediated by money, which permeates the cultural and political dimension with the plastic qualities of circulation, transposability, and fabrication. She asks at the end of her essay, “What kind of critical gesture can be made in the face of plastic’s inexhaustible exchangeability?” Indeed, to further this question, I ask my own: what is the role of art in a pervasive culture of materiality, consumption and dominion? How can the very objects of American materialism also inform us of an object-oriented-ontology? How do Judy Natal’s photographs depicting the lifeless neon signs raise ecological, ontological and political awareness, and bring our attention to sublime objects? What can humans do when confronted with Natal’s gestures of ontological-objects?

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Boetzkes, in her recapitulation of Barthes’ essay, “Plastic” (1957), describes plastic as essentially the “spectacle.” Central to my analysis, and recalling Weiner’s analysis of capitalist ideology, Natal reframes objects as future post-human objects that contrast their “past life,” as things used as a means for control. As Natal states: “In my eyes, Neon Boneyard Las Vegas A-Z is a living, organic, archaeological site that weaves together Las Vegas’ past and present in unexpected ways.” As Morton suggests in *Hyperobjects*, objects bridge and traverse

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271 Ibid
spatiotemporally. Likewise, Bennett’s concept of assemblage melts cause and effect and within each agent entering the assemblage, the assemblage thus also blurs causality challenging both space and time as a linear dimension.

This argument about objects through Speculative Realism, and specifically the neon sign-object as an ontological entity, contrasts French theorist Jean Baudrillard’s criticism of society moved by seduction and illusion. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard discusses the signs in advertising and their mystifying qualities:

Like the signs in advertising, one is geared down, one becomes transparent or uncountable, one becomes diaphanous or rhizomic to escape the point of inertia— one is placed in orbit, one is plugged in, one is satellized, one is archived—paths cross: there is the sound track, the image track, just as in life there is the work track, the leisure track, the transport track etc., all enveloped in the advertising track. Everywhere there are three of four paths, and you are at the crossroads. Superficial saturation and fascination.

In a similar way Karl Marx criticizes the commodity as containing mystifying qualities that replace the truth of labour-value with exchange-value, the advertisement seduces the viewer obscuring truth and meaning through “charms and traps of appearances.” While for Marx capitalism was governed by production, Baudrillard believed that capitalism had entered a new era in which its propelling force was consumption. For Baudrillard, the truth of reality was the

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274 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 31-34.
276 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 149.
277 “The truth is not that "needs are the fruits of production," but that the system of needs is the product of the system of production, which is a quite different matter. By a system of needs we
play of signs that governed society giving the individual the false belief, or the illusion, of freedom and agency. The relationship between American materialism and its climax towards a Speculative Realism that I propose begins by looking deeper into the very objects of illusion to uncover an incongruous ontological withdrawnness.

The first neon signs arrived in America in the mid-1920s in Los Angeles, before reaching New York or Las Vegas. After visiting Paris in 1923 and seeing Georges Claude’s adaptation of the Moore light in a Parisian barbershop and then at the Paris Motor Show, the entrepreneur Earle C. Anthony, who founded the first car dealership in California, Packard Motor Car Company, systematically introduced the neon-craze in the U.S proving it to be a clever medium for businesses. While the new medium was introduced to California, New York and Las Vegas became famous for its association with the entertainment business. The neon sign further asserted its mystifying properties with the added effect of animation through “complex timing devices that turned tubes on and off in succession.” Not only was there the dimension of light, but motion also emphasized the dazzling effect on the viewer. With the combination of light and motion, recalling cinema, neon signs were also appropriately called “spectaculars.” Despite the negative implications of representation, signs, and metaphor from the Frankfurt School intellectuals such as Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, and then by the French Marxist thinkers, Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard, I argue that the commodity, and objects for the purpose of consumption like the neon sign, can also gain an ontological status through a departure from post-structuralist analyses of signs and representation, and still employ a Marxist

mean to imply that needs are not produced one at a time, in relation to their respective objects. Needs are produced as a force of consumption, and as a general potential reserve (disponibilité globale) within the larger framework of productive forces.” Ibid., 42.

Ibid., 2.

Jane E. Boyd and Joseph Rucker, “A Blaze of Crimson Light”

Ibid.
critique of capitalism. Speculative Realism continues a Marxist criticism of American materialism through a realism of objects. As Bennett shows through her vital materialism, the viewer’s task is to look beyond mere representation, beyond desire and pleasure, and be met with withdrawnness and the alien-as-alien.

Advertisements and neon signs, created for consumption and for the fulfillment of desire, are exhausted due to their instantaneousness. Illuminating The Strip at night, the glow from the signs bewitches viewers with promises of nighttime pleasures. The relationship between desire, consumption and capitalism is a formula for control. In this way, the commodity and products from capitalism like neon signs appear as hollow objects without any depth; viewers consume them at face-value through their superficiality. The neon sign perpetuates this hollowness through the instant and yet transitory spectacle of light and motion. In the same way Theodor Adorno remarks on the political power of the entertainment industry, the neon sign resembles the effects of film and art. He states:

Even from the visual point of view the sudden evanescent images of the cinema come to resemble a sort of script. The images are seized but not contemplated. The film reel draws the eye along like a line of writing and it turns the page with the gentle jolt of every scene change...Thus the technology of the mass work of art accomplishes that transition from image to writing in which the absorption of art by monopolistic practice culminates. But the secret doctrine which is communicated here is the message of capital.\textsuperscript{281}

With Adorno’s notion of mass culture as a tool for the mechanization and dominion of viewers through visual consumption, the object of commodity incurs a frivolity that is similar and yet

\textsuperscript{281} Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 81.
contrasts Baudrillard’s post-structuralist account of the object of commodity. For Baudrillard, in recalling Derridian deconstruction, advertising and representation is annulled into a void in which the viewer’s attempt to translate signs becomes pointless. Instead, Baudrillard’s account of the representation-object is one of inexhaustibility. It is “a product of its own surplus,” that reorients the viewer to other objects ad infinitum in the disarray of signifieds.

Briefly, let us consider Baudrillard’s examination of the state of hyperreality, a seamless integration of simulation and reality without clear distinction, in the Las Vegas signs:

When one sees Las Vegas rise whole from the desert when dawn breaks, one sees that advertising is not what brightens or decorates the walls, it is what effaces the walls, effaces the streets, the facades, and all the architecture, effaces any support and any depth, and that it is this liquidation, this reabsorption of everything into the surface that plunges us into this stupefied, hyperreal euphoria that we would not exchange for anything else, and that is the empty and inescapable form of seduction.

Both Adorno and Baudrillard share similar ideas of representation and the objects of commodity. While for Adorno, the visual seduction communicates the underlying power of capitalism, Baudrillard advances this idea of the reification of human beings in an inescapable illusionary nature of reality. The neon object so far, through Adorno and Baudrillard, has been presented as a tool of consumption and as a tool used by capitalism to perpetuate itself. The object dominates the viewers and is dominated by consumers.

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283 Ibid., 31.
284 Ibid., 91-92.
Speculative Realism on the other hand challenges the presumption of objects as means for consumption, as instant and temporal, and exhaustive things. It is through Natal’s photographs of fragments, and isolated letters that new meaning and new realities are possible. In up-close shots, and the compressed compositional frames, instead of wide landscape shots, one focuses on these objects as different entities. In the act of capturing letters in an alphabetical order, Natal also displaces the letter from its original meaning, use, and placement in a sign. Like Johanna Drucker remarks in “Fallen Icons: The Afterlife of Signs,” the concluding essay in Natal’s published photographic book:

Her images reorder the boneyard, intervening in the random scattering of possibilities by imposing an order as arbitrary as it is legible, the order of the alphabet, A to Z…This is an alphabet book, and the allegiance to that external structure reveals the fundamental
The attention to fragments, scale, and compression and condensation of the frame creates possibilities for a new dialogue between the objects. As Drucker reveals, “Everywhere, these signs are taking each other by surprise.”\textsuperscript{286} In the photograph of the Neon letter J (Fig. 75), the subject is the letter. It reveals decomposition and decay that, if we did not know where the particular letter came from, communicates a melancholic aura surrounding it. The paint has worn off the metal, and now reveals it instead. The fragmentary isolation of the $J$ also separates it from belonging to the Jerry Nugget sign. It is at once, what Morton calls, a relational part of the Jerry Nugget sign, and also something other than that ($p \land \lnot p$). Judy Natal liberates the Neon $J$ from its original meaning, and reconfigures it as something alien.

In Neon letter $K$ (Fig. 76), the $K$ belongs to the sign “Luck,” from the Lady Luck Hotel and Casino sign. The $K$ along with the rest of the sign shows the damage from the elements and of time. As it stands in the photograph, it presents an ironic and ambivalent presence of a world in which viewers are attracted to try their luck in Las Vegas and shows the vestiges of hope and promise in the inevitability of loss. Luck, is merely an illusion propagated by the very site of Las Vegas. Neon letter $N$ (Fig. 77) is distinctive in its typography, once designed by YESCO (Young Electric Sign Company), also responsible for the “Welcome to fabulous Las Vegas Nevada” sign. The letter, belonging to the Royal Nevada sign, similarly shows the signs of time, with the original color almost stripped entirely away.

\textsuperscript{286} Ibid., 58.
Fig. 76 Judy Natal, *Neon letter K*, 1999-2001.

Fig. 77 Judy Natal, *Neon letter N*, 1999-2001.
Fig. 78 Judy Natal, *Neon letter R*, 1999-2001.

Fig. 79 Judy Natal, *Neon letter S*, 1999-2001.
As Natal writes in the introduction to the published works of Neon Boneyard: “Like an aging body, one can actually see the seams, the veins, and the sags on the signs as you might see on a one-night stand the morning after, dissolving any twilight illusions of perfect beauty.”

The Neon letter N is wrapped in green and grey wire as if being held in place. The wires also entangle the letter in the way exposed veins crisscross a dilapidated carcass. The Neon letter R (Fig. 78), believed to belong to the original Wilbur Clark’s Desert Inn sign, presents the insides of the letter in which the neon tubing, once filled with energy and light, similarly alludes to lifeless veins. The metaphorical presence in the photographs is a product of anthropomorphizing them.

Bennett deems anthropomorphism necessary to combat an anthropocentric view of the world. Natal uncovers a melancholic presence in the “entropic condition of decay,” that for Drucker, is the tension, and dynamism, between melancholy and “recovery and restoration.” It is what Bennett describes as the vibrancy, and a quivering of objects. Although the photographs show the fleeting presence of time and its effects on these objects, Natal also shows an energy in the objects themselves as they become detached from their origins as beacons of nightly pleasures, and signification, and enter new relations with other objects or stand independent as fragments. Likewise, the anthropomorphic sympathy we feel for the objects reflects Bennett’s notion of vital materiality. The connection between both human and non-human entities is a shared materiality that she hopes would bring a “greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and non-humans.”

However, it also informs us of the “alien” quality of ourselves, in which we find “kinship” between our human and “foreign”

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289 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 112.
290 Ibid.
constitution. For Bennett, not only do objects exhibit this foreignness, but humans also must come to the realization of an “indispensable foreignness” within themselves. The solution of a strategic anthropomorphism to combat anthropocentrism as proposed by Bennett allows humans to also reposition themselves as akin to nonhuman objects and attempt to resolve the impact of ecological and political threats that also affect their existence.

One of the most unequivocal examples of the tension between the sign’s past, as a medium for entertainment, and its future, as something transcendent, is the Neon letter S (Fig. 79) of Natal’s series. The photograph captures the relation between a giant skull sitting horizontally in profile and the neon letters beneath it spelling “SIN.” Already seen in her previous series Earthwords, Natal captures the dialogue between the skull and the letters eliciting an ominous presence. While the photo allegorizes the city’s alias, “Sin City,” illustrating the perils of nightly escapades, it also demonstrates the power of relations between causal objects. The skull in fact was removed from the many props of The Battle of Buccaneer Bay, a spectacle produced by the Treasure Island Hotel. The letters S-I-N are from the Treasury Casino Sign. While separately, they each reference different buildings in Las Vegas—one a pirate-themed show, and the other, part of the word “Casino”—the new object relation, photographed by Natal, is replete with allusions to the very city itself. Neon letter S can easily be connected to Timothy Morton’s concept of the hyperobject and its quality of phasing. Just like the signs display the lapse of time, and the exposure to the elements, the unique typographic element also transports us to a different time. Like a dinosaur footprint in an ancient rock, Morton describes, there is a shared space between the rock, the viewer, and the dinosaur. There exists a sensuous connection; we see the causal effects of the object in which differing

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291 Ibid., 113.
timescales coalesce. As Morton says, “Objects entangle one another in a crisscrossing mesh of space-time fluctuations.”\(^{293}\) Natal captures the rupture in our understanding of linear time through language; through letters. Phantasms of past objects from the late 1920s Los Angeles and Las Vegas emerge. Phantasms of lights, the nightlife, and The Strip emerge. Also, Natal acquaints us with the future present of objects and an impeding ecological crisis, already in suit, in need of reassessment.

**Conclusion**

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), Walter Benjamin criticized the methods of reproduction in art-objects. For Benjamin, the authorship of the object is jeopardized, and “aura” is diminished through photography. As a political strategy, the reproducible work of art can subvert traditional aesthetic authority from the emblematic works of art that were forwarded by fascist ideologies. Benjamin’s treatise on aesthetic experience is important to present the study of objects and their withdrawnness and ontological status. Benjamin defines aura as “the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be.”\(^{294}\) The object, as seen in Natal’s photographic series thus continues to present a distance despite the reproducibility of the work. Rather than being more than just a tool for the documentation of ephemeral work such as in land art and installation art, Natal captures the object’s transience and withdrawnness. The object’s ontological reality escapes perception. Morton describes the hyperobject’s non-locality as: “objects wrapped in objects wrapped in objects.”\(^{295}\) Art, specifically my analysis of Natal’s photographic series, explicitly points to the alien entity; objects that rupture our preconception of what they are.

\(^{293}\) Ibid., 65.


\(^{295}\) Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 44.
Natal’s photographs also exposes the effects of capitalist ideology by capturing objects that once mystified and lured people into the activities of frivolity, instant gratification and consumption. Instead, Natal captures these objects in their new state of ontological vitalism that overcomes their state as tools for ideological power. Natal captures glimpses of an object’s withdrawnness. Objects instead relate to other objects vicariously and the photograph becomes another object which withdraws and is also able to relate vicariously.
CHAPTER 4: JUNG LEE-BEACONS TO THE WITHDRAWN

Introduction

Korean artist Jung Lee materializes the inconsistencies of language and meaning in neon-text installations within the South Korean wilderness. Traveling abroad to the United Kingdom in order to pursue a bachelor degree in art from the Kent Institute of Art and Design, Lee became immersed in the popular culture of the Western world and everyday conversations in which the nuances of the English language became apparent to her as a foreigner. Discovering the limits of language between expression and reality, she related this “solitude and sorrow” to people in modern society who she saw were unable to fully express themselves through language.\textsuperscript{296}

Translating her perception of language onto the South Korea landscapes, Lee emphasizes a visual and textual dialogue with the landscape that communicates an ambiguity in the identity of a defined interrogator and the recipient of the haunting messages. The uncanny texts, materialized in neon-installations, emit a metaphorical aura within the reclusive plains that appear to communicate with the viewer. In contrast to Judy Natal’s works, Lee presents the alternating coldness and warmth from not only the ambiguous texts, but the neon material in the landscapes. In Lee’s works, neon emits a warm glow against the misty cold landscapes that contrast the coldness that is tied to the stigma of neon as a beacon to moral decadence in the city nightlife. Instead, neon is recontextualized as a vibrant object which alludes to withdrawn object realities.

\textit{Bordering North Korea} (2005-2008) introduces Lee’s oeuvre in which she recontextualizes language into landscapes enabling new meanings and interpretations to emerge. By appropriating the propaganda of the North Korean regime, translating them to English and

then inserting them within the South Korean landscapes, Lee creates a visual and textual photographic-assemblage in order to bring attention to the uncanny beauty of the landscapes to simultaneously contrast them with the politicized texts.

In contrast to her earlier photographic text-assemblages, Lee’s later work presents the physical materialization of text through neon into the landscape creating different object-relations and new contexts for meaning. Inspired by the literary work of Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* (1977), Lee unravels the disparities in the internal reality of a lover’s discourse through the materialization of words in her series *Aporia* (2010-2011). In the series *Day and Night*, inspired by Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* (1308-1321), Lee discovers the character’s yearning for salvation through heaps of “divine” words reflected over the sea recalling both liturgical and theological associations.

Instead of focusing on the emptiness and limits of language, I depart from the post-structuralist theories of writing and signification of Roland Barthes and assess metaphor and language as the gateway into a Speculative Realist analysis of word-objects in Post-Conceptual art. In particular, I argue that, through Speculative Realism, Lee’s poetic statements uncover the South Korean background as an anthropomorphized entity that at once revives and abandons the romantic aesthetic of landscape art through Timothy Morton’s notion of the speculative sublime, and that they orient us to an ecological ontology.

The Allure of the Withdrawn: Crossing the “Hermit Kingdom”

Jung Lee’s first photographic series titled *Bordering North Korea* (2005-2008) presents nuances of the works of traditional landscape ink paintings from the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) and also the practices of Conceptual art. I argue that this fusion of styles found in Lee’s works creates a dynamism that is understood by her perspective and influence of both Western and
Eastern cultures, socially and artistically. Moreover, the series explores different vantage points through the disjuncture of text and image that alludes to North Korea as a withdrawn entity. Thus, allusion and the visual and textual juxtapositions enable the viewer to enter ethical relations that, instead of looking through the “Western gaze,” the phrases stir the viewer and enable him or her to empathize with the reclusive nation behind the borders.

Firstly, Lee’s photographs recall the “mysticism” offered by the scenes of trees and haze traditionally used in the ink paintings of Jeong Seon (1676-1759) from the latter half of the Joseon Dynasty. Seon, known as the father of jingyeong sansuhwa, or “true-view” landscape painting, emphasized a realistic topographical rendering of Korean landscapes that departed from the traditional rendering of Chinese idyllic landscapes.297 Seon’s ink paintings of Mount Inwag in Seoul, the Han River of Soul Korea, and Mount Kumgang in North Korea are rendered with detail using dark brushstrokes which visually balances the use of negative white spaces. In particular, Seon’s Inwag Jesekdo (Fig. 80), presents a play with the negative white spaces that contrast the heavy dark ink drawing of Mount Inwag and its surrounding trees. These white spaces are reserved to define the mist that travels across the mountain range or, in other paintings, to define the tranquil streams and rivers within the valleys. In traditional Korean symbolism, the mountain, water and clouds, shown in the ink painting, represent symbols of

longevity and “express the universal wish for a long, healthy life.”

The auspicious symbols have characterized the Korean landscape throughout the Joseon dynasty and were given further emphasis by Seon in his true-view style.

Lee’s series represents a mysticism that recalls Seon’s ink paintings. Lee recontextualizes the former iconic symbols of longevity, of clouds, mountains and water, to bring forth the political situation of North Korea which consequently brings new meanings to the photograph’s mysticism. In this way, the meaning of longevity becomes related to the country’s current reigning government, where the concept of “longevity” is instead replaced with the concept of “endurance” that North Koreans must live day to day. Lee visually and textually


materializes the mystery of what lies beyond the borders of North Korea. Characterized as a mysterious place and only learned of vicariously from news reports, North Korea remains tied to its politics. Thus, using the landscape to convey the country’s mysterious nature, Lee heightens its uncanniness using propaganda slogans. The relationship between the landscape photographs and superimposed text visually and textually allude to the withdrawn reality of North Korea that can be further understood through Speculative Realism.

In *Bordering North Korea #5* (Fig. 81), the appropriation and recontextualization of Korean iconography by Lee is evident. Visually, she captures the Korean landscape precisely on a misty day. The image, saturated with an overall color of blue by the heavy clouds, surrounds the entire view. The usual delineation of the sky from the earth is obstructed by the pervasive mist. An abundant image of the earth, along with its mountain range, streams, and hills appear to
come forth more distinctly near the bottom third of the image. Distant delicate lines of the
mountain range emerge in different tones of blue near the middle of the image. The image, while
captured in a different medium, recalls the landscape ink paintings by Jeong Seon. Seon and Lee
both capture the mountain range, mist and vegetation of the Korean landscape emphasizing the
movement of the clouds as well as its pervasive presence. Lee does this through the distinct
tones of blue that appear as sheer curtains overlaid on top of another to create a spectrum of the
color blue. Seon does this through the delicate ink handling and washes to create different tones
of grey. Both images are similarly captured in varying tones to bring forth a sense of mystery.

Visually and textually, the image alludes to the withdrawn quality of North Korea
presented by the superimposed text reading “hermit kingdom.” This phrase finds its origins from
the Joseon dynasty in Korea where after the invasions by the Japanese and the Manchus, which
led to Korea’s ties with China, the nation became reclusive. Adopting China’s Confucian
ideology, Korea was unable to make contact with foreigners and travel abroad was forbidden
thus obtaining its nickname the “hermit kingdom.” The term, however, has been revived to
describe North Korea’s current state; it continues to be withdrawn from the rest of the world. In
Seon’s image, the sense of withdrawnness is captured by the rendering of a single temple or villa
at the bottom right corner of the image. The temple or villa is overwhelmed by the immensity of
the mountain and which, due to the tones of grey, is absorbed by the landscape. This instance of
seclusion or withdrawnness however, is tied to the mountainous landscape which were places for
performing spiritual rituals. By contrast, in Lee’s work, the relationship between text and image
materializes a new era of seclusion and withdrawnness. Superimposed onto the image in a grey
color, the text does not attract the attention of the whole composition, but like Seon’s rendered
temple or villa, it soon becomes absorbed by the mist and landscape. Instead, in Lee’s work, the text simultaneously emerges and withdraws within the composition further alluding to the withdrawn quality of what we believe to know of North Korea.

Fig. 82 Jenny Holzer, Protect Me From What I Want, 1987. Showplace Square in San Francisco, California.

In contrast to the traditional ink landscape paintings, Lee’s use of bold text recalls contemporary artists using advertisements, neon and language in different ways to contrast the bombardment of signs, lights and artifice in consumer-society. Recall, Lawrence Weiner’s text sculptures which overcome the boundaries of countries and language, especially as seen in A Translation From One Language Into Another (1969) and An Object Tossed From One Country To Another (1969). Following Weiner’s trajectory however, another artist continued the practices by the early Conceptual artists and working within the medium of text, produced large scale public installations (Fig. 82). American artist Jenny Holzer, was a key figure in feminist art.
in the 1980s in which her installations publicly addressed subjects of taboo like “sex, violence, war and death.”\textsuperscript{301} Using text as her medium in which she installs the large-scale displays in public spaces, Holzer’s work is intentionally political and impactful. Viewed also through the lens of Speculative Realism, her works can be reinterpreted as alluding to withdrawn subjects kept from the public surface.

Holzer appropriated truisms by political and philosophical figures in \textit{Truisms} (1977-1979) and \textit{Survival} series (1983-1985) which appeared as commercially printed posters, t-shirts, and in electronic boards above Times Square and in San Francisco. Initially, the neon-sign was attached to the allure of consumer seduction that conveyed metaphors of moral decay. The glow of the sign in Lee’s works, however, also orients us to another type of brilliance and allure; one that separates itself as a hypnotic tool by consumer-society and instead as an allure that hides an impenetrable reality. From Holzer’s projections series of 1996-2001 (Fig. 83), created using LED signs, the installations in Buenos Aires share similarities with Lee’s later works such as in \textit{Have You Ever Loved Me} (Fig. 84). Conceptually, both artists materialize the internal (ex. feelings, private thoughts, and intimate moments) into the public sector through the manipulation of light; the romantic texts are contrasted with stringent texts which emphasize the volatile state of love between amorous and arduous messages. In the series \textit{Bordering North Korea}, Lee likewise brings the internal reality to the public and beyond the borders by appropriating propaganda that the citizens of North Korea consume daily and translating it to the English language which readily implicates a larger public.

\textsuperscript{301} Uta Grosenick and Ilka Becker, \textit{Women Artists in the 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} Century} (Köln: Taschen, 2001), 234.
Fig. 83 Jenny Holzer, *Arno*, 1996.

Fig. 84 Jung Lee, *Have You Ever Loved Me*, 2010.
Fig. 85 Propaganda Art Distributing Co., “Peace and Safety Over the Korean Peninsula” Korean Art Gallery in Pyongyang, North Korea.

Fig. 86 Ri Sok Nam, *Blue Sky*, 2005. Korean Art Gallery in Pyongyang, North Korea.
Another aspect of the series *Bordering North Korea*, is Lee’s appropriation of visual characteristics from traditional 1950-1960s North Korean propaganda posters that further find a reemergence in contemporary North Korean propaganda paintings. Common North Korean propaganda posters such as *Peace and Safety Over the Korean Peninsula* (Fig. 85), represents the 1950s and 1960s art style of bold colors and even bolder and succinct messages. North Korean propaganda posters continuously emphasize the country’s national flag colors of blue white and red. While these kinds of posters appear vintage to the western viewer, they are in fact still prevalent and pervasive within the country reflecting its stagnation as a nation since its inception as a socialist state in 1948.302

As an example of contemporary North Korean propaganda art, Ri Sok Nam’s *Blue Sky* (Fig. 86) is a painting from the controversial exhibition “Flowers for Kim Il-sung” which was

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shown at the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna in 2010. Exhibited alongside other North Korean propaganda art, *Blue Sky* continues to utilize the characteristic utopian imagery of the vintage propaganda posters from the 1950s. Contemporary propaganda art thus continues to represent the façade of living in a utopian country which contrasts the reality the country lives.

In Nam’s depiction of North Korea, the artist captures children staring out across the serene and colorful Korean landscape. Like the vintage poster *Blue Sky*, it presents images of peace and happiness that instill an ideology within the people.

In a stark contrast to *Bordering Korea #5*, in which the text is framed and immersed in muted tones, the superimposed text from *Bordering North Korea #6* (Fig. 87) is in bold red letters recalling the same techniques of propaganda posters and contemporary propaganda art. Visually, the image presents the Korean landscape covered in snow intricately delineating the trails from the mountains and fields and the snow topped roofs of the residential areas. In the top left corner, the pink glow of the sun is faintly shown behind the mountain-range. This image, like the rest from Lee’s series, captures the beauty and tranquility of the North Korean landscape that at first recalls the idyllic North Korean landscapes depicted in propaganda posters and art.

However, the words, “We Have Nothing To Envy” in bold capital letters, contrasts the snowy landscape and appear intrusive and misplaced given their translation into the English language. Influenced by Korean aesthetic and later immersed in Western culture, Lee creates a disjuncture between text and image which disrupts the traditional propaganda images and text creating a visual and textual reverberation of the work within the Eastern and Western viewer. Moreover, Lee’s appropriation of propaganda messages, photographed from outside the borders of North Korea, furthersubverts the propaganda and instead alludes to the withdrawn reality of
the country. Like Holzer’s site-specific installation works, Lee combines text and specific sites through photography to create continuous oscillation and disruption within the viewer.

Lee investigates the dialogue between text and landscape and its possibilities for creating awareness of the withdrawn reality of North Korea. The dialogue also transports the viewer onto a new and restricted territory which elicits a feeling of uneasiness in absorbing the contrast between text and image. The images, photographed through the vantage points of China and South Korea, offers us a limited perspective of North Korea that is only possibly accessed through the peripheries in which we only see the boundaries of the country. From behind the borders, Lee photographs the tranquility of the North Korean landscape. By contrast, from behind the borders, the media portrays the state of disruption from inside the country. And from inside the country, the government power spreads propaganda about the ideologies people are forced to believe.

Fig. 88 Jung Lee, *Bordering North Korea #1*, 2005.
In the simplicity of its composition, the haze and mysticism surrounding the text “We Are Happy” from Bordering North Korea #1 (Fig. 88) characterizes how the Western culture perceives the East, as “exotic” and as alien. Visually, the image depicts a mountain range that appears and disappears with the constant movement from the fog. Similarly, the text, in grey lettering, emerges and is absorbed by the grey tones of the scene. Like Seon’s ink drawings, the photograph resembles the washes of grey tones overlaid on another that also differ from the intricate brushwork by Seon. The work functions in many ways: first, Lee translates the propaganda texts into English as a way to demystify the East and acquaint the Western viewer with reality. She says: “[I] began to question whether North Korea was beginning to drift as an object of curiosity, distant from its actual substance…” Arguably, the texts also disrupt the message and reality that North Koreans constantly consume. The disjunction between image and text enable the Western viewer to empathize with the mixed-messages that North Koreans live day to day. Secondly, through the photographic work, North Korea can be understood as a withdrawn entity by which the text serves to transport us or vicariously relate us towards a hidden reality. While the text brings political awareness to the reality of the “hermit kingdom,” the allure of the text alludes to an ontological entity that becomes more apparent in Lee’s subsequent works.

Lee interprets the North Korean landscape creating emotional resonances in the play between text and image. The text becomes impactful in its translation to English, enabling a wider audience to contemplate its relationship to the image. Alluding to different artistic traditions, traditional Joseon dynasty landscape paintings and Conceptual art, Bordering North Korea is a complex series that merges Lee’s different cultural influences. Lee evokes the notion of allure within the texts contrasted by a serenity and beauty within the landscapes. Overcoming

\[\text{\textsuperscript{303} Ibid.}\]
North Korea as “an object of curiosity,” she considers what lies behind the borders through the method of allusion in text which brings to the forefront what North Korea is in actuality. The power of text, and its ability to stir, becomes integral to Lee’s later works. The dreary mysticism of the landscapes persists into her series *Aporia* and *Day and Night*, in which the power of the text in conjunction with the landscapes elicit a more mysterious aura that is materialized in the direct installation of neon-text into the North Korean wilderness.

**Fragments, Déréalité and Allure**

In his critical essay “On Popular Music” (1941), Theodor Adorno draws a parallel between popular music and the superficial glitz and glamour of mass culture. Adorno reveals that despite the allure of the neon sign, its stereotypical quality reverts back to “humdrum.” He writes:

> Yet, it is just those violent colors which bear witness to the omnipotence of mechanical, industrial production itself. Nothing could be more stereotyped than the pinkish red neon lights which abound in shops, moving picture theaters and restaurants. By glamorizing, they attract attention. But the means by which they are used to overcome humdrum reality are more humdrum than reality itself…The term glamorous is applied to those faces, colors, sounds, which by the light they irradiate differ from the rest. But all glamor girls look alike…

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In Chapter 3, I discussed how Natal reframes the obsolete neon signs in her series *Neon Boneyard Las Vegas A-Z* to emphasize their material status as archeological debris. Through an analysis of Speculative Realism, and in particular Jane Bennett’s vital materialism, I emphasized how Natal captured the vitality and organic quality through the condensation and compression of

the photographic frame. The quality of allure that Graham Harman describes in Speculative Realism differs greatly from the formulation of the commodity by Jean Baudrillard, Guy Debord, and Theodor Adorno. Instead, we can think of objects as entities who have overcome their functionality. The use of neon signage as a medium in the works of Lee, and as a subject considered by Natal, allows for a consideration of neon as an inanimate thing that exists beyond its commercial frame. While Natal focuses on the continued vitality of neon signs, Lee manipulates neon as a working medium which glows enigmatically in uncanny and foggy landscapes. Instead of insisting on the superficial allure of neon signs, Lee shows their speculative allure, which discloses a vicarious experience of a withdrawn object.

In Lee’s series, *Aporia* (2010-2011), the word “aporia,” from the Greek “a” and “poros”, means “without a way” or “without a passage.” 305 It is not surprising that her installation and photographic work denotes a nostalgic feeling that was inspired by Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977). In contrast to South Korea’s city of Seoul, lit at night by neon signs, reminiscent of New York Times Square or the Las Vegas Strip, Lee’s installations glow against the silence and barrenness of the wilderness. The melancholic aura of Lee’s works can be related to the withdrawnness of the object described by Peter Schwenger’s in *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (2006). Schwenger, devoting an analysis of objecthood stemming from Bill Brown’s thing theory,306 and Heidegger’s concept of thingness,307 relates an object’s inaccessibility with sadness: “…the alienation of familiar objects, their strangeness and hence sadness, can often be the aim of art. The sadness is, to be sure, linked with a sense of the

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inaccessible.”  Therefore, while Lee may articulate a sense of longing derived from the limits of language stemming from Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*, the work itself, as an object through the analysis of Speculative Realism, exudes a necessary withdrawnness that is inaccessible to the viewer or other objects.

In *A Lover’s Discourse*, Barthes’ discourse on love is one of loss, in which fragments of thought by philosophers and novelists like Goethe, Proust, Nietzsche, and Lacan are composed, or montaged, to create an “amorous subject.” As Graham Allen describes in Barthes work, the lover, who pronounces “I” in the text is a “reader of signs…who constantly searches for signs that the other participates in the Imaginary, the fiction of the lover’s self.” The object of the work is the compiled text and words that create a fictional subject, in the absence of that subject. Secondly, the writings that compose the fictional lover are one-sided; there is no reciprocity with the loved object—they are absent. Instead the work is replete with absences, fiction, and the simulation of a discourse composed by fragments. The reader, as Barthes comments at the beginning of his work, is offered a “discursive site: the site of someone speaking within himself…” Barthes deconstructs the notion of love and reveals another absence—how language or text escapes meaning and thought, epitomizing the post-structuralist critique of language.

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In *The End* (Fig. 89), the bold neon letters in a white light elicits a ghostly horizontal glow amongst the other different horizontal planes of the landscape photograph. The stratified composition delineates several boundaries: the saturated sky promising an incoming storm; the blue sea with waves that stream across the image as white ribbons; the muted red color of the earth, and the sickly pale green color of the foreground amid remnants of grass and twigs. The entire photograph appears to have been washed over with a cold blue tint. The visual and textual elements of the work create a metaphorical relation alluding to an impending end or a temporal and visual schism within language. Although the photograph does not make known what will come to an end, or if it simply presents the definitive present “end” as already occurring, Lee offers an ambiguity when confronted with the definite article “the.” In a similar way to how a reader approaches the last pages of a novel, it is the end, of a linear narrative progression, and not simply an end. The definitive limit creates a stronger and more impactful visual relationship.
with the viewer. The abruptness in *the end* suggests an inescapable presence or moment of rupture that also makes no promise of a beginning or continuation but in which the viewer is caught in a perpetual state of a void.

At first, when the viewer is confronted with Lee’s neon installations the relationship between text and visuality reveals a palpable absence that connects to Barthes’ work. The desolate landscape and the one-sided statements by an absent author or disembodied voice implicate the viewer and also confronts the viewer with himself or herself. The dizzying perpetual signification of the neon material is heightened by its commercial quality whether in the wilderness as it signifies itself, or in an urban environment among the signification of other signs. However, in contrast to an urban environment, the neon material in the wilderness acquires an uncanniness that, in its signification, also exudes a further degree of absence. Each sign installation recalls Adorno’s criticisms of neon signs: superficiality, “humdrum,” and the allure of the glow. In fact, as Allen explains, Barthes similarly resembles Adorno’s criticisms of the culture industry, or the way culture and art is consumed by the “processes of commercialism and commodification.”

For Barthes, modern literature absorbs all languages and writing, which dictates and seduces the reader with poetic bonds or clichés. Instead, for Barthes, as for Marx, the radical solution for modern literature is to demystify the ideologies hidden within the text—articulated through the allure of poetry and cliché—and produce a “neutral style” of writing that challenges “tradition” and “style.”

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310 Ibid., 19.
311 Ibid.
It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the ‘person’ of the author. The author still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoires. The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions…

Previously, we witnessed how Lawrence Weiner’s decontextualized text also condemned the supremacy of the artists as autonomous creators. In his “Declaration of Intent,” Weiner advocated for the multiplicity of authors or receivers at the moment of receivership in the same way Barthes does in A Lover’s Discourse: “The discourse is spoken, perhaps, by thousands of subjects, but warranted by no one…” In his thesaurus-like composition of the book, he also describes the uncertainty of signs alluding to the futility of interpretation: “Whether he seeks to prove his love, or to discover if the other loves him, the amorous subject has no system of sure signs at his disposal.” Likewise, in “Death of the Author,” he champions the birth of the reader and the death of the author, and at the same time exposes the infinite instability of meaning by empty signs (much like the neon signs)—a “déréalité.”

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314 Barthes, A Lover’s Discourse, 2.
315 Ibid., 214.
316 Déréalité, personified by the amorous subject in which they experience absence or a withdrawal of reality is different from unreal. Instead, a disreality is more akin to “disreal” or “artifice,” which alludes to Barthes critique of realism in literature. Called “The Reality Effect,” Allen states that it “was created initially in an attempt to move beyond literary conventions towards an accurate representation of the social world,” and instead Barthes discovers that it degenerates in creating “codes” and “conventions” for “the illusion of reality.” Allen, Roland Barthes, 21. In A Lover’s Discourse, Barthes writes from a fragment of de Sade: “So long as I
With this in mind, it would appear as if Lee’s works present the post-structuralist underpinnings of the death of the author and the birth of the reader (or in this case the viewer) through the deployment of signs that have been decontextualized and which expose the superficiality of the medium. Lee neutralizes the word by setting it in an isolated landscape with no clear connection to a particular author and in the vacuous medium of neon. The work transmits nostalgia, loss, and a void, both visually and textually. And yet, vigour reverberates through the humming and “buzz” of the noble gas inside its glass enclosure. While neon may be the “soundtrack” to moral decay, or the cold automation of technology or allude to the anxiety of the future mechanization of the human-body, \(^{317}\) I propose a reality withdrawn from the discourse of the commodity which the neon-object infers vicariously. Instead, I propose the autonomy of the neon-object, stripped from its associations to the “culture industry,” which infers a hidden reality through its very artifice.

This alternative understanding of the allure of the object coincides with W. J. T Mitchell’s description of pictures as things beyond their use. In “What do Pictures (Really) Want?” (1996), Mitchell shifts “the location of desire” to images in contrast to the desires of a beholder or artist. \(^{318}\) Pictures are not vehicles of meaning or instruments of power. By asking “what do pictures want?” Mitchell is actually reconsidering the thingly quality of pictures. Their


materiality is what preserves an object’s autonomy. In other words, the materiality of the object is in fact the aesthetic condition by which to expose the withdrawnness of the object. Graham Harman and Timothy Morton respectively make claims to this recession of the object in their analyses of Martin Heidegger’s four fold. Lee’s neon works present a different idea of allure that is distinct from the use of neon as an aspect of commercial culture. This notion of brilliance and shine can be reinterpreted in neon using Heidegger’s example of colour as “shining” in “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935-1937).

Color shines and wants only to shine. When we analyze it in rational terms by measuring its wave-lengths, it is gone. It shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained. 319

Lee’s works present yet another dimension with regards to how humans interpret the work. Neon is afforded a new dynamism, one that departs from its previous criticisms and associations. In the following section, I introduce the concept of the “interobjective” dialogue through which the aesthetic causal dimension between objects becomes the only means by which to witness the object in its very withdrawnness.

The (Speculative) Sublime: An Interobjective Dialogue

An amorous intensity contrasts the icy wintry blue scene in which the red neon text bleeds a pink glow across the snow reading Once In A Lifetime (Fig. 90). The scene is encased by a frigid hue of blue in which the landscape emerges from within the snow. Frozen branches surface like hands attempting to escape an icy prison. Framed by a red and pink glow, the words appear to demark a memorial for the once fertile landscape. Visually, the work harks on a Romantic

sensibility in which the primacy of emotion and the appeal to the senses appears at first to overcome rationality. We know the seasons change, and yet we are emotionally overcome by the landscape’s apparent death in *Once In a Lifetime*.

![Image of Once In A Lifetime by Jung Lee](image)

Fig. 90 Jung Lee, *Once In A Lifetime*, 2011.

The blankets of fog and the muted or minimal tones by Caspar David Friedrich in *Monk By the Sea* (Fig. 91), for instance, is comparable to Lee’s *The End* (2010). With the addition of text, Lee demands the viewer to stand and face him or herself reading the text, to face the immediacy of “the end” and the internal emotions that accompany this confrontation. Equally, the viewer faces the visual and textual arrest of the landscape. In Friedrich’s painting, the monk is seized by the power of the boundless seascape contemplating its very infinity. Similarly to Friedrich’s monk, the beholder in Lee’s *The End* is suddenly arrested by the text and contemplates its relation with the infinite landscape. Formally, the works, centuries apart, use the

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horizontal layers of sky and earth in dreary tones to present a pervasive melancholic aura. The visual similarities between Kant’s notion of the sublime and Lee’s works also open a textual adaptation of the sublime.

Fig. 91 Casper David Friedrich, *The Monk by the Sea*, 1808-1810.

The communication between the landscape and viewer was employed by artists in the 19th-century as a way to combat the allegorical conventions set by traditional iconography. Charles Rosen, in “Caspar David Friedrich and the Language of Landscape,” considers the way Friedrich detached symbolic objects from their hieroglyphic signification and disrupted allegory. While Friedrich did use symbols like dark hues that had become unconsciously accepted, he, like William Wordsworth and John Constable, however, also allowed nature to “speak directly,”

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322 Ibid., 61.
in an evocative rather than a discursive way which disrupted the allegorical symbols and allowed
the environment to evoke its own terms.\footnote{Ibid., 65-66.} Visually, Lee’s photographs present the same motif
of evocative atmospheric tone and color implying the particular mood of sadness and longing.
Moreover, Lee also uses familiar textual tropes of love that, alongside the romanticized
landscape, alter the mode of expression of the symbol. Lee ruptures the artwork from the clichés
of the landscape tradition by juxtaposing it with the dissonant word; the neon medium is
displaced to an unexpected location.

Aside from a Romantic inspiration of landscape, the romantic and yet wistful aura in
Lee’s works exemplifies Morton’s notion of OOO as an adaptation of Heidegger’s notion of
revealing and concealing. In “Sublime Objects,” Morton explains an obscurity and a
withdrawnness of objects: “...object-oriented rhetoric becomes the way objects obscure
themselves in fold upon fold of mysterious robes, caverns, and fortresses of solitude and octopus
ink.”\footnote{Morton, “Sublime Objects,” 213.} Strangeness and mystery surrounds the object preserving its autonomy. Causality,
however, synonymous with the aesthetic dimension, is the energy by which objects come into
contact with one another.\footnote{Ibid., 216.} In Hyperobjects, Morton describes the flow of causalities as if
electricity ran through hyperobjects;\footnote{Ibid., 29.} the cacophony of buzzing and humming by the neon
medium and object alludes to an inherent vitality and a withdrawnness contrasted by its
displacement from the city and joined with the tones of the wilderness. Curiously, in Barthes’ A
Lover’s Discourse, he represents this contradiction between “the unknowable” and the belief of
knowing the amorous subject that can be also understood through the ideas of Speculative
Realism. Barthes writes:

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 65-66.}
\footnote{Morton, “Sublime Objects,” 213.}
\footnote{Ibid., 216.}
\footnote{Morton, \textit{Hyperobjects}, 29.}
I am caught in this contradiction: on the one hand, I believe I know the other better than anyone and triumphantly assert my knowledge to the other ("I know you-I'm the only one who really knows you!"); and on the other hand, I am often struck by the obvious fact that the other is impenetrable, intractable, not to be found; I cannot open up the other, trace back the other's origins, solve the riddle. Where does the other come from? Who is the other? I wear myself out, I shall never know.\textsuperscript{327}

It is through phantasia and transport through language that an object emerges or an object relocates us to another. Contrary to Weiner’s statements which lacked a subject, and therefore become anonymous objects, Lee includes the pronouns “you,” “your,” and “me” in her statements. In an accusatorial tone, Lee implicates the reader/viewer and implicates an absent other (that does the accusing and implicating) to which one talks. For instance, in \textit{How Could You Do This To Me?} (Fig. 92)—a foggy aura pervades the scene in which the text manages to penetrate through—both pronouns “you” and “me” are implied and yet also absent. Lee’s photographs are representations of a tension between love and melancholy, allure and concealment, presence and absence, text and visuality, and language and landscape—an in-betweeness that Morton describes as a necessary abyss that allows things to coexist.\textsuperscript{328}

\textsuperscript{327} Barthes, \textit{A Lover's Discourse}, 134.
\textsuperscript{328} Ibid., 79.
For Morton, the concept of the speculative sublime is more closely tied to Immanuel Kant’s notion of the sublime than Edmund Burke’s: instead of fear it is a sense of freedom of rationality that exceeds imagination. For Kant the feeling of the sublime in nature is the play of the faculty of imagination and reason, in which the mind “feels itself set in motion” at the alternating fear of being overwhelmed and overcoming that fear in the inadequacy of the faculty of imagination to grasp the estimation of immensity.\footnote{Immanuel Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgement}, Trans. James Creed Meredith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 88.} Contrary to Kant, the speculative sublime attempts to create an intimacy between objects instead of a separation from object and subject in which phantasia and transport direct objects towards the withdrawn.\footnote{Ibid., 217.}

An intimacy between objects, such as between the neon text and the landscape, the viewer and the photograph or the viewer reading the text, is what Morton describes as sublimity. Take Lee’s work \textit{Why}? (Fig. 93); the yellow neon-text emerges from within the dark silhouettes.
from the branches of a wild and barren group of trees. The atmosphere of the photograph includes a row of dark trees, stemming from the foreground, that lead to a distant body of water, blanketed by fog in which the sky and sea become unified into obscurity. Within the somber mood, the neon text emerges as a phantasm, and similarly conjures up ghostly objects of potential answers for the ambiguous question. It presents what Morton terms, phantasia, or how an object impinges on another.\textsuperscript{331} Borrowing from Kant’s comparison of the sublime to “shaking,\textsuperscript{332}” the object’s imminence stirs the viewer into a speculative sublimity in which the viewer also becomes aware of the vibration between the proximity and distance of the object. Phantasia, or the alternating appearance and absence of the object, is possible when the mind becomes attuned to the causal capacity of objects that infers the infinite world of objects. This visualization overwhelms and disrupts the viewer as if they have witnessed the appearance and disappearance of a phantasm. It “shakes” the viewer because they have made contact with an object that appears alien and then becomes specific.\textsuperscript{333}

\textsuperscript{331} Ibid., 225.  
\textsuperscript{332} Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgement}, 88.  
\textsuperscript{333} Morton, “Sublime Objects,” 225.
In another example, Lee’s works transport us to other objects such as memories and feelings. The experience of the speculative sublime is a stirring inside of you in which you are moved by specific references.\textsuperscript{334} Across a white field, a row of tall trees stand uniform peppered with snow. The neon text-installation created with a white light diffuses a pink glow on the snowy ground creating the only separation between the white letters and the powdery white background. \textit{I Still Remember} (Fig. 94) directs the viewer’s attention to objects such as memories and feelings; the viewer is moved to the withdrawn reality of potential objects that is sealed from access yet, nevertheless, thinkable and thus, in proximity.\textsuperscript{335} In a similar way that Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of the conscious and unconscious uses the iceberg

\textsuperscript{334} Ibid., 223.
\textsuperscript{335} Ibid., 224.
metaphor in which consciousness is the tip of the iceberg and the unconscious is the hidden abundant portion of the iceberg, the words, “I still remember,” allow distant memories to emerge or, as Freud describes, “come into consciousness.” In another way, *Once in a Lifetime* visually and textually directs the viewer to metaphors of the landscape in a state of death by winter. The work represents what I determined as anonymous objects, which through their absence, facilitate a causal effect.

![Image](image.jpg)

Fig. 94 Jung Lee, *I Still Remember*, 2010

To find beauty in Lee’s poetic and tragic works is an example of energy, a causality that allows the viewer to relate to the object vicariously. As Morton recalls in *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (2013), the Kantian notion of beauty *appears* to emanate from the object; it is non-conceptual and separate from the subject judging it. Beauty as such, however,

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has no source; it is an object in and of itself through the vicarious relation of interpretation. Vicarious relation is the way objects do not come into contact directly, but instead come into contact through a third object in the sensual interiors of objects. The aesthetic experience occurs in the abyss between objects. In this aspect of beauty as a causal effect, the presence of the viewer is not implied. The object is not bound to the subject; it is autonomous. The effect is how the human perceives this encounter with the “beautiful object.”

In Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, he addresses how Speculative Realism can direct us to an attunement of the causal capacities of hyperobjects—objects massively distributed in space and time relative to humans—to ensure an ecological awareness. Morton describes how hyperobjects such as global warming, while imperceptible and yet pervasive, exhibit causal capacities that affect our lives. Ecological ontology reconsiders the ethical and ecological concerns of coexisting with nonhuman entities.

Similarly, landscape architect, Anne Whiston Spirn had already considered the way nonhuman entities coexist and interact with one another in her book *The Language of Landscape* (1998). Spirn theorizes about landscape in conjunction with aesthetics in order to resolve the relationship between human and nature toward an ecological understanding of both. Spirn describes a dialogue between the natural elements themselves outside of human interpretation which can be reinterpreted using Speculative Realist terms as an interobjective dialogue between objects. She says:

> The sun sends a pervasive signal. All landscape elements respond to its light and heat: sunflowers track the sun, turning faces east to west from morning to evening; earth dries

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338 Ibid., 90.
341 Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Language of Landscape* (London: Yale University Press, 1998),

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out on west-facing hillsides so only drought-and heat-tolerated plants grow there; desert plants develop a thick skin to buffer temperature extremes from day to night; desert people build houses with thick walls….Sunflowers’ tracking, soil’s drying, plants’ thick skin, people’s sweating are unconscious dialogues with the sun; building thick walls is deliberate.\textsuperscript{342}

The processes of nature appear at first to be simple processes perceived by the viewer interpreting them. Or, viewed differently, the relational properties between the sun and the landscape can be interpreted as objects in and of themselves. The sun and the sunflowers are brought together within the object of light or the object of heat, in the same way, the viewer forms another relational-object when he or she interprets the sunflowers reacting to, or being affected by the sun. The interpretations of processes of nature and the relational properties between nature, are objects of causality also known as the aesthetic dimension that enables objects to encounter other objects. Likewise, as Spirn poetically discusses the dialogue between the elements of nature, we are reminded that the aesthetic dimension does not merely belong to humans but rather is the way all objects relate to another.\textsuperscript{343}

However, Morton’s notion of interobjectivity, which precisely accounts for nonhuman object-object relations, recalls Bennett’s concept of strategic-anthropomorphism in order to combat anthropocentrism. If the human anthropomorphizes the landscape giving it human qualities, then the viewer may reconsider it as something beyond its perceptual dimension and instead, as something uncanny that is not subservient to humans. If the viewer can consider objects as uncanny entities with agency, then even if humans are bound to looking through their human-experience, a strategic anthropomorphism would paradoxically combat an

\textsuperscript{342} Spirn, \textit{The Language of Landscape}, 38.  
\textsuperscript{343} Morton, \textit{Realist Magic}, 24.
anthropocentric view of the world. In the same way humans anthropomorphize things, non-human entities similarly anthropomorphize humans. Thus, Spirn’s discussion of the language of landscape anthropomorphizes it and also unravels the interobjectivity of non-human objects.

While Lee’s earlier series *Bordering North Korea* emphasized a political dialogue between North Korea and the Western world through the disjuncture of image and text, *Aporia* orients the viewer to more romantic notions of love and despair as inspired by Barthes’ writings and Lee’s perspectives of both Eastern and Western cultures. The anthropomorphization of landscape, along with the amorous and arduous messages in neon, further strengthens the notion of the speculative sublime as an interobjective dialogue.

The Romantic technique in literature and art was to present the language of landscape by overcoming basic symbolism. Romantic art and literature, politically conservative at the time, offered an aesthetic which attuned the beholder to their emotional sensibilities which departed from the Enlightenment ideals of reason and order that had been radical interventions in politics and art. Thus, the Romantic aesthetic allowed for a stronger connection to art and literature which enabled artists to withdraw within themselves and explore the complexity and mystery of human-emotions. Lee employs similar Romanticist techniques in many of her works; the landscape and atmospheric sensibility sets up the neon text to create a dialogue between love and despair. For instance, in *I Want to Be Your Love* (Fig. 95), the red neon text appears caught in the middle of an interweaving tangle of branches. The red glow emits onto the nearest branches by the neon installation transforming them into red blood vessels in such a way as to bring a visceral quality to the statement. The red-stained piece recalls notions of interiority, of pulsation,

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344 Bogost also concurs with Bennett’s strategic anthropomorphism, however, elsewhere he states that anthropocentrism might be unavoidable. Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 77.
and of energy that contrasts the cold blue background that emerges from the gaps between the interlocking vessels. The foreground is sprinkled with red drops that resemble blood splatter, accentuating the way in which love becomes embodied.

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 95 Jung Lee, *I Want to be Your Love*, 2012**

In Lee’s series *Aporia*, the texts embody the landscape, and their relationship becomes integral for the aesthetic success of the work. Lee’s interpretation of love as an addiction enables her to visualize the precise site to emphasize a sense of “entrapment” and “endlessness.”

While the South Korean wilderness is barren of human life in its raw state as an overgrown landscape, its relation to the neon texts presents a disparity and an irony in the dialogue between objects. Lee’s interpretation of love as an addiction presents itself in *I Want to Be Your Love* as

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the entanglement of branches in the foreground and background translates the feeling of desire in a state of captivity.

Lee’s works externalize the internal turbulence of emotions and thoughts. In an interview with Nara Shin from the online publication of Cool Hunting, Lee explains her obsession with the phrases:

I contemplate over the phrases for a long period of time, until I feel the neon sentences are alive. You could call it ‘personification.’ I keep imagining and sketching out what the story will become when I place that sentence down in different spaces. And so I wildly keep searching until the scene I have envisioned from deep down, emerges.348

The 19th-century British art critic John Ruskin called personification pathetic fallacy, outlining many concerns with the tendency to ascribe human qualities to non-human things.349 Personification, he believed, was a distortion of reality that recalled the inherent solipsism of the Cartesian declaration: I think therefore I am. Ruskin found troubling the instance the viewer began to change their thoughts on nature and take it as a reality. By contrast, Morton argues that all objects are in dialogue with one another in a way that must be understood as equally determined and real. Thus, the displacement of the text-objects onto abandoned landscapes transforms the dialogue between two opposing objects and presents an anthropomorphic dialogue of the landscape that implicates the viewer. The viewer no longer directly externalizes his or her emotion or thoughts onto the landscape. Instead, the landscape appears like as an uncanny entity which converses with the viewer, anthropomorphically asking the questions “why?” “how could you do this to me?” and “I still remember.” The neon surfaces from the sites

to radiate the mysterious messages and stir the viewer through the relation of phantasia. They are uncanny and alien rather than a personification projected by the viewer. The feeling of melancholy brought forth by these works, however, introduces us to the limits of our interpretations and perception of the object which we falsely believe to be melancholic.

In his book, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*, Peter Schwenger discusses the anthropomorphism of objects as projected from the viewer that in turn produces a state of melancholy in him or her.

The melancholy I am speaking of underlies the very moment when “now you see it”; it is generated by the act of perception, perception of the object by the subject. This perception, always falling short of full possession, gives rise to a melancholy that is felt by the subject and is ultimately for the subject. It is we who are to be lamented, and not the objects that evoke this emotion in us without ever feeling it themselves.  

For Schwenger, it is not the objects themselves that evoke melancholy or longing, but instead it is the perceiver, who, because of the withdrawnness of the object, is overcome by a longing or melancholy. He further describes how despite their physicality, objects are “always implicated with a metaphysical nonexistence, an unknowableness that is—at least for the perceiving eye—a kind of death.”  

The rift between appearance and essence for Schwenger, follows the psychoanalytic Lacanian tradition by which objects inform the subject of their “lack” of their “narcissistic desires,” and does not legitimize them as ontological entities.  

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351 Ibid., 174.
352 Peter Schwenger, while adopting a psychoanalytic approach to things (precisely what W.J.T Mitchell avoids in *What do Pictures Want?*) refers back to a Phenomenology via Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and a psychoanalysis via Lacan which does not develop the potential for an object-oriented ontology but instead succumbs to a correlationist view of the object or thing.  

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Lee’s texts are beautifully imbued with the alternating messages of love and despair accentuated as they are by the landscapes. However, I propose that this is merely a symptom of the speculative sublime in which objects (human and non-human alike) encounter each other as alien to one another. The state of melancholy, in Speculative Realist terms, is another object-like entity in and of itself. The affect is “the footprint of another entity” that is experienced in and of itself. Affects can be reconsidered as objects as well. The presence of melancholy as presence is an aesthetic affect and effect of the coexistence of objects. Lee allows us to come into contact with the uncanny presence and agency of objects, which stir, conjure and transport us, and in which the aesthetic effect of melancholy and longing lets us know of such proximity and distance. With this in mind, the interobjective dialogue of entities allows us to reconsider also their life and agency beyond our perceptions and interpretations of them in which they become active rather than passive objects.

Beyond the Sign: Object Ecologies

The theory of the speculative sublime liberates the object from the confines of human perception and meaning while still maintaining the high levels of intimacy and interactivity between objects and the viewer. Lee’s works materialize internal depths of memories, of love and pain through the landscape and its interaction with text. Likewise, the anthropomorphized landscape provokes an environmental awareness in the viewer by the contrasting messages of sorrow and devotion. In a similar way that Judy Natal introduced metal and plastic signage to the desert landscape of the Joshua Tree National Park, Lee introduces the urban object of neon in order to create new relations and dialogues between distant objects.

Morton, Realist Magic, 159.
Ibid., 161.
In “What Do Pictures Really Want,” Mitchell’s analysis of pictures is in part that they take the default position of femininity. He says: “The question of what pictures want, then, is inseparable from the question of what women want.” Mitchell borrows this question and argument from psychoanalysis. While Sigmund Freud’s views of women as passive and subordinate to men in his essay “The Psychical Consequences of the Anatomic Distinction Between the Sexes” (1925) inspired controversy, they also inspired the developments into female sexuality and feminine psychology soon afterwards. Mitchell borrows the question to determine how the life of pictures, like women’s sexuality, is presumed to be unknown. Moreover, Mitchell theorizes that, given the gender politics of the gaze, pictures “want a kind of mastery over the beholder.” The relation between the “interrogation or the invitation” for pictures to speak and the politics of the gaze uncovers the female paradigm associated with pictures. Pictures are similarly thought of as having to “awaken desire in the beholder while not disclosing any signs of desire or even awareness that it is being beheld…” While Mitchell departs from the “power” of images as vehicles for messages or tools for control, he alludes to and anticipates an unexplored ontology of pictures.

356 Freud’s question is captured in the three volume biography by Ernest Jones: ‘There is little doubt that Freud found the psychology of women more enigmatic than that of men. He said once to Marie Bonaparte: ‘The great question that has never been answered and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is ‘What does a woman want?’” The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud: Years of Maturity (1901-1919), vol. 2 (New York: Basic Books, 1953), 421.
358 “The significance of the factor of sexual overvaluation can be best studied in men, for their erotic life alone has become accessible to research. That of women - partly owing to the stunting effect of civilized conditions and partly owing to their conventional secretiveness and insincerity - is still veiled in an impenetrable obscurity.” Sigmund Freud, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, trans. A.A. Brill (Rough Draft Printing, 2015), 30.
360 Ibid., 80.
The relation between “femininity” and the ontology of objects is inferred through an anthropomorphism of them. At the end of the 20th-century the legitimization of subaltern identities was emphasized following deconstructionist theories.\(^{361}\) By metaphorically equating “femininity” with pictures, Mitchell directly exposes pictures as another subaltern identity that has succumbed to the whims of humans. Thus, Speculative Realism goes beyond post-structuralist theories, still centered on the human perspective, and includes the legitimization of objects as ontological entities. Pictures, among other non-human entities are considered withdrawn entities. Likewise, the projection of an anthropomorphized “femininity” to landscapes also addresses how landscapes can be considered as withdrawn alien entities. They are imperceptible to the senses and are only possibly accessed vicariously through text. Initially, Lee’s works present what Mitchell terms the “Medusa effect;” the neon signs transfix and paralyze the viewer through their glow and written text, located in the emotive landscapes. While the works seem to speak directly to the viewer,\(^{362}\) the speculative sublime reorients the object not as the deadly Medusa, but as vicariously relating to another through text.

Lee’s works show the aesthetic dimension through the lens of Speculative Realism. Melancholy, as noted previously, is an effect of this causal relation which shows the coexistence of objects. Thus, the relation between an art-object and the viewer is integral to art history’s methods of interpretation and to understand the coexistence with the art-object, not the subordination of objects. If the art-objects vicariously present the object’s allure, how can the viewer interpret the work? Furthermore, how do Lee’s works also invite an ethical awareness of object co-existence?


Jane Bennett addresses the ethical reconsiderations of entering into assemblages of co-existing vital materialisms through relations. As previously mentioned, for Bennett, an anthropomorphic relation with materials elicits empathy with materials which could help combat human-narcissism. In a similar way, N. Katherine Hayles in “Speculative Aesthetics and Object-Oriented Inquiry (OOI)” (2014), argues that the way to combat anthropocentrism is “through an imaginative projection into the worldviews of other objects and beings, based on evidence about their ways of being in the world…” The aesthetic ideas of relation and interpretation in objects of art seem to initially challenge the impetus of combating an anthropocentric view of objects. However, In “Interpretation and the Affordance of Things” (2014), Boetzkes uses a Heideggerian analysis for Nam Jun Paik’s works that demonstrates how the aesthetic technique of anthropomorphizing art-objects enables their thingness to emerge and their objectness recede. As Boetzkes asserts, the anthropomorphism of technology in Paik’s works “paradoxically, accentuates the thingness of the thing.” Paik’s work, Boetzkes continues, inverts itself as “invisible equipment,” or its objectness, and instead presents itself as a “thing.” She concludes:

It is the perceptual situation of object relations and not simply the thing as such that freely grants meaning. The thing, or rather the object/thing dialectic, now read as tool/broken tool, and concomitantly the concealing and revealing of an object-world,

365 Ibid.
gather and grant our sense. Meaning and interpretation take place in the midst of concealed equipment and perceived things.\(^{366}\)

Following James J. Gibson’s notion of “affordance,” Boetzkes explains that as things, artworks present possible affordances as the “function” of the object recedes.\(^{367}\) In Lawrence Weiner’s conceptual works, the language-sculptures, which often stand alone as pure text, are presented through the medium of text in which the allure of the words, such as through metaphor, signify an object-world beyond the visual dimension. In contrast, because the medium of neon is so visually apparent in Lee’s text-sculptures, both neon and landscape present affordances that emerge while the equipmentality of neon and landscape withdraw behind the surface effects of allure.

Interpretation, or translation, can be conceived as an effect or relation of the coexistence of objects in which “the meaning of an object is another object.”\(^{368}\) In other words, interpretations and translations, like affects, are also objects in and of themselves. Thus, when present with Lee’s evocative work, the interpretation of the work is an object which encases the viewer-object and the art-object but which does not penetrate the art-object. Different viewers will interpret the work and thus form new relational-objects. The “real” object, as Harman says, however, remains impenetrable despite these newly formed objects. The art-object preserves its autonomy. Secondly, following Ian Bogost’s concept of entering ethical relations, Lee’s works also allow the viewer to coexist with the art-object and form ethical interpretations (new objects). Lee’s heaps of texts, while presenting text as object-entities, also acquaint the viewer with an ecological ontology.

\(^{366}\) Ibid., 274.
\(^{367}\) Ibid.
\(^{368}\) Morton, *Realist Magic*, 90.
Similar to Robert Smithson and Judy Natal’s heaps of language, Lee’s series *Day and Night* (2012) are heaps of text that emphasize its object-quality. The floating clusters of neon text among the sea come from Lee’s inspiration of Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*. The theological references, not only from the words but also from their site of placement recall the desire for “salvation” and a different sense of longing than from her *Aporia* series. In *Day and Night #2* (Fig. 96), the words “God,” “death,” “faith,” “life,” “love,” “soul,” “promise,” “you,” “truth,” are clustered in a heap and float on the sea in which the different coloured lights appear ghostly against the overwhelming darkness of the scene. The coloured reflections from the neon texts fuse together as abstract forms become bisected by the movement of the water in the form of ripples and small waves. Visually, the work presents a division: a contrast between the presence of a textual form that is read by the viewer and the distorted coloured forms that appear in the water purely as a visual representation.

Fig. 96 Jung Lee, *Day and Night #2*, 2012.
Lee’s photographs are fragments of the original work by Alighieri. Lee takes these fragments, like Barthes takes texts from other authors in *A Lover’s Discourse*, and treats them as objects in which she reassembles them along with other texts. By fragmenting and reassembling the words, Lee also deconstructs the work. She takes the clichéd words and regroups them to create a piece that no longer recalls the original work. This deconstruction of the *Divine Comedy* is also visually reflected across the ripples and waves that crisscross the abstract coloured forms in which readability is no longer possible. Likewise, amidst an evident deconstruction, a sense of withdrawnness is made apparent. The pieces of text reflect a duality between coherence and incoherence. The reformed texts, assembled in a heap, acquaint the viewer with them as object-entities. At once, their appearance as text also alludes to an impenetrability accentuated by their incoherence as part of the heap. As a unit, the texts in relation to other texts, also demonstrate contradiction between words such as “death,” “life,” and “faith,” and “truth.” The interpretation of these words juxtaposed with other words in the jumbled heap transports the viewer to other objects or conjures objects such as their own memories or ideas of life or religion.
In *Day and Night* #3 (Fig. 97), the heap of neon texts presents the same word “you” in different coloured-neon. The jumbled heap of “you,” shares the similar effect as *You, You, You* (Fig. 98) from her *Aporia* series. *You, You, You* is a neon-text installation on a green blanket of leaves and bushes. Both works directly appear to implicate and accusatorially point at the viewer. The installations are fragmentations of the works of Dante Alighieri and Roland Barthes, and which are reduced to a single pronoun, “you,” which no longer recalls the originals works. In this way, the landscapes appear to accuse the viewer; the repetition of the word emphasizes the accusatory tone in the text. The viewer is confronted with him or herself and the landscape in which case the anthropomorphized landscape talks back through the neon text. Precisely because
the texts are of the single pronoun “you” it is recognized by everyone. Likewise, because the word “you” separates itself from the original literary works of Alighieri and Barthes, it conveys a melancholic, longing, and denunciative tone that can otherwise bring forth the ecological ontology of the landscape along with its bushes, foliage and tress and earth. While Lee’s photographs are mostly taken in the winter in which they depict snow on the ground and leafless trees, the landscapes coupled with the text transmit the metaphorical notions of death, coldness, and sterility. The neon sign thus functions as a displaced object which contrasts the wilderness unscathed by humanity and recalls the urbanized areas populated by commodity, artifice, and excess. The signs paradoxically emit the only sign of energy and light within the wilderness.

Fig. 98 Jung Lee, You, You, You, 2010.
In another example of heaps of neon text, Lee takes inspiration from the early modern Korean poet, Kim Sowol. Known for the poem “Azaleas,” his poetic style recalls traditional Korean folk songs mixed with nostalgia, melancholy, and loss. Lee reinterprets Sowol’s poetry and materializes them to a landscape in the form of a neon installation which elicits a further ethical relation between the viewer and landscape. In *Sanyuhwa Flowers on the Hills* (Fig. 99), the jumbled Korean text resides over a landscape of tall grass and within foliage. In the background a forest emerges within the dusk. The Korean characters are jumbled into a heap and are read as visual forms rather than read as horizontal text. The different coloured neon undermines the text and offers a visual dynamism that blends within the surrounding foliage. The work is taken from Kim Sowol’s poem, “Sanyuhwa,” translated as “Mountain flowers.” The translated poem reads as follows:

In the mountains, flowers bloom,  
oh, how they bloom.
Fall, spring, and summer through,
oh, how they bloom.
In the mountains,
in the mountains,
the flowers
bloom so well left alone.369

Reading the poem against the landscape reorients the viewer to read it as an ecological work. The nostalgic presence of the poem in which it is installed as a physical entity into a landscape is paradoxically emphasized by the last line of the poem: “bloom so well left alone.” The viewer is present in relation to the work, and yet, they feel their presence is undesired. Through Speculative Realism, the work is read differently. Rather than simply recalling Korean poetry, the art-object demands the viewer to question their place within the object-world. What does the image (or in this case the landscape-object) want? The allure of the text draws the viewer to the withdrawn entity of the landscape; its reality is impenetrable and imperceptible. The landscape demands an awareness of the co-existence of objects in an object-world in which the human is displaced from ontological hierarchy. Thus, the viewer feels an uncanny presence that stirs him or her because the landscape has become something other than its visuality.

Conclusion

Lee’s oeuvre has presented a complex arena for the discussion of Speculative Realism in which her interpretations from different points of view have enabled a new notion of interpretation to arise. Our interpretations of art, formed by our visual plane, are newly formed relational-objects of it. The reverberation of the art-object as it withdraws and emerges through visual allure allows glimpses of the withdrawn “real object” that is impenetrable and imperceptible. Through

the works by Lee, the causal/aesthetic dimension of metaphor has reintroduced an object-like quality enabling the viewer to become struck by the presence and withdrawnness of object entities. Moreover, a Speculative Realist interpretation of Lee’s work has shown us how object-entities also orient us to an ecology of object-entities.

The strategic anthropomorphism of the neon words makes the coexistence between objects visible. It is nearly impossible to look at and perceive things from a perspective other than our own. However, it is possible to begin to question what one thinks he or she knows of reality and consider the things that surround us daily as more than objects or as their equipmentality. As Robert Jackson describes in his essay “The Anxiousness of Objects and Artworks: (Iso)Morphism, Anti-Literalism and Presentness” (2014), it is necessary to speculate about how other objects “empathetically project.”

Recalling Michael Fried, Jackson reminds us that:

> By virtue of its determinate essence, an object cannot avoid projecting its own aesthetic inwardness onto other objects, yet it also cannot avoid accepting the “presentness” of recession, which traps its contents.

A strategic anthropomorphism enables us to sense the reality of objects. What happens after something is no longer of use? Speculative Realism tells us that they continue to exist. They create relations (new objects), form assemblages, and become hyperobjects. Their presence is uncanny, and yet the abyss of causality stirs us as we are reminded of their agency and hidden reality. It is time to think about an ecological ontology.

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371 Ibid., 358.
CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A (SPECULATIVE) AESTHETICS

Throughout this thesis I have attempted to overcome a series of assumptions regarding how objects are perceived as passive and inanimate matter, or in the other extreme, as tools or vehicles for the purpose of dominance. The study of objects I have attempted to unravel stems from another assumption, that of the dematerialization of the object that was anticipated to take place with the rise of Conceptual art in the 1960s. Following the rupture of Modernist aesthetic ideas, Conceptual art was seen as the decay of art all together; artists in this movement such as Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, and Sol LeWitt worked with new mediums such as language and for many critics the primacy of the idea was seen as replacing “skill,” “aesthetic beauty,” and “form.” Through the works of art by Lawrence Weiner, a pioneer in Conceptual art, and through the subsequent works of Post-Conceptual art by Judy Natal and Jung Lee, who continued to use language as their subject and medium, I have demonstrated new perspectives that overcome the idea of Conceptual art as a radicalization of art. Finally, through the lens of Speculative Realism, I have proposed how the philosophy challenges our analyses of perception, our preconception of objects as passive matter, and how it introduces new methods of interpretation through a vicarious relation between them. Likewise, I have attempted to unbind the art-object from an anthropocentric view and instead have shown how the art-object poses a challenge to the discipline of Art History as an autonomous object.

This thesis began as an attempt to uncover the assumptions of Conceptual art as a dematerialization. Between the Modernist critics like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, Conceptual art was seen as not autonomous but instead as implicating the viewer directly, or what Fried called “theatricality” in Minimalist art. Instead, following the theories of Rosalind Krauss and Nicolas Bourriaud, Post-Modernist Art, and thereby, Conceptual art, were celebrated
for expanding the medium and methods of art-making which overcame traditional painting and sculpture. Likewise, Post-Modernist Art was seen as facilitating relational aesthetics in which art could pose political and social challenges. In this example, Lawrence Weiner, through the medium of language, was able to expand the accessibility of art from beyond the white walls of the gallery. This introduced new relational methods that politically advocated for a democracy in the distribution, access, and reception of works. However, despite the newly found positive ideas of Conceptual art as revolutionizing traditional Modernist aesthetics, I introduced the philosophy of Speculative Realism through Graham Harman, Timothy Morton and Jane Bennett, which enabled new theorizations of perception and interpretation in art and art history. Within the challenges posed by Speculative Realism, I introduced the problem of correlation, or anthropocentrism, in the methods of perception and in the interpretation of the art-object. Through a discussion of the rise of a phenomenological interpretation of art throughout the 20th-century, I exposed the inherent problems with an analysis that risked descending into solipsism. Through Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology, the art-object was confined to the embodied experience of the viewer which cemented their position in the world. In the same way, the relational and political analyses of Post-Modern art also emphasized the correlationist problem of reality where the primacy of the viewer and their interpretations bound the object for the purpose of human meaning. Instead, my introduction of Speculative Realism in the realm of art history and criticism challenged these correlationist beliefs of objects in reality in which objects could be conceived as autonomous ontological entities.

As one of the pioneers in Conceptual art, Lawrence Weiner, following A.N. Whitehead’s philosophy of materialism, began to forgo the creation of objects and instead created language sculptures that equated the viewer with an already existing reality. Weiner liberated the object
from human purview; his ambiguous and poetic works reflected a material reality that often did not address specific objects which I later termed “anonymous objects.” Likewise, his use of clichés opened the work to deconstructionist and Marxist analyses in which they ruptured the assumptions of meaning in the clichés and demystified the objects and returned them to empirical notions of materials. Through a Speculative Realist analysis I introduced a study on the ontology of Weiner’s material objects and departed from the materialist notion of objects. I unearthed a hidden reality implicit in his language sculptures that instead spoke of their atemporal and non-spatial characteristics. Likewise, I analyzed how his material objects conjured and transported the viewer to vicariously relate to other objects. Not only did Weiner initiate a democratic reception and works the works more accessible, but I argued that he was among the first artists to also advocate for an ontological democracy of the objects themselves.

Following Conceptual art, the Post-Conceptual work of Judy Natal emphasized a different paradigm of Speculative Realism that dealt with Jane Bennett’s notion of vital materialism. Natal’s photographic series depicts the geographical landscapes of the Joshua Tree National Park within southeastern California and the Las Vegas Neon Museum. The scavenged plastic and metal letters from *Earthwords*, as well as the vintage neon alphabet letters from *Neon Boneyard Las Vegas A-Z*, create spatial relations between landscape and object. Within the contradictions of wilderness and the entertainment centers in Nevada and California, Natal unearthed a hidden vitality that emits through objects of excess, waste, and their use. Inspired by the work of Robert Smithson, Natal creates a textual and visual dialogue in her series, *Earthwords*, between the found objects and their geographic position. Through Speculative Realism, I challenged the phenomenological interpretations of landscape that, I argued, inhibited the object-landscape from its withdrawnness. Furthermore, in *Neon Boneyard Las Vegas A-Z*, 
the neon-objects, imbued by Marxist theorists as beacons of moral decay were instead viewed as vital materialisms creating new relational-assemblages within their new place of repose.

In Jung Lee’s works, the Korean-born photographer also embraced neon as her subject-matter. However, contrary to Judy Natal, Lee used neon as a medium, that while eliciting romanticized notions of melancholy and ardor within the landscape setting, they enabled a continued overcoming of signs as a hypnotic tools by consumer-society. Inspired by Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*, Lee analyzed the limitations of language similar to the incoherence and uncertainty felt in the emotion of love. I departed from Barthes’ post-structuralist notions on the limits of language and I continued to analyze these moments of incoherence as the object’s impenetrability and inconspicuousness from visual consumption. Within Lee’s works, I reconceived the notion of allure, not as a tool, but instead through Harman’s notion of Speculative Realism—as a withdrawnness of a hidden reality and the real object through its brilliance and shine. Following allure, I also analyzed the notion of Bennett’s strategic anthropomorphism as a way to empathize with Lee’s landscapes through a convergence of the W.J.T Mitchell’s borrowed psychoanalytic question and notion in which he describes pictures in the default position of “feminine” that I further applied to objects. I unraveled the notion of interpretation within Morton’s notion of the speculative sublime that revived a Romantic sensibility in the works that not only addressed its visual characteristics, but alluded to the withdrawn object world that could be addressed through ecological ontology.

Through the Conceptual and Post-Conceptual works of art beginning with Lawrence Weiner and continuing with Judy Natal and Jung Lee, the medium of language overcomes the characteristics of dematerialization. In fact, language cannot be conceived as a dematerialized or disembodied entity. Language cannot be characterized solely by human expression that
paradoxically falls prey to ambiguity through signification. Through the literary devices Morton appropriates from Longinus, language is reconceived as an object-entity that has object-like qualities; it transports and conjures and thereby allows the viewer glimpses of hidden realities. It instead emphasizes the aesthetic dimension that is causality; it is an interobjective relation between viewer and object. In *Realist Magic: Objects Ontology and Causality*, a work devoted to the aesthetic dimension between objects, Timothy Morton criticizes Conceptual art as “reducing the ontological to the merely ontic,” or as presenting a pervasive “jaded cynicism.”372 However, as I have shown through the conceptual and post-conceptual works in this thesis, there is something real underneath the objects of language and the objects of art. Through Speculative Realism, we uncover the rift between essence and appearance in these works and it begins by asking what we believe these objects to be. It is through the philosophical work by Husserl and Heidegger that we begin to speculate about things. We begin to overcome the preconceptions of an object’s use as functionality or equipment and it is through earth, or Harman’s allure, or Morton’s speculative sublime that we uncover its thingness and we become aware of its withdrawnness that Bennett describes as the “force of things.”

Through language, we discover the moments of incoherence through which we also become aware of alien entities. Not only do the works pose a challenge to the discipline of art history demanding a reevaluation of the theories of perception and interpretation, but also, Speculative Realism suggests a new version of Greenberg formalism tied to the Romantic notion of the sublime. Paradoxically, we are required to reevaluate the autonomy of art through the very formalist criticism that propelled the rupture of Modern art into Post-Modern art. The relational potentialities within Post-Modernist art are not to be dismissed, but instead are to be looked at as

the creation of new objects of interpretation by vicarious relation. While unable to puncture the hidden core of the object, as I have shown, these objects of interpretation enable the viewer to also create ethical relations with the object that also brings forth an ontological homogeneity among all objects and brings awareness to the coexistence of objects. My hope is that by continuing Harman’s aesthetics as first philosophy, through the works of Conceptual and Post-Conceptual artists, I have shed light into the false-assumptions of not only Conceptual art and objects, but have also validated them as initiating a different conversation with art theories of interpretation and perception. Conceptual art-objects do not reduce to the ontic, but inspire a search for depth within the works. I hope that this thesis will encourage further speculation on objects beyond their ontic allure and towards a Speculative Realist notion of allure. This particular work by Weiner, best describes the way we keep visualizing reality. We keep trying to order, categorize and make sense of it.

*Bits & Pieces Put Together To Present A Semblance Of A Whole.*

We are constantly creating new semblances of a whole as we view the world through our human experience. The reality of objects recedes. And yet, the proximity and distance of objects unnerves me, because I too become part of the object-world; part of semblances and withdrawnness.
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