## Specials > OBJECTHOOD

The *Specials* podcasts focus on projects by artists and curators who have some kind of connection to the Museum's programming and the MACBA Collection. OBJECTHOOD is a series of podcasts about new perspectives on the role of the object in contemporary art and philosophy. The first interviews in this series were conducted during the seminar *Expanded Choreography. Situations, Movements, Objects…*, which took place at the MACBA in March 2012.

Production, interviews and documentation: Roc Jiménez de Cisneros.

Roc Jiménez de Cisneros is an artist. He lives and works in Barcelona. vivapunani.org

# OBJECTHOOD #1

This podcast is about objects, but more importantly, it is about some of the recent theories that offer new conceptualisations of objects in contemporary philosophy and art. This first episode features philosophers Graham Harman and Luciana Parisi. Harman's object-oriented ontology opposes Kant's anthropocentrism and the scientistic standpoint, in defence of a radically broad notion of objecthood; while Parisi looks at the relations between things and data, between macrophysical objects (or blobjects, as Karim Rashid called them) and the algorithms that create them.

## 01. Introduction

The song 'I Can't Put My finger on It', by Ween, is a brilliant take on the problem of epistemology, contained in their 1994 album *Chocolate and Cheese*. The lyrics are basically a series of short questions about an object that is never revealed.

> 'Can it survive under the sun? Is it alive or is it dead? Is it brown, is it white? Is it really outta sight? Can it heal, is it real? Can it feel the threads of time? Does it glow, will it shine? Does it leave a trail of slime?' All that is clear is that the object remains completely withdrawn, a total mystery.

In our everyday life, the term 'object' is a wildcard, a placeholder that we readily exchange with other similarly flexible words such as 'thing'. The concept of object is ubiquitous in our language and view of the world, and it seems hard to describe our experience of reality without making explicit or implicit reference to objects. Poincaré even said that the notion of space independent of objects is impossible to picture. And yet, despite this apparent prevalence, throughout history objects have been at the centre of a heated debate; for centuries, philosophers have dissected objects into their parts and wholes, their properties, their constituting matter and so on, often pushing them towards the background and creating a weird chasm between metaphysical enquiry and everyday experience.
Over the past century however, the overlapping ideas of philosophers such as Alfred North Whitehead, Bruno Latour, Xavier Zubiri, Alexius Meinong, Charles Sanders Peirce and others, have spawned a number of new views that counteract previous strategies. Far from the trends that have dominated the debate for a long time, these realist ontologies embrace objects to the fullest, putting the subjectless object at the centre and going well beyond the material and the middle-sized. For Graham Harman, who pioneered object-oriented philosophy in 1999, this flattening, post-humanist take on objects is the best antidote against the anthropocentric perspective that Quentin Meillassoux calls correlationism. For Harman, objects are 'entities (…) quite apart from any relations with or effects upon other entities in the world'.

Authors like Timothy Morton, Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, Jane Bennett and Steven Shaviro among others, have expanded on Harman's object-oriented ontology in recent years, taking its flatness to other fields such as ethics, ecology or video game theory. Bogost says: 'corporeal and incorporeal entities count, whether they be material objects, abstractions, objects of intention, or anything else whatsoever – quarks, Harry Potter, keynote speeches, single malt Scotch, Land Rovers, lychee fruit, love affairs, de-referenced pointers, Mike "The Situation" Sorrentino, bozons, horticulturists, Mozambique, Super Mario Bros., not one is "more real" than any other.'

In the first part of *South Park*'s 2008 Imaginationland trilogy, Kyle makes a point about leprechauns being imaginary creatures, to which the Mayor of Imaginationland replies: 'Well, of course they are! But just because they're imaginary, it doesn't mean they aren't real.' In Harman's terms: 'the reality of a thing cannot be identified with its presence, its unconcealment or its usefulness for any particular human agent.'

Object-oriented ontologies borrow their name from computer science. In object-oriented programming (a term coined in the early sixties at MIT), all the elements

[South Park's Imaginationland]

in the program are treated as simple objects, independent from each other but able to communicate and interact. The objects the programmer wants to deal with, such as words and numbers, are the central concern, rather than the actions and the logic to operate on them. This metaphorical likening of digital units to physical objects has in turn been broadened by contemporary theorists such as Luciana Parisi, Paul Capland or, again, Ian Bogost, who have adopted a realist approach towards data, code and algorithms. In his research on digital photography, Capland considers the JPEG standard an 'actant', that which Bruno Latour described as elements in a network that modify or enhance other actors.

Meanwhile, extending Whitehead's idea of eternal objects, Parisi talks of algorithmic objects as 'concrete operations of space-time'. Not just as strictly armchair conjecture, but in relation to disciplines like architecture, industrial design or choreography, where data can easily be thingified or compressed 'into a number of discrete objects', as in the project *Synchronous Objects for One Flat Thing*, reproduced by the William Forsythe Dance Company. For Parisi and Stamatia Portanova, these objects 'not only visualise, but simultaneously transduce and re-animate the complexity of the dance elsewhere'.

## O2. Biographies

**Graham Harman** is a professor at the American University in Cairo, Egypt. A former Chicago sportswriter, he is one of the founding members of the Speculative Realism movement, and has been developing object-oriented ontology since the late nineties. Some of his published titles include *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002), *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (2005), and *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012).

**Luciana Parisi** is senior lecturer at the Centre for Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths College, London. Her research looks at the asymmetric relationship between science and philosophy, aesthetics and culture, technology and politics. She is the author of *Abstract Sex* (2004) and *Contagious Architecture: Computation, Aesthetics and Space* (2013).

## O3. Timeline

**00:57** Introduction
**07:52** Graham Harman, objects from pre-Socratic times to the present
**22:13** The basics of Harman's Object-oriented ontology
**33:48** Luciana Parisi, algorithms as objects, data as thinking machines, objectiles

## O4. Related links

*Expanded Choreography. Situations, Movements, Objects…* seminar
www.macba.cat/en/coreografia-expandida-situaciones

Graham Harman's blog
doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/

Graham Harman's lecture at MACBA
www.macba.cat/en/conferencia-expanded-choreography-graham-harman

Luciana Parisi at Goldsmiths
www.gold.ac.uk/cultural-studies/staff/l-parisi/

Luciana Parisi's lecture at MACBA
www.macba.cat/en/lecture-expanded-choreography-luciana-parisi

An essay and book series edited by Ian Bogost and Christopher Schaberg
objectsobjectsobjects.com/

[Joan Brossa, *Xanca*, 1986. MACBA Collection. MACBA Consortium. Photo: Gasull Fotografia]

A journal of object oriented studies
ozone-journal.org/

Paul Capland's PhD thesis
www.academia.edu/3461556/JPEG_the_quadruple_object_PhD_Thesis

## 05. Credits

Produced by Roc Jiménez de Cisneros. Voice: Barbara Held. Documentation and interview: Roc Jiménez de Cisneros. Recorded with Beyerdynamic MC 930, a Tascam DR-100 recorder and edited with Sound Studio.

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