Returning to (Strange) Objects
David Ruy

Since the mid-nineties, architecture has accelerated its move away from the discourse of the architectural object towards the discourse of the architectural field.[1] The vicissitudes of the architectural object has lost its uncanny appeal, and recent work is more often than not circumscribed by the mental image of an underlying network of relations that is deep, dynamic, and more real than the object itself. A manic effort to interface with the perceived global network now seems to be the ordinary response to the anxiety that architecture is perpetually on the verge of being left behind by a constantly accelerating and interconnected world.[2] In retrospect, popular paranoid fantasies such as *The Matrix* and *The Wizard of Oz* were reasonable depictions of the deep suspicion that reality is not what it seems. We celebrate the hero that sees the network for what it is and share a common desire to discover the secret reality behind the curtain of appearances.

Architects today are preoccupied with considerations of architecture as a by-product of socio-cultural milieus, as a conditional component of technocratic systems and networks, or even as the provisional end calculations of measurable parameters within the literal or construed environment. Even those architects that are primarily interested in form and aesthetics have had a peculiar tendency to search for external parameters and constraints to couch the legitimacy of the architectural object in relationship to a projected external milieu. Like Janus, the transition from object to field has had many faces but has shared a single body moving towards the virtual.

These days, it seems perfectly natural to think of architecture as a consequence of its context, however it is defined. The coordination of external force (sometimes measurable, sometimes hypothetical, and sometimes downright imaginary) is understood to be a central concern of contemporary practice. Those who love architecture remain ambivalent about this state of affairs. On the one hand, we see earnest desire for engagement in the affairs and conditions of the world. This desire for relevance and participation in current events has de-emphasized the architectural object and emphasized the application of architectural intelligence to a wider field of operations. It is important to emphasize that this desire is sincere, and it is difficult to find fault in the inclination to be an active participant of the world. On the other hand, operating within the larger field has resulted in the authority of the architect becoming vague and ambiguous. It has been difficult to define what exactly is meant by "architectural intelligence." It has also been unclear whether or not such intelligence is actually needed by the "real world." It may be a severe underestimation of the intelligence that is already operating in the world in other forms of practice. The de-emphasis of the architectural object has taken some of the magic out of architecture as attention is geared towards the facts and figures of the global network. The mysterious power of architecture is rarely spoken of today without embarrassment, but still, the loss of architecture's significance and influence as an independent object seems to be an ever-present source of lament.[3]

It is only in the longer view of architectural history that this shift from object to field seems odd because architecture has predominantly been presented throughout its history as a thing in the

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[1] Stan Allen's concept of the "field condition" was a seminal moment in this regard. See Stan Allen, Points + Lines, Diagrams and Projects for the City, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 92-103.

[2] See Sanford Kwinter, "Virtual City, or the Wiring and Waning of the World," Assemblage (April, 1996), 86-101.

[3] At recent lectures Rem Koolhaas has been regretfully pointing out that architects never appear on the cover of Time magazine anymore. The implication is that to have more authority and influence, architects need even more engagement with the contemporary situation. But it is hard not to wonder if the reverse might be necessary, since this is already the prevailing tendency and the architect's predicament seems to be getting even worse.

world, largely independent of external influence.[4] This shift from architecture as a practice of embodiment (of values, idealities, or of the universe itself) to architecture as a practice of coordination is a peculiar feature of the Modernist legacy.[5] The peculiarity of this change in interest largely escapes notice today because the contingency of architecture on external conditions seems to have become a default assumption. Considerations of the architectural object itself, independent of its context, now seem esoteric, and arguments for architecture's autonomy are judged to be anachronistic. Though there are some notable exceptions,[6] architects celebrate contingency more than autonomy today. The prevailing desire is for architecture to avoid being insular, form larger networks of relations, and, in general, be more engaged in the conditions of the contemporary world.

It is worthwhile to study this shift in more detail because there are some profoundly problematic assumptions in theories of the architectural field from an ontological point of view.[7] But perhaps more tangibly, this shift has unexpectedly reshaped expectations concerning the authority of architects and the power of architecture. Both of these concerns (and they are surprisingly linked) need to be addressed in order to assess the current state of the discipline and develop an alternative to the gloomy forecasts for the practice. But before these concerns are addressed, nature must be mentioned.

Although the expression of cultural values and the integration of architecture with urban fabrics are more widely recognized as contextual considerations, the urgent contextual concern today pertains to architecture's relationship to nature. Nature is the ultimate milieu, the all-encompassing field of material phenomena. In this respect, the examination of architecture's move from object to field, at this moment in time, is also an examination of architecture's move towards nature. Perhaps architecture's movement from object to field culminates in the involuted erasure of the architecture/nature[8] divide.

It is important to consider this move from both the standpoint of architecture as a discipline and architecture as a practice. As an old discipline, architecture finds the problem of nature deeply imbedded in its history; nature has often been a source of architectural innovation. Starting in antiquity, accelerating through the Renaissance, and going underground in Modernism,[9] we can find architecture looking to nature for aesthetic inspiration, formal models, and proportional constraints. Even in cases where architecture deliberately avoided nature in favor of developing an explicitly rational theory, nature was always the sublime 'other' bracketed by such rationality. Geometry and proportion, form and function, and structure and ornament are some of the major disciplinary territories that have been revolving around the problem of nature. Nature has ceased to be a mythical source of design inspiration, but continues to be mined for architectural knowledge with investigations into such things as nonlinear dynamics, self-organizing systems, genetic algorithms, and biological morphogenesis. Although some would make the objection that such investigations are not properly disciplinary (because of their origins in science), investigations such as these continue

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[4] Without a doubt, there has always been a degree of contextualism in architecture. But I would like to make a distinction here between pre-Modern practices with those methodologies that emerged throughout the Modernist period where architectural form was determined and constrained through rational measure of external factors (zoning envelope becoming architectural form, for example). However, this is a general tendency. Many exceptions can be identified.

[5] Thoughout the past two decades, Sanford Kwinter has made an invaluable contribution in documenting and critiquing the Modernist legacy in contemporary urbansim and architecture. His speculative theories have had a profound influence on the current generation of architects. See Sanford Kwinter, Far from Equilibrium, (New York: Actar, 2008).

[6] The most well-known and explicit example would be Peter Eisenman. Throughout his career, Eisenman has emphasized the autonomy of the architectural discipline.

[7] See Levi Bryant, Graham Harman, Nick Srnicek, The Speculative Turn (Melbourne: re.press, 2011).

[8] See Jeffrey Kipnis, "/Twisting the Separatrix/," Assemblage (April, 1991), 30-61.

[9] Detlef Mertins has written extensively on the lesser known organicist strains of early Modernism. See Detlef Mertins, "Bioconstructivisms," in Machining Architecture, ed. Lars Spuybroek (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), pp 360-369.

to have as their goal the design of significant architectural objects and are rarefied experiments by a relatively small group of experts that are primarily interested in the discipline, and not the practice, of architecture.

In contrast, architectural practice has not had much concern for nature until recently. Besides basic pragmatic concerns for manipulating the ground, keeping the rain out, or making sure the interior has enough light and air, the practice of architecture has been more concerned with the endless logistics of the building itself. This has dramatically changed. Faced with the impending doom of global warming and environmental collapse, architectural practice has been forced to also contend with the even more impossible logistics of the environment itself. To cope with such demands, ecological theory has necessarily entered into the architectural practice. Ecological theory and its extension into the ethics of architecture's material practice has outlined the imperative of sustainable practice today, and has largely replaced the disciplinary investigations of nature that were dominant in the academy prior to Modernism.

Though the words 'nature' and 'ecology' seem interchangeable in contemporary discourse, it is important to make a critical distinction between them, insofar as ecological thought involves a very particular way of understanding nature. Ecological theories predominantly project systems that describe a field of discernible relations,[10] the individual constituents of a given ecological system being of less concern than the relations themselves[11] – so much so that even the constituents of an ecological system are themselves theorized as ecological systems in their own right (the internal ecological network of a particular human body, for example). Nature, seen through the ecological telescope, is a grand network of relations where the appearances of objects (rock, tree, frog, cloud, human, etc.) are superficial, and the network of relations is understood to be the deeper reality. The grand finale of architecture's movement from object to field may very well be the collapse of the architectural object into a field of relations that then dissolves into a general ecological field of relations that constitutes the world. And thus, architectural practice unintentionally becomes subsumed by ecological practice. Though it is difficult (and perhaps unethical) to contest the perceived sustainable imperative of the early 21st century, there is cause for hesitation before the prospect of architecture's disappearance as it becomes an entirely new form of practice based on ecological thought.

Sustainable politics have become forceful and monolithic in recent years, resulting in new codes and protocols for all material practices. It has become an inescapable reality that architecture now has to grapple with. But what exactly is being sustained in sustainable practice? Though critics are emerging, that which is being sustained is generally understood to be the equilibrium of human material practices in their relationship to nature. Human material practices, such as architecture, have been bombarded with criticisms (mostly fair ones) for its oblivious greed and short-sighted exploitation of material resources. Architecture, along with other practices (such as the manufacture of electronic products), is now required to consider the long-term viability of its practice in relationship to nature. However, it is important to note that this desirable equilibrium is an extension of the widely held belief that nature itself would be in equilibrium if not for the malevolent intervention of mankind. If nature is like a grand calibrated clock, human beings keep throwing it out of sync. Thoughtful maintenance by enlightened caretakers is required in order to keep this clock running on time.[12] To put it more bluntly, nature is good while humans are bad. Laws and

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[10] This is not a stable observation. Timothy Morton and others working in the field of ecocriticism are actively contesting the intellectual frameworks of ecological theory. Ecological theory will likely undergo radical transformations in the 21st century.

[11] An extreme version of this is the systems dynamic model of Jay Forrester constructed in 1970 while a member of the Club of Rome, a think-tank currently based in Winterthur, Switzerland. The attempt was to model the entire world as a single interrelated system. His model predicted environmental collapse in the early 21st century.

[12] See Daniel Botkin, Discordant Harmonies, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

protocols are seen as necessary in order to promote good behavior, because good behavior does not seem to come 'naturally.'

As an alternative to the caretaker model, perhaps the darker scenario from the standpoint of individual liberty is the idea that the world is a single ecological system or network. In such a case, the maintaining of equilibrium is tantamount to everyone having their role in the machine (because we would be part of that system too). In other words, you are a necessary cog within the clockwork of nature. You can't break the machine if you're part of the machine.[13] And like a cog in a clock, you cannot change your relationship to the system. This is politically problematic. In response, recent ecologists have made a concerted effort to theorize emergence and change in the hypothetical systems of nature, incorporating such principles as feedback and nonlinearity to address what appears to be an obvious need to address change, novelty, and a politically necessary condition of indeterminacy in human action. However, these theories are still problematic, and the mythological image of nature in equilibrium continues to be a dominant cultural mindset despite its obvious sentimentality.

All observable evidence indicates that nature is not and never has been in a state of equilibrium. Careful observation has always revealed nature to be in a perpetual state of change. If we are to take the flux of nature seriously, we would then have to understand sustainable practice as a willful act that seeks to maintain an artificially constructed equilibrium with maximum benefit for human occupation over the long term. Because nature itself is not stable, the stability would have to be forced. If the sentimentality associated with the mythological image of nature is eliminated, the aesthetics of gentle stewardship and bias against artifice would go with it, leaving nothing but impossible questions regarding what exactly constitutes maximum benefit for human occupation, and the even more difficult questions regarding how to construct and enforce such conditions.

The flux and instability of nature is an astonishingly problematic condition because ecological system theories, despite their many successes, have never been able to fully account for change in networks of relations. This is where the philosopher, Graham Harman, introduces an important observation that "relationism" leaves no room for conditions in excess of those relations (by its own definition), and therefore provides an inadequate account of how change comes about.[14] To quote Harman:

> All of these positions overmine the object, treating it as a useless substratum easily replaced by direct manifestations. Though we claim to be speaking of objects, they are really nothing more than palpable qualities, effects on other things, or images in the mind. But there are problems with relationizing the world in this way. For one thing, if the entire world were exhausted by its current givenness, there is no reason why anything would alter. That is to say, if there is no difference between the I who is what he is and the I who is accidentally wearing a yellow shirt from India at this moment, then there is no reason why my situation should ever change. An injustice is thereby done to the future.[15]

Making this provocative observation, Harman goes on to espouse greater focus on the development of an ontology of objects, and objects alone, abandoning ontologies of the mind in relationship to the world (Husserl's phenomenology, for example among many others). In this new object-oriented ontology, the human being is a being like any other (an object like any other). The provocative extension of this line of thought is the necessary conclusion that objects withdraw from one another. To explain this initially cryptic idea, it is necessary to be briefly reminded of the

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[13] See Adam Curtis, All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace, part 2: The Use and Abuse of Vegetable Concepts, DVD (BBC, 2011).

[14] Graham Harman concisely presents a critique of prevailing ontologies (relational ontologies and materialism is of particular interest here) through his denial of "undermining" and "overmining" philosophies. See Graham Harman, The Quadruple Object, (Alresford: Zero Books, 2011), pp 7-19.

[15] Ibid, pp 12-13.

problem previously pointed out concerning relationism. If an object could be completely exhausted by a summation of its relations, there can be no way for the object to change its relations. Therefore, there must always be something about the object that is in excess of its qualities and relations. There will always be some "dark nucleus of objects" (as Harman puts it) that is withdrawn from access by other objects. The being of the object is always more than its relations. If we pause for a moment and apply this ontological insight to the current discussion, we can suppose that the architectural object—if it is indeed unified—is always more than any summation of its internal relations. The architectural object, like any object, would have that "dark nucleus" that cannot be exhausted by a list of its qualities. Going further, this object-oriented ontology would have to throw the being of any relational model into doubt. Though networks and fields may continue to be eminently useful models of understanding, they carry with them a flawed ontology. In the end, the field is not real in the same sense that the object is. None of this suggests the abandonment of all field models, however, we can conclude that field models cannot be legitimized as a deeper way of understanding the thing in front of us; it is, upon analysis, quite the opposite. We can continue to incorporate field models for their usefulness, but should remind ourselves that they are artificial constructions.

Perhaps most astonishing in this object-oriented ontology is that two terms that have been used liberally throughout this current discussion, "nature" and "world," are themselves not real objects. What we refer to as "nature" or the "world" is comprised of real objects (this frog, that tree, this river, that building), but the hypothetical super-container of them all is actually not a real object (it is a false unity). In this respect, Harman's object-oriented ontology opens up a unique possibility of rethinking the peculiar problems associated with the problem of nature. A return to the object would have to be understood as a turning away from a mythological or sentimental understanding of nature and a turn towards the particularities and the essential strangeness of the objects themselves. Just as Timothy Morton in ecological criticism sees the need to investigate the possibilities of an "ecology without nature,"[16] we may also want to investigate the possibilities of an architecture without nature. It must be emphasized that this does not mean the abandonment of interest in current environmental problems. In fact, it is the reverse: the intensification of interest in studying the particularities of the problems ahead of us. Abandoning idealisms of nature, we are left with greater interest and focus on the objects of nature themselves. We would start to think that the particularities of the objects are not meaningless accidental features, but imbricated with their being. There would also be a productive indeterminacy in our consideration of objects because we would recognize that objects are always to some degree withdrawn and strange.

While thinking about this object-oriented ontology, it is fascinating to finally consider how the architect is to be understood. Assuming, for a moment, that the architectural object is unified as an object, what is the architect doing exactly in making such objects? Remember that the architect is also an object in this ontology—not an enlightened mind outside of the world of objects giving form to formless matter. The making process is something very different in this scenario than what we're used to. Perhaps "making" is not even the appropriate word anymore.

It is impossible here to do full justice to this emerging movement in contemporary philosophy, but the primary intention here is to indicate possible alternatives to the idea of architecture as a field of relations, and describe some initial speculations about what it might mean to return the focus to the architectural object itself. A return to the architectural object as a disciplinary priority cannot be a nostalgic return to pre-modern academic preoccupations with character, propriety, and the idealities of compositional balance. Nor is this return to the object a simple return to figuration and detached massing. "Object" here should not be understood in a literal sense. Much of what has been

[16] See Timothy Morton, Ecology without Nature, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

learned throughout Modernism is now invaluable, or at the very least, indispensable to architecture's possibility of being in the world. Even if the world is not a real object, the projected world remains the locus of contested values still essential to survival. A return to the architectural object, strange as it may be, is not a call to rewind the tape of history, but instead a call to carefully avoid what might be unproductive dead ends in current directions, due to an ill-conceived ontological foundation. A renewed focus on the architectural object itself should not fetishize the discipline's history, but instead be a recognition of what is withdrawn and strange in the architectural object's interaction with other objects (including the human being, but also non-human beings) as we continue our current practices of making new objects.

A return to the architectural object would move interest back to the thing itself. Obvious enough. But this is not so obvious given architecture's tendency to illustrate theory through practice. In other words, architecture has a tendency to consider theory as somehow being more important (or real) than the project through which it manifests itself. A return to the architectural object suggests that theory is always retroactive to the architectural object, and is itself another form of making. Architectural theory would always have to be retroactive because if indeed the architectural object is real, there will always be something about the architectural object that will be withdrawn from theoretical access. However, as a form of making in its own right, the production of architectural theory may be less constrained and more creative than it has been of late. By relaxing hang-ups over primacy, the interaction between the architectural theorist and the architect might possibly be more promiscuous and produce more children.

For the maker of the architectural object, the idea of the muse continues to be absurd, but muse-like ideas of intuition or phenomenal sensitivity persist because creativity continues to be perplexing and mysterious. In the language of object-oriented ontology, the strange, withdrawn interaction between objects sometimes brings forth a new object. However, the new object is not a simple Boolean operation of adding objects together. New objects come into existence through a strange interaction between objects where new relationships are formed but without the qualities of the originals being exhausted. To apply it to the problem at hand, in the interaction between the architect, as object, and other objects (be it a place, a material, a piece of software, or a preexisting theory) an architectural object sometimes comes into existence. What exactly happened in this interaction will be occluded. In other words, a successful object-making event cannot be completely encapsulated by a methodology that might repeat the success. Good architects have known this for a very long time. Perhaps object-oriented ontology might simultaneously open radical territories while rediscovering or affirming some very old insights of the architectural discipline.

It would also have to be recognized in this line of thought that there is a lot more to craft than is generally thought. As a non-theoretical interaction between the maker (as object) and the various objects of the making process, "craft" is the ambiguous word that has, in the past, identified the unique expertise of the maker in its relationship to materials. The relationship is somewhat visible through evident techniques, but again, the interaction is strange, as the objects are withdrawn from complete access to each other. Here, the authority of the maker does not originate out of a certification according to generalized standards—the authority of the craftsman comes from the strange individuality of the maker. There is something about the master craftsman, as object, that cannot be reduced to a set of qualities, and is irreproducible. If the architect, as object, could be reduced to a set of qualities, it seems perfectly natural to see the authority of individual instances of the architect compromised. In fact, why don't we go ahead and implant all of those qualities into an artificial intelligence and have as many architects as we want? Is it just a technical problem of programming the artificial intelligence? Or, more likely, is it a fundamental problem of never being able to completely encapsulate the architect (again, as object) through a list of its qualities? As

difficult it may be to accept, the individuality of the architect, on a deep ontological level, needs to be recognized in order to claim more authority because every maker then is a one of a kind.

Finally, with regard to the power of architecture, the manifold meanings and conflicting interpretations of the architectural object need to be recognized not as undesirable misinterpretations and accidents of perception but as strange, but real, interactions between objects. Because the interactions between objects are irreducible to a finite set of discernible relationships, the interactions are unpredictable and strange. "Meaning" understood as a consequence of interaction then cannot be critiqued in terms of proper and improper interaction. The multiplication of signification through the interaction of strange objects signals again what can be thought of as a very old thought, that the mysterious power of the architectural object persists beyond individual readings or individual interpretations.

The compromise of the architect's authority and the diminishing of architecture's power through the dissolution of the architectural object into a field of discernable relations seem to be an accidental, self-inflicted wound. Through the sincere desire to be more in the world, architecture may have accidentally turned away from the very real objects right in front of it, including the architectural object itself. The full implications of this nascent ontology are yet to be considered. At the very least, however, there appears to be strong reasons for considering the significance of the architectural object once again, and reflect upon its strangeness.