Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics

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Silent Spaces: Allowing Objects to Talk

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Abstract: Object-oriented ontology (OOO) is a philosophy that asks us to step outside the human-centric view of the world to recognize that objects have realities of their own. Although we cannot directly access a thing-in-itself, we can still come to know something about it through an indirect access that Graham Harman suggests is provided by aesthetics, specifically the metaphor. In the metaphor, we step into the place of the object-in-itself (that withdraws) and experience a taste of its reality. This main purpose of this article is to show that the visual arts—specifically Haim Steinbach's art works—offer a different way to know objects. Steinbach "arranges" found objects on shelves; this emphasis on "arrangement" raises questions about the nature of the space between objects. I argue that it is this space between objects (rather than the indirect contact with objects) that grants us some access to the thing-in-itself. By relating the spaces between objects to silence, I show that it is in these spaces that objects speak. In other words, the theatricality of the metaphor Harman privileges for understanding the object only exists in a silence that emerges from the spaces between objects.

Keywords: visual art, Object-Oriented Ontology, OOO, aesthetics, contemporary art, Graham Harman, Haim Steinbach, art arrangements

1 Introduction

Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) is a theory of existence that posits objects exist equally, that is, they are equally real with no natural hierarchy.[1] Graham Harman dubs this the "new theory of everything," with one of its main principles being that "all objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real, or fictional."[2] Overall, then, Harman subscribes to the principle that all things initially exist equally and in the same way, rather than "assuming in advance that different types of objects require completely different ontologies."[3] From this, which is the acceptance of a "flat ontology,"

1 In this essay, I use the terms "object" and "thing" interchangeably. This is not the case for everyone who writes about objects; however, for the purposes of this essay, there would be no benefit in strictly delineating the two terms. See Heidegger, *Being and Time* for one of the ways that the terms have been separated for a different purpose.

2 Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 9. It is important to note that this means that the grouping of "objects" includes more than just material objects; it also includes dreams, fictional characters, sounds, events, etc. Harman's explanation is that an "object" is anything that "is more than its pieces and less than its effects." Ibid., 53. Furthermore, "reality" is different from "real." Harman splits objects into real objects and sensual objects. *All* objects have a *reality* in that they have a type of existence, but only real objects have an independent existence. Sensual objects require for their existence someone to be attending to them. In this sense, I am a real object, as is the computer I am using to write this paper and the works I talk about; the dream I had last night or the characters in a novel are sensual objects, as they do not have an existence unless and until someone pays attention to them.

3 Ibid., 54. Note that while object-oriented ontology, as an ontology (or study of existence), suggests that all things exist equally, Harman's argument is not that all objects are *always* equal—nor that we should avoid privileging some over others—but only that before we make any judgments or create any hierarchies, we should consider all things (including abstract and imaginary objects) equally. For him, this "is a useful way for ensuring we do not cave in to our personal prejudices about what is or is not real." Ibid., 55.

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OOO develops its purpose: to challenge the ideas both that we as humans have a special status and that although we may not have knowledge, as proclaimed by Socrates in Plato's writings, that does not leave us in complete ignorance.[4] In other words, we can "know something without knowing it,"[5] and consequently, we have an obligation to learn what we can about the things we know nothing about. In supporting these ideas, one of the main arguments Harman makes is that central to the reality of an object is its withholding of direct access: we cannot acquire direct knowledge of an object, for we only have "*indirect* access to reality."[6] This withholding constitutes an object's withdrawal. For Harman, an object "withdraws" from our knowledge because there is such a thing as the Kantian thing-in-itself that we cannot access (albeit with a difference from Kant: in OOO objects can connect with each other, not just with humans). An object's "withdrawal," then, is due to this "in-itself" aspect of the object that is inaccessible, and therefore withdrawal is not an active withdrawal but a condition of an object's existence. Harman then argues that the *indirect* access to an object requires aesthetics. In particular, he privileges metaphor because although we cannot interact directly with another real object, in order to understand a metaphor, *we*, as a real object ourselves, step into the place of the absent object (i.e., the object of the metaphor that "withdraws" from us), "embracing the qualities" of the object that get ascribed to the main object of the metaphor.[7] It is in this way we can, to an extent, experience the reality of the object in the metaphor and come to "know something without knowing it."

In this paper, I argue that when this concept of things having realities of their own appears in the art world, e.g., when artists such as Haim Steinbach "arrange" objects on a shelf, it reveals a dimension of OOO that theorists often neglect: the space between objects. When Steinbach presents objects, he does so with the belief that in his presentation he is revealing something about them *as the objects they are*. In Steinbach's words, an object's "meaning is inherent in what it is in itself, not because I glued it to another object or something like that. I simply place the object on a shelf/surface in a normative way meaning: the way that people use objects. I don't draw them, I don't alter them. They are basically found objects or already existing objects, I just make arrangements of them."[8] Central to this, I propose, is that his works accentuate the relationship between space and silence. Steinbach, in an interview with Peter Schwenger, refers to silence as a "space of reflection," a space that exists in all relationships between objects in an arrangement.[9] While Steinbach further refers to this as a "space of the unknown,"[10] this essay will argue that the silence that occurs between objects, or that which *can* occur between a viewer of Steinbach's art and his art itself, is not just a space of reflection or a space of the unknown but also a space of possibility, a space of criticality, and a space of intentionality, and ultimately, silence is the physical space in which the theatricality of the metaphor can take place.[11] In effect, Steinbach's "arrangements" are the metaphor Harman privileges as an effective means for achieving indirect access to a thing in itself. These arrangements also highlight the preconditions necessary for the metaphor to successfully illustrate *something* about an object. Furthermore, Steinbach's art allows this access to the object via the same mechanism that allows us access to the object of a metaphor: by creating the situation in which *we* step into the relation.

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4 For more on the relationship between Socrates' assertion that he knows nothing and OOO's argument for obtaining a type of knowledge, see Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 171–177. One example in Plato's writings comes from *Symposium*, wherein Diotima teaches Socrates that something exists between wisdom and ignorance: "judging things correctly without being able to give a reason." Plato, *Symposium*, 202a. This idea, however, is common throughout many of Plato's works.

5 Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 177.

6 Ibid., 62.

7 Ibid., 83.

8 Steinbach, "Haim Steinbach: 'It Was a Concept that Generated a New Historical Movement in Contemporary Art,'" n.p. My sentence here is partially misleading; Steinbach was involved in this type of art—the art that tries to bring out the object in its own right—prior to the establishment of object-oriented ontology. Nonetheless, the tenets are the same, and Steinbach now feels he has a philosophical framework for his art.

9 Steinbach, "Haim Steinbach," n.p.

10 Ibid.

11 "Theatricality" is the term used by Harman to describe the action of stepping in to the metaphor in place of the object that withdraws. As the real object that takes the withdrawn object's place, we take on that object's associated qualities just as an actor takes on a role in the theatre. For more, see Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 81–85.

This essay is therefore an attempt to grapple with the issues that arise out of this relationship of human and objects as well as the relationship *between* objects in Steinbach's works, and it concerns not just the question of what is between objects, but why we make arrangements, what arranging does, and what it offers in terms of objects. What goes on in that space of silence between objects, and, ultimately, what is the significance of this space for an object-oriented ontology? To explore the space of silence that exists between objects, I first offer a look at how Steinbach understands the space between objects, before connecting Steinbach's art to Harman's ideas about metaphor. I then extend ideas of silence and space to argue that both elements are critical for the acquisition of data by which to judge objects, before arriving at some nascent conclusions about how Steinbach's art is itself a physical manifestation of the metaphor described by Harman and how this art then reveals the necessity of the space between objects. Finally, I offer an analysis of how this understanding of the necessity of space and silence for object-oriented ontology may have significant value, not only for the philosophy of OOO but also the grander project of it. First, it shows the importance of extending a "flat ontology" to include space and silence, and second, only once this flat ontology encompasses space and silence can we truly come to see that we humans are not as privileged as we think we are.[12]

2 Silence as a space of the unknown

When Steinbach mentions silence, he does so in response to a question about the "chatter" of people who see his works and then talk about them and what they mean or what they are meant to mean.[13] That is, he emphasizes the *lack* of silence that surrounds his works. His point is that viewers of his art are often not content to sit in silence; rather, they try to fill the space of silence. The space of silence is too unknown, too unfamiliar for comfort. As Steinbach says, "...silence can be intolerable within a group and within the individual too. ... Often what is not silent is more determined."[14]

I contend that this suggestion, in its relationship to OOO, operates on two levels within Steinbach's art: not only at the level of the viewer but also at the level of his art in itself. Take, for example, Steinbach's *Untitled (cabbage, pumpkin, pitchers) #1*.[15] Neither the cabbage nor the pumpkin match the image one might immediately associate with those items. The cabbage on the left is ceramic; the pumpkin in the middle is a kitschy, soft Halloween decoration. On the right are three pitchers, all copies of each other yet conspicuously smaller than the other items. The pumpkin is given prominence not only because it's in the middle and on the tallest shelf but also because it has a face. The entire arrangement, thus, immediately challenges any and all of a viewer's preconceptions about these objects. Schwenger, in describing his response to this work, refers to the "discrepancy between the names of objects and the multiple aspects of their actual presence" and the vividness of the work's presence, concluding, "even as the objects remained uncompromisingly themselves, connections, contrasts, and connotations seemed to buzz between them."[16] This response corresponds to Steinbach comments in which he is clear that his art produces an uncertainty, which in turn creates anxiety. The viewer then feels compelled, in a way, to reduce that anxiety by establishing the "reality" of the objects in Steinbach's pieces or by determining (or creating) those objects' meanings. The

12 I am not suggesting that Harman excludes silence from his flat ontology, only that he does not focus on it in his theory. OOO theorists, in general, tends to gloss over space and silence except, potentially, for Tristan Garcia, who argues, "things communicate only by their *solitude*." Garcia, *Form and Object*, 58; my italics. Garcia's concept of solitude, however, is different from just silence and space; for him, it is a common element shared among all objects. Essentially, it is the fact that all things exist on their own, and this is what allows them to relate to one another.

13 Steinbach, "Haim Steinbach." Steinbach's comment regarding the "chatter" that surrounds the work is referencing a comment Duchamp's made about the "chatter" that completes the work. While Steinbach is not disagreeing that chatter completes the work, he is, nonetheless, suggesting this chatter changes, changing the work. My reading of Steinbach's relationship to chatter is that the chatter completes the art in a way that obscures the objects themselves. This chatter, then, is not helpful chatter but instead limits access to the object in itself.

14 Ibid.

15 Steinbach, *Untitled (cabbage, pumpkin, pitchers) #1*, 1986, plastic laminated-wood shelf, ceramic tureen, foam-stuffed polyester pumpkin, three ceramic Hall pitchers, 54 3/16 × 84 × 27 ½ inches, Bomb Magazine, Fall 2012, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/haim-steinbach/.

16 Steinbach, "Haim Steinbach."

viewer does this, "completing" the artwork by talking about it and filling the silence that surrounds it, trying, in the above case, to make sense of the discrepancy between one's expectations and the reality of the work.

This relates to OOO in that the object in itself, as present in Steinbach's works—not "composed," not pre-determined—appears out of place. This object is never as one expects to encounter it; therefore, the object is unknown.[17] In a sense, the object in the art is the broken hammer in Heidegger's analysis of the tool: the object that is only revealed as such when it is not what we expect it to be.[18] In other words, the object reveals itself as having a reality outside our common understandings of it. The second point is that in revealing its reality, the object nevertheless withdraws. A viewer of Steinbach's work may recognize the "out of place" quality of the objects within it, but the same viewer has no direct access to what the objects' proper places are; the viewer only has the knowledge that the objects' true realities are not as the viewer has assumed them to be. The objects are not just unknown, but also unknowable. Reading Steinbach's work in this way accentuates the central tenet of OOO: the "*withdrawal* or *withholding* of things from direct access."[19]

Steinbach's art as art, however, counteracts this to a degree because it provides *some* access to the object. While the objects themselves may withdraw, the "arrangement" of said objects provides the indirect access needed to gain at least some understanding of them. His art operates like the metaphor operates for Harman: it is "the manner in which sincere relation with a sensual objects is transformed into direct connection with a real one."[20] This initially appears via the withdrawal of the object: as an object withdraws—and by its withdrawal—it makes known that it has a reality of its own, a reality that exists outside of a viewer's understanding of it. Beyond that, however, Steinbach's art also provides indirect access to the object by providing a connection to a real object. In *Object-Oriented Ontology*, Harman describes how, in a metaphor, we—the human as the real object—step in to take the place of the withdrawn object, and in so doing, take on the sensual qualities of the object that is the subject of the metaphor. In his example, we step into the place of the withdrawn cypress tree and take on the qualities of the "ghost of the dead flame" to which the tree is compared in a metaphor he uses that comes from the Spanish poet López Pico.[21] In Steinbach's art, we (for example) step into the place of the withdrawn cabbage, pumpkin, or pitchers to take on the qualities highlighted by the work's arrangement. This, then, gives us a new understanding of the object—the absent cypress tree or the objects in Steinbach's art—even if it is not a fully justified, or justifiable, understanding. In Steinbach's art, however, the viewer does not actively "step in" to take on the qualities of a sensual object that has revealed itself to be real; instead, the objects seem to *demand* that we see them as real because the "arrangement" presents them as they are in themselves. This unexpected quality of the demand allows viewers to connect the objects in ways never before considered; in other words, like the metaphor, Steinbach's arrangement is the mechanism that affords a different look at the object. Harman writes, "the real qualities of any sensual object we encounter can be found in the unnoticed background assumptions

17 Steinbach prefers the term "arrangement" to the term "composition" to describe his works: "There is something more 'democratic' about an act of arrangement over one of composition. Perhaps this goes back once again to our discussion of the notion of authority? It's interesting that although the readymade is often considered to be connected to indifference, that it's actually imbued with huge amounts of authority, whereas the way you relate to objects tries to attack that notion of authority." Steinbach,"Not a Readymade," 196. A "readymade" is an "object become art" because an artist selects it and removes it from its intended use, presents it in a new situation, and calls it art. Steinbach is distinguishing his use of objects from a "readymade."

18 For more, see Heidegger, *Being and Time*. In Heidegger, "present-to-hand" is the equivalent to what the object's withdrawing from us for Harman. It is the object as it is in itself, the reality of the object that makes itself known when an object that is "ready-to-hand" is broken or goes missing. In other words when the object is divorced from the use we make of it and presented as a being in its own right. This "present-to-hand" object, however, cannot be fully known; "present-to-hand" is a "mode of *obtrusiveness*." Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 94. In other words, it is obtrusive because the object forces itself and its unknowability on us.

19 Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 7.

20 Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 213.

21 Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 72. This metaphor appears first when Harman writes about José Ortega y Gasset's reflections on the metaphor of a Spanish poet, López Pico. The metaphor in full is: "the cypress is like the ghost of a dead flame." Ibid.

that make it visible to us."[22] By forcing those background assumptions into the foreground—by showing viewers that objects are *not* what they expect—Steinbach's art challenges observers to see the reality of the objects associated with those real qualities. His art allows observers indirect access to an object, and as Harman argues, "*indirect* access to reality is generally the best we have to work with."[23]

As mentioned previously, when Steinbach refers to silence as the space of the unknown, he is highlighting that people who visit his installations "chatter" about it as they try to make the unknown, known. In Steinbach's art, specifically, this is deliberately drawn out because of how Steinbach places objects. By arranging them "the way words are arranged in a sentence,"[24] Steinbach is communicating a meaning, but this meaning is not self-evident. Rather, as they withdraw and reveal their reality, the objects emphasize for viewers the lack of knowledge that they, the viewers, have towards those same objects and how no one "[enters] the work neutrally or openly."[25] This two-sided effect—of drawing out our presuppositions and of emphasizing the reality of the object in itself—illustrates an object's intensities: for if one does not have the ability to understand an object fully or in itself, then objects have a solidity and an efficacy that challenges the human-centric view of the world. This, then, explains why the space of the unknown can also be a space of anxiety-laden uncertainty.

When Steinbach suggests, "in the space of silence there may be peace or turmoil, misunderstanding or generosity, and reaction or counterreaction,"[26] he is making this connection to anxiety clear. In fact, as previously cited, he explicitly states, "the problem is that silence can be intolerable within a group and within the individual too."[27] The inability to maintain silence upon viewing his work, then, arises due to the anxiety provoked by uncertainty within silence. The idea that silence is connected to anxiety is commonly explored in studies of social relations. Sherry Turkle, for example, argues that this anxiety arises because "it is often when we hesitate, or stutter, or fall silent, that we reveal ourselves most to each other. And to ourselves."[28] The potential revelation precipitated by silence, as Turkle further explains, is the reason why people "take out their phones, check their messages, send a text,"[29] or in relation to Steinbach's art, is why people "chatter." In other words, people cannot tolerate this silence; yet, it is precisely the revelatory ability of silence that makes it useful for Steinbach. Although Turkle's interests lie in human relationships and the effects objects have on those, one can extend her argument to the object realm: not only do humans reveal themselves in silence, but *objects* also reveal themselves. And in this way, the space of the unknown may be more than just a space of uncertainty; it may in fact be what Schwenger suggests in his interview with Steinbach: "the most adequate response to the otherness of the object."[30]

3 Silence as a space of reflection

Therefore, if silence is "the most adequate response" to Steinbach's art, the space of the unknown does not necessarily have to be anxiety ridden; it can also be a space of reflection. In this sense, if observers of Steinbach's works remain silent, then they might benefit from that silence that comes to occupy the space once the objects in Steinbach's arrangements of them have revealed themselves to be unknown. Rather than immediately filling this space with talk about what these objects—or Steinbach himself—might mean,

22 Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 189.
23 Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 62.
24 Steinbach, "Haim Steinbach." The quotation is from the interviewer, Peter Schwenger, not Steinbach himself. Steinbach, in a different interview, himself emphasizes this aspect of the arrangement: "By the end of the 1970s I was doing installations in which I was arranging objects in a normative way. I was not gluing them together. I was not adding paint. I placed them on shelves, like words in a sentence or notes in a musical score. The language of placement, the language of arrangement." Steinbach, "Not a Readymade," 194.
25 Ibid.
26 Steinbach, "Haim Steinbach."
27 Ibid.
28 Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 23.
29 Ibid.
30 Steinbach, "Haim Steinbach."

and by maintaining a silence, silence becomes a space of reflection on the objects in themselves, not a space filled with subjective reflections. It allows the objects to "speak" for themselves in a way or at least offers the potential that objects can appear in themselves and not merely as observers' conceptions of them.

This space of reflection may also, then, allow one to confront one's prejudices and presupposition about objects. It allows us to place ourselves in the metaphor "and attempt the electrifying work of becoming the cypress-substance for the flame-qualities" in the metaphor as described by Harman.[31]

4 Silence as a space of intentionality

Silence then further opens up a space for intentionality, intentionality in the sense that objects can indirectly touch as the real object, i.e., the human, "poke[s] though into the phenomenal realm, the only place where one [object] relates to another."[32] This, for Harman, rests on sincerity, which is analogous to the "intentional act" in phenomenology as described by Edmund Husserl. In phenomenology, the intentional act describes the action of directing one's thoughts to rest on an object, or, in other words, approaching an object with the deliberate focus on what is perceived phenomenologically, i.e., through the senses and as the object *presents itself* as an "intentional object."[33] Observers of Steinbach's art, after being confronted with the objects in their own right and recognizing that they (the observers themselves) rarely, if ever, approach objects without having preconceptions of them, can then step outside of their preconceptions to focus *intentionally* on the objects and see them as they appear. They can become wholly enraptured, with "sincerity," i.e., with the intense focus on the "contact between a real object and a sensual one,"[34] which in relation to Steinbach's art would be the contact between those who see his art and the objects in his works.

Silence as a space of intentionality then provides the foundations for opening up to the object in itself because in this silence we can "hear" the object. As Pier Aldo Rovatti suggests, silence—provided one can "abstain from looking back … [and] succeed in making it ours"—is not a void (or a space of uncertainty) but "is a predisposition to listening; above all we can hear … a background noise which is downright deafening."[35] Although this background noise for Rovatti consists of the diverse narratives that arise in the margins of literature, they can also be thought of as *the objects*' diverse narratives, the narratives that reveal the reality of those objects.[36] Therefore, not only does silence provide a space for objects to speak, as described in section three of this essay, but it also predisposes (or encourages) the human who encounters these objects to listen.

5 Silence as a space of possibility

Finally, then, in the realm of silence as abstract composition of space, silence ultimately becomes the space of possibility, the possibility associated with creativity, wherein objects are no longer purely equivalent to their use or their monetary value and also wherein objects no longer correspond to one's presuppositions of them. This opens up the possibility that objects have a value in and of themselves, a non-monetary value

31 Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 87.

32 Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 197. As Harman goes on to mention, this ability is only possible through a "sincerity," in which a sensual object—he uses the example of a tree—and a real object—in his example, the "I" of himself—come to inhabit the interior of a third object: "the intention as a whole," which is a real object itself and thus provides a real (indirect) connection between the objects. Ibid., 197; 199.

33 For a more in-depth discussion of these two aspects of intention as well as a third aspect, the "intentional content," see Husserl, *Logical Investigations*.

34 Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 205. Although this is often taken to be a human quality, Harman believes this sincerity is an "ontological feature of objects in general" and thus applies to non-human objects as much as human objects because being "sincerely absorbed" means, in its most basic form, "[foregoing] other possibilities of greater and lesser import." Ibid.

35 Rovatti, "Transformations," 68. Admittedly, Rovatti writes about the silence we encounter in stories, in narrative, that reveal truths, but there is a reason to consider Steinbach's art as narrative. He himself, as previously mentioned, suggests his arrangements are communicating a meaning, one that like the narratives Rovatti discusses, can be hard to understand.

36 Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 189.

and an importance that does not differ among objects, nor even from the value we give to humans: the value that comes with existing, in whatever form, and of sharing in reality. In this space, "the imagination is activated when you enter the territory where unpredictable possibilities might allow for new meanings."[37] Silence, therefore, allows one to think clearly, in a sense. It gives the objects the space to be themselves, and in being themselves, if we can listen to what they have to say, then we can come to understand them better. This silence also becomes a space of play in which, because the objects have revealed themselves to be other than we think they are, objects can then be anything, or at least, this silence gives us the space in which to play with the ideas of what these objects might be. And in this play, we learn something about these objects; thereby, we can come to make better, more correct, judgments about them because we step outside of our subjective experience of these objects and get closer to them as they are in themselves.

6 Silence as a physical space and physical space as silence

Silence, then, plays a large role in Steinbach's art and, therefore, also discloses the significant role silence plays in OOO. Silence offers a way to conceptualize Harman's theory and creates the means for approaching objects in themselves in order to gain some semblance of knowledge about them. In my final analysis of silence, I argue that looking at Steinbach's art via the concept of silence helps bolster Harman's argument because it realizes the benefits Harman proposes of starting from a flat ontology and offers an explanation of how (and a reason for why) the metaphor works. Steinbach's arrangements achieve this because they reveal what is really at stake in an object-oriented ontology: (1) human subjectivity limits the ability to "think" objects, and (2) objects have an efficacy that humans need to consider. In other words, objects are more complex than we assume and are hard to understand in themselves because of the long-standing belief that human are special. Objects, nonetheless, *compel* us to do certain things *and* affect our understandings of them. I contend that silence is not only the abstract space that allows objects to talk but is also *physically* manifest as the space between objects. This physical space between Steinbach's objects in his arrangements represents the way that objects "touch without touching," the "vicarious causation" that through indirect connection permits the indirect access to the object.[38] This twofold idea of space—physical and abstract—illustrates its general importance for the study of objects. Harman briefly discusses space in an article titled "The Road to Objects." There, he argues that space is an arena of "relation *and* non-relation," and "space means that there is something at a distance from us, or withheld from us."[39] Therefore, the space between objects is *necessary* in order to reveal this distance (and to establish a silence). In revealing this distance, it also reveals that objects have their own realities. Consequently, "arranging" becomes necessary, too, as it manipulates these distances. In this way, Steinbach's art links Harman's OOO to Husserl's phenomenology differently from the use of deliberate intention: Steinbach's arranging does for the observer what "parenthesizing" does for Husserl. Arranging removes observers from their background assumptions and forces them to look at what *is*.[40]

How, then, does the space between objects perform this parenthesizing? Steinbach arranges his works the way ordinary people arrange objects on a shelf. There is a logic to the arrangements, but one that is not necessarily self-evident. Therefore, observers confront various independent objects

37 Steinbach, "Haim Steinbach."

38 Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 150. "Vicarious causation" is a modification of "occasionalism," which is a concept that allows two objects to touch via mediation. Harman's "modification" is that *nothing* can allow two objects to touch, so mediation is off the table. Instead of mediation, then, two *real* objects can only meet through a *sensual* one—"the fictional images they present to each other"—with the consequence that this meeting has "retroactive effects on the real." Ibid., 163. Note that he describes this as the way in which two *real* objects meet, but similarly, two *sensual* object cannot meet except through a *real* one. For more, see chapter 4 in Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*.

39 Graham Harman, "The Road to Objects," 176.

40 For more on this, see Husserl, *Ideas*. "Parenthesizing," for Husserl, has a positive sense in that it does not eliminate these background assumptions or remove any prejudgements; rather, it means that observers determine their prejudgments in order to set them aside. Observers can then approach experiences free from theory because they know what they bring to the experience, i.e., they know what their starting points are.

that come to have different meanings when arranged together. Spaces that may have been wide are narrowed, forcing observers to "step into the work" in place of the objects and take on the qualities that relate these various objects to each other. Steinbach's arrangements support and enhance this idea when one looks at them in total, rather than as individual pieces. In the various exhibitions of his art, certain objects often reappear with new shelf mates. For example, in *Supremely Black*, a piece from 1985, two black ceramic pitchers share a (plastic laminated wood) shelf with three boxes of laundry detergent.[41] In *Untitled #1*, the piece from 1986 discussed previously, two of these same black pitchers (at least visually the same) share a shelf with a cabbage, which is really a soup tureen, and a pumpkin, which is really a halloween decoration.[42] As the objects that accompany the pitchers change, the objects that are the pitchers seem to change as well, or at least we—as viewers—open up to the possibility they change. In other words, in addition to providing an observer with indirect access to the pitchers by providing different metaphors for them to step into—which works to establish different information about this object—Steinbach's art uses space as a silence in which the objects talk to and affect *each other*. In this way, the objects communicate, albeit indirectly, their beings. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes, "speech—including silence—is not a *means* of communication, but communication itself, an exposure (similar to the way the Inuit Eskimos sing by making their own cries resonate in the open mouth of a partner). The speaking mouth does not transmit, does not inform, does not effect any body; it is—perhaps, thought taken *at its limit*, as with the kiss—the beating of a singular site against other singular sites…"[43] The space between objects becomes its own communication, one that allow the observer to see the objects in their own rights as the various objects resonate within each other to reveal their singularities.

The shelf is a part of this. In *Untitled #1* (1986), the shelf is not one shelf, but three shelves: one for the cabbage, one for the pumpkin, and one for the pitchers. Each shelf has its own width, height, colour, etc., and a viewer cannot instinctually view the artwork as a whole. Furthermore, in *Supremely Black* (1985), two of the same pitchers as in *Untitled #1* sit on the same deep red shelf, which emphasizes how the pitchers in the 1986 piece are the same objects as in the 1985 piece. Yet in *Supremely Black*, the shelf is more of a traditional shelf that extends the length of the work. The colour changes—the detergent boxes sit on a black shelf—but it is easier to see the shelf, and therefore the piece, as one. Steinbach, when he speaks of his shelves, suggests they can highlight the fact that all objects are particular objects by "[trying] to engage what they do with each other."[44] In *Supremely Black*, then, the shelves help to draw out similarities or connections between the objects, whereas in *Untitled #1*, the shelves highlight the contrasts. In this way, Steinbach, too, reveals his belief in the necessity of the space between objects: by using space to encourage objects to engage with each other in new ways, he suggests that objects have new things to teach us, things that can only be taught if objects are permitted to talk about each other.

7 The significance of space for OOO

Understanding silence and space this way offers a potential answer to one of the questions that started this essay. By "arranging" objects, Steinbach is creating spaces that allow for the indirect access to said objects and some understanding of them. Thus, in our own arrangements—of knickknacks, of books, of furniture, of ideas, etc.—we may unknowingly be doing the same thing: helping to clarify the object(s) in question for ourselves. Arrangement, then, becomes necessary for knowledge. Therefore, one of the consequences of this paper is that it is not theatre, as Harman suggests, that "lies at the root of all other arts,"[45] but the visual

41 Haim Steinbach, *Supremely Black*, 1985, plastic laminated wood shelf, two ceramic pitchers, three cardboard detergent boxes, 29 x 66 x 13 in., Smithsonian Institute, https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/photos/supremely-black.

42 Steinbach, *Untitled #1*.

43 Nancy, *The Inoperable Community*, 30–31.

44 Steinbach, "Haim Steinbach: 'It Was a Concept that Generated a New Historical Movement in Contemporary Art.'"

45 Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 83.

arts, or at least the "art" of arranging objects.[46] This art makes manifest the space of silence and permits the sincere relationship with and between objects as each object plays off others to create new metaphors and new experiences of each other. Therefore, the spaces between objects, the silences that allow objects to speak, are a necessary precondition of the metaphor and, thus, of theatricality.

A second consequence of this is the requirement to expand the flat ontology of OOO to encompass space and silence as objects in their own right. They have effects, yet neither can be reduced to those effects. They have components, yet neither can be reduced to its components. Therefore, space and silence both meet Harman's definition of an object.[47] The corollary consequence is that once silence and space are included in a flat ontology, they reveal themselves to be "special," or what is most important for grasping reality beyond our own subjectivity. Harman never suggests that his ontology has to remain flat, only that people should accept the possibility that all things are initially equal so as to, thereby, avoid prejudging anything out of consideration for analysis (which could, consequently, result in *erroneous* conclusions). It is only in starting from a flat ontology that space and silence can be seen as things in themselves—and not as nothing[48]—and it is only then that we can understand humans have no special status (or are not the only objects with special status), but silence and space do. It is silence and space that emerge as preconditions for reality and, thus, for us as humans and for the subjectivity we value. Gabriele Schwab, in her work on trauma, shows clearly the effects of silence and its possibilities after a trauma has destroyed memory, history, and language: "Sometimes the breakdown of language forces us to listen to the silence, to acknowledge the gap, to inhabit it and rebuild the world from inside out."[49] Silence and space, as shown by Steinbach, do exactly this: they reveal the gaps in our knowledge and allow us the opportunity to rebuild our concept of the world by highlighting the importance of things outside ourselves.

The final consequence of silence and space, then, is that they provide an idea of how an object-oriented ontology can be brought into the political realm or of what this theory might mean in practice. Between humans, there is a need for space and silence so that the *other* can become a subject, not an object, or in the terms of Harman's theory, the other can become an object-in-itself, not just the object we want it to be.[50] Without this space or this silence, the other never has the chance to appear, and thus all relations are muted. In terms of human-to-object relations, space and silence are needed to think through our actions and our judgments because space and silence are essential if we hope to ever achieve the true judgment of Socrates. This means that projects should never proceed without the proper space and silence in which things-in-themselves can show themselves, and we should never assume we have full control of any process. Rather, we must develop the capacity to sit in uncertainty, and we must acknowledge the potential for unpredictability, which further requires more comprehensive policies for dealing with unpredictability. We

46 Although art history suggests that the "art" of arranging objects arises directly from "happenings," which require the viewer's involvement and are performance pieces, as well as Dadaist and Surrealist theatre, Steinbach's work, which, therefore, does arise from a theatrical tradition, nonetheless challenges the prominence of the theatricality within this tradition. As Steinbach argues when his work is compared to that of the Duchamp Ready Made, Duchamp "was working like a Dadaist or Surrealist" by altering the works or adding something of himself to them. (Steinbach, "Haim Steinbach: 'It Was a Concept that Generated a New Historical Movement in Contemporary Art.'" In his own work, Steinbach is letting the objects be the objects that they are, which is also why he prefers the term "arranging" to describe what he does. (See note 14.) While he doesn't deny there is a performativity inherent in art installations, one that relies on the grammar of the institution, he arranges objects in order to break that grammar. My point is that Steinbach's works, thereby, draw attention to the necessary precondition of the presentation rather than the performance. See Steinbach, "Haim Steinbach" for a discussion on how his work differs, in his view, from Duchamp's.

47 "The only necessary criterion for an object in OOO is that it be irreducible in both directions: an object is *more than its pieces* and *less than its effects*." Ibid., 53.

48 Even if one accepted silence and space were "nothing," they would not necessarily be excluded from OOO; Tristan Garcia argues, "nothing is not the opposite of something; nothing is the absence of something, the empty place left by something. Nothing is what remains when one has removed something. … Nothing is therefore not the opposite of something, but rather the opposite of something *added to* the absence of this something." Garcia, *Form and Object,* 46.

49 Schwab, *Haunting Legacies,* 50.

50 This is precisely how Harman conceives of politics when he reads Bruno Latour in *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political*. My point is here is that silence and space are necessary for this, which is something I feel Harman (nor Latour) ever states explicitly.

need to listen to objects as they speak to each other—in our silence—and it is only in the (multiple) spaces between objects that this can occur. This silent space is also what encourages us to listen, and if we listen, we just might find we might have something to learn from objects.

8 Conclusion

Steinbach's art answers many questions about objects and what goes on between them, even if it cannot offer a complete knowledge of objects. His art, nonetheless, fills in the gaps of Harman's theory by showing the necessity of space and of silence, for "in solitude we find ourselves; we prepare ourselves to come to conversation with something to say that is authentic, ours."[51] This solitude, this silence, this *space* is what permits the indirect access to an object's reality, which is all we can achieve according to Harman. It not only forces us to confront our presuppositions about objects, but it also allows objects to "talk" and prepares us to listen. It challenges our beliefs in the superiority of human subjectivity and forces us to acknowledge uncertainty. It is the physical manifestation of the metaphor that Harman privileges as a means of indirect access to objects. As such, it reveals the necessity of space and silence for any comprehensive object-oriented ontology.[52]

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51 Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 10.

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