

# Objects

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*The real is what resists.*

—Lacan

A painting hangs on a wall. A man stands in front of it. He has been standing there for some time. He is not an art critic and he is not a tourist and he is not lost. He is just a man looking at a painting, and the painting is looking back at him in the way paintings do, which is to say not at all, which is to say completely.

The painting was made by a person. It is the only one. It has a price. These three facts—authorship, uniqueness, market price—seem like the least interesting things you could say about a painting. They seem

like bureaucracy. They seem like the kind of information that belongs on a museum placard rather than in a conversation about what the painting is. And yet these three facts, taken together, are the entire reason the man is standing there rather than walking past. Without an author the painting would be a natural phenomenon, a sunset, a stain. Without uniqueness it would be a print, a copy, an instance of a type. Without a market price it would be a doodle, a private mark, something that never crossed from the person who made it into the world where other people have to reckon with it. The bureaucracy turns out to be the ontology. The placard is the point.



This is what Graham Harman has been trying to say for twenty-five years, though he would not say it this way, because he is a philosopher and philosophers are not allowed to say things this simply. What he would say is that objects withdraw from their relations, that no encounter with a thing exhausts the thing, that the real object hides behind every sensual surface. What he means is that the painting on the wall is more than you can see, more than you can say, more than any list of

its properties. You could describe every brushstroke, every pigment, every craquelure in the varnish, and you would still not have the painting. Something would remain. Something always remains. That remainder is what makes it an object rather than a heap of facts.

But Harman also says this about bricks and cotton and fire. Everything withdraws. Every object has a hidden interior that no relation can access. And this is true, and it is important, and it is also the reason you need the three criteria—authorship, uniqueness, market price—to get from objects in general to art objects in particular. Because if everything withdraws, then withdrawal alone cannot tell you what makes a painting different from a brick. The brick withdraws. The painting withdraws. They both have interiors you cannot reach. The difference is that someone made the painting, there is only one of it, and the world has put a price on it, and the price is the world's way of saying: there is something here that I cannot get to the bottom of, and I am willing to pay for the privilege of trying.



The market is not the arbiter. The market is a participant. It can be wrong about an object the way anyone can be

wrong about anything. A forger paints a Vermeer. The market prices it as a Vermeer. The market is wrong. But the error is not a flaw in the concept of market price as a criterion—it is just error, the same kind of error that occurs whenever a detection instrument encounters a signal it misidentifies. The forger's painting does not have a market price of its own. It has a borrowed price, a stolen price, the Vermeer's price misattributed to a copy. That is not a real market price for that object. That is the instrument malfunctioning.

And then something interesting happens. The forgery is exposed. The forger becomes famous. The forgeries start selling as forgeries. They acquire their own names, their own provenance, their own collectors. A van Meegeren has a market price now—not Vermeer's price, its own. The pseudo-object has become an object. The copy has achieved an identity independent of the original. You can point at it and say: that is a van Meegeren, and the pointing picks out something real, something with its own withdrawn interiority that you cannot exhaust by describing it. The market detected the transition. The market is not always right, but over enough time and enough transactions, the market is the best instrument we have for registering when a new object has entered the world.



A company is an object. This sounds strange until you think about it for more than a few seconds. The East India Company had employees and ships and trade routes and legal charters, and none of those things were the East India Company. You could replace every employee, sink every ship, alter every route, revise the charter, and something would persist—some principle of identity, some withdrawn core that exceeded the list of components. The company did things that none of its parts could do. It had a kind of agency that survived the death of every individual person in it. That is withdrawal. The object exceeds every account you can give of it from the perspective of its parts or its relations.

And a company can be an art object. When Elon Musk bought Twitter for forty-four billion dollars, he was not buying a set of servers or a codebase or a user base. You could replicate all of those things and you would not have Twitter. He was buying the thing itself—the object. And the price was the market's attempt to detect how much withdrawn interiority was in there, how much depth the thing had, how inexhaustible it was. The enormous disagreement about whether he overpaid is exactly the kind of disagreement you get at

an art auction. Was this thing actually worth forty-four billion dollars, or was the market wrong about what kind of object it was dealing with?

Twitter had an author. It was unique—there was literally only one Twitter. And it had a market price. Those are the three criteria. And Musk’s entire struggle since buying it is the struggle of someone who acquired an art object and discovered that the thing has its own reality that resists whatever you want to do with it. You can repaint it, rename it, hang it in a different room. The thing pushes back, because it already is something.



Donald Trump built Truth Social when he was banned from Twitter, and this is the forgery case playing out in real time. Truth Social started as a copy—a parasitic pseudo-object defined entirely by reference to the original. It was “Trump’s Twitter clone,” and the description exhausted it. There was nothing behind the surface. You could list its features and you had the whole thing. No withdrawal. No remainder.

And then it went public. It got its own market price. It got its own user culture, its own strange identity that nobody would confuse with Twitter. It became a real

object—a bad painting, maybe, but a real one. Its own thing. The market price was the moment the transition became visible. Before the IPO it was a copy. After the IPO it was an object. The quality is almost irrelevant to the objecthood question. Van Meegeren’s forgeries are bad paintings and they are real objects. Truth Social is a bad platform and it is a real object. The badness does not cancel the objecthood.

But Mastodon is not an object. Mastodon has no singular author, no uniqueness—anyone can spin up their own instance, that is the entire point—and no market price, because there is nothing there to price. It is a protocol, a set of tools, a codebase anyone can fork. Nobody owns Mastodon the way someone owns a Vermeer. Nobody has feelings about Mastodon as an entity. It does not withdraw, because there is nothing there to withdraw. It is fully transparent, fully exhaustible. You can read the code and you have basically got the whole thing.

Nobody talks about Mastodon the way they talk about Twitter. Nobody loves or hates Mastodon. It does not provoke, does not seduce, does not resist. It just sits there, available, a tool rather than a thing. And the three criteria explain exactly why, without recourse to anything mystical.



A sunset is not an art object. This is obvious, but the reason it is obvious is worth stating, because the reason is the author criterion doing the work it was designed to do. The sunset is unique—no two are alike. The sunset might even have a market price if you could sell it somehow. But the sunset has no author. Nobody made it. And without authorship the thing remains a natural phenomenon, however beautiful, however irreducible, however much it withdraws from description. Art objects are made things. That is not a limitation of the definition. That is the definition.

The Grand Canyon is not an art object for the same reason. It is beautiful and unique and probably priceable, but nobody made it. Central Park, on the other hand, is an edge case—Olmsted and Vaux designed it, it is unique, and if you could sell it the price would far exceed the real estate value of the land, because you would not just be buying acreage in Manhattan, you would be buying Central Park. The object exceeds its materials. The functional use—people jog there, children play there—does not cancel the objecthood, it just makes it harder to see.

A diamond is not an art object. It has a market price and it might be unique, but the person who pulled it out of the ground was a miner, not an artist. The market is pricing the material, not the object's withdrawn interiority. Nobody stands in front of a diamond and feels that there is something inexhaustible about this specific diamond's singular identity. The market prices carbon.

But a found object can be an art object—a rock, a urinal, anything—if and only if the person who found it was operating as an artist. Duchamp picks up the urinal and it crosses over. The authorship is the crossing. The artist's act of designation is itself the creative act, and the market recognizes the transition by assigning a price to the designated object that has nothing to do with the price of porcelain.



The interesting question is what happens at the boundary. When does something that is not an art object become one? When does a pseudo-object achieve objecthood? The answer is always the same and it is always visible in the market.

A philosophy that nobody reads is not an object in the philosophical marketplace. It is not quoted, not

traded, not built upon, not argued with. It exists but it does not participate. Objectivism is like this. Ayn Rand took the surface of Aristotle—naive realism, the primacy of existence, A is A—without entering into genuine dialogue with the tradition. She copied the surface the way a forger copies a Vermeer, and the philosophical marketplace never assigned it a price of its own. Philosophers do not engage with it. It circulates entirely outside the discipline. It is, to paraphrase Baudrillard, not quoted on the marketplace of philosophy.

Harman took a very similar starting point—things are real, realism is right, Aristotle had something—and because he was actually an author in the strong sense, actually a philosopher engaging with Heidegger and Husserl and Whitehead and Leibniz, the result is a real philosophical object. It has a market price in the philosophical economy. People cite it, argue with it, build on it. The difference is not that Harman is smarter than Rand. The difference is that he is doing the thing. He is operating as a philosopher the way Duchamp was operating as an artist. The authorship is the key.

And the circularity is not a flaw. What is an artist? Someone who makes art objects. What is an art object? Something made by an artist. This sounds empty, but it is the same kind of ontological claim as everything

else. The category is real. You can tell from the inside whether something belongs to it or not.



A doodle on a piece of paper does not have a market price. This is the point where most people disagree, and the disagreement is instructive. The romantic position says the doodle is art because all expression is art, because the impulse to make marks is sacred, because the child with the crayon is doing the same thing Vermeer was doing. And in some register this is true. But in the register that matters for the definition of art objects, it is not true. The doodle has an author and it might be unique, but it has no market price, and the absence of the price is the absence of the world's recognition that there is something there worth trying to reach. The doodle may have withdrawn interiority. Maybe. But the withdrawal without market recognition is indistinguishable from there being nothing there at all. Harman's ontology, applied naively, would grant the doodle the same status as the Vermeer, because both withdraw, both exceed their descriptions, both have hidden depths. And this is the problem with applying allure

and withdrawal without the three criteria. You lose the ability to distinguish the things that matter.

The market price is not the definition of value. It is the detection of value. The world looks at the Vermeer and keeps coming back, keeps trying to get to the bottom of it, keeps paying more for the privilege of standing in front of it. The world looks at the doodle and walks past. Both might have depth. But only one has produced the evidence.



There is a deeper claim here about what Harman is doing, and it is this: he is lifting the ontic into the ontological.

The ontological difference in Heidegger—Being versus beings, ontology versus ontics—is supposed to be an unbridgeable gap. Ontology asks about Being as such, the conditions for anything to show up at all. Ontics asks about this particular thing and its properties. Heidegger thought the cardinal sin of philosophy was collapsing that difference, treating Being as just another being.

Harman commits that sin on purpose. He takes the withdrawal that Heidegger reserved for Being itself

and hands it to every individual entity. Every object withdraws. Every object has the depth that Heidegger thought only Being had. The ontological drama is happening at the ontic level, in every specific chair and brick and painting. That is a unification of ontology and ontics.

And this is why the three criteria—author, uniqueness, market price—do not betray his project even though they are completely ontic. In a framework where ontology and ontics have been unified, ontic criteria are doing ontological work. The market price is not a sociological observation. It is the ontic surface through which the art object's metaphysical depth becomes legible. The price is withdrawal made measurable. The price is the trace left by an interiority that no amount of looking can exhaust.

This is not a counter to Harman. This is what Harman is doing. He is taking categories—art, objects, companies, fictional characters, historical events—and asking: what must be true about reality for these categories to work the way they do? He is treating the institutional facts at face value and then asking the metaphysical question about them rather than treating the sociology as already fully explained. The market and the art world are not arbitrary conventions imposed by

institutions. They are responses to a real structure. The conventions are not the point. What the conventions are tracking is the point.



Music is art but a record is not an art object, or at least not in the same way. An album exists as a work that gets instantiated in copies. You can buy a pressing of it but you are not buying the thing itself. You are buying a reproduction. Nobody owns a particular album the way someone owns a particular painting.

But then a rap group manufactures a single physical copy of an album, places it in an ornate box, and sells it for millions of dollars to a pharmaceutical executive who keeps it in a vault. The album had no independent physical existence before this gesture. It was infinitely reproducible, like any other record. And then someone imposed uniqueness, authored the scarcity, and the market assigned a price. The three criteria converged and the album crossed over from being a work to being an object. The artificial scarcity created a real object. Which means the objecthood was not inherent in the music—the music was always there, always the same—but in the specific act of making it singular.

This is the found object logic applied to something that already existed as art but not as an art object. The music was art. The single copy in the ornate box is an art object. Those are different claims and it is fine that they come apart. Most of the things that matter most in human life are not art objects. Music is not. Love is not. Air is not. The art object is a rare and specific achievement—a made thing, a singular thing, a priced thing—and it deserves its own narrow definition rather than being collapsed into everything we happen to find beautiful or important.



Objects resist. That is the simplest thing you can say about them and it is the most important. A painting resists your interpretation of it. A company resists the plans of its new owner. A philosophy resists summary. A forgery resists being what it pretends to be and then, when exposed, resists being dismissed as nothing. Even the word “object” contains the verb: to object, to push back, to refuse the role assigned.

The man standing in front of the painting has been there for some time. He is not going to leave with the painting explained. He is not going to arrive at the final

reading that exhausts its meaning and allows him to move on. He is going to leave with the painting still in there, behind the surface, behind the pigment and the varnish, behind everything he can see and say, and the fact that it is still in there—unreached, unexhausted, withdrawing—is the reason he will come back. Not because there is a secret to discover. Because there is no secret. Because the depth is real and the depth has no bottom, and the bottomlessness is what the market has been trying to price all along, and the market will never get it right, and the failure of the market to get it right is not a flaw in the market but a confirmation that the thing is real, because real things are the things that resist being captured, that exceed every relation, that remain after every account has been given.

That is what an object is.

That is what it has always been.

