



## ON Objects: Interview with a Chainsaw: An Object Oriented Exploitation Manual.

*A critical reflection framed within the construct of the ‘interview’ the text seeks to understand how the subject shifts position under non-anthropocentric models such as those proposed by Speculative Realism. It questions the extent to which issues of causation can be adequately articulated when not informed by practice-based research. While non-correlational models suggest a significant shift in the role of the artist/interviewer, this is framed as an extension of the process and media-driven practices of the 60/70 dematerialized conceptual practices in that the authorship of the work is co-constituted in the dynamic interplay between object and subject. Citing Joseph Beuys’ How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare, 1965, and Jim Allen’s Poetry for Chainsaws, 1976, the spoken word or ‘interview’ is explored as a modernist construct that being fundamentally anthropocentric in nature, problematises causation and practice based research. As such artistic practice is shown to be in conflict with Object Oriented Ontologies flat ontological stance.*

(Ambient noise of studio activity in preparation for interviews)

Notation: The following interview was conducted in the artist studio at 21:25, April

27, 2014. In attendance artists James Charlton and (inaudible over studio noise) chainsaw.

(Ambient noise of studio activity)

Artist: Let me start by ...

(Exerted breathing and Chainsaw pull start.)

about the role

(Exerted breathing and Chainsaw pull start.)

objects in your work.

(Ambient noise of studio activity)

Artist: You can’t start...



(Exerted breathing and Chainsaw pull start.)

Chainsaw : Starts

Chainsaw : Revs twice.

Artists: Inaudible Comments

Chainsaw : idles.

Artists: Inaudible Comments

Chainsaw: Revs

Artists: Inaudible Comments

Chainsaw: Throttle open to cut.

Artists: Intermittent Inaudible Comments Continue.

(Sound of wood hitting floor.)

Chainsaw : idles.

Chainsaw : stops.

(Ambient noise of studio activity)

Notation: The interview was terminated by the artist at 21:28.

(Ambient noise of footsteps.)

Pause.

Interview techniques seem to differ from interrogation techniques only in levels of severity. At least this what I can surmise from the *CIA Human Resources Exploitation Manual* (1983). Both it seems are simply forms of questioning that are no more than a means of obtaining information from subjects. However I am still thankful that the version of the manual I downloaded is heavily notated with amendments that replace terms condoning *coercive* techniques with slightly more politically correct rejections of such treatment.

So just how does one go about interviewing a chainsaw?

The proposition of course is loaded with assumptions, not the least of which is that the chainsaw will have a way of responding – even if I manage to ask a question in a manner that it could understand. Anyway, what could I hope to learn from such an interview – what do I want to find out? The idea that objects might have something to tell us is, however, not an alien concept. In fact our contemporary obsession with scientific observation and empirical reasoning can be taken as an acknowledgement of the belief that we only have to *watch* a subject closely to learn something from it: That they will in some way *speak* to us and tell us something about themselves.



Beuys' *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), and Jim Allen's *Poetry for Chainsaws* (1976), both of which cast imposing shadows over early practice. But I choose to re-examine these works through the eyes of my recent forays into occult of OOO – Object Oriented Ontology, or one of its aliases – Object Oriented Philosophy or Speculative Realism. OOO's anthropocentric stance has many appeals and certainly at a time when the future of the world that we have created seem tenuous at best it is appropriate to reflect on what objects would do without us.

Thankfully the condensed format of this paper forces me to provide only the briefest outline of OOO as a set of crude bullet points:

1. OOO rejects any correlational imperative between thinking and being (Meillasseux, 2008).
2. Objects are irreducible.
3. Objects are not ontologically exhausted by their relations with humans.

(Harman, 2013)

But just what would an Object Oriented *reading* of *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* be? Clearly the authoritarian position assumed by Beuys for the most part is in conflict with a non-anthropocentric stance. Almost as if on a lecture podium Beuys, his finger raised to make a point, assumes the mantle of the Professor – imparting knowledge to the uneducated hare. There is no indication that this is a conversation or that the hare might contribute anything useful to the discussion. Beuys is the authorial modernist, responsible for everything there is to know. Through the hare the artwork will simply listen to what the artist has to say and embody his vision within its otherwise lifeless body.

Even as a dead animal the hare is given no agency – it is never asked to play a part in the work that goes beyond the desire of the artist. The hare is muted not by death but by Beuys' correlational authorship. Beuys prompts us to see the hare as a symbolic incarnation of things humans can only imagine (Beuys, 1971) but in doing so he denies us the ability to imagine the hare at all. All we can imagine is Beuys' imagination of the hare as a symbolic incarnation. Rather than bringing the hare to life through our human ability to produce ideas, the hare is raised zombi-like by the blanket of authorial intent that Beuys wraps around the work. Beuys' futile attempts



agency beyond the intent of the artist. But a dead hare is no more silent in a work than a chainsaw that is out of petrol.

Allen, too, assumes an authoritative position in the 1976 version of *Poetry for Chainsaws*, but more as paternal figure than professorial don. In the recent re-performances of his work, however, he seems to depart from this role to embody a more sinister character. In the original version Allen, dressed in white, appears as more of an ethereal father figure reading a bedtime story to lull the rambunctious chainsaws to sleep, than the incensed voice of dissent in the Ginsberg poem *Howl* (1956) that he reads aloud.

“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix”, (1956) is after all more likely to result in nightmares than sweet dreams.

Now some thirty year later Allen, dressed in army fatigues, is the artist as paramilitary and a far cry from the prophetic figure of the 1976 version where his appearance evokes Beuys’ shamanistic role. This more macho attire contrasts uncomfortably with Ginsberg’s lamenting embodiment of Moloch – the character of blind patriotism and insatiable greed that is the war machine. For now Allen sitting rather than standing, is united with his comrade chainsaws – rather than floating like a benevolent angel above them. Allen has infiltrated the enemy camp but is he a conscript or a covert operator in the work?

Clearly Allen the artist is still the interrogator – he is still in charge of the investigation. Despite drowning out the prose, the chainsaws seem intent on the artist – clustering around him while he for the most part ignores them or moves away when they become too fractious. The chainsaws, like “the best minds” (1956) of any generation, follow his orders. The interrogation – if we can see an artwork in this way – is conducted on his terms. The gallery is the Abu Ghraib of artistic practice where objects might be held without reason for an indeterminate duration.

Of course I am twisting these two works to my own ends – manipulating them through my interrogation techniques to make the point I wish to make. These are after all questions that might be posed about many artistic practices, assuming that any such practice is the domain of a human-artist.



uld one participate in an Object Oriented Practice – a practice that reflects OOO principles? Is it possible to think about authorship in the same way, or must we radically rethink our methods and function with the production of the work?

What I really seem to asking in my *Interview with the Chainsaw* then is: what are the challenges that OOO makes to authorship (modernist or otherwise)? Or perhaps that should be stated the other way around: what are the challenges that authorship makes on OOO? For authorship as causation remains a thorny question to which OOO has not yet it seems formulated a satisfactory answer.

This is not to say that Object Oriented Philosophers don't address this issue. (See Harman, 2013). It is simply that their methods, like coercive interrogation techniques, undermine the credibility of their results. Causation within a OOO framework is rigorously resolved by an object of *real intention* being inhabited by two *real objects* (Harman, 2007) that are both themselves and not themselves at the same time (Morton, 2014).

These arguments like “dogs sniffing at trees” and “pencils penciling about pencil sharpeners” (Morton, 2014) are arguments arguing about arguments as only philosophers can do. But they never stop to ask the dog, the pencil or their own ideas what they *think*. Of course here lies the ultimate conundrum of OOO. It is epistemically bound to humans – it is humans philosophizing about human ideas, not *objects* philosophizing about object-ideas. Remembering that an OOO *object* is as much an idea as it is a thing, Object Oriented philosophers, with a few rare exceptions make scant use of *objects* in any other way. Certainly their writing is filled with examples of aliens, hammers and sensual-trees but they seem never to actually have picked up a hammer and interrogated it or for that matter allowed themselves to be interrogated by it – the object. OOO is a Human Oriented Object Ontology and can surely be no other way, for what do aliens and hammers know of ontology?

Acknowledging that art is an exploration of causality Motron (2014) again misses the point. Art in the modernist tradition is a human idea premised on authorship. It takes for granted the primacy of human agency. We cannot see the works of Beuys and Allen as forms of “vicarious causation” (Morton, 2014), as they are too entrapped by the artist's intent. Even Steven Hammer



His glitch works, while showing a willingness to at least conduct object oriented interviews by allowing various forms of near failure agency in the work, are overly focused on preconceived aestheticised output, despite the process base of his practice.

Surely such an OOΔ would need to de-emphasize the stylistic dirt of glitch and focus on the process of becoming – the practice of intent as it is constituted in the inter-object interview rather than in the analysis of the interview or the art product. For in the art-product a new interview begins between artwork and audience. It is in the becoming of practice that OOO begins a conversation with the inter-given object and in the artifact that the becoming of art dies.

This Interview or, as it turns out to be, Interrogation of a Chainsaw, is just as anthropocentric as all art must surely be. It conforms in spirit to the CIA Resources Exploitation Manual and like the most ardent operative has yielded nothing under coercion. For art to resist its author-centric tendencies artists must learn like any good interviewer that “information obtained from a subject under torture is not reliable.” (1983).

— James Charlton (Colab, AUT University, Auckland, NZ and TransArt – Plymouth University, Plymouth, UK. ), July 2014

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