

Does Public Art Have to Be Bad Art?

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Object-hood's Indecencies: *Tilted Arc* and the Lessons Learnt in Breakdown

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Abstract: This essay looks to re-evaluate sculptor Richard Serra's famous claim that "to remove the work is to destroy it." Using OOO, and particularly Graham Harman's interpretation of Martin Heidegger's tool analysis, in order to analyze the now famous moment when *Tilted Arc* was de-installed from Federal Plaza, Manhattan in 1989, this paper argues that the work was not in fact destroyed but rather that its ontological autonomy was even more absolutely revealed in that moment as such. Although it is the case that art objects and sites are prone to discursive co-construction and evaluation, it is this analysis' claim that they both are possessive of a deep, substantive form also, a form resistant to appropriation. *Tilted Arc* therefore revealed something even more insidious and dangerous to those who opposed it than the power of art to speak back to its surroundings. Rather, it uncovered the substantive objecthood of the site itself.

Keywords: Object Oriented Ontology, Graham Harman, Martin Heidegger, Richard Serra, Counter-Language, Public Sculpture, Public Art

I want to make it perfectly clear that Tilted Arc was commissioned and designed for one particular site: Federal Plaza. It is a site-specific work and as such should not to be relocated. To remove the work is to destroy the work.

-Richard Serra.

We all know the story by now. Richard Serra's monumental work *Tilted Arc* is installed in the middle of Federal Plaza, Manhattan. Although the art world defended its position, those working in and around the plaza almost immediately began campaigning for its removal. Serra spent the better part of a decade arguing that the work was dependent on the site itself, but ultimately lost in the very public campaign which after a four-year legal battle won out.

Thus goes the founding legend of site-specificity, one which all works of public sculpture have fallen in the shadow of in some way since. The public denunciation of *Tilted Arc* has probably given it the dubious title of being the most debated work of public art in all of recent history, and certainly one of the most publicly hated. Many works of public sculpture cause dislike and frustration. Most recently and notably Sam Durant's *Scaffold* gained widespread attention, and also debates surrounding confederate statues throughout the United States have invited international debate, and yet these works have a much more overtly political tone than a *Tilted Arc* ever presumed, and almost never are they actually removed.¹ It may be that Serra's statement reveals more of his own personal verbosity than any kind of ontological accuracy. However, despite that what a "site" may be is in a contemporary context increasingly understood along dialogic and community-based, rather than formal lines, his phrase seems to be one that art history cannot quite escape.

¹ Durant's work was of course buried at the site where it was originally installed, which arguably is not the same as its removal.

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The work of art is nothing if not a philosophical starting point, and yet it feels like sometimes on the brink of losing this, too. So often we are instructed about what and how to see, but engaging with aesthetics on our own terms requires the kind of philosophical encouragement that we find in even shorter supply in public versus private spaces. Especially in North American cities, public art is so often of the “plop art” variety described by Miwon Kwon. These are those awkward modernist behemoths we all know so well—abandoned in the city-scape with no meaningful relationship to their surroundings—and that tend to be read as inaccessible or mere corporate anecdote, and usually of course are both. On the other hand works can be so integrated into the built architecture like James Turrell’s *Straight Flush* (technically interior to a building yet exposed day and night through the multi-floor windows) that they are less art than architectural adornment, or in Turrell’s case a convenient and probably lucrative backdrop to the popular show *Suits*.

It is not that there is no good public art. But the balancing act between the public and private bureaucracies who sanction these works makes it hard for anything good to enter into popular consciousness. It is instead temporary, guerilla, ad-hoc, improvisational and otherwise underground or unsanctioned methods that are usually designated as holding higher critical importance and so unfortunately, public sculpture of the permanent and semi-permanent variety is considered and not unjustly an art of compromise.

A work of art may be a philosophical starting point only if we are encouraged to read it as a thing not immediately understandable, as something strange, a luxury rarely afforded by the simplistic and commercially determined, bureaucratically sanctioned works that populate our cityscapes. The scandalous moment of *Tilted Arc* has always compelled me, in part because it is hard not to romanticize a time when public art was front page news. Additionally, it presents an opportunity to consider why and how this work had such an effect. What about it was so aesthetically radical, or even so existentially threatening that it was not allowed to remain?

In the analysis that follows, I will insist that it is not the case that *Tilted Arc* was destroyed in March of 1989, when it was taken apart and shipped to storage. Rather, we can consider the moment of de-installation to be a moment of breakdown such as is discussed by Heidegger in his analysis of the broken hammer in *Being and Time*. Here, it is in the moment of breakdown more than at any other time that the autonomy of the object is revealed. In other words, the breakdown is productive of just the philosophical starting point in public space that we need. Works of art of course imbricated in a landscape, one that pushes up against them, but works push back too; they are in the Heideggerian sense, obstinate. The works de-installation shows us just the fissure points such obstinacy can produce.

I do not mean to deny the relevancy of the site. Rather, by inverting Serra’s claim that to remove a site-specific work is to destroy it, I look to re-evaluate not just the autonomy of the work but re-evaluate also how we might return the site’s relevancy and autonomy to itself too. Public art has the ability to radically de-nature the site, and yet this site is more available to the radical imagination when it is not *just* of discursive construction, but have their own ontological autonomy too against we can press.

For Graham Harman the basis of ontological autonomy—the object—is defined most simply as that which is more than its component parts, and less than its effects.² He explains in *The Third Table* how OOO is articulated against two prevalent philosophical biases, using the analogy of the two tables borrowed from the physicist Arthur Stanley Eddington. In Eddington’s formula, the first of the two tables is the one with which we are the most acquainted: that of “the familiar world” of everyday experience, known to us by its causal effects, its function and our inherited knowledge or prejudices of what a table might be.³ The second table is known to us all too, but especially by those of the scientific professions who are its champions. This is the table of tiny particles: of atoms, whizzing protons, empty space and electrical bonds. This is also the table that in the scientific world view, is generally accepted as the the only one which is really there. In this approach, the day-to-day table with which we interact is only a provisionally useful construct brought forth by our human perception—by all other counts, it is a convenient mirage. OOO stakes its claim, however *between* these two tables; to Harman an object is neither the everyday table nor the scientific table that is

² Harman, *Object Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, 53.

³ Harman, *The Third Table*, 5.

the real table, but rather they are both equally unreal.⁴ The real table is more durable than its relations, and more significant than its atomic parts.

An object, therefore, holds at the level of its own substantive middle-ground. Harman designates this level as an object's "form".⁵ This is not form as we know the word, explicable by a list of qualities, since these would still be following an OOO analysis still considered component parts. Rather, he defines a deep, substantive form that lies beneath; a deep form of the "real object", encrusted beneath that "sensuous object" with which we are better acquainted. We cannot fully access the real object Harman tells us, yet we can speculate at its existence via analogy—in his favorite example, by a re-orientation Heidegger's tool analysis.

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger develops a philosophical analysis of a hammer that breaks. If you ask someone what an object is, you will usually get one of two answers: what it looks like or what it does, in other words, its form (its qualities) or its function. For a hammer, would be its hammer-shape and appearance on the one hand, and its ability to sufficiently hit things into wood on the other. In the moment where the hammer breaks, however, to Heidegger as to Harman something fundamental occurs: the hammer is revealed as something more than its form and more than its function. We call it a "broken hammer" and not something new of mysterious design, and do this even though it no longer looks like a hammer, nor would be very good at hitting nails into wood. This moment of breakdown, in other words, is one which reveals the hidden background of objects in the world, a background that is both resistant to human appropriation and always existent, in withdrawal, and mysteriously disguised in surplus behind the scenes.⁶

With art, unlike with a hammers, it is notably less clear where form starts and function begins. For *Titled Arc* this might be especially true, since the authorially desired engine of functionality for Serra—to disrupt the language of the space—was intended to take place via a counter-language articulated in the formal vernacular of the work's design. In an open letter published in *Art in America* in 1989 the artist wrote, "Site-specific works primarily engender a dialogue with their surroundings. Every language has a structure about which one can say nothing critical in that language. There must be another language, dealing with the structure of the first but possessing a new structure to criticize the first".⁷

Although Serra denied that his site-specific works were meant to an *overt* social, political commentary, he did write that, "the works become part of the site and restructure both conceptually and perceptually the organization of the site. Based on the interdependence of work and site, site-specific works address the context and content of their site critically".⁸ Yet if Serra was re-asserting the critical basis of site-specificity, he was doing so against the prevalent belief of the time that public works should function as conciliatory framing devices that enhance public space for public use.⁹

Yet the work's inverse curvilinear counter-position to the centrally arranged pavement stones of the Plaza; its subtle changes in patina as it aged; how the slight "tilt" could imply an unequal distribution of power, or a gravitational pull; the way its large, steel expanse blockaded a perfect view of the central fountain, or potentially caused some passersby to re-plan their promenade from one side to another; all these disruptive qualities that expressed as Serra said "another language"—a counter-language—to the aesthetic parameters of the site are in the eyes of OOO just *qualities*—existent, yes, but nevertheless superficial in relationship to an object's real deep form. Consider Serra's insistent use of "language" in his open letter, and how words express, push towards, dance away from, but are ultimately superficial to the things they convey. Words, like qualities, do not sink into the ontological depths of an object's very core.

⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁵ Hence also why Harman chooses to describe OOO as a new Formalism over a new Materialism, since his concern as he defines it is with an "ethics of form" and not with matter, per se.

⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

⁷ Serra, "Tilted Arc Destroyed", *Art in America*.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kwon, *One Site after Another*, 73.

It is worth noting that despite all this authorially designed counter-linguistic insubordination, the public distaste was directed more than anything else not to the ugliness or aesthetic unsuitability of the work, but to the apparently “practical” risks it presented. It is not that people didn’t think the work was ugly. During the four-year legal battle regarding its status, the huge steel sculpture which was alternatively called “a piece of nonsense or garbage”, “an arrogant, nose-thumbing gesture”, “a scar”, “a mistake”, of “no artistic merit” and as something favored “only by those belonging to a mental ward”. However, even more frequent were the “practical” concerns that ranged from the bizarre to simply false. These included that the work impeded social functions (public events, concerts, etc.), that it would increase crime and hooliganism, that it could be used as a terrorist device to blow bombs off of (the tilt apparently at a perfect angle to hit the upper reaches of the surrounding civic buildings), that people might piss all over it, or that it would soon be covered in graffiti.

Unless we assume that form and function are identical, it seems curious that a work designed in formal opposition to the site should be critiqued most vehemently for such functional concerns. Following an OOO analysis, a different set of concerns are raised. If a language (or counter-language) is only ever an expression of qualities, bound to referentiality but never penetrating the object itself, what is it then in the deep form of *Tilted Arc* that so radically disrupted the site of Federal Plaza? Returning OOO’s definition of objects, to describe an object as only and necessarily existent in relation to its site or surroundings would be the same as to describe in as only its effects, and therefore to discount the ontological independency of objects unto themselves. In light of the artist’s famous claim that to remove the work is to destroy it, it has been of course noted that the work was never in any way literally destroyed, incinerated, melted down, shot into space or tossed into the Hudson river. It was simply taken apart and reinstalled elsewhere. In other words, it was broken down.

When *Tilted Arc* was removed it was not destroyed, but as in the instance of Heidegger’s suddenly malfunctioning hammer, the work was revealed as such with more strength than before; its ontological and obdurate excess became suddenly, rudely foregrounded. Recall that *Tilted Arc* in its new location was never called “the work formerly known as Tilted Arc”, despite what Serra’s proclamation may imply. Rather, when the work was dismantled it was revealed for what it truly was—a real object of substantive form, free from appropriation, obstinate and durable in form and not simply explicable by its component parts (aesthetic qualities, or formal counter-language), nor by its effects on or by the site. This is not to eradicate site-specificity or re-substantiate the modernist project, but only to say that objects have an ontological independency that cannot ever be entirely swallowed up by their context, despite what dialogue they may also engage in.

We are still still left with the question of why the work posed such an imagined and ugly threat. If it was only in the instance of breakdown that the object was revealed as such, why was it seen as a threat for so many years before that moment? The most serious of charges against the work as already stated came in the form of terroristic fear and shared a common concern for *violent or obscene attacks on the site itself*. In other words, it was not that violent or contentious politics surrounded the work—to the contrary it seems from an outside perspective to be a relatively peaceful work—and yet somehow a resolute and persistent fear of violence was not projected into the work itself (that it would somehow inspire violence), but rather sublimated into a fear for the very site itself. All this despite that in the nine documented years of the work’s installation, there were no recorded instances of any such assault. This brings me to the most radical suggestion I will make: that if the breakdown enacted by *Tilted Arc*’s de-installation revealed the art object’s own radical autonomy, that another “breakdown” had happened even prior to that, namely, *the breakdown of the very site as an object itself*.

Let us return to the claim that an object is simply something more than its components and less than its effects. Federal Plaza too was not just a series of municipal buildings, nor just a cog in a massive municipal bureaucracy. It had a certain middling congruency felt by those who had worked there for many decades designated not only by its name, but by the homogeneity and ontological consistency that those who staked their careers, identities and existential securities in had deep vested interest in. If we use again the model of the hammer—it was when the *form* of Federal Plaza (as a circular, centrally planned and symmetrical site among other qualities) and the *function* of Federal Plaza as an exclusively civic municipal

space was disrupted that, no longer recognizable, *the site broke*, if only temporarily, in the sense that the hammer did too.

Yet just like the hammer, it did not become known as “the space formerly known as Federal Plaza”. Nonetheless a seam had been pulled open; Federal Plaza’s in-appropriable form was in a glimpse and like a rumble revealed and felt, a basis no number of civic regulations, no judges, and no sculptures could re-determine. Like a healthy body rejecting a virus (or an ailing patient refusing treatment), Federal Plaza ejected the visiting pathogen. As far as those who had lobbied for its removal were concerned, Federal Plaza had “won”, but there was a price to pay. For if Federal Plaza’s deep form had ejected the sculpture, it had still let down its façade as a merely discursively constructive site. Instead, it was revealed as an object not unlike that of Serra’s design, of a hidden, autonomous object-hood impenetrable by the human world.

That the massive and abstract presence of *Tilted Arc* in Federal Plaza would be so disturbing in a space determined by the *particular* artificiality of the municipal bureaucracy with its tedium, opacity and very human claims to legitimacy—only further reinforces this claim. *Tilted Arc*’s unintentional affirmation of objecthood had a counter-effect that Serra could not have quite predicted. It did not just present to the surrounding civic employees a *language* of the site they worked within, but in undermining the politically-determined form and function of the site itself, inferred that legitimacy is not just granted by humans, but also within the level of ineluctable form. Thus the work presented a serious threat of a particularly existential variety to the status of the civil servants who worked there—a threat that they sublimated into a more manageable terroristic one. It is no wonder then that it was the Chief Judge of the Court of International Trade, located at 26 Federal Plaza, who spearheaded the campaign and four-year case against it.

This is of course what public art should do. It should demonstrate that our surroundings are of shallow human construction. It should boldly clash with civic propaganda, and reveal that space is not just a hollow container but a determinate physical entity in which we have deep, epistemic stakes. It should be dangerous and cheeky, and always offend public decency when the time is ripe.

The sense the Federal Plaza employees had of the threat to their environment was therefore not one that was unfounded. Breakdown is a philosophical starting place—and to start over is dangerous. Breakdown reveals to us a glimpse the ineluctable material on which human discourse is built, and as such the moment of breakdown is a moment of aspiration, also. *Tilted Arc*, therefore, did pose a threat to the legitimacy of the status quo, just not one registerable by human introspection, but existent nonetheless beneath the beautifully broken surface.

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*The bibliographic references to (a) the *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* and (b) to *New Literary History* are both **not** cited in this text in its final form. They were cited in earlier drafts, but removed for simplicity.