

Thirty-five Hundred Years of Consecrated Objects

Maria Fusco

The transformation of an object from material to thing is, by necessity, contextual. Plastic subtractions and additions are prompted by our visibility and our desire. This box has been painted white. The box's four walls are smoothed into blank surfaces serving the purpose of directing my gaze downwards. Because white gives me less to look at, it is easier for me to focus only on that which is not white. My eyes, I now realise, are trained to require such a white space to assess characteristics, forms and relations more precisely. It is white paint, not I, which is the lens to identify with surety that which is the most important to capture of these objects. Detailed systems of discovery and exposure need to be set in place in order to pinpoint proof of how an object acts. Each object is perforated, incomplete, patched and ragged and, when in action, an object defies representation. Jonathan Lamb wrote, *An idea of sensation radically at odds with empiricism. According to Locke and Hobbes, the impact made by an object on the senses leaves a print, copy or image capable of being stored in the mind as an idea, and when sufficient ideas are absorbed they can be*

reproduced, reflected upon, and reorganised into dreams or abstract ideas. Proof is always contingent on esoteric knowledge and may only be seen as certain if such proof may be compared with other, very similar objects. And which of these objects that I spy should I choose to share with you? It is necessary for me to numerate all in order to properly share? What does description really tell you about what I see, about the opacity of history and the normalisation of trace to be sure about what has gone before? Primo Levi wrote, *I already know what happens when things of iron become things of paper. It ends wrong.* My intention is an act of subjective capture which I hope to sustain without proof.

Carol Bove

Undisturbed, ancient stucco survived intact in underground tombs and grottoes, hence the term then *grotesque* to describe a very particular type of decorative object motif where crisp bladed figures and hard foliage entwined. Sebekhotep's tomb on the West Bank at Luxor, constructed around 1400 BC, is a stucco and mud 'tribute scene' crowded with paradigmatic citizens and animals. Startlingly fresh, its surface is still persuasive because it is so shallow. Hannah Arendt wrote, violence is *an ancient vocabulary*; the stucco in Sebekhotep's tomb simultaneously proves and disproves this. Proves because stucco has survived by being only a surface object of inscription and disproves because stucco is non-representational. The stucco style fashioned formal acceptance of unity through asymmetry. By presenting irregular clefted shells and S-form waves to contextualise and harmonise a central allegorical meaning revealed itself spacially, furthering its intersubjective aim by directing the eye to assess the entire picture plane as a single artifact. Stucco is an itinerant, a work on the move. In order to preserve its usefulness stucco must match relief-ornament object to three-dimensional object. Abstraction is crafted then by temperature as much as context.

Steven Claydon

A stone axe head is the main character in Alan Garner's novel *Red Shift*, compressing a thousand years of time through a single object. The axe head hurtled through 400 AD Roman Britain, to 1650 English Civil War, to 1975 in Garner's present day of writing, all located in one small rural site of Mow Cop in Cheshire. Garner's use of the stone axe head as murder weapon, as good luck charm, as love talisman was simultaneously method and subject: Garner wrote, *It's the netherstone of the world... The skymill turns on it to grind stars.* Later Bruno Latour wrote, *Anyone who has never been obsessed by the distinction between rationality and obscurantism, between false ideology and true sensation, has never been modern.* The stone object then was causal, its entropic relationship to time was central to examination and to subsequent comprehension; there 'time' was the chronological space that watching took place within: both by the axe itself waiting for its new owner and by the owners themselves who took too long to comprehend the power of the object they have tenancy of. The stone axe head's casual closure makes a mess of linear narrative through the insistence and persistence of emotional matter.

Gerard Byrne

In English law, from 1200 until its abolition in 1846, the legal figure of the deodand meant that an object was just as culpable as its owner in cases of accidental death or grievous bodily injury. The object in question — a knife which had stabbed, a carriage wheel which had crushed, a tub filled with boiling water which had scalded — was automatically forfeit to the Crown's almoner to be sold or exchanged for the harm that had been inadvertently rendered through its materiality, the gains were then applied to some pious public use. William Pietz wrote, *Any culture must establish some procedure of compensation, expiation or punishment to settle the debt created by unintended human deaths whose direct cause is not a morally accountable person but a nonhuman material object.* The deodand's insistence of the legitimate simultaneity of vastly differing conceptual forms of the physical presence of the guilty object, and the potential social distribution of sanctimony is palpable. The deodand was decidedly not a representation or a procedural tool of damage, but rather a gift, bestowing the random with reason, to buoy the faithful.

Duncan Campbell

It-Narratives were a very popular form of story telling throughout the 1700 and early 1800s. First person accounts of *things* such as coins, quills and rings which related their tale from their own material perspective. The It-Narrative was essentially moralistic helping the stories' characters towards a better life. And thereby, because proofs were needed, It-Narratives were somewhat slyly able to detail, with seeming innocence, lascivious or illegal activities from a generous close-up. Diderot's 1748 *Les Bijoux Indiscrets* is narrated by a magic ring that persuades women's genitals to recount all their owner's secrets and in the first full scale It-Narrative, *The Golden Spy* from 1709. Charles Gildon wrote, *The gold coins that hum and whisper at night in the author's ear are the spies, and they discover astonishing secrets, not all of which are communicated to the reader.* We are left wanting. This semi-cinematic mode of transition from matter to plot demonstrates that the subordination of human agency through *thing* narration is in direct service to the liberation of natural order. But this comes at a price, for as Gildon wrote, *to fear the Sense of Things should destroy all confidence betwixt Man and Man, and so put an end of human society.*

Gabriel Kuri

The red pocked face of a cheap, mass-produced Victorian house brick. The surface of this brick laid with hundreds of others into a network. The machine-pressed brick, manufactured in 1909 by Thomas Prangnell's family firm on the Isle of Wight, found its right place only in patterned relation, the Flemish bond, to other bricks for alone the brick was not a house. Manuel de Landa wrote, we live in world that is a *complex mixture of geological, biological, social, and linguistic constructions that are nothing but accumulations of materials shaped and hardened by history*. But the brick's surface began to crumble, attempting wearing away to powder. What kept the brick intact, what kept the house from falling down, was the brick's core. Mark Twain wrote, *It looks like a hole, it's located like a hole, blamed if I don't believe it is a hole*. But the brick's holes were not the definition of an empty core, they were a plenum object of three cast holes, they were not therefore the brick's weakest spot but rather its strongest; sustained by mortar not by the brick itself. Holes held the Victorians together with mereological interplay.

Wolfgang Tillmans

My favourite Woody Allen routine, 'Mechanical Objects', was performed regularly on stage, screen and tape between 1964 and 1968. In the routine Allen explicates and laments his combative, delinquent relationships with everyday machines; in return he eponymous objects rebel against his repetitively boring use of them, assess his social standing and ultimately punish his techno-phobic misdemeanours. On stage Allen said, *I have a tape recorder... and as I talk into it, it goes "I know, I know"... I walk into his elevator... and I hear a voice say "Kindly call out your floors, please." So I say "Three, please"... and on the way up I began to feel very self-conscious cause I talk, I think, with a slight New York accent, and the elevator spoke quite well... I thought I heard the elevator make a remark.* The objects apply their own judgmental criteria to their service users, harnessing their own bafflingly demotic knowledge and mechanical logic to creatively adapt inbuilt functionality for punitive purposes. The social configuration of technological objects are necessitated by that which needs to be retrieved through their idiosyncratic semblance of normality.

Basim Magdy

Disposable soft contact lenses became internationally commercially available in 1987. These transparent object pairs elicited at least five significant things: a cosmetic return to clarity; a concealment of imperfection; a closer proximity between sensation and observation; a better reason to look in the mirror each morning; a daily collapsing of the distinction between object and owner. Anthony Kenny wrote, *Verbs like 'see', 'hear' and 'detect' have a feature which is sometimes described by saying what they are 'achievement verbs'. Just as it is impossible to win a fight unsuccessfully, since to win just is to fight victoriously, so, we are told, it is impossible to see incorrectly or hear mistakenly.* The embodied change that disposable contact lenses brought about means that the wearer could afford to possess objects that enabled them, on a daily basis, to adjust the faculty of sight as they wished, without commitment, without long term investment but *with* imagination. This could be understood as a radicalising of perception. Paul Valéry wrote, *God made everything out of nothing, but the nothing shows through:* disposable contact lenses helped their users to see this more clearly.

Hayley Tompkins

Terms of assemblage are necessitated by that which needs to be read through the arrangement of their components. Patina is an essential tool in this real-time legibility. I opened a package this morning which contained an object I had ordered online: a US Navy daisy-mae style denim hat. It took five weeks to arrive, two weeks too late for the birthday of the friend I had bought it for. I was disappointed to see that, despite the seller's assurances, the daisy-mae hat appeared to have been worn. Its wide brim was seared into position with a prior fold, a dark greasy crease which didn't appear to be fabricated, faked or distressed. Michel Serres wrote, *The object of taste exists, concrete and singular outside of any short, finite sequence of technical terms. It carries and gives up the virtually infinite detail which causes us to suspect and guess the presence of the real, the object in the world.* I can't be sure if this was the same singular object I believed I had ordered online because I didn't see the patina up close. One thing I can be sure of is that the hat was ready for me.