







Objectified
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SASA GALLERY

Objectified

David Cross

It seems perverse that an exhibition called *Objectified* should straddle such a broad range of artistic media. For a term that is so strongly associated with sculpture and installation, it appears at first glance curious that photography, sound, painting and drawing would, or even could, be drawn into a thematic sweep across materialities. That *Objectified* speaks to an ambitious knitting together of artworks based on idea and context more than material and genre, highlights the legacy of a shift in contemporary art in recent decades. Rather than locating meaning solely in the genre itself, in the photographic manipulation of light and shutter speed, or the movement of graphite across paper, artists have increasingly sought to build connections across disciplinarity at the level of idea, context and relation. There is a profound freedom that underpins this mode of art making, a willingness to identify and activate new connections without the enforced boundaries of having to make and be classified according to relatively narrow ideas of form.

Of course the freedom to draw from multiple sources also has its flip side and can also be seen as a form of pressure. As Martha Buskirk has identified in her book *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, no artist can escape the obligation of having to make a series of self-conscious decisions about issues that include format, medium, content, appearance, duration and relationship to precedents, with each read as a conscious and highly deliberate choice.¹ While it is indeed the case that no decision can be taken as assumed or given in this discursive and highly fluid mode of art making, the potential both for artists and curators to make exhibitions in remarkably new ways is at the same time great. In this project, curator Karen Paris has sought to offer her own distinctive meditation on art in the post-medium era drawing on the ideas of British thinker DW Winnicott and specifically his

conception of the transitional object. The exhibition seeks to drill into the complex field of objectness in a very particular way by examining the idea of the artwork as a repository of complex psychological associations first manifest in infancy.

Winnicott was a philosopher known for his writings on both subjectivity and subject-object relations. He was especially interested in charting and understanding object attachment, which occurs as part of the process of the understanding of self. According to Winnicott, the phenomena of transitional objects begins when a child starts to separate the 'me' from the 'not-me' and evolves from complete dependence to a stage of relative independence. The child sees him/herself and the mother as a whole or one, but slowly over time realises that this is not the case, and to counteract the sense of loss the child fantasises about an object they are wishing for, that the mother no longer offers.

A transitional object could be a real object like a blanket or a teddy bear, but other 'objects', such as a melody or a word, can fulfill this role as well. In a later stage of the development the child no longer needs the transitional object. He is able to make a distinction between 'me' and 'not-me', keeping inside and outside apart while at the same time ensuring they are interrelated.²

What is significant to Winnicott's model for art is that these primary and deeply held identifications lead, as he argues, to the use of illusion, symbols and objects later on in life. These forms, while taking on decidedly new meanings and relations, are still always susceptible to the return of infantile significance and association. In short the meaning of objects are formed through the irreconcilable relationship between fixity (infancy) and contingency (the development of self-reflexivity that comes afterwards).

The idea that an art objects meaning is never fixed but subject to a complex array of contextual variables has today become something of an orthodoxy and sits in a very interesting relationship to the thinking that underpins the transitional object. Both ideas highlight the clear sense that art objects only ever have provisional meanings and value. They are in complex ways imbued by artists and audiences with a certain charisma whereby they can be seen to step out from the ordinary- from being a urinal or a basketball floating in a water-filled glass vitrine - becoming instead objects of heightened significance.

Yet the processes of imbuing objects with artistic value is subject to the vagaries of context, the discretion of art history and of course to the social complexities that underpin the accumulation of taste, or what Pierre Bourdieu has called cultural capital. It is also crucial to note that just as objects can be elevated beyond the banal, (Manzoni's notorious cans of artists shit, Joseph Beuys' works with felt), they can just as easily be returned to non-artistic material forms by being emptied of the enhanced cache that only art can seem to bring. Without the constant vigilance of art history and the authority of the museum/gallery such objects can easily leak charisma like a slow puncture.

The shopping docket that hung on the wall of the 1998 Sydney biennale relies entirely on the museum or gallery to imbue it with the required importance. Without this it is no different to all the discarded dockets that drift across the supermarket carpark. Over time we seem to care less for the object (a fading docket) as it becomes but one gesture in what was a faux-transgressive detour by artists in the 1990s into the mundane territory of the everyday. However the audacity of the gesture still has the capacity to rankle especially for audiences who view such a merging of art and life as nothing short of an outrage.

The inherent instability of objects and there value poses a particular challenge for artists navigating their own transitional objects. This relates to the specificity of meanings attributed by the artists in *Objectified* to certain photographs, images, sounds or objects. Because these meanings are so unique and potentially oblique, (cooking ingredients, photographs of childhood spaces) they can never be recovered or understood in the same way by the audience. That we have no access to these histories however is of course the point. We are presented with objects that are prefaced as intensely meaningful or, more to the point, were at a particular time meaningful in the lives of the seven artists. Our challenge is to build new understandings of these re-creations, to locate these forms within our own experiences and to imagine situations in which they might come to signify intensely powerful associations.

We can of course choose to treat the objects on their own terms at face value simply as artworks that we encounter in the gallery. To a degree this is a given. Yet the curatorial premise of the exhibition inserts a compelling challenge into the heart of our experience of the work by prefacing that these objects and materials are not simply meaningful as artworks but as distillations and re-formations that have significantly shaped the seven artist's identity. *Objectified* offers a number of registers or layers by which the charismatic aura of the object is examined. It highlights disparate ways of thinking through the issue of how and why artists and audiences imbue objects with meaning. And crucially, it offers some suggestions as to why we also fall out love and discard the things that were once so precious.

Notes:

1. Buskirk, Martha, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, MIT Press, Boston, 2005, p.12.
2. Winnicott, D.W, *Playing and Reality*, Tavistock Publications Limited, London, 1971, pp. 1- 4.

Acknowledgements

The SASA Gallery supports a program of exhibitions focusing on innovation, experimentation and performance. With the support of the Division of Education, Art and Social Sciences, the SASA Gallery is being developed as a leading contemporary art space and as an active site of teaching and learning. The SASA Gallery showcases South Australian artists, designers, architects, writers and curators associated with the School of Art, Architecture and Design, University of South Australia, in a national and international context.

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Artists: Heidi Kenyon, Tristan Louth-Robins, Will Nolan, Tanya Schulz, Paul Sloan, Sera Waters, Laura Wills
External Scholar: Associate Professor David Cross,
Co-Director, Research and Postgraduate Studies, School of Fine Art, College of Creative Arts, Massey University

Editor: Dr Mary Knights
Catalogue design: Keith Giles
Catalogue project management: Dr Mary Knights & Keith Giles

SASA Gallery staff:
Dr Mary Knights, Director, SASA Gallery, AAD, UniSA
Keith Giles, Curatorial Manager, SASA Gallery, AAD, UniSA
Julian Tremayne, Installation Consultant
Craig English & Peter Harris, Technical Officers, AAD, UniSA
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Chris Boha, Ursula Halpin, Dr Sue Kneebone,
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Genevieve Brandenburg - Photographer
Lise van Konkelenberg - Video Producer

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Middle: Paul Sloan, *Untitled*, 2012
Back: Pip & Pop, *Bing Bong Big Bang*, 2011

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