

Art, objects and 'superabundance'

Delpha Hudson 29/12/09

There is no better time to wonder at the meaning of objects in our lives as we ponder our piles of Christmas pressies. As we go into the next decade (the 'tight tens'?) how will we interpret 'things' – everyday manmade object 'things'? Contemporary art echoes life as the term 'superabundance' is batted around, and 'superabundance' is a very fitting word to describe our possessions in the West. Possessions daily test our value decisions about what really matters, and what 'things' really mean.

Both nationally (and for me locally), 2009 brought a huge range of shows using everyday, found and historical objects. My patch in Penwith, Cornwall has become a microcosm of 'object' art. Found objects in art have a long, and interesting history from Surrealism and DaDa, to the conceptualism of the 60s. Cheap and available, objects can be magically transformed once removed from their original usage, re-sited or combined in surprising ways. My own fascination with everyday objects has transformed me from a 'normal' contemporary artist working in performance and video, to a driftwood-collecting-object-obsessive. Somehow I have the feeling I am not alone.

Discarded idiosyncratic, worn, and memory laden - everyday, and historical objects are social and cultural artefacts that are psychoanalytic, iconographic, semiotic, symbolic, socio-historicaland much more. Artists have been quick to see not only powerful personal symbolism, but also institutional and cultural critique in their use. Broodthaer's conceptual museum *Department of Eagles*, set up in Brussels in 1968, played with the classification, and categorisation of objects, questioning power structures, and history. The Tate Britain's recent show *Classified* dealt with similar themes,

'how we see the world is how we understand it. Things are seen in relationship to other things and actions. Connections are made, naming takes place and meaning is formulated. ...'

Yet instead of suggesting that objects can be understood according to an order imposed ('classification'), 'The meanings and names given to things are not fixed, but instead fluid.'

(www.tate.org.uk/servlet/CollectionDisplays?venueid=1&showid=2499, 22/12/09)

A projected joint 'object' project between the British Museum and the BBC was recently announced as an 'unprecedented partnership' in the national press (Guardian, 26th Nov 2009). This grand collaboration intends to construct a history of the world using objects collected from 2 million years of history. Curators working in new 'connected' ways intend to 'assemble order, and meaning through 'core objects' and present them to diverse audiences in order to understand history'. Everyday and historical objects are used as symbols to create order and meaning, yet

because classification strategies change throughout history, the way that they can be interpreted is never really fixed. Neither is meaning.

Imposing order, and rationality is a basic need it seems - Ricoeur's 'economy of superabundance' (1974) argues for a balance in the relationship between universal symbols (fixed) and imagination for new meaning (fluid). The *zeitgeist* of object usage sees historical and art institutions making claims for both.

Bourriard's *Altermodern* show of 2009 presented his own ideas about 'superabundance', showing contemporary art as part of 'meaningless, and constant appropriative play in post-modern culture'. For Bourriard 'signs', (which I will inaccurately simplify to mean 'things' and objects) and have lost all contact with human history,

'forms are no longer indexed to a narrative defining them as belonging to precise historical moments but rather embedded in the text of culture with no reference save to themselves' (Bourriard, 2009, p.98).

In other words, signs (objects) are so super-saturated with meaning, they can no longer symbolize anything. Bourriard seemingly denies any possibility of using objects to impose order on the 'futility, and anarchy of contemporary history'. Is it this fear of meaninglessness that ironically explains a shift towards more shows using objects?

Mark Dion's Tate Thames Dig 1999, in the Classified show, grouped together objects found on the banks of the River Thames. Displayed in a nineteenth century display cabinet none of the objects were labelled. Visitors were invited to form their own ideas about them. Here art invites imagined meaning rather than imposing order. There is an enormous flexibility with which we attach meaning to objects, and derive meanings from them. Research reveals how objects are part of the process of how we become human.

'Past memories, present experiences, and future dreams of each person are inextricably linked to the objects that comprise his or her environment' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981)

It is as if objects are an expanded boundary of the self. We recognise ourselves in them, they are attached to time, place, and usage. They have the potential to evoke narrative. This was the primary idea of Penzance's Penlee Museum's *Object Project*, a collaborative project by Sally Crabtree. Collecting diverse objects and stories, through a series of workshops, and placing it into a *Cabinet of Curiosities*, storytelling and humour was used to fuse fragments and diverse elements. Described as imaginative aesthetic experience, 'the flux of life' (Herwitz, 2008), seems a perfect way to describe how objects bring us to life just as we have given them life.

Virginia Wolff's story *Solid Objects* describes the 'staggering mutability of things'. Our encounter with objects 'mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape that haunts the brain'. (www.socialfiction.org/solidobjects.html, 23/09/2009)

Like *chosisme* the writing of stories through 'things', not people, art's fascination is often with objects' bewildering power to haunt, and tell stories. The 2009 V&A show *Telling Tales*, showed contemporary designers rooting through stories and myths, to engender meaning, and imagination. It is as if

'the synthesis of reality and imagination is one great symbolic narrative' (Coupe, L, 1997, p.41)

Joshua Sofaer's project *Object Retrieval*, (also 2009), focused on only one object from UCL's Museums & Collections. In the space of 7 days, the public were invited to join a rolling team of researchers from the arts and sciences 'to stand outside of their own personal and professional bounds and take a fresh look at something they thought they already knew about.' Art projects of this kind encourage our ability to re-visit meaning, and ask visitors to use their imaginations in interpreting objects. It is almost impossible nowadays to visit a museum, and look into a cabinet or display without some kind of art project insertion! Whilst this could become tiresome, revealing the public's as well as the experts' interpretive processes have seemingly become essential, as art created from objects invites permeable interpretations. As Octavio Paz says

'the work of art is a secret sign exchanged between meaning and meaninglessness', (Paz, O., 1987, p. 54)

Objects bring their own language, histories, and indeterminate meanings evoking reality, and stimulating the imagination. Art is the everyday object transformed, re-ordered and re-presented. St Ives Orchard gallery's *Christmas exhibition*, featured a selection work from artists who assemble and paint objects. Debbie and Sam Hall have developed a very particular aesthetic in curating this contemporary show as with edgy symbolism, and dark storytelling, objects here become vehicles for a nightmare before Christmas. A similar kind of haunting that is also to be found in Harriet Bell's *The Kellys and the O'Kellys there*, at the The Millenium Gallery round the corner.

It remains to be seen whether the meaninglessness, and meaning of historical and everyday objects, will continue to fire our imaginations, and untie a knots between order and interpretation but the next decade will undoubtedly continue to feature art shows that re-cycle objects, and re-cycle meaning.

Delpha Hudson, artist and writer is based in Penwith, Cornwall. *Possessed Possessions*, an artists' collaborative project with Jesse Leroy-Smith, is showing at the Exchange Gallery, Penzance, January 2010, with a performance evening *Silver Screen Séance* on 23rd January.

References:

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Virginia Wolff's story *Solid Objects*, www.socialfiction.org/solidobjects.html, (23/09/2009)

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Object retrieval project,www.objectretrieval.com/ (23/12/09)

Suggested images: * have photos, and permission

Mark Dion's *Tate Thames Dig* 1999,

cabinet of curiosities at the Penlee Museum, 2009*

Cornwall Museum cabinet with museum objects and contemporary 'art' – or indeed any recent artist-intervention museum show!

orchard gallery show*

Harriet Bell , Millenium Gallery,*