

Unstable Objects

In the traditional parlour game “Animal, Vegetable, Mineral”, also known as “Twenty Questions”, a series of questions are asked, in which an opponent can only answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’, establishing a knowledge of an object by means of deduction. These questions employ the taxonomy of things, and how we come to know the object through its categorisation. Through a process of eliminating the possibilities using the differentiation of binary classifications, we learn and re-programme our strategies, until we can figure out the identity of the object.

In their manifestation, the ‘objects’ in this exhibition share ‘unstable’ characteristics that are purposefully determined by the artists, through the strategic approach to the object’s production. During this process, empirical knowledge is pitted against the authority of theory and logic, towards a re-evaluation of epistemological methods and means.

In antithetical spirit towards the idea of the guessing game, the following is an investigation as a reversal of these rules. Yet unlike the objective of the game, where the identity of the object is arrived at by reduction and specificity, the ‘unstable object’, or artwork in this case, is a point of departure to expand the inherent nature of the object, through its experiential meaning and interpretation.

The artist Mair Hughes presents an installation of inter-related elements arranged on a wall area containing spray-painted found information posters, stencilled motifs onto paper and fabric, found objects, watercolour and pencil drawings, a shelf covered in sandpaper rubbed with ageing limes, a handmade poster reading “The Prime Moment for Memorizing New Information”. These elements deploy the nature of learning from textbooks, specifically two-dimensional diagrams, and problematise the simplification of graphic representations to how we obtain knowledge. The disconcertion evoked by Hughes is through the reduction of information to its constitutional elements to disrupt the authority of its reception. For example, a recurring graphic symbol of a connecting ‘branch’, used as a motif, is taken from an Open University poster “Tree of Life” depicting a graphic representation of Charles Darwin’s “The Origin of Species”. Here the meaning has been redefined, to defy function and classification, creating associative relationships to other elements that confuse its physical and symbolic representation, i.e. a tree branch. The artwork poses a questioning whether the systems and structures of categorisation over-simplify and often negate other sensual (phenomenological) knowledge.

The experiential knowledge of the object, specifically domestic furniture, is the basis for the artist Sam Stocker’s exploration. His works are sculptural forms made from appropriated found furniture and pre-existing artworks, configured in a fashion to render the furniture functionless. Visible from the exterior, a crude ‘window’ is cut into the form to create a ‘picture frame’ into an interior space that is created by the reconfigured furniture. The work concerns the transposing of architectural and pictorial compositional space, as previous artworks included paintings that mimicked the spatial arrangements of architectural features i.e. the window positions in rooms. The role of painting is significant as Stocker expands the principles towards a “grammar of construction”. This ‘grammar’ is formulated by our pre-existing knowledge of the domestic object, by its function, physicality and psychology in relation to our bodies. In summary, having emptied one ‘real’ domestic space of its furniture, this furniture is then used to construct a ‘fictional’ architectural space, seen through and within the negative spaces that the furniture now makes. Hence, the reconfigured object alters our bodily relationship, disrupting the body’s psychology and creating an uncanny tension between physical space and pictorial illusion.

The psychological effects of a domestic object is prompted by Stocker, in contrast, the work of artist Helen de Main explores the effects of exterior fixtures and furnishings of those found, and often forgotten, in public space. De Main presents a series of sculptures that resemble distressed exterior architectural furnishings including an air vent with paper spit-balls, three shop window canopies, a seemingly damaged barrier, and partition screen covered in Financial Times newspapers. They recall the territories of public and institutional space in Israel and Palestine where the artist as ‘foreigner’ took inspiration. The artworks attest to the status of these spaces being contested sites for political conflict, or economic and cultural regeneration. Here, the object

in conflict is comprehensively recorded, through a series of photographs, as they inhabit streets, buildings, wastelands, and zones meticulously categorised or 'tagged' by de Main, using key words such as 'colour', 'barriers', 'metal', 'architecture' etc. From these sources, the object is remade, and through this process, subjected to the artist's experience of the management of this conflict and protest. Therefore the artwork is instilled with uncertainty, original or copy, real or counterfeit, and most significantly the proposition that the inanimate object can be imbued with a resilience of the human spirit.

When the artist Ani Baronian discovered a drawing, made by her brother and herself as children, underneath a coffee table acquired when her Grandmother had died, it created a moment of delight and surprise. This uncertainty between the 'everyday' and the surrealism and theatricality of happenstance is a recurring theme in Baronian's objects. The artworks are a series of drawings on painted canvas and found objects depicting fictional scenarios set in domestic spaces. Here, the physical object and the image of the object are at play, for example an upturned table and dinner place setting is arranged as if a 'scene in a play', describing an action that had once taken place, where the drawing is incongruously revealed on the underside of the tabletop. Contemplating the characteristics of herself as an 'anxious' child, and its effect on the language of domestic objects. The artwork becomes a means to rehearse the psychological dramas being played out in the artist's mind. Objects are used to plan (through drawing) and stage (through installation) the fictional acts of the artist, and therefore orienteer the viewer's interaction with, and psychological response to, the object.

In conclusion, the exhibition 'Unstable Objects' allows one to question the fundamental nature of how we come to 'know' the physical world. The artworks challenge us to retrace the origins of our emotional lives, and reconnect us to the most primal of physical and psychological states. Through the conceit that we learn and understand by play, or more acutely 'act out', the destabilising strategies of the artists to redefine (Hughes), reconfigure (Stocker), remake (de Main) and rehearse (Baronian) the object confound the corporeal and intellectual experience. The body's fundamental connections with 'things' as receptors or resistors to knowledge become central to these artworks, and their being. In so doing, these artworks mediate metaphorical dialogues between you (the viewer) and the artists, in which each artist invites you to ask a question, and let the guessing games begin.

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