

# REALITY FLICKERS

Writing With Found Objects And Imagined Sculpture

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## Abstract

Reality Flickers: Writing With Found Objects And Imagined Sculpture

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This 'thesis' relocates sculpture in narrative writing. It creates and describes its own form, and produces its own spaces in order to make the writing an artwork. An art school and the studio are reconfigured as the fictional site of production that features in the story of the work, along with its institutional furniture, bureaucratic demands and idealised conceptual ideology. Found objects, imagined sculpture, ideas and objects are pushed through the narrativised space of the work, for example, Absalon's *Cells*, Joseph Kosuth's use of chairs and Mike Nelson's spatially referenced fictions and installations are encountered alongside characters based on G.W.F. Hegel, Carolee Schneeman and most prominently, Slavoj Žižek.

Sculpture's medium might be seen as the matter of the everyday, or indeed anything, and by that token nothing in particular. From here comes the suggestion that *reality flickers*: as both a subject and object, sculpture is part of reality, but it is contingent and essentially unstable - it moves back and forth between absence and presence. More specifically, without a delimiting medium, the subject of sculpture flickers, or becomes indeterminate. In pursuit of this subject one can only present particular incidents of objects. The object of sculpture flickers too. As a result of its proximity to non-art, it fluctuates between absence and presence as artwork. The employment of found objects and the production of artwork that can function as non-art, highlights both this instability, and the role of language in recontextualising and re-defining everyday things so that they become objects of critical attention. Similarly, artists' writing can disappear into the everyday of literary work but can re-emerge as art if it holds open questions about the nature of art and reality and if it does so within the discourses and spaces and institutions of art.

This 'thesis' complicates the parameters of sculpture by relocating it as writing. It is a language-based artwork, but the stories are drawn from a sculptural environment, embedded with sculptural language and then re-inscribed within a sculptural context. And despite the apparent awkwardness of the sculptural object in the academy, sculpture turns out to be precisely not opposed to conceptual work and language but actually dependent on it, because sculpture is seen to emerge in the contemplation of what that object can be.

Finally, this artwork complicates the convention of the 'thesis'. In the same way as its story narrativises 'the tutorial' (with the skeleton of Hegel), or 'the seminar' (suspended and relocated as a footnote), the work as a whole proposes a narrative that unravels and problematises the form of the 'thesis' and in doing so, it becomes *antithetic*.

### KEYWORDS

Absalon, Art & Language, Conceptual Art, Contemporary Sculpture, Fiction, Fantasy, G.W.F. Hegel, Ilya Kabakov, Mike Nelson, Narrative Writing, Royal College of Art, Carolee Schneeman, Slavoj Žižek, The Found Object, The Object, The Subject, Lawrence Weiner.

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2.1-2.3 Katrina Palmer, *Everything is Real (3-Minute Readings)*, Royal College of Art, London, 2010  
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Dimensions variable

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## Author's Declaration

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted. Text from Katrina Palmer, *The Dark Object*, London: Book Works, 2010, has been edited and reconfigured to form selected passages of this thesis.

Katrina Palmer, 2011

PREFACE

## Sphere

With her striking blade, the killer cuts into the body's bulging throat. A slash across the larynx splits the thyroid gland and the swollen trachea. A massive obstruction is revealed. She drops the scalpel. Her urgent fingers, more accustomed to tapping qwerty keyboards, now delve into the startled opening and trip across the slippery surface of the object, without ever grasping it. The old body writhes towards its silent end on the writing desk, amidst puddling blood, a reddening array of bleached A4 paper and lemon tinted sticky notes. The killer, the fabricator, the slasher, the murdering life-stealing witch, takes a moment to recharge her resolve. 'Everything is real' she says, before pressing her hands down hard on the desk. She feels the visceral wetness begin to seep into the wood grain. She drags her palms across the surface, smearing a dreadful florid stain to the edges of the desk, over its sides and down its legs, around which her fingers then curl and squeeze, leaving a darkening impression. She whispers, 'Art is real, because reality includes every object as well as every person along with their actions, emotions and imaginations... those tears in your eyes may be dependent on a story, or an idea, but they're still part of reality.'

Her gaze fixes on the stubborn fleshy dome, throbbing in the gaping throat. She jumps on the desk, sits astride the juddering body and thrusts both hands into the torn hole. The jugular splits and spits a crimson fountain. Her fingers slither down around the sides of the bobbing object and she manages to drag it out of its bloody bed, against the force of suction and along with the slurp and spillage of it. The blockage is finally uprooted. The old body is relieved of the lump in its throat along with a final gasping death rattle.

In her greedy hands, the reaper clasps the cankerous wad. She gets herself upright on top of the desk and uses her foot to shift the corpse. Assisted by its slide across the congealing pool, it slips over the edge of the desk and hits the floor. The body remains where it lands with the weight of terminal inactivity. The killer stands amidst the blood-mist. The extracted object is a spherical form that's growing and spinning. It slips from her hands and, by some mysterious force, hovers in the air overhead, just out of her reach, turning on its axis.

Stymied, the murderer sits down on the edge of the desk and rubs the pale pink grain of her skirt with her ever redder hands. She watches the sphere dripping as it revolves above her, at the centre of the room and her thoughts turn to its dark side. Like any object, it is unstable, exposed to inconsistencies, changes and developments. Its uncertainty must not be celebrated, but rather exorcised through fiction. Indulging the trajectory of her thoughts, she imagines the sphere with three layers. The external one is the surface - her attempt to create a coherent façade. Beneath this is the intermediate layer where she envisages a series of events taking place. But finally, beyond her control, an unstable core is formed of the victim's silent

fantasies. In the assassin's mind, this innermost narrative is an amorphous and volatile pit of lava. It is the anger that had grown in the old body as its silent words became trapped and compacted. A good person had choked towards a voiceless death on the build up of tears and the ingestion of other people's excess, and all the time with the clamorous pain of reserve welling up inside, but that muteness had produced inaudible fantasies that are so much more adventurous than anything the murdering knife-wielding slut could conjure up alone.

Enraptured by the sphere in the air, the killer traverses its surface, as if it is a landscape, and is for the first time apprehensive about what she might encounter. Its ground is strangely undulating underfoot, and there are occasional angular protrusions from the layer below. She moves a little further on and is shocked by erupting bursts of lava: the victim's words rising from the core. These areas are skirted with great care, her normally aggressive disposition undermined by her uncertainty of the terrain. Now an ominous realisation unsettles the ripper: the lava creates the semi-solidified shell - the entire surface has been formed by the dead body's fantasies. This disturbing thought shifts the authorial provenance of the story away from the life-stealer. It's a diminution of power that rushes at her like a slap. She stands underneath the dripping sphere, bewildered by her enfeeblement, submitting to the potent allure of the body's silent stories. She sinks to her knees and gratefully sucks up the excretions that splash across her open mouth and she tastes the spunk of the life she missed, a real life, because it always is. It always is.

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

## Introductory Note

Written in the form of a story, this thesis is both a document about sculpture, and writing as sculpture. It narrates its own materialisation, engages the contemporary destabilised object and embodies an argument for writing as a sculptural practice. The story is inscribed in the particularities of place, time and material - where spatial organisation, description, the unfolding of desire and the chronicling of change and development are a sculptural as well as a narrative process. The objects, actions and thoughts that inhabit it, are suspended between what is really present and an imagining. There are three central issues:

*1) The absence and presence of the object in writing about existent sculpture, found objects and imagined objects.*

This story is told using an expanded conceptualisation of work with objects, ranging from Absalon's sculptural production of forms, through Mike Nelson's constructed environments, to Jorge Lois Borges' imagined objects. The found object recurs throughout, in work that appropriates words, such as Joseph Kosuth's definitions and Stewart Home's books, but predominantly, the thesis considers how the thing that is 'found', becomes an object of critical attention as sculpture. Sculpture that appropriates found objects undermines the permanence of what is considered to be real, and embarks on a transformative course, through linguistic redefinition and institutional contextualisation. The site of production, i.e., the place in which the story is written, is re-presented as its own found object. For example, a chair from the studio is drawn into sculptural practice as the object of language-based conceptualism. This object, used as a catalyst for writing and storytelling, is realised through material substance, non-disclosure and suggestion.

*2) The significance of writing and storytelling as sculptural practice that is spatially and contextually referenced.*

Language played a key role in the conceptual practices that emerged in the late 1960s. Words appeared on gallery walls as images and statements (e.g. Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner), and art moved into publications as the texts of academic criticism (e.g. *Art & Language*). Although language-based, this art distanced itself from a commitment to extended literary or narrative forms, seen to have associations with problematic qualities such as expressiveness and poetic affectation.<sup>1</sup> At a tangent to the anti-literary trajectory above, this document is contextualised by an emergent body of work from artists such as Tris Vonna-Michell and Lindsay Seers. They reclaim 'literature' and 'narrative' from the dominant hegemony, exploiting its forms, but doing so in the non-conformity and discipline of specific artists' writings. Such work is contextualised by

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<sup>1</sup> See the introduction to Charles Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001

its immediate physical setting and its discursive terrain. In this practice, writing as a thinking activity (seen here as a process that continues and evolves through a cycle of reading and re-writing), narrative (as relating a sequence of events that can be fictitious, but may also be the factual unfolding of a proposition, recounting a history, or arranging furniture in a room), fiction (as a literary form of prose-based imaginative writing) and storytelling (as writing that is produced with reference to the particularities of a context) are interweaved to speculate on the sculptural object (how it operates formally, what it is conceptually and what it could be).

### 3) *The flickering reality of words and objects.*

In the writing of this thesis the articulation of perceptions is seen as not simply linguistic, but dependent on imaginative thinking, where things and thoughts collide, where ideas can be as sensual as external reality, and vivid objects can be formed in conceptual discourse, as imagined sculpture. The use of fiction in research engages with the possibilities specific to contemporary practice, having peculiar relevance in the current environment of destabilised and expanded categories, ideas and objects. In other words, writing can interact with the volatility of the linguistic and material uncertainties of what might be art or not, but also, the socio-economic and spatial insecurities of objective reality in-general. Perhaps sculpture temporarily holds the object in suspension, much like words can coalesce to form meanings that are dependent on their context. Artists' writings are an appropriately speculative form that gives cognitive provisionality a discursive legitimacy.

To introduce the story: The protagonist is the only student at 'The School of Sculpture Without Objects'. Enclosed within a studio, the student resists this confinement and the school's anti-object stance by employing ideas and things from the studio in a series of increasingly sensual fantasy stories. These narratives develop alongside a character based on Slavoj Žižek and his ideas. The fictional world of the thesis is comprised of three arenas: the ideal school; the studio; and the student's fantasy scenarios. By progressive encapsulation, the school encompasses the studio, which in turn contains the fantasy scenarios. These three arenas revolve around one another, and correspond respectively to the surface, intermediate layer and core of the overall structure, that is metaphorically envisaged here as an irregular sphere. This imperfect spherical form is not resolved or fixed: it is an organisational device proposed as an imagined object. It is shifting and unsettled, with a volatile molten core. Apparently discrete layers intermingle and are infiltrated by the agitated passage of material and cogitation. The reader travels directly through the sphere, from one side and then out of the other: surface - intermediate layer - core - intermediate layer - surface.

SURFACE

THE SCHOOL OF SCULPTURE WITHOUT OBJECTS



**School of Sculpture Without Objects > headed paper**

## Internal Memorandum

Re: The Student

It has been brought to our attention that the student intends to, and we quote, 'make an object'. This must not be allowed to happen, under any circumstances.

The student says the object 'would not be unduly sensual in any way' and 'it might even be text based'. As if the size of its material presence could render it either acceptable or less superfluous, when quite obviously any object will be excessive. Material will be manipulated, a thing will be made manifest. One can only surmise what horrific contrivance will be produced. And we must beware; the less obvious the object is, the more undermining is its potential, as it may not be noticed among things-in-general. It has also been rumoured that a Health and Safety meeting will be convened in order to suggest that if an object is introduced to the School it could perhaps be viewed from a distance and from the corner of one's eye. No. If we allow this to be considered we lay ourselves open to a creeping mass of distasteful substances, impressing their sensations, masquerading as - and with - real things.

In the past, the student has displayed signs of fatuous negativity (remember the 'locker' incident). An investigation must be undertaken to find the origin of this latest development. In our opinion it was the introduction of a break in the Programme that allowed the student space to withdraw and dream up this plan. What has emerged from this recess is tantamount to the erection of a substitute symbolic reality and, be in no doubt, is designed to undermine the School's ethos. The only fabrication that our student must engage in is the one that we have constructed.

The student will inevitably fail, but it is as the failed gesture that the aforementioned object presents the greatest threat. For what if the object is not more than the nothing that we have but is rather less than? What if the object is what is missing?

In accordance with our previous instructions, the studio has for some time been sealed from the outside, with the student in it. With solemn conviction we recommend that this situation is made permanent.

NB: Naturally, the Programme is to continue in the student's absence.

INTERMEDIATE LAYER

THE STUDIO

## Abstract

The student, alone and locked in the studio, is constructing a space to write in, or writing a space to make in. An email arrives. 'Student, please supply an Abstract.' Abstract what exactly? How could a summary be extracted from a whole that doesn't exist? Why write an Abstract, when there are more immediate concerns, such as the effect this punitive confinement might have on the production of art? The student straightens the desk and considers how fictional spaces are the sum of the 'real' objects they contain. This leads to thoughts about art that deploys everyday objects to elaborate scenarios, narratives and characterisations.<sup>2</sup> A second email arrives. 'Student, supply your Abstract - now.' Good God, does this School really have nothing better to do than plague its student with demands. The student wants to create an object, but that is prohibited by the School's policy. Increasingly distracted by the desire to touch another person, the student is driven to imagine that object and that touch in fiction writing. In the student's stories, ideas about the object are worked into the explicitness of fantasy as well as the ambiguities of reality. Imaginary relationships and scenarios are created and intense physical experiences are visualised in the studio space that is now sufficiently organized for the student to begin writing. A character named Žižek is introduced; he will be used as a cipher, to animate the stories at both their intellectual zenith and the basest point of their banality. A third email arrives. 'Student, Condense the project onto one side of A4. Demonstrate the ability to analyse and articulate, to evaluate and contextualise. Link processes with outcomes. Explain your methodology! Abstract project from practice and commit it to the page.' Well really, apart from the onerous bureaucracy of this exercise, it was clear to the student that, to write an Abstract would be an inherently paradoxical undertaking. The composition must not expand, but rather present itself as a reduction. The objective is a document consisting of exclusions. About to dismiss the task, the student recalls Maurice Blanchot's claim that, because nothing is made present, the only thing writing manifests is writing representing the un-presentable.<sup>3</sup> The student decides that the Abstract, like the Hegelian subject, can only find itself in its own negation. Between the writing and the abstracting, an A4 space will be inhabited.<sup>4</sup> The pathos of the act will have a material result; the 'Abstract'. The contrary nature of this object has to be approached from an oblique angle, fictionalised perhaps. The student stands at a distance and considers the space with a blank expression.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Elmgreen & Dragset, *The Collectors*, the Danish and Nordic Pavilions at the 53rd Venice Biennale, 2009. A luxurious home is filled with peculiar collections. The identity of the fictional inhabitants is revealed by an obsessively fetishised relationship to the objects in the space.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Also on the negation involved in creative production, Hélène Cixous describes the 'murderer-painter' in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Oval Portrait'. See 'The School of the Dead' in Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

## Essay

A book sits on the student's desk, in the quietly oppressive confinement of the sealed studio. It is closed, mute and apparently insantly content in its objecthood. It has a white hardback case, with a blank jacket. It does look really cool, but so satisfied within its whiteness and its paperiness and so persistent in its presence that it draws the student's attention.

The student leans forward and picks the object up, in a casual way, as if it is a very ordinary thing.

The pages contain monotone images of artwork by an artist called Absalon. The student flicks nonchalantly through them and barely registers a difference between one picture and the next before putting the book back down. As Absalon apparently makes white objects in achromatic spaces, it's a wonder, thinks the student, that any image is visible on the paper. The strange notion creeps into the student's mind that the artwork has been usurped by these pages; an entire practice has been absorbed. Despite being unnerved by this publication, the student is desperate for the sterile distance of the School to be supplemented with an outburst of physical passion, or anything that would acknowledge a positive material presence, and so, feeling there could be something potentially antagonistic about the book's insistence, decides to look at it again, only to be instantly irritated by the preciousness of its presentation and its untainted content. The student reluctantly reads the array of texts about Absalon printed inside, the whole time aware of grubby student fingers touching and spoiling the bloodless images.

Deciding a short essay might be an appropriate response, the student closes the book and writes the following by way of an introduction:

**the student > desktop > draft essays**

Whiteness and Objecthood in Absalon's *Cells*

Between 1987 and 1993, Absalon created a body of work that formulates a sustained proposition of white objects composed to form white rooms which he called *Cellules* or *Cells*<sup>5</sup> (figs. i and ii). These *Cells* are specifically designed to suit the proportions of a single artist inhabitant. A number of issues arise from this proposition with regard to Absalon's use of the object and how it makes meaning. In order to expose and

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<sup>5</sup>Absalon numbers the *Cells*, but they are not always sequential (e.g. *Cell no.1*, prototype, 1992 and *Cell no.2*, 1991). He also uses the same titles for different works.

then respond to these issues this essay will be formulated through a Hegelian dialectical model. This model is chosen for its appropriateness - its shape develops through contrasting dynamics: From white, to black to grey. The thesis will describe the *Cells*' whiteness, purity, geometry and formal efficiency and how the resulting formulation suggests an idealised futuristic space capsule, or the confines of religious asceticism.

The antithesis of this proposal is the dark presence of the body. A comparison will be made to Louise Bourgeois' cells and cell-like rooms. Bourgeois' cells are thick with autobiographical narrative played out through a histrionic, and at times abject, combination of domesticity and the surreal. Her *Red Room - Child*, (1994), for example, is a contained area demarcated by wooden panels (fig. iii). The confined chamber, full of dark mahogany furniture, is scattered with blood-red objects ranging from spools of thread to a contorted arrangement of human hands, twisted together and cast in red wax. Although Bourgeois' cells cannot be entered, her spaces are heavily and consistently stained with human presence, and so are more overtly psycho-archival than prototypical, making the two practices almost irreconcilable.

Andrea Zittel's *A-Z Management and Maintenance Units* and *A-Z Comfort Units* (fig. iv), have a similar sense of coherence to Absalon's *Cells*. The objects in both practices have the look of the commercial prototype. They are compact functional spaces, consisting of basic cubic elements such as shelves, tables and cupboards. Zittel makes reference to a contemporary design aesthetic but hers are used spaces rather than show-room clean, so there are items like books, drinking glasses and CDs scattered about. Zittel's work suggests a temporarily absent body, whereas Absalon promotes negation to the point of spirituality. Absalon excavates the solitary space, emptying it out so the vacancy that is left echoes with and even depends upon the denial of the living presence of a human subject. This abstraction defines the cell as a space of exclusion and social non-identification. Absalon's work looks so white because there is no inscribed body, or the body that is alluded to is the artist alone, attempting to exist in a quasi-spiritual retreat from an unhygienic society.

The conclusion of this essay will be a synthesis that uncovers Absalon's relationship to both minimalism and conceptualism (figs. v and vi).<sup>6</sup> An issue for sculpture has been that it can appear as materially rather than conceptually based, and so it is closely associated with the dumb sensuality of the body as opposed to the

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<sup>6</sup> Bernard Marcadé describes Absalon's practice in these terms: 'These forms, these structures, manifestly sustaining some relations with sculpture, nevertheless seem largely to exceed this register. They float in an indefinite space-time while defining themselves in a fundamentally autonomous manner: *Specific Objects*, to take up Donald Judd's formulation, as well as fictional spaces...' Bernard Marcadé in Idit Porat (ed.), *Absalon*, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1995 p.13.

elevated mind. Marcadé refers to the aspirations of 'specific objects'<sup>7</sup> and situates this work as reaching beyond minimalist sculpture, through architecture and design and towards a conceptual ideal of the artefact that is somehow untainted by its materiality.<sup>8</sup> This suggestion of the transcendence of the object sculpture from the visceral corporeality of the object body, is somewhere between a utopian dream and a fictional vision. Absalon's *Cells* are propositional models; they are like the fictional scenarios of an idealised future occupant who will inhabit the spaces while allowing them to remain as they are. However, the *Cells*' whiteness retains an inherent anxiety that stems from the violence of the initial act of abstraction. In its conclusion, this synthesis will overturn...

What does the synthesis overturn? Having not even completed the introduction to the essay, the student stops writing. A genuine effort had been made to produce a good piece of work, in fact there was an attempt to get the whole essay into the introduction. But on re-reading the text the student is embarrassed by its naivety, and the apparent inability to develop the dialectical argument. The metaphor of movement through white and black will inevitably lose momentum by the time it gets to grey. The student is now convinced that as an introduction it promises only the most vapid text ahead, because it presents language as the carrier of fixed and knowable meanings, and any Barthesian sense of writing as an excessive, stumbling or disturbing text of bliss has been expunged like the less than hygienic, normal body, absented from Absalon's *Cells*.

Increasingly distressed, the student stands up and walks around the desk that occupies the centre of the room and considers the impossibility of handing a finished essay in to the School. Even if there was someone to give it to, the student begins to wonder, with horror, if the equation of blackness with the body, and whiteness with intellect and idyllic purity, could be misconstrued as evidence of a skewed relationship to the social space. A propensity to 'paranoid constructions' and 'fantastical scenarios' were the terms they might use. 'A marginal figure with misanthropic tendencies', they would say. In a mean little assessment report they would probably see this essay as symptomatic of such patently inaccurate labels. Having

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<sup>7</sup> See Donald Judd 'Specific Objects', 1965, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2003, p.825. See also James Meyer (ed.), *Minimalism*, London: Phaidon, 2000. 'Specific object' is a term used by Judd to describe minimalism's reference to objecthood over and above medium. 'The main thing wrong with painting is that it's a rectangular plane placed flat against a wall. A rectangle is a shape itself; it is obviously the whole shape; it determines and limits the arrangement of whatever is on or inside of it.' Judd advocates work that does not portray illusionary space and that is not sculpture, not painting and not made up of smaller relational parts, but that is rather a specific object, characterised by the parts being subordinate to the whole.

<sup>8</sup> Philippe Vergne interprets this withdrawal from sculptural presence: 'Looking at Absalon's investigations at this moment, it seems that he was trying to find, invent, understand the furniture-object that would occupy a space without being an intrusion...' Philippe Vergne, Absalon: The man without a home is a potential criminal, <http://www.thegalleriesatmoore.org/publications/absalonpv.shtml> 25/3/2008

circumnavigated the desk twice, the student decides to sit down, but on contact with the moulded plastic chair, jumps up and begins to walk around again. As the School's anticipated response has now shifted from conventional feedback to damning psychological critique, the student feels like the whole project is riddled with neuroses and that it would be best not to pursue the essay. It doesn't much matter anyway, it is a self-imposed task in response to a cold and pretentious book.

The student had said this out loud and is now conscious of the lack of response and wonders whether it matters that nobody is listening.

### Three Suspended Seminars

A period of typing and printing followed by the scattering of paperwork across the desk has continued for sometime, and has now produced disarray to the extent that either a tidying process needs to begin or a new place to work has to be found. The student moves the chair away from the desk, and starts writing, awkwardly, with laptop on knees for a few moments before abandoning the exercise and surging towards the desk, scooping up handfuls of paper to form a tall dishevelled column and transferring it, in three stages, to the floor. With most of the paper displaced, a number of items emerge that surprise the student, including a citrus chunk of cellophane-sealed sticky notes and an old black A4 folder. A wipe of the finger across the dusty surface and the package of notepaper is a fresh delight, but it is put aside because the contents of the folder are less obvious. On opening it, the bulk of anaemic pages are distantly familiar to the student, who is not inspired to look too closely at the assemblage. It is a file of college documents that chronicle the development of the School, from its beginnings as a regular 'School of Sculpture', to its current eccentric condition 'Without Objects'. There is a range of paperwork from the original School, then a number of documents that announce the change of ethos, followed by a series of standard forms, regulations and decrees. The folder is expeditiously closed - the student has no intention of digesting the School's rhetoric. But as it is put down with the foredge, rather than the spine, facing the student, it is immediately apparent that beyond the standard white of the School's forms, a band of off-white (almost grey) edging, indicates a discrete section at the very back of the folder. These pages, with their sombre tone, are intriguingly unfamiliar. The student throws the folder open.

The first shaded page says: School of Sculpture: Discussion Papers - Three Seminars on The Object, Sculpture and Language. The second page has been stamped in block capitals: CANCELLED. This is an exciting find for the student. Even if the seminars never had, and never will take place, there is evidently a considerable amount of information in these advance documents. And as the heading indicates 'School of Sculpture', they must have been conceived some time before the School was re-launched. The student hurries across the studio, settles down on the chair-bed and reads the discussion papers for seminars 1 and 2,<sup>9</sup> hungrily, then goes through 1 and 2 again, trying to read between the lines of their incompleteness,

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<sup>9</sup> **School of Sculpture > headed paper**



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Students are expected to read these papers in advance of the seminars. The discussion topics and cited works are a starting point. You must read around the subject. Come prepared to contribute to the discussion.

### School of Sculpture > headed paper

#### DISCUSSION PAPER FOR SEMINAR 1

#### The Object And Sculpture In Relation To The Subject

#### A SUMMARY OF THE SEMINAR'S KEY PROPOSITIONS:

##### 1.1. OBJECT AND SUBJECT

1.1a At the outset, we will ask you to consider the object in the very broadest sense; as a metaphysical object, encompassing anything presented to the mind, that is, the thing, or things, that stand/s in relation to the subject. Subject/object debates run parallel to mind/body questions and have an associated correlation in the pairing of theory and practice. The subject is recognised as an elusive concept, frequently described as 'de-centred'<sup>i</sup> in that, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain a sense of either the human subject as a coherent self, or the linguistic subject as a meaningful referent of the predicate in language. Indeed, in place of an assumed correspondence of representation and the subject, there is a fractured array of conflicting discourses and metonymic deferral. Any attempt to present the subject is always in its absence.<sup>ii</sup> Instead of being a self-contained, self-transparent entity, the subject's meaning is defined by, and dispersed via language, into the unstable territory of the socio-historical milieu. The subject (and the mind, and often theory) may be defined as the thing that evades presentation, and the object (and the body, and practice) as a substitute presence. Although the bond between subject and object has at times been seen as a structural dualism,<sup>iii</sup> contemporary thought generally expounds a more complex interrelation,<sup>iv</sup> without reducing the terms to equivalence.

1.1b We will briefly refer to Slavoj Žižek, who writes on the object in relation to the subject, employing his interpretation of Jacques Lacan's ideas. A key object for Žižek is: '...the Lacanian *objet petit a*; we search in vain for it in positive reality because it has no positive consistency – because it is just an objectification of a void, of a discontinuity opened in reality by the emergence of the signifier.'<sup>v</sup> Primarily, when the child splits from the mother, the lost mother becomes the little other, or the *objet petit a* where *a* indicates other (*autre*). The *objet petit a* is not a substantive object that can be captured as a representation, rather, as the original loss, it is the essence of loss itself. This *objet petit a*, is the object cause of desire. It teaches us how to desire,<sup>vi</sup> where the desire is to be the object of the others' desire. There is also the barred object: this is the subject, constituted as that which resists incorporation into the symbolic order of language, representation and ideology. The third of Žižek's objects, the *Phi*, is the attempt to represent *jouissance*. Sometimes translated as sexual climax, Lacan's *jouissance* refers to what is excessive or traumatic, and the *Phi* endeavours to objectify this impossible thing.<sup>vii</sup> The seminar will suggest that if Žižek's ideas are used to interpret the representation of ideas in the sculptural object: the object may indicate the shortfall of the representational process, maternal loss beyond recovery and language that stumbles through its inevitable symbolic failure, in sum, a metaphorical body that stands in for the elusive subject.

##### 1.2. THE UNDISCLOSED OBJECT

1.2.a We will look at how the object has an overt appeal to touch, sensuality and an association with commodity that promotes the physicality of things. The production of objects has been bound up with the reduction of artwork to merchandise, in a way that encouraged an adverse reaction to the making of objects and the growth of what are, at first sight, less tangible practices (see 3.2). But there is a market and a social value for any practice, no matter how slight or immaterial its physical presence.<sup>viii</sup> We will refer to Jean Baudrillard's suggestion that objects are encoded within consumer society, as an organised system of signs, where meaning is sited in not just the economic value of the object, but also in its sign value - as a sign of the owner's status, style, wealth etc. Whilst we acknowledge that the condition of commodity is bound up with the object, it is at a tangent to our concerns: beyond the analysis of the way in which objects are consumed, we look to complicate the understanding of the spatial and material presence of objecthood.<sup>ix</sup>

1.2b Tangibility does not necessarily make the object a fixed or stable entity that is fully disclosed in its presence. The meaning of any object is contingent upon its context and the associations made by an individual viewer that will change depending on the time and any number of conditional circumstances of the object's appearance. We will see that the presence of an object can be obstructive in the sense that to

object is to stand in the way. A refusal to speak, a deliberate non-disclosure can be perceived as a pathetic stance, a sign of ignorance, or diffidence. Sculpture can have this sort of brute literalness if it is seen to objectify ideas that object in their object-ness. But then again, the object is also an absence, it is the aim of an objective, and in this sense it is never fully realised, like a desire, it is ungraspable. Sculptural practice grapples with the object's taciturn stance and its relationship to the linguistic subject: concealing discourse in its physicality and concealing itself among things-in-general. These concerns are especially evident where that practice overlaps with the everyday, because found object sculpture is specifically articulated through the play of presence and absence, declaration and non-disclosure.

### 1.3. THE SUBJECT OF SCULPTURE

1.3a We will consider 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' (1979),<sup>x</sup> in which Rosalind Krauss argues that the subject of sculpture has become 'siteless' in relation to the object. She explains how at one time sculpture was definable as not-landscape and not-architecture, but increasingly, as object making converges with the everyday forms, the classification has lost its hold over the work. Citing the land-art practice of Robert Smithson, for example, Krauss states that because anything can be called sculpture, the term has become insignificant. Taking on Krauss' ideas, JJ Charlesworth claims that diversity is in fact intrinsic to sculptural practice and '... categories are still useful inasmuch as they illuminate the elasticity of a term.'<sup>xi</sup> Charlesworth argues that, with real things as its medium, the object sculpture may be from any category of form. It is work with objects and the idea of objecthood that includes the less obviously material manifestations of formal enquiry, such as sound, event, words, actions and fictions. And because the object is mutable, it is likely to cross several of these categories.

1.3b We will suggest that the object that cannot disclose its subject, can be linked to the difficulty in limiting or defining sculpture as a practice. If seen like this: Krauss' reference to 'sculpture' and 'sitelessness' is the bald pairing of object and subject, where the term 'sculpture' is the indeterminate subject of language, and *each instance of sculpture is a mutable object that marks the absence of a subject*. The subject's failure (in that words only refer to it but it is never present) is indicated by the object that stands in its place. That destabilisation is part of the transient and deferred nature of reality as depicted in post-structural theory. Perhaps sculpture's concern is with the matter of reality, because it is not circumscribed by a material (whereas e.g. painting is paint and photography is photographs). And it is the movement between the absence and presence of that reality (and the subject and object) that contributes to sculptures' continuing significance as a distinct discipline.

If you are interested in the object of sculpture in relation to the subject and you want to know more, RESERVE YOUR PLACE NOW.

#### **Additional Notes And Further Reading For Seminar 1:**

- i. A trajectory for the de-centred human subject is expounded in David Macey (ed.), *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, London: Penguin Books, 2000. p.73 and p.85: The contemporary sense of de-centring can be traced back to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and the Copernican Revolution, i.e. the discovery that the earth is not at the centre of the universe. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Darwin's theory of evolution then re-positioned humans as no longer privileged superior beings. Freud's 20<sup>th</sup> Century theory of the Unconscious, posits human being-ness as always-already beyond what we can be aware of. This is followed by Lacan's subject who enters into language through an imaginary identification with an image of the self, that then alienates the subject, splitting it into the one who speaks and the one who is spoken of.
- ii. The subject is the void, the nothing behind the curtain, the failure to be present. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989, p.196
- iii. A dualistic account of the object as independent of the mind is in the writings of René Descartes (1596 -1650). See *Discourse on Method and The Meditations*, London: Penguin Books, 1968. The Cartesian system presents two distinct substances: *res extensa*, the world of material things and *res cogitans*, the internal world of ideas.
- iv. A radical re-working of the subject/object dichotomy was envisaged by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). As the founder of phenomenology, he portrayed a human subject intimately bound with the object world. A phenomenological description of this relationship '... should analyze, e.g., how visual objects are perceived and how they depend on our cognitive activity of seeing, focusing, moving about, on the correlation of seeing with touching and grasping...' Robert Audi (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p.405. Terry Eagleton

traces contemporary discourse through its articulation of the subject object relationship (this is the linguistic subject as well as the human subject): Saussure's (1857-1913) structuralist theory of language brackets off both the subject and the object and sees meaning only in the system of signs that is made up of the signifier and the signified. For Saussure language names things arbitrarily, so words have no meaningful connection with either a real object or with the human subject. Eagleton goes on to explain post-structuralism through Barthes and Brecht. By deconstructing the value of the system of signs, meaning is seen as totally absent, there is just the endless play of differences in which the subject is actively involved in re-writing the text. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983, p.96-136.

- v. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989, p.95
- vi. E.g. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Massachusetts: Massachusetts, 2006, p.18 and p.40
- vii. E.g. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, London: Verso, 1997, p.175
- viii. Material objects can be vilified and dismissed as no more than crude spatio-visual products: objects of consumption. The commodity status of the object is the subject of ongoing debate, well covered in the pages of art theory and criticism and repeatedly exploited by artists who problematise the status of the artefact as a commercial entity. See W. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, London: Fontana Press, 1992; F. Jameson, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1991; J. Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, London: Verso, 1999. See also David Hammons, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 1983, the pathos of the artist in the street selling ephemeral snowballs. See Karl Marx's suggestion that the object remains a sensuous thing in its function, and only comes alive, and dances its part in power relations, when it is transformed into a commodity. 'The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness...' Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, London: Penguin Books, 1990, P.16
- ix. Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, London: Verso, 1996
- x. Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', in Hal Foster (ed.) *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, New York: The New Press, 2002
- xi. JJ Charlesworth, 'A Field of Many Coloured Objects: Sculpture Now', in *Contemporary*, Special Issue No.64, Summer 2004

## School of Sculpture > headed paper

### DISCUSSION PAPER FOR SEMINAR 2

#### Realism And The Destabilised Representation of Found Objects

#### A SUMMARY OF THE SEMINAR'S KEY PROPOSITIONS:

##### 2.1 CRITICAL REALISM

2.1a We will bring a sculptural perspective to a number of approaches to realism and the ways in which they speculate on the representation of the object. Common to the many types of realism is the notion of a spatio-temporal world that is external to the mind. Although the object may be perceived in relation to a subject (ref. 1.1a), it continues to exist independently of particular knowledge and experience.

2.1b Conventional realism has historically been associated with the desire to produce a representation that is as close to reality as possible; verisimilitude is the mark of its success, a style that is taken to extreme in hyper-realism. There can be something reactionary about mimetic realist representation: it affirms the status quo, making it useful as a tool for hegemonic propaganda. The idea of a possible equivalence between the signifier and the signified inherent in conventional realism is consistent with a conception of a representational system that works as a stable symbolic totality. In this way, the form of social realist images can glorify the condition of the worker in the socialist state, and the capitalist realism of Pop Art may make explicit reproductions of the economy's commodities. In contrast, hyper-real forms have been made that reference more than their relation to mass production or the market. For example, Fischli and Weiss' *trompe l'oeil* works *Untitled (Rotterdam)* (2003) (SLIDE 1), or Lasse Schmidt Hansen's *Making Things* (2009) (SLIDE 2). These works highlight the material and spatial decisions that shape a relationship with the artists' studios. The site of production is figured as its own found object - a studio that reflects on itself - dictated by the subtle choreography of a casual series of events - movements of things that passes by unnoticed, and yet structures our environments. These are precise representations of everyday objects, but instead of reinforcing the appearance of things in a prior-to-purchase idealised state, they convey the contingency of the lived-with object.

2.1c Direct realism is the belief that we do not see impressions of objective reality, rather our experience of seeing *is* reality. For the direct realist, perception is best understood without an object, so rather than seeing a particular thing, one just perceives ‘red-ly’ or ‘round-ly’ etc.

2.1d Representational realism describes encounters with reality as being mediated by a ‘temporal-lag’. This notion implies a delay between the object and the perception of it, during which time the object might have ceased to exist.<sup>i</sup>

2.1e In its contemporary manifestation, the critical realism championed by Roy Bhaskar<sup>ii</sup> and his associates, allows for the object to be reinterpreted through changing conditions. They acknowledge that reality is a given and independent object, but insist that our perception of it is mediated by, and transformed through, the continuing process of social practice. For the critical realist, everything is real.<sup>iii</sup>

2.1e<sup>c</sup> Key citation: ‘The Critical Realist concept of reality is a generalised one: given that a human being contingently exists, it includes the world of concepts, including false concepts, and all the products of illusion and of imagination, virtualisation and hyperealisation, including never anywhere existents (fictive beings in their semantic and psycho-social identity) “everything is real”.’<sup>iv</sup>

2.1f We will see how for critical realists, the body is not opposed to the mind: ideas and fantasies are as real as objects - one really has an idea, even if it does not manifest as an independent presence. However, critical realism is not an argument for making work that ‘looks real’. It is a position on the nature of objective reality that is seen, not as the work of the individual mind, but socially produced. Sculpture that uses found objects may be described in relation to realism augmented by this socio-critical twist. Found objects are not originally made as art and they are not approximations of the thing in the world, rather, the thing is appropriated, or re-contextualised as the object. In employing the thing itself, found object art bypasses the mimetic processes of conventional representation, and instead works with a destabilised, discursive form of representation.

2.1g We will consider the ways in which Bhaskar draws on the ideas of Karl Marx. Marxism is not a form of realism, but Marx’s idea of the object in action may be useful in understanding sculptural realism, and the provisional condition of the object. In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx radically redefines the object as a ‘practical sensuous activity’.<sup>v</sup> He writes that human activity is not just theoretical, it is an objective and critical process, in that it produces the objects that form and can transform the material conditions of the social space. This is not about individual agency, the object is produced by labour and ideology. For example, Bertolt Brecht’s productions in the theatre use this Marxist sense of the object, they use realism without illusion, revealing themselves as representational constructions that the audience plays a part in creating. For Marx, the object in process is not a static thing, but the thing-plus-subject in a socio-historical-ideological context. Marxism, and the above realisms, assert objective reality, but they do so whilst presenting the contingency of that reality.

## 2.2. EVERYDAY THINGS AND GENERIC OBJECTS

2.2a When we look at Michael Newman’s writing on generic objects,<sup>vi</sup> we will see how they can be produced by artists and relocated among things-in-general. (Newman cites the example of Scanlan’s *Nesting Bookcases* (1989-1995) (SLIDES 3 and 4). ‘Duchamp’s move is repeated by Scanlan, but as an inversion: not to select a generic object that would appear as art that was not ‘work of art’, but to make a work of art that would appear as – or more precisely disappear into – a generic object.’<sup>vii</sup> Such an artefact is,<sup>viii</sup> in-effect, a kind of reverse readymade.<sup>ix x</sup>) Whilst Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, and their challenge to, and initial rejection by, the exhibiting academy exposed the perceptual and institutional conditions in which art is recognized, Newman argues that the reverse readymade can ‘... maintain open, an unrealized possibility for art to transform everyday social life, occupying private space like a secret graft.’<sup>xi</sup>

2.2a<sup>c</sup> Key citation: ‘It may be that the curse, or the blessing, of contemporary sculpture is precisely its proximity to things-in-general, its generous promiscuous exchange with ordinary things and material reality. That extraordinary, hairs-breadth, microsecond, atom-wide moment in which an object that operates in the world as just itself suddenly shifts, and becomes the same object, now transformed into art. The ease with which sculpture now moves across this paradigmatic gap is the defining feature of the contemporary moment.’<sup>xii</sup>

2.2b We will see how JJ Charlesworth’s statement above, echoes Newman’s assertion. By moving back and forth between artefactuality and factuality, the object has transformative potential, not just for art, but also for the social space it provocatively occupies. The predictability of everyday things is unsettled when they are documented or temporarily reframed as found objects. (We will look back at slides 2, 3 and 4 to

see how Scanlan and Hansen use a realism that represents the object in action, but it does not confirm objective conditions, it destabilises them, or highlights the instability that is already present.)

### 2.3. THE FLICKERING OF OBJECTS AND WORDS

2.3a Sculpture that uses the found object makes things-in-general appear mutable in an undetermined representational process that will bring us back to the problem of delimiting the object of sculpture in language. We will look at the infamous 1967 polemic *Art and Objecthood*,<sup>xiii</sup> in which Michael Fried asserts that if a thing has ‘the condition of non-art’, then it is an object, but if it is art (specifically the modernist art that he celebrates), it is not an object. For Fried, where there is no clear difference between art and the everyday object, art descends into theatricality. He accuses minimalist, or what he calls ‘literalist’ practice of pursuing such objecthood,<sup>xiv</sup> as rather than being autonomous from its situation, it requires a viewer in the same space, experiencing it, like theatre.<sup>xv</sup> Where Fried claims that the very definition of the artefact is that it is not an ordinary object, Howard Singerman notes that all that Fried rallies against continues to be embraced by contemporary practice that persistently exploits the time, space and materiality of the everyday.

2.3a<sup>c</sup> Key citation: ‘Fried’s theatricality would become an important term for theorising postmodernism in the visual arts; the negative attributes of his minimalism would come to characterize the art of the 1970’s and early 1980’s would become the defining and critical attributes of postmodernism.’<sup>xvi</sup>

2.3b When Fried equates objecthood with the everyday, is he raising a metaphysical concern, suggesting that it is impossible for something to persist as artefact if it has once been not art? Or perhaps he wants to maintain his critical authority over a genre with particular constraints? Charles Harrison suggests that Fried’s concern is for different types of art to be bounded by the parameters of their specialisms. He says it is not just about being able to categorise, it is also indicative of a need to identify the technical and material conventions of a medium, in order to judge the success of a particular work.<sup>xvii</sup> Not only is it possible for things-in-general to become objects of art, but the object may slip back and forth. Even sculpture that does not use found objects, draws its raw material from the non-art world. While this movement and emergence undermines the categorical certainties that allowed Fried to name and contain objects that are art, and those that are not, it equally suggests a versatility that could expand the critical possibilities of sculpture, and the responses to it.

2.3c We will reveal how found object sculpture highlights the precariousness of perceptions of the everyday and the transience of objective reality, precisely because it both claims parts of reality and recontextualises it as art - things flicker anxiously between conditions, alternately revealing themselves and holding back. The action of the found object involves movement and stillness: it puts things into brackets, temporarily holds them in suspension. It occasionally snatches, catches an object, and then lets it go again, think of Richard Serra’s film *Hand Catching Lead* (1968) (SLIDE 5). This is the flickering process of representation - words are pinned down to make a sentence with meaning that is less secure on a second reading. When words and things are situated differently, they are re-defined in their context - they are re-used and re-arranged, citations are appropriated and collaged into new work. Perhaps debates about what sculpture is, reveal sculpture’s affinity with a less determined perception of language and the reality it attempts to represent.

ATTEND THIS SEMINAR on realism and found objects. Hear the evidence and make up your own mind about reality, in seminar 2.

#### **Additional Notes And Further Reading For Seminar 2**

- i. See Robert Audi (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999
- ii. See Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy*, London: Verso, 1989
- iii. The Lacanian Real is not to be confused with realism. According to Jacques Lacan’s schema, the Real is a noumenal order that is the nothing beyond the point of symbolic failure. It is therefore precisely not ‘reality’ and is not the real referred to in critical realist assertions that ‘everything is real’. As evocations of experiences that are difficult to symbolise, representations of trauma have been described as attempts to present the Lacanian Real. Although a provocative concept in-itself, the Real is at a tangent to the ontological and epistemological concerns of realism.
- iv. Mervyn Hartwig (ed.), *Dictionary of Critical Realism*, London: Routledge, 2007, p.400

thinking that the sheer ubiquity of the object must have fostered the current School's paranoia, before turning to seminar 3.<sup>10</sup>

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- v. Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845) as cited in David McLellan, *Karl Marx Selected Writings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, p.156
  - vi. Michael Newman, 'After Conceptual Art: Joe Scanlan's Nesting Bookcases, Duchamp, Design and the Impossibility of Disappearing,' in Michael Newman and Jon Bird (eds.), *Re-Writing Conceptual Art*, London: Reaktion Books, 1999, p.211. Unlike the readymade, which conventionally appropriates the object by neutralizing its function, Newman believes the generic object's place in society is embraced as part of the work in '... an act of identification with a collective subject and an unconscious choice that has already been made... its function... has become inscribed on the collective consciousness.' *ibid.* p.206
  - vii. *ibid.* p. 212
  - viii. The artefact is a human-made or crafted object. The etymology of the word is from Latin '... arte factum, from ars skill + facere to make.' <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/artifact> 10/8/2010. There is an implication of manipulated construction here, but this does not exclude found objects or natural forms, which are able to transmute into artefacts by being re-contextualised or modified.
  - ix. Although found objects (or *objet trouvé*) are everyday objects, re-contextualised within the discourse of art, found objects may also be 'readymade'. Readymade, a term coined by Marcel Duchamp, conventionally refers to objects that were originally mass-produced or manufactured. The 'unassisted readymade' may be presented as artefact off-the-shelf, i.e. not customised by the artist.
  - x. An example of a similarly reverse ready-made, is in the earlier work Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin, *Crane*, 1966, in which a functioning crane was commissioned and sited in a park.
  - xi. Michael Newman and Jon Bird (eds.), *Re-Writing Conceptual Art*, London: Reaktion Books, 1999, p.218
  - xii. JJ Charlesworth, 'A Field of Many Coloured Objects: Sculpture Now', *Contemporary*, issue no.64, Summer 2004
  - xiii. Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998
  - xiv. *ibid.* p.152.
  - xv. *ibid.* p.166-7
  - xvi. Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p.175
  - xvii. Charles Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001, p.12-13

## <sup>10</sup> School of Sculpture > headed paper

### DISCUSSION PAPER FOR SEMINAR 3

#### Sculpture and Language-Based Conceptualism

#### A SUMMARY OF THE SEMINAR'S KEY PROPOSITIONS:

##### 3.1. THE LOCKED-ROOM

3.1a This seminar will begin by looking at 1969, when one art school developed an approach to the object and language, born of an attempt to force its sculpture students to confront materials and challenge their process of making things.<sup>1</sup> In doing so they proved that the object is more complexly intertwined with language than they had imagined. We will examine how this school embarked on a teaching programme centred around what were benignly referred to as 'projects', but were in fact a series of radical pedagogic experiments performed on the incoming first year sculpture students. 'The materials project', now known as the 'locked-room', is the most notorious of those experiments, and it involved locking students in a room with a particular material and forbidding them to communicate, either with staff, or one another, for the duration of their confinement (SLIDE 6)

3.1a<sup>c</sup> Key citation: 'The students, including Richard Deacon and Tony Hill, were locked in a studio every day for eight hours for a term. They were not allowed to leave the room, and remained under the staff's constant surveillance. Each student was given one particular material - it might be a block of polystyrene, or a bag of plaster. With this they had to work for an unspecified period of time, with no critical feedback from their tutors... The preceding generation of ... students, including Richard Long and Gilbert & George (who had themselves rejected Anthony Caro's sculptural teaching aims), hadn't just reduced their dependence upon the sculptural object; they had done away with "matter" altogether. Such a removal

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raised a sticky question for art educators: how do you teach something that has no defined subject or medium, process or protocol?"<sup>ii</sup>

3.1b Inside the locked-room, language, objects and mechanisms of control were oddly fetishised: the power dynamic was staged within strict boundaries that left the students, not only spatially constrained, but subject to systematically regimented codes of behaviour underpinned by a plethora of written rules and scripted commands. Control mechanisms and routines centred on particular props. The door was a significant prop – it was not simply shut, but the addition of a large padlock became symbolically charged as an object power. The mask project involved hooded members of staff shouting abuse at individual students. At a recent conference<sup>iii</sup> some ex-students expressed their enjoyment of the opportunity to indulge themselves with focused attention on materials despite their awareness of the posturing of the staff, whilst others spoke of institutionally imposed restraint, coercion and abuse.

3.1c We will see that 1969 was a time of a crisis around the object of sculpture, concurrent discourses about so-called 'de-materialisation' and the emergence of performance and conceptual art, including the first edition of *Art-Language*. In contrast to these trends, the Materials Project was formulated as an attempt to 'address materials in a pure way without conceptual indexing' and to exclude language from the studio so far as that was possible.<sup>iv</sup> Despite the project leaders' professed desire to elevate experimental object-making, great care was put into the production and filing of instructions for the projects, whilst the sculptures were discarded, seemingly irrelevant as objects beyond the action of having performed a part in the event. Students were given stop-watches in order to time their productivity, but this gesture appears to confirm that they did no more than use materials to mark the passing of time. It is as if the students were confronted with the fact that there are only so many things that one can do with a block of material - anything they made with it would be insignificant. Many students worked throughout the experiment, in spite of everything. What emerged from the studio is not traditional object-based sculpture but rather sculpture as an action, an event, a performance and a series of documents (instructions, rules, course descriptions, photographic evidence, transcripts), in other words what is in hindsight, precisely language-based conceptual artwork and an expanded conception of sculpture. We will suggest that part of what gives the 'materials project' its discursive legitimacy (apart from debates about art education) is the way it is formulated as the act of sculpture in social space and time, and described through language. This experiment produced a series of events and a mass of documents that present sculpture as a practice embedded in discourse. In addition to affirming the compulsion to work with objects it exposed how sculptors work with the idea and language of objecthood.

### 3.2 ONE AND THREE CHAIRS: A FOUND OBJECT AND A MISSING SUBJECT

3.2a We will review the way in which conceptual art originally appeared to show contempt for the object,<sup>v</sup> but failed to work without it. Sculptural form has an explicit physicality that is as much there in the cool paired down high-minimalism of Donald Judd, and in Martin Creed's teasing at the edges of materiality, as it is in the brazen over-indulgences of Janine Antoni or Paul McCarthy. Artists persistently materialise their ideas, they combine thoughts with specifically selected objects, and the full effect of artwork, is a somatic encounter with this union. (The idea of Creed's lights going on and off is a simplistic gesture in-itself until the viewer is confronted with the bare walls of the host institution, and Marcel Duchamp did more than revel in thoughts about the everyday; it is his provocative choice of a urinal that unsettled the academy.) Every artefact is a particular object and the decision to use it gives rise to a string of idiosyncratic associations and pernicious connections.

3.2b This seminar will draw attention to Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) (SLIDES 7 and 8), as an example of work that is about art as an idea, but that always deploys language and the object. We will see that it requires the curator to pick any chair, photograph it and display the image on the wall, next to the chair and alongside a photocopied dictionary definition of 'chair' - this definition is an appropriation of words as found objects. As the chair is at the discretion of each curator, the work transforms according to where it is shown. The piece is partly about this material inconsistency. A manifestation of *One and Three Chairs* is only part of the work in process. Each re-formulation produces a capricious artefact, in that it has been (and will be) different chairs, with their particular photographs, and varying definitions. The only apparently unchangeable element is the initial idea. The work is then Kosuth's idea of art, in this case perhaps the idea that art is the correlation of object, photograph/image, definition, an inherent inconsistency in representation and an assertion of the authority of an artist's conceptual intention.

3.2c We will see that apart from questions raised about the relative meanings of different forms of representation, and Kosuth's positivistic idealism in regard to his own authority, the choice of a chair as the object of the work is of interest. Kosuth dismisses the object as '...the physical residue of an artist's

ideas.<sup>vi</sup> He says: ‘Works of art are analytic propositions... A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist’s intention, that is, he is saying that the particular work of art *is* art, which means, is a *definition* of art.’<sup>vii</sup> The work may be about defining what art is, but it exists as a chair, and the words that define it. Chairs are both almost invisibly quotidian, and yet simultaneously associated with a subject of significance, a two-way movement that is paralleled by Kosuth’s withdrawal of his hand, whilst concurrently elevating his designation of it as art.<sup>viii</sup> The work displays the instability of the bond between the signifier and signified; every time chair-ness is defined as a subject, its definition is undermined by the knowledge that it will disappear to make way for the next permutation. In this sense the variable figure at the centre of *One and Three Chairs* is both a substantial found object and a missing subject.

### 3.3. FORMING OBJECTS WITH WORDS

3.3a Siah Armajani’s *North Dakota Tower* (1968) (SLIDE 9), will be proposed as a metaphorical projection of the destabilised relationship between an idea, words and an externally designated object. The object is an assemblage of his speculations that are at once conceptually ambitious and representationally fragile. Armajani works out and describes the necessary height of a tower in order for it to cast a shadow from one end of Dakota to the other. A series of calculations and sketches depict an eighteen-mile-high tower, and even though the objective is not made manifest, the mere suggestion of it in a few pencil lines, a title and a series of notes, produces a concept of an object that is formed in the imagination. Armajani’s work does not have the sustained conceptual commitment to words as for example, Lawrence Weiner’s, but it is concurrent with Weiner’s, and it suggests, with a degree of pathos, the potential for sculpture to emerge in the contemplation of what the object can be.

3.3b Whilst Michel Foucault was writing about objects developed in discourse (‘The Formation of Objects’, 1969),<sup>ix</sup> there had also been a rapidly evolving conceptual art movement developing objects with words as art. We will open Lawrence Weiner’s book of *Statements* (1968), to show the complexity of the interface between word as idea, and word as matter. The book consists of a series of instructions for producing particular fabrications, and as such, they reflect his ‘statement of intent’. Using language as a sculptural material, Weiner’s statement is a work in-itself: ‘1. The artist may construct the work 2. The work may be fabricated. 3. The work need not be built. Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the art the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.’ (SLIDE 10)<sup>x</sup> The wording articulates the making of objects and actions, but simultaneously asserts that they need not be made. By synthesising his sentences as constructions that hold a conceptual suggestion and ink on paper, and occasionally determining them as large scale wall-spanning signage, Weiner shifts between material substance, non-realisation of linguistic suggestion and realisation of words in space.

3.3c Mark Prince makes the following assessment of the unstable connection of sculpture and words in Weiner’s practice: ‘This ambivalence allows the words their particular ambiguous weight as sculptural objects. If they are replete and hermetic – grounded by the wall onto which they are mapped – they are also depleted.’<sup>xi</sup> Prince’s assertion is that Weiner appears to promote an unproblematic relationship between word and object – where the word, as minimalist sculpture, is an autonomous non-referential (specific) object, fully present in-itself. But the work is made more compelling by the fact that he simultaneously undermines the words’ ability to function autonomously - the meanings refer to intent, content, action, subjects and objects that are not present in the words.

3.3d On the broader development of artist’s statements as artworks in academic environments,<sup>xii</sup> our starting point will be *Art-Language* (est. 1969), a journal devised by the academic-based group Art & Language.<sup>xiii</sup> This journal is dedicated to debate and on-page speculation on the subject and object of language-based conceptual practice. A citation from the introductory text in the first issue epistemises their approach.

3.3d<sup>c</sup> Key citation: ‘Suppose the following hypothesis is advanced: that this editorial, in itself an attempt to evince some outlines as to what ‘conceptual art’ is, is held out as a ‘conceptual art’ work.’<sup>xiv</sup>

3.3e The seminar will show how Art & Language refer to ‘The concept of using ‘declaration’ as a technique for making art’, i.e., attempting to have something recognised as art, can be an art in itself. Such text, Howard Singerman argues, is taking hold of art discourse as it becomes increasingly reformulated as academic practice.<sup>xv</sup> He says that the proliferation of language-based work that defines itself, can be seen as symptomatic of the post-modern epoch, in so far as it lends itself to the production of knowledge within academic terms; there is a drive towards theory through structural and post-structural analysis, and a self-conscious attempt to articulate its forms through clear, reproducible and certifiable methodologies. We will look at how conventionally authoritative formats associated with academic institutions (such as lectures, readings, screenings and books) have become increasingly prominent forms for artwork, as is



seen, for example, in the practices of Ryan Gander, Janice Kerbel, Liam Gillick, Dora Garcia and Lindsay Seers. (We may also suggest that, moving in the opposite direction, there are academics, such as Slavoj Žižek, who have been embraced by the art-world and whose work includes making films and what could be seen as performance-based lectures.)

3.3f One of our examples will be Lindsay Seers' *It Has To Be This Way*<sup>xvi</sup> (2009) (SLIDE 11). This is a documentary style film installed in a sculptural viewing structure, accompanied by a book. The structure repeats forms from the film, locating the viewer in the work, and the work as art, but the art is disclosed in a scholarly voice. The book, *It Has To Be This Way* by M. Anthony Penwill (2009), reformulates the narrative of the film – a poignant hallucinatory story of a lost step-sister, a parallel historical study of the transvestite Queen Christine of Sweden, an investigation into processes of photography and the recording of image, testimony and personal history. Words, voices and images are placed and arranged in the work as found objects. Chris Fite-Wassilak writes, 'It Has To Be This Way balanced its several modes of presentation effectively, but in progressively decreasing amounts of ostensible objectivity.'<sup>xvii</sup> Overlapping fiction with theory, history with autobiography, photographic technology and documentary filmmaking, Seers counterbalances the quixotic content of the narrative by formatting the work as factual presentation and, in playing these modes off against each other, she destabilises the authoritative voice while substantiating the fiction and establishing a broader definition of language-based artwork.

COME TO THE SEMINARS and follow the key developments of sculpture's exchange with language and reality. We will lead the discussion by considering sculpture (the subject in language and the object in action), as part of the restlessness and uncertainties of social reality in-general. The elevation of the idea, a suspicion of the visual and an augmented role for language combine to form a critical attitude to the object.<sup>xviii</sup> Attempts have been made to reach for the 'de-materialised', or the 'post-object',<sup>xix</sup> but the object persists because concepts are materially determined in their context. It is not just that sculptural practice can be 'found', mass-produced or performed for example, it is also that the critical context of art is an object for the work, including the ideology and words that define it and the institutions that frame it. Sculpture may be formed in discourse - and that discursive object revolves around the problematics of movement and stillness, disclosure and non-disclosure, its proximity to non-art, its awkwardness in conceptual practice, its sensuality, its volatility as a term and its instability as a time-based thing in social space. Sculpture re-presents objecthood as the confabulation of words and world - and in this layering, it brings a potentially subversive complexity to the absence of subject and presence of things.

### Additional Notes And Further Reading For Seminar 3

- i. These events took place at Central Saint Martins School of Art, London, 1969-1972
- ii. Hester Westley, 'The Year of the Locked Room', in *Tate etc*, Issue 9, Spring 2007
- iii. The A Course: An Enquiry, conference at Central Saint Martins, 27th May 2010
- iv. Peter Kardia, speaking at The A Course: An Enquiry, conference at Central Saint Martins, 27th May 2010
- v. Kosuth contended that any artefact was a mere by-product of his proposition about what art is. Kosuth's notion of the propositional object is derived from analytic philosophy and routinely associated with his attempt to re-define art as no more than the proposition of work in the form of a significant statement. See Peter Osborne (ed.), *Conceptual Art*, London: Phaidon, 2002, p.28. Osborne describes how language-based art can be traced back to the readymade and its attempt to make anti-aesthetic work, i.e. Duchamp's choice of what were at the time considered to be objects that were indifferent to taste, is analogous to text being linguistic rather than visual. Osborne also argues that visual indifference is connected to Saussure's linguistics in which meaning is sited in discourse and language rather than in visual experience.
- vi. Joseph Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy' in Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1972, p.163
- vii. *ibid.* p.164
- viii. Peter Osborne suggests that in identifying himself as the bearer of meaning, Kosuth's claims attempt, but fail, to empty the artefact of its presence. Peter Osborne (ed.), *Conceptual Art*, London: Phaidon, 2002, p.42
- ix. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Oxon: Routledge, 2002. Foucault writes that discourse is more than signs that designate things in external reality, rather, the practice of discourse forms its own objects. He specifically speaks of the problem of seeing discourse as a neutral means of referring to things that are anterior to it, and instead he promotes the 'objects that emerge only in discourse' and of 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (*ibid.* p.54). He

The final page of the document is followed by a blank sheet of the grey paper, then a single startling sheet of white confronts the student whose hesitant hand glides across its smoother surface. The following notice is printed on the white page:

### School of Sculpture Without Objects > headed paper

#### NOTICE OF SUSPENSION

The attached series of discussion papers were produced before the School's conversion and re-launch as 'The School of Sculpture Without Objects'. We have assessed the content in the light of our new ideals. The series is: at odds with our ethos. We can project current discourse on sculpture, language and objecthood into the future, creating a what-if scenario: What if the extended seminars allow a conception of sculpture so broad that the School itself could be absorbed into the student's practice? Nothing less than a voiding of the entire series will conform to the School's amended aims and objectives. It is therefore concluded that these seminars must be cancelled, rendering the discussion papers futile.

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describes discourse as involving the consideration of the structures of power and authority that regulate the object and delimit its parameters, along with consideration of the 'surfaces of emergence', (ibid. p.45) that is, the pre-existing situation or domain in which the object is normatively sited. He explains the need to examine the complex relationship between institutional power structures and social processes, because it is in these areas of tension and overlap that multiple objects emerge and are dispersed across the discursive field. For Foucault, this is not an attempt to find meaning, but to undertake the practice of discourse, and to form objects. See also Felix Guattari, who points out that Foucault wrote 'The Formation of Objects' at a time of social unrest and radical disorientation of spatiality, Gary Genosko (ed.), *The Guattari Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p.174

- x. Lawrence Weiner, *Statement of Intent*, 'First published in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition "January 5-31, 1969" organized by Seth Siegelaub in New York' as cited in Donna De Salvo and Ann Goldstein, *Lawrence Weiner: As Far As the Eye Can See*, Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, 2007, p.104
- xi. Mark Prince, 'The Self-Effacing Object', in *Art Monthly*, no.319, September-October, 2008
- xii. Howard Singerman singles out textual declarations made by Donald Judd and Robert Morris in the 1960's. The formal significance of minimalism is gained through texts working alongside artefacts, in a debate that was extended by the conceptual movement. Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p.177. See Donald Judd, 'Specific Objects', 1965, as cited in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2003; Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture, Parts 1 and 2', 1966, as cited in James Meyer (ed.), *Minimalism*, London: Phaidon, 2000, p.217-220.
- xiii. Adrian Piper also made numerous works of declaration, often representing her self as the object.
- xiv. Terry Atkinson, 'Introduction', *Art-Language: The Journal of Conceptual Art, Vol. 1*, (May 1969), reprinted in Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1972, p.9
- xv. Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p.155-157
- xvi. Lindsay Seers, *It Has To Be This Way*, Matt's Gallery, London, 2009
- xvii. Chris Fite-Wassilak, 'Lindsay Seers Matt's Gallery', *Frieze*, Issue 122, April 2009
- xviii. Conceptual art's critical attitude to the object is referred to in the introduction to Michael Newman and Jon Bird (eds.), *Re-Writing Conceptual Art*, London: Reaktion Books, 1999
- xix. For an extended argument on dematerialisation that concerns itself with work such as performance, institutional critique and 'anti-form' see: Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, California: University of California Press, 1997. This book, compiled as a continuous series of statements, interviews and descriptions, is in-itself a radical re-working of the format of critical writing.

Having reached this end point, the student walks over to the desk, turns over the packet of sticky notes, picks despondently at the resistant wrapping until it splits open, peels off a fresh square and affixes it as a flavescent flag on the first shadowy page of the seminar document. The student then closes the folder and taps the word 'object' into the search engine on the laptop. After trawling through multiple sites on metaphysics and linguistic theory, the German translation of 'object' brings up two terms: *gegenstand* and *objekt*. *Objekt* is understood in the English sense of 'object'. *Gegenstand* is more like 'something'; it literally means 'stands against' and appears to be used for an object in relation to another object, action or event. There is an astonishing list of possible uses of these words - an enumeration that presents itself like a vast resource for potential sculptural manifestation. The student prints the list out and places it on top of the stack of writing, on the studio floor:

**Gegenstand {m}**

item  
thing  
topic  
object  
matter  
article  
subject matter  
subject-matter

artifact [Am.]  
subject [theme, topic]  
cause  
purpose

**realer Gegenstand {m}**

real object  
concrete object

**spitzer Gegenstand {m}**

prick

**besagter Gegenstand {m}**

object in question

**stumpfer Gegenstand {m}**

blunt object

**einzelner Gegenstand {m}**

single item

**wertloser Gegenstand {m}**

picayune  
worthless item

**zentraler Gegenstand {m}**

focus

**untypischer Gegenstand {m}**

atypical thing

**aufbewahrter Gegenstand {m}**

article in custody

**gepfändeter Gegenstand {m}**

pawned object

**geschätzter Gegenstand {m}**  
treasured article

**versicherter Gegenstand {m}**  
assured object  
object insured  
insured property  
subject-matter insured

**gefährlicher Gegenstand {m}**  
dangerous article

**verpfändeter Gegenstand {m}**  
pledged object

**heißbegehrter Gegenstand {m}**  
signed-for object

**mandelförmiger Gegenstand {m}**  
almond

**billiger Gegenstand {m}**  
bargain

**der betreffende Gegenstand**  
the matter in question

**zum Gegenstand haben**  
to involve

**einen Gegenstand erkennen**  
to perceive an object

**einen Gegenstand auslösen**  
to take sth. out of pawn

**einen Gegenstand erörtern**  
to debate on a subject

**Gegenstand {m} des Spotts**  
scoffingstock

**Gegenstand {m} der Anklage**  
article of accusation

**Gegenstand {m} der Begierde**  
object of desire

**Gegenstand {m} des Mitleids**  
object of pity

**Gegenstand {m} der Abneigung**  
aversion

**Gegenstand {m} der Besorgnis**  
cause for alarm

**Gegenstand {m} der Verehrung**  
object of worship

**Gegenstand {m} des Begehrens**  
object of desire

**Gegenstand {m} des Gespötts**  
mocking stock

**Gegenstand {m} der Beschwerde**  
cause for complaint

**Gegenstand {m} des Interesses**  
object of interest

**Gegenstand {m} des Gelächters**

figure of fun  
 cause for laughter  
 object of laughter  
 object of mirth [poet.]

**Gegenstand {m} einer Erfindung**

object of an invention

**fest eingebauter Gegenstand {m}**

fixture

**Gegenstand {m} der Versicherung**

object insured

**Gegenstand {m} von Spekulationen**

subject of speculation

**scharfer / spitzer Gegenstand {m}**

shiv [Am.] [sl.]

**Gegenstand {m} einiger Erörterung**

subject of some debate

**nicht klassifizierbarer Gegenstand {m}**

non-descript object

**Gegenstand {m} des Spottes**

pointing-stock [archaic]

**mit dem Gegenstand vertraut**

acquainted with the subject

**Gegenstand des Gesprächs sein**

to be the subject of conversation

**Gegenstand des Gelächters sein**

to be the laughing-stock  
 to be an object of derision

**(mit einem Gegenstand) herumspielen [nervös, gedankenverloren etc.]**

to toy with

**in Zahlung gegebener Gegenstand {m}**

trade-in

**Gegenstand {m} der besonderen Beachtung**

object of special attention

**zur Sicherheit hinterlegter Gegenstand {m}**

collateral

**Gegenstand {m} des beweglichen Vermögens**

chattel

**Das war nicht Gegenstand (+Gen.)**

That was not the subject of ...

**einem Gegenstand eine Nummer zuweisen**

to assign a number to an object

**einen Gegenstand zum Verkauf anbieten**

to offer a thing for sale

**einen Gegenstand zur Erörterung bringen**

to broach a subject  
 to bring a matter up

**etw. zum Gegenstand einer genauen Untersuchung machen**

to subject sth. to critical scrutiny

**Recht {n}, einen Gegenstand zu verkaufen**  
 right to sell an article

**Objekt {n}**  
 object  
 objective  
 property

**3-D-Objekt {n}**  
 solid

**gejagtes Objekt {n}**  
 quarry [chased / hunted / sought object]

**indirektes Objekt {n}**  
 indirect object

**bevorzugtes Objekt {n}**  
 object of preference

**spekulatives Objekt {n}**  
 object of a venture

**rückversichertes Objekt {n}**  
 reinsured object

**erdnahes Objekt {n}**  
 near-Earth object <NEO>

**versichertes Objekt {n}**  
 object insured

**schlüsselfertiges Objekt {n}**  
 turnkey (project)

**objekt-relationale Unverträglichkeit**  
 object-relational impedance mismatch

**ein Objekt erkennen**  
 to make out an object

**Objekt {n} der Begierde**  
 object of desire

**Objekt {n} der Lächerlichkeit**  
 object of ridicule

**besonders bevorzugtes Objekt {n}**  
 object of special preference

**zu belichtendes Objekt**  
 object to be exposed

**Fokus-Objekt-Abstand {m} <FOA>**  
 focus-object distance <FOD>

**großes Binär-Objekt {n}**  
 binary large object <BLOB>

**das Objekt seiner Zuneigung**  
 the object of one's affection

**ein Objekt mit einer Hypothek belasten**  
 to mortgage a property

**Dieses obscure Objekt der Begierde**  
 That Obscure Object of Desire [Luis Buñuel]<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.dict.cc/> 14.2.2010

## Tutorial Report

The student stands next to a low comfortable chair that can be opened-out and used to sleep on; it is a chair-bed. A pillow, a couple of blankets and a sheet form a neatly stratified oblong stack at the centre of the chair's seat.

The episode with the Absalon book, the suspension of the seminars and a distinct reduction of supplies in recent food parcels has left the student feeling hungry and resentful and has been a huge distraction from the objective, which is of course, as the student recalls, to make material work and not to let The School of Sculpture Without Objects succeed in suppressing creative activity. The visceral physical body has to be brought into the sterile cell, an object needs to be made that will counter the terrible thinness of the student's experience and completely undermine the School's virtual existence.

The means of producing this thing must be carefully considered. The student walks over to the desk, perches on the edge of the plastic chair, picks up a pen, surreptitiously writes three words about creative practice and then stealthily conceals them within the lines of a half-written story: assemble; appropriate; fabricate.

'The School will never guess I have an object in mind', the student whispers, and this suggestion sets off a muddy stream of speculation: If the object could simply be the objective of touching another person and whether it would be enough to have this or any objective in mind without ever having to actually create it as a physical reality, and if ideas are things at all, or else are actually so dense that they are like dark matter or a completely different kind of entity, and if there is nothing outside of materiality then the objective is not enough because it is nothing, and if the object is nothing more than a fantasy how would that relate to presence when a fantasy could, in fact, be a very camal and not an intellectual thing, and yet some of the most intense sensual, even sexual experiences can actually take place, not physically, but in the arena of the mind. Thoughts coalesce and the student imagines a theoretico-erotic essay, bursting with explicit imagery spawned from the excitement of ideas. The momentum of these musings slows to a stop. The deliberations are not actually progressing, instead they're moving back towards themselves in a jumble of inconsistent semi-lucid thought paths. To move forward, something needs to change, someone else's ideas must intervene. A little deference to the pedagogic order might be required. The student suddenly knows what has to happen, jumps up with a start, and slams a hand on the table to give the revelation emphasis, 'I must demand a tutorial!'

The student walks to the chair-bed, moves the stack of bedding from its seat to the floor and sits down to think silently before rushing to the desk and opening the laptop. The production of an object would

have to be put to one side, if only temporarily, because a tutorial has to be orchestrated. It will take considerable dexterity to fabricate the events and conditions necessary to achieve this objective.

Generally the student pays very little attention to the unremarkable notice board on the School intranet start-up page, but now looks at it intently. There is a Termination Warning and next to it is the Internal Memorandum (which the student has never bothered to read) and just below is another notice. Have there always been three notices? The student is so accustomed to the notice board's insignificance that the need not to look at it at all has made any looking at it seem forced. But now, something has caught the corner of the student's eye and, frustratingly, whatever the thing that has changed is, it seems to be merging in with everything that is the same. The student is systematically scanning the screen from left to right, up and down, but the notice will not un-conceal itself. About to give up, the student starts to turn away from the computer then quickly turns back and yes, there it is, a new one, just below the other two: A visit and tutorials by G.W. F. Hegel scheduled for 'today'. Eager for critical feedback and not put off by the fact that there is no available time slot, the student sends the notice to print, picks up a pen, scribbles, 'Please fit me in if possible' across the bottom of the page and tosses the request aside.

The student knows full well that Hegel is dead, but is nevertheless making preparations for the tutorial. There is no actual work to show Hegel, as the student has not created a single object since enrolling at the School, so the preparations involve trying to look as if engaged in a task, some thoughts of what to talk to Hegel about and locating a chair for him to sit on. Additional time is then spent arranging the chairs: The student's chair faces Hegel's, the distance between them is at least three paces so there would be no bodily contact, however they are placed just close enough to enable easy conversation. These preparations have been a satisfying distraction from what is otherwise a familiarly unproductive routine.

Remembering that there will be a report to be filled in, the student retrieves the relevant form from amongst a mass of paperwork. It is a three-page document headed Tutorial Report (Evidence that a Tutorial Took Place). The student reckons the sole purpose of these institutionally pathologised rituals is to inject an already wretched situation with the poison of bureaucratic inanity, but on leafing through the blank report, decides the time spent waiting for Hegel could best be filled by completing it. This is not to make a mockery of the procedure, not to lie, but to look at it more as a prediction of what is likely to be said.

The student writes the following text in the section headed SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION:



## School of Sculpture Without Objects > headed paper

### SECTION ONE: SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

Hegel wanted to know why I had requested a tutorial with him and what I thought of being surrounded by objects and not people. I didn't really know but I guessed the tutorial would be over before it began unless I made an effort to be communicative, so I said, 'There are objects here and, well, not much else really... Maybe I'm not very sociable.'

He pulled his chair slightly closer to mine, sighed and told me that my relationships with objects will only be important if I can dissolve any sense of my self. I replied, 'But I need my objects. I know I'm something other to them, I feel, I think and I can say "I am" and "they're not".' Hegel said it is not enough for me to say I am because I think, I should ask myself further questions about what I am. His assertion was that I am a thinking thing, but I am only a thinking thing because I think of things.<sup>12</sup>

I didn't understand. I hope the School will not penalise me for this lack of comprehension because I was somewhat distracted by a growing sense of unease with Hegel's appearance. He is dead, after all, yet he was sitting in front me in the form of a decaying hollow-eyed skeleton. His voice was a dry Germanic whisper emerging from a jawbone that opened disconcertingly wide and snapped shut with a clatter at the end of every word. I found that if I tried to look at him directly I could really only see the studio and he appeared as a sort of stain within it. If I squinted my eyes and turned my head at a slight angle then he came into focus, but the studio became a blur. An additional distraction was a large and bulging leather pouch he had slung over his scapula. The pouch was fastened with a drawstring. A dark green mould covered the leathery skin that seemed as crumbly and decrepit as its owner. Every-now-and-then he would lift the bag and shake it, shedding flakes of its outer layer and rattling its mysterious contents.

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<sup>12</sup> Hegel's comments in our tutorial resonate with his writings that develop as a narrative, which progresses, through negation. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, p.10, 'Further, the living Substance is being which is in truth Subject, or, what is the same, is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering itself.' And see Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1980, p.37 '... he will see that, in addition to the thing, there is his contemplation, there is himself, which is not that thing. And the thing appears to him as an object, as an external reality, which is not in him, which is not he but a non- I.' Also see Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth - Century France*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, where she unfolds Hegel's writing, showing that consciousness is consciousness of the object that it seeks to explain, in a process that changes both the object and the conscious subject.

I jumped as Hegel asked, 'What is the I that thinks?'

How the fuck would I know what the I that thinks is?<sup>13</sup> Feeling seriously out of my depth I tried to change the subject. Perhaps, I ventured, it would be more interesting and relevant to talk about what it felt like to be dead.

He must have detected the mix of fear and intimidation that shook my voice because he said the strangeness of his presence in my studio was no more curious than my own presence and that I displayed an hubristic arrogance in positing myself as a self-transparent thinking subject. I said 'How can your words be emerging from dead bones?' He actually laughed and pointed out that I had no concept of how ideas emerged from the matter of my own body let alone his. He said I was a mass of matter under the delusion of some greater significance. He was 'breathing' heavily, he seemed to be excited or maybe he was suffering. With every rasping 'breath' his remains expelled a foul smelling gas in my direction. I noticed his ulna was missing and shifted my chair back a little as he extended his brittle radius towards me and said he wanted to talk about desire.

I froze in horror as he gripped my knee with the articulating bones of his cold ivory hand. Obviously I asked him to move it, referring to the School's Regulations on Physical Proximity that strictly prohibit any physical contact between anyone at anytime. He slowly withdrew his arm to his side but the force of the grip had snapped the joint at the wrist leaving the disembodied hand on my leg. I yelped and brushed it off - it shattered as it hit the floor. Perhaps I should have apologised. Frankly I just wanted Hegel (or what remained of him) to go. I certainly didn't feel like engaging in a conversation about desire.

Unflustered by his loss, he used his remaining phalanges to slowly unfasten and open the drawstring pouch. He then scooped up the bone debris from the floor and added it to what was evidently a collection of similar remains. He attempted and failed to re-tie the bag with one hand then leaned forward and muttered

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<sup>13</sup> I was not able to answer Hegel's question at the time, but further reading reveals his preoccupation with the thinking subject. E.g. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, p.33, 'Through this process the simple, self-surveying whole itself emerges from the wealth in which its reflection seemed to be lost...In general, because, as we put it above, substance is in itself or implicitly Subject, all content is its own reflection into itself. The subsistence or substance of anything that exists is its self-identity. Self-identity, however, is pure abstraction; but this is thinking... Being is thought.' Also, Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1980, p.37, Hegel asserts the need to focus not on the being but on the 'I'. It is not just that there is thinking but that there is an I that thinks – that is self conscious. If he were just conscious the word 'I' would not appear, there needs to be more than just passive thought, there needs to be an object of thought.

these words, 'I don't even like you.'

Bits of the bag skin flaked away from its surface and fell to the floor. He carried on talking, and I'm paraphrasing him here because I can't remember exactly what he said, but this was the gist of it, 'Essentially, the subject that is thinking is thinking of an object. You discover yourself as a subject and the world as an object in a relationship of desire because if there is desire then there is both an I that desires and a thing/an object that is desired.'<sup>14</sup> Now, this is not as simple as it sounds, because in order to be realised as a subject you must first negate the object—this negative action is becoming through negation.'<sup>15</sup>

Whilst Hegel was talking I surreptitiously opened the drawer in the small cabinet. I kept my squinted eye on him, while I rifled through papers, feeling for a Forbidden Contact Declaration form. He suddenly stopped talking and asked 'What do you keep in there?' I dropped all the papers and shoved the drawer shut, 'In where?' I said. But he wasn't looking at the cabinet, he was pointing at the upright locker, 'In there,' he said, 'that box. It has coffin-like proportions, as if it could contain a human body.'

He started 'breathing' more heavily again and rattled his leather pouch, which sent ancient smelling gases and dust towards me. As I turned my head to evade the rotten air, it occurred to me he was thrilled to think there could be a corpse in the locker, he seemed hungry for it, as if he wanted to replace his own missing bones with someone else's. I said, 'I keep Slavoj Žižek in that locker. Although it's not like I literally keep Žižek himself in there.' I stopped. I felt suddenly confused about how the 'real' living, breathing man named Žižek, related to my world. I thought then that any attempt to use Žižek's body and his ideas in my stories was at best an abstraction but worse, perhaps, a false scenarioising that might well need to be referred to the Committee for the Upholding of Ethical and Moral Principles. Hegel brought me back to reality by suggesting I let Žižek out of the locker as he might be helpful to the conversation. I explained that it is Žižek's ideas that interest me. I told him, 'Žižek has written about the bone as the ultimate point of the failure of the representation of the subject.'<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Hegel here confirms what is said of him *ibid.*, p.37, 'Desire is always revealed as my desire, and to reveal desire, one must use the word 'I'.'

<sup>15</sup> Hegel is paraphrasing his famous assertion on the subject from G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, 1977, p.19, 'It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative... Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. [It is spirit] This power is identical with what we earlier called the Subject.'

<sup>16</sup> '... (the skull bone) is nothing but a positive form of a certain failure: it embodies, literally 'gives body' to, the ultimate failure of the signifying representation of the subject.' Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, 1989, p.208

Hegel leaned forward and inclined his skull (as if his eyeless sockets were looking right through me) and whispered, 'Žižek is right, substance is subject, the spirit is a bone.'<sup>17</sup> I tried to look back at him. There was no gaze to meet. I could see only a tenuous framework of crumbling matter. I wanted to feel empathy for this collection of human remains but I just felt horror and confusion.

'What do you want from me?' I asked.

He fumbled with his swag of bones.

I gripped my hands together to stop them from shaking. My fingers were exploring my own protruding knuckles and I could think of nothing but the skeletal form, mirroring his, just under the surface of my skin. I recoiled into the chair and said, 'Žižek refers to you a lot, I know he has written about that expression. I think he's suggesting "the spirit is a bone", because the bone is the presence of death or nothingness in the body, so where you might hope to find spirit there is only bone. It is as if in life we carry around our own finitude as a negative presence under our surface. And because the body as an object is what stands in place of the subject, it embodies the subject's failure to present.'

Hegel nodded in resignation, dropped the pouch to his side and seemed to ready himself to leave. He told me I had only the most elementary understanding of his ideas and recommended a dozen books to read, preferably in the original German. He got up, rattled across the studio, then he turned and said, 'You must dissolve any coherent sense of yourself and grapple with the negative space because it is only in the very negative agency of the process of dissolution that you will find the positive condition of the subject and its relationship to the object.' And with that he stood up and stumbled over the chair leg, and as he collided with the locker he promptly crumbled into a heap of fragmented bone and dust, accompanied by a nauseating cloud of malodorous gases.

I was shocked, to say the least, but I took my dustpan, swept the remains up, tipped them into the rotten leather pouch and then dropped the whole thing into the rubbish bin.

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<sup>17</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Oxford University Press, 1977, p.208, 'When being as such, or thinghood, is predicated of Spirit, the true expression of this is that Spirit is, therefore, the same kind of being that a bone is. It must therefore be regarded as extremely important that the true expression has been found for the bare statement about Spirit – that it is. When in other respects it is said of Spirit that it is, that it has being, is a Thing, a single, separate reality, this is not intended to mean that it is something we can see or take in our hands or touch, and so on, but that is what is said; and what really is said is expressed by saying that the being of Spirit is a bone.'

I thought I heard a rumbling from behind the locker door. I called out 'Stay in there and think about the limits of your body!'

I sat in silence for a while after that.

SECTION TWO: DETAIL WHAT PROGRESS YOU HAVE MADE (IF INDEED YOU HAVE MADE ANY) SINCE THE PREVIOUS TUTORIAL AND LIST ALL OF YOUR FAILINGS. INDICATE YOUR NEXT PLANNED MEETING.

I have not seen Hegel before and I think it's very unlikely that I'll see him in the future.

SECTION THREE: TO BE COMPLETED BY THE TUTOR

***The student's account of events is a pseudo-philosophical confabulation of phantasmagorical proportions.***

The student prints out the completed form, reads it through and then slumps across the desk, despondently. The locked-room holds a hungry prisoner, untouched and under-nourished. Beyond the burning that gnaws at the student's gut, is the need to be part of concrete social reality and for that reality to be normal, the want of change and development and a longing for the constructive activity of producing new and substantial work. Even if nothing new was made, the already existing fabric of things could be altered enough for someone to notice and a connection would be made with this other person (it would take just one person). You can surely die from the want of the warmth of human contact and yet the paradoxes of the situation are laughable. After all the anti-object assertions of the School and its sanctimonious proclamations against physicality, the student's most powerful thought is that of making contact with someone. This idea is the only productive element in the student's barren universe.

With a bowed head and a diminishing body, the student puts a hand flat on the unresponsive surface of the desk and leans into it. The Final Show is around the corner and there is nothing more in the studio than a pile of stories and a collection of furniture, and none of it does anything more than reflect the institutional, spatial and ideological constraints of the School environment. The knot in the student's stomach is the fear that the School has been successful in its conditioning, not because they have lessened the desire to make an object, or to touch and be sensually engaged with the world (these desires are there more than

ever), no, their real success is in the fact that their student realises it is always-already impossible to produce a credible object. Sullen and defeated, the student now believes an object is just a thing, irrelevant, stupid and dumb. Anyone repeatedly trying to add a real object to the world will eventually be crushed by the weight of its impossibility. Anything the student fabricates, appropriates, assembles, performs or even conceives and calls 'art' will be pathetic in the face of the impossible historical and cultural weight of that title.

The student wants to present work made from the tension between concept and the presence of form. It will be a gross object that is also a narrativised idea. It might even be a gross idea. The student's hand glides across the surface of the desk. 'If I have to work with what's already here, then I may as well take the inane blandness of this desk or my chair as my object for the Final Show. I'll leave it in an unassuming corner of the School, and because it's an institutional piece of furniture they won't notice it, won't even see it; it is, and will continue to be, part of the fabric of the space. My desk will be a realistic artwork so accurate in its representation of the thing that it is the thing itself. But it's more sinister than that. It'll be dark. Its ordinariness will subtly obscure its presence. A sneaky, unnoticed stain, lurking in the shadows and spoiling their pseudo-conceptual edifice!'

It occurs to the student that there is something Heideggerian in these thoughts: An ordinary object concealing itself in its 'earthy' materiality and simultaneously un-concealing or disclosing the significance of its being as a thing. 'It will after-all not be totally held back, because it will perform its desk-ness and designating that desk-ness as an artwork will set up a "world". A world, in this sense, need not necessarily mean a total environment or an installation or a narrative, it can be a singular object. If my understanding of Heidegger is right, then something is produced or formed or opened when a world is set up, and that's what the object does, it starts "worlding". When the world of the table is disclosed - brought forward - there'll be a disclosure of its being, a "sensuous presencing", and I'll have slipped it under the School's radar... a desk, being their desk... but in claiming the readymade 'ordinary desk', the act of naming which attempts to designate it as art will almost certainly be self-defeating because it will mean the object (the desk) is no longer ordinary.'

The student picks up the computer, puts it on the floor next to the printer and then lifts the two front legs of the desk so it tips backwards sending the freshly accumulated sheets of paper along with pens, pencils and notebooks sliding slowly off the edge of the surface so there is now space on top to clamber on and stand in the middle of. It doesn't feel stable. If it had been solidly crafted out of mahogany it would be stable, but it is a wood-chip compound, Formica-topped institutional surface, on mean metal legs. The student lays face up on top of it, legs straight and feet hanging over the sides, hands feeling around the edges of the surface, catching a finger in a peeling flap of plastic strip beading, and imagining: Imagining the

depravity of the School's narrative of bondage and subjugation: 'The fuckers are all but starving me aren't they? They get my rubbish and my stories, but there haven't been any food parcels for ages. They want me dead, that's the real meaning of this termination procedure. Well, if they want my body I'll give it to them, in all the horror of its physicality. Yes, that's it! I'll be laid out on this table for the Final Show! I'll be a stinking mass of decomposing matter, with flies buzzing around me and fucking maggots eating my flesh. My own corpse will be the object; grotesquely present and brutal in its obstinacy... abject... objecting... whatever, they'll fucking hate it.'

CORE

THE STUDENT'S FANTASY



**the student > desktop > emails and letters**

Professor Žižek,

I write to you from inside the studio. God only knows how long I've been here, and all this time with the object, I never made, looking back at me. Well I've come to a firm decision regarding this object, one which I believe will finally allow me to move forward. I realise now, the only way I can produce work is if I make something up. I must inscribe the object with the credibility of a presence. Then I can believe in it, and persuade other people to do so as well - or at least suspend their disbelief for the duration of the Final Show. Even if it is only temporarily credited with significance, in a transitory transcendental moment, my quasi-real object will be imposed on the nothingness of reality. I can't hope for any more than that. I'm going to try to write this object, so it's not a static thing but an activity. As this is my first approach to making something in this way, I've decided to fashion it from clay, so please bear with me:

I've got a bag of clay on my desk. Taking a scalpel I puncture the plastic wrapping and sink the sharp edge into the fatty slab at the end furthest from me, then I ease the blade back along its entire length, gliding smoothly through its buttery texture, cutting across the centre and moving with calm resolution directly towards my abdomen. I put the scalpel down and tuck my fingers into the incision between the plastic skin of the wrapping and the clay body. I peel the plastic back, tearing the package open before turning the clay out with a slap on the surface of my desk. As soon as I touch the rectangle of earth my fingers become embedded in its tacky receptiveness. The clay depresses in response to the shape and weight of my hands, re-moulding itself in ridges and troughs. I'm trying to smooth the fingerprints away but every contact forms an impression in the clay's surface, its malleability seeming like a nauseating eagerness to please. I try to stop thinking about making anything more than an action, the repetitive moulding pressure of the table impacting against the weight of the clay, time passing and then it has been shaped into a rough sphere. It's a ball of clay.

Professor Žižek,

I thought I could somehow create an object when all I can do is play like a child. I can't imagine why making it out of mud seemed like a good idea when I know if the object is going to impose itself on this School, it has to be a significant presence and clay's not going to cut it. I need your help. No, I need you. If you were here in the flesh, the formidable scale of your literary output alone would undermine the School's inherent culture of restraint - the presence of the substantial object that is your body would be mind-blowing.

Dear Žižek,

I've attached a story that I wrote about a character based on you. It's called *Žižek's Copernican Turn*. Will you let me know what you think of it? It is very cunning of you to get around the problem of replying to my emails by including messages to me in your books. I now understand that The School of Sculpture Without Objects is just a symbolic construct. It has allowed me to maintain my role as its student and has prevented me from ever being an artist. Now I can no longer maintain this role and have to look outside of the School, it's time for me to construct a totally new reality. My new environment should be less claustrophobically inward looking, one in which I can tackle ideas in a more measured way. If I am to avoid becoming pathologised by this bizarre School I have to leave, but I'm worried. I worry about losing myself in the process.

## Žižek's Copernican Turn

Professor Slavoj Žižek, theoretician and cultural commentator, prolific author of countless influential and controversial books, is trying to write in an office at the back of a building over-looking a square. He is oppressed by the room. He is overwhelmed by the seemingly incommensurable distance between the empty page and the text he must write to fill it. He sits at his desk, fingers on keyboard, staring blankly into mid-air, apparently pondering how to begin and now transfixed by his own inaction. The computer, a slim efficient laptop model capable of audacious acts of information wizardry, sits in passive reflection. The earth turns. This partial revolution leaves the sun behind the roof of the adjacent building. A cold chill begins to spread across Žižek's body and a shiver jolts him into consciousness. He sniffs and rubs at his nose. The light is fading, so the day must have passed and he hasn't written a single word. He needs to complete a paper for tomorrow's conference - he has a reputation to maintain and an ever-increasing, loathsome horde of fans to contend with. For that moment on the platform he will be the centre of the universe.

Žižek taps the computer to wake it from its sleep and focuses his eyes on the luminous white light of the blank page in front of him. He can only type with a single finger, but normally does so with considerable alacrity. The finger is forced into action and he defiantly types, 'Because it is immanent to the symbolic, the Real cannot be presented; it can only be a negative gesture that is the failure of the symbolic.' The screen only registers 'Phi'. He deletes the anathema and positions his finger more carefully on the keyboard. Again the screen displays 'Phi'. 'But what's this? My God!' He continues to stare at the screen. He is fully awake now, with a stream of ideas filling his head. Determined to capture his thoughts, he picks up a pen and paper and attempts to write but only manages to produce a colourless and superficial etching on the page. After a minute of frantic scribbling in the hope of reviving the flow of ink, he puts the pen down. He has scratched through three sheets of paper with the barren nib. The damned thing is useless, he flings it away, throws the torn paper to the floor and then sits back and attempts to take a deep calming breath. It turns out to be a shallow breath that catches in his throat and the more he thinks about his inability to breathe deeply, the more rapidly he gasps at the air.

Žižek stands up and exhales slowly before pacing the blackening room in his socked feet. He stops, abruptly rushes to his desk drawer, discards various items of forgotten stationery and then retrieves a dusty Dictaphone. He blows on it and pushes the record button. The light comes on. The tape whirls. He makes agitated gestures with his hands, pulls his shirt, rubs his nose, pushes through his hair and then opens his mouth to speak, 'Phi is an image representing the impossible Thing...a traumatic Thing which cannot be presented... finally there is only the pathos of the act.' This isn't quite right. He stops the Dictaphone and

attempts to rewind it, but it jams and, too disheartened to struggle further, he releases his grip on the contraption, letting it drop on to the desk. He kneels then lies flat with his back on the floor, staring into the light hanging from the ceiling. The bulb makes a slight buzzing sound before it flickers and dies.

The room is now a very dark place. Žižek is aware of the earth moving beneath him. He begins to feel dizzy and slightly nauseous, sensing his own limitations in the disconnection between where he is and where he wants to be. Reaching out, he clings to the leg of his chair with a sweaty little hand. He lies in the gloom, the dark suddenly cut through by street lighting. Holding the chair, as if it were an anchor grounding him in his moment of insecurity, he sees that his fingers are around the point at which the leg tapers like a delicate ankle. He feels as if he is in some way violating the chair and almost enjoys the moment. He looks up under the skirt of the ceiling lampshade at its pendulous defective bulb, then turns his head and can make out the dark contours of the normally concealed underside of his desk; an intricate structure of interlocking planes and nails and hidden joinery that begins to seem ominous from his low position. These things, still and only obliquely present in the room, loom over him, mocking his lack of agency. With renewed purpose he lets go of the leg, heaves himself to his feet, grabs his bag and heads for the door. He grasps the handle, turns it and pulls. It resists. Frustrated, he yanks at it with considerable force and it snaps off at its base. He drops both the handle and his bag and dashes to the window. Although the sash is stiff and unreliable he manages to get it open and push his head sideways through the gap between the window frame and the window itself, which he holds to prevent a guillotine-like descent.

He calls out into the darkness, 'I am Slavoj Žižek! I'm trapped here!'

There is no response. He pulls himself in and the sash slams shut. The force of the window closing coincides with the sudden re-awakening of the light in the centre of the room and he comes face to face with his mirror image in the window. There are dark rings around his eyes. He rubs at his nose and agitates his hair with his hand. He pulls off his T-shirt and wipes the gathering condensation from the glass before considering the hairy mass of his torso. He takes off the rest of his clothes and tosses them in the centre of the floor. With his nose pressed into the cold window he tries harder to see the outside world. It is indistinct. In its place is the dripping image of his room and his body standing in it. He uses his finger to trace his outline on the glass, so as to fully conceive his absence, rather than to close up the picture and make it whole. The ceiling light goes out again and the moon casts a gentle glow across the room. He bundles his discarded clothes into a makeshift pillow on the floor, lies back on it and caresses the normally reassuring contours of his naked body. The chair and the desk are where he left them. The discarded pen is on the floor. The withdrawing man curls into a tight ball and, as the earth turns, just enough to reveal the sun, his thoughts are of his being in the world as nothing more than an excremental inanity.

Dear Professor Z,

I picked up your book again and allowed it to fall open randomly, it opened to p.262, I counted to the two-hundred-and-sixty-second word on the page and the sentence read 'conceptualise the distinction between imaginary resistance and actual symbolic re-articulation'. It's good that I'm listening to you because matters have deteriorated significantly since my last letter and I can't stay here any longer. In fact, I saw a notice that suggests some sort of termination procedure has begun. I've got to leave before they terminate me.

Dear Professor Z,

I tell you this in confidence: My plan with the clay is not quite what it seems. I only want to appear to make an object, just to throw them off the scent. The clay object is just a decoy - they will never think of that. They'll be so distracted by the disgusting presence of the clay thing that they won't see my actual object, the real thing (the real thing that I'm going to make up). It sounds contrived I know, insincere even, but it's neither. It's a way of putting the uncertain status of the object into practice, and I reckon I can make it work.

Yet every time I approach the idea of an object I get overwhelmed by the materiality of physical and psychological phenomena, the thick sensuality that exudes from things and thoughts entraps me in libidinal trauma, and then I start writing and maybe I try to introduce a new character, try to forge a relationship (see *Chair Bed* and *Under The Desk* attached) but I can't impose any meaning because words seem thin, arbitrary and irrelevant.

## Chair-Bed

'Take your knickers off, then turn around and kneel, put your head right down and your arse in the air.'

Carole E sits on a chair that can unfurl to form a bed. She thinks about the chair silently withholding its contingent bed-ness, like a secret. She stands, flips the chair open, exposing the bed and she gets into the position Z demands of her. It's a good chair, she thinks, but once opened up, it's not such a great bed. She wants to ask Z something, but her mouth is dry and her lips are beginning to crack. Just able to reach her tin of Vaseline, she twists it open, applies the balm and then asks a question into the back of the seat. She wants to know if Z's looking at her.

'Yes,' Z says, 'I am definitely looking at you.'

Carole E is aware of the graphicness of her exposure, not with any embarrassment, rather, she knows how banal this all is.

From Z's perspective that same banality is utterly compelling, it doesn't need to get any more stimulating than this.

'What's wrong?' he asks, and immediately regrets it. He doesn't want an answer. Moving with a real get-it-while-you-can urgency, he drives his cock into her open body. She gasps, and the tin drops from her hand. From the awkward positioning of her head she has an inverted view through her own parted legs to the vigorous swing of his scrotum.

Carole E explains that it's not very subtle but it works, yes. Fuck. Yes. Yeah. Fuck. No. No, she wants him to wait, it's all wrong.

'Well it's working for me.'

Carole E disregards the irritation in Z's voice. Continuing to make her point, she tells him that it is good but it's just too obvious, her mind is somewhere else. She asks him if he wants to go there with her. She disconnects herself from him, turns around, pulls up her knickers and straightens her clothes.

He finds the timing of her interjection quite inconsiderate and thinks he might actually hate her for it. He looks at her through narrowing eyes and says, 'I'll close the bed up shall I?'

She doesn't want the bed closed up, not yet, she wants to tell him a story. This is Carole E's story:

'It's in my head. It starts with seeing someone across a room. It's a private view, the opening for the gallery show we're supposed to go to tonight.'

Z interrupts, 'That whole across the room thing is so clichéd. Can't you think of something more interesting?' He can think of something more interesting: the sad tale of his declining erection. (It slipped out

of her body like a newborn child, glistening and raw. Born without a brain, sustained by nothing but an instinct for survival and a maniacal sense of its own potency. Rejected by its mother, it weakened then finally collapsed and curled up in pitiable disappointment.) He does up his fly and tunes back into her words.

She's saying, 'I think it's the intelligence behind his eyes I want to get to. Or maybe I want to get past that intelligence to something more instinctual.'

'I've explained this to you before Carole E, it's desire itself that's a fantasy.'

Carole E remembers that he's also said there's no such thing as a sexual relationship, just power relations and fantasy. But with taciturn control, she keeps the thought to herself and instead presses on with her story, 'I see myself sitting him down on the chair then I'm opening his trousers...'

While she's talking she starts to push her knickers down again. Her middle finger slips through labial folds and moves against the pulse of her clit. She's aware of what she looks like and the tight twist of underwear across her thighs.

He listens and watches her intently, he says, 'God, this is so much better.'

Carole E speaks, her words swift and breathy. 'Other people no nobody yes nobody else in the room sees us I bend down and lick I lick the tip of his cock and his body jolts and the composure drops away from his face but I carry on breathing shallow and fast and I'm lifting my skirt and using my hand to guide him inside me and it's slow it's deep slowly deep fucking with his hands he's got his hands underneath my t-shirt on my tits now both on my arse and as I raise myself up he's pulling me back towards him with my heart swollen pumping thick surges of desire flooding and we're kissing with me right there holding on staying in the moment with his face his hair he's so into the whole idea of this and it feels it feels, really good.' She stops.

Z asks with some urgency, 'What's happening now? Keep going.'

Carole E says, 'This is just what I'm thinking because I'm still on the other side of the room. I catch his eye and he looks right through me. I'm only imagining all of this and I don't understand how nobody else notices when the story's written all over my face, I'm branded with it in blood red lettering.' She stops telling the story as she starts to think that maybe Z's right, the scenario is formulaic. Maybe she should add some contextual detail, fill in the characters, make the narrative less prosaic. She folds the bed away, sits on its chair and takes a notepad and pen from her bag.

Z asks 'What are you doing?'

She's writing her scenario.

'Read it to me.'

She won't read it. She writes rapidly with her lips apart, nearly shaping words, but she's deep in the hushed subterranean passages of her own thought world. When she's finished, the story has filled a dozen

pages of A5 notepaper. She rolls the paper into a tight tube and picks up her tin of Vaseline. She smears the outside of the paper tube with the greasy substance. She stands, then opens her legs and gently pushes the story up inside her cunt. He watches the text disappear with intense fascination. Looking at this woman he wonders if he'll ever get close to her again.

She pulls up her knickers.

He says, 'My God, you're almost entirely insane. I really want to know what you've written.'

She's not going to tell him what she's written, it's not for him.

Z has his coat on now and in curt tones of dissatisfaction he says, 'I don't see why things can't be more straightforward, less vicarious. I'm going straight to the opening. Are you coming?'

She might go later.

Z manages a smile and says 'Okay, see you there, I'll be on the other side of the room.'

He heads for the door. A space is uncovered. Carole E sits down on the chair-bed, carried away to some phantasmagorical auto-suggestive wonderland, with the little story covertly furred and deep inside her cunt.



## Under the Desk

Z sits in the office, taking a gift from Carole E out of his bag. It is a book about a house built by Jorge Pardo. He lays it on the desk, indulging his hands and eyes with the smooth glossy paper, smart sharp printed words and the superior colour reproduction of carefully designed objects. Z has little interest in sculpture, but Pardo's house impresses him as a piece of fantastical realism. It seems extraordinary that he made the house as an artwork but fabricated it with enough particularity for it to become a real home that he now lives in. Something falls out of the book. He picks it up. It is a business card, that says 'Carole E: Fantasist', on one side and 'Carole E: Realist', on the other. He thinks about Carole E and the volatile fragility of her language then lets her card drop from his hand. It lands in the book, fantasist side up. He turns it over, then turns it back again and closes the book. He drums his fingers on the shiny outer sleeve, sits back in his chair and reflects on Carole E's unpredictability. They have had some fabulous times together but her fantastical thoughts always leave him feeling slightly unnerved. She creates a distance between them, in fact he feels like they never made actual contact with each other. She's a tease. He picks up a pen and writes a letter to Carole E. It is a letter that explains all the confusion of their undernourished relationship.

He stops writing and glances around the office. Something has altered his perception of the space. His usual sense of being is troubled by a sudden vagueness. He sits up straight and tries to identify what is wrong. A number of objects are missing from the room, and not only that, he can't remember the names of those objects. He pushes the letter aside. It is a letter and it is on a desk but what is he sitting on? It is no more than a series of hard, flat wooden surfaces.

A devastating failure of reality follows. He feels something shift beneath him. The support falls away just as he stands up. In the spot where the chair formerly stood, there is a vaguely rectangular puddle-like mass of melted matter, although there is no significant heat in the room, so it can't have melted, but that is the best way to describe the transfiguration from a solid form. He stares into the amorphous blob that was once a chair and can make out a number of twisted metallic strands that look like elongated nails or screws and, running right through it, are the distinctive curving lines of the grain of the wood. He bends down and allows his outstretched fingers to make hesitant contact with the mass. It surrenders with an oddly pleasurable sensuality against the weight of his hand. He quickly pulls away and grasps at the legs of the desk. The desk! He is still able to remember what it is called and is not going to let it go.

It is as if there is an unidentified new force in the world - certain objects have the ability to withstand it - others are unable to maintain their coherence. He desperately wants an explanation. He is fairly down-to-earth generally. He knows all the objects around him are always already shifting and contingent but he

does not believe reality is reducible to an individual's knowledge or a particular experience. This sudden distortion of reality can't be connected to his imagination. He is contemptuous of Humean Idealism and the sort of theory that claims concrete objects are nothing more than a bundle of properties and relations. A desk would be just a collection of oak and joining materials, a combination of rectangularity and flatness, and a particular relation to function due to its shape and position in a room. There would of course be other consequences to such theories if they were true: If the only real thing was the individual's perception of properties and relations, the object would just have a momentary presence, and any sense that it appeared to endure through time would simply be the experience of a series of these momentary objects. In thinking about these ideas, he may have allowed himself a moment of doubt, which has seeped into the room and is spreading from object to object, like an infectious disease.

The corner of his wide eye catches a sudden movement and he watches a papery glossy slime pool on the surface of the desk. Carole E's card and the remains of the letter he had written to her are in the midst of it. He plucks them out and rushes to the door. With the card and letter in one hand, he grasps the handle with the other, sensing its solidity as a sort of secure and fixed spot - a full stop. He concentrates on the words for things: 'door, handle, floor, door... wood, panel, rectangle ...' The door gives way and he turns to face the room. The floor is now a thick turgid stew of matter with only the desk standing at its centre. He trudges across the room, moving quite cautiously through the sticky aberration. It is a stagnant swamp of grossly distorted partial forms and yet there is something beautiful about its lack of compositional restraint. He stands knee deep in it, looking at shimmering scatterings of sand and molten shards of what was previously solid - there are unbound fibres of curtain fabric, free-flowing colours and shapes, memories and associations. Amidst the multiformity, he notices the sharply defined corner of a box-like form virtually intact suspended in distended swirls of vibrant plastic and he sees the anxiety in his face in a reflective puddle of black oil. He knows he is in his office but far from the taken-for-granted familiarity of the everyday things he can work with.

The strength in his legs, the resistance that keeps him upright, starts to give way, compelling him to sink down until he is semi-engulfed by the decomposing sludge. And now he lies back, allows the swirling mass to take him and his thoughts with it, holds his arms above the surface and sees Carole E's business card and his letter still there in his hand. He remembers the threat of a loss of composure in her words and wants to explore intelligent, less fevered fantasies with her, simple things, to talk and experience the sharing of power, vulnerability and exposure: the glistening, flickering intimacy of storytelling. His arm collides with the edge of the desk that is still standing at the centre of the room, and just then, he hears her voice calling to him:

### (The Conversation Under the Desk)

'I'm under the desk, come and join me.'

'No. You're no good.'

'Come on. You can crawl under here and lie next to me.'

'No. You're a no-good slutty whore and I won't do it.'

'You'll stand there 'till it's pitch black dark will you?'

'No. It's only a bit dark and it won't hurt me.'

'Come on. It'll be pitch black dark any minute and you'll be alone and you won't be able to find me or anyone else.'

'You're a slut and a liar and I'm staying where I am.'

'What's that in your hand?'

'It's a love letter.'

'I knew it was! Ah, that's better. You're here now. Okay so we're not actually touching each other 'tho you're nearly next to me. I knew you'd come under the desk eventually. So, why don't you read me the letter?'

'I can't see the words. It's pitch black dark under here.'

'You must know what you've written, tell me what it says, it's only fair.'

'The letter says I'm in love with you. It says I want to touch you. It says you're full of shit but I still want to touch you. I want to hold you in my arms in a tender loving way. I want to put my hand inside your knickers – the letter explains that this too is a tender desire. It asks if you want to touch me or do you just like the idea. It says...'

'Stop! So I like the idea of touching you in this dark space. What could be wrong with that? What more do you want?'

'We're next to each other but we're not close, that's what's the matter. Ever since the first time I saw you I've been shaken and distracted. You're fabulous. Yes, I want to touch you. Touch me. It's the real thing for me. I'm mad for you. I'm waiting for you to respond and you just like the idea of it. That's what's wrong. There, I've said it.'

'Well, you're all cock-a-hoop aren't you, just because you've got spunky words in your mouth.'

'Touch me.'

'I want to, but I can't. I don't know why, I can't explain. It's dark here.'

'I told you, it's all in your head and there's nothing real behind it. You don't really want me. You're no

good. You've lured me here saying one thing and meaning nothing, like a fucking whore. You'd absolutely no intention of touching me, had you? Had you? You're a fucking cock-teasing whore. None of what you say you want is real. Under this desk isn't a space for us, it's just a space for your cock-teasing fucking fantasies.'

'You're wrong! It's dark here. It's pitch black dark and no light can get in. And you're right too, I'm no good. I am scared of making physical contact with you. I bet you're feeling pretty smug now aren't you? But have you ever felt the dark horror of an idea un-materialised? Have you ever wanted to make something real but you can't? You find it easy to say and write what you think, whereas I keep it inside and it makes me feel like a stupid child. Are you really so close to me? I can't see you, I don't know if you're looking at me with a smug smile or the dim blankness of incomprehension, and this darkness seems so bloody familiar to me. But my eyes are adjusting and it is starting to change. I can just about see you now, holding your letter, dressed in your arrogance. And the touch, will it be good when it happens, or will it be a nasty prod? You say you want to hold me tenderly but will that feel as real and intense as we could possibly get? Or will we have our moment of true intimacy when you've got your hand in my knickers? Do you think we'll have the most profound contact when you touch me there? When your fingers are actually up inside me? Will we really be close then? I want to know... I bet that's taken the smile off your face. You say you first saw me when I was fabulous, but you haven't seen anything. Do you see me now I'm coming into the light? Yes, I'll be faithful to the idea because it's a bright one, and it'll charge-up a world and all hell with it. Come on, put the letter down and let's put our arms around each other and we'll hold on to that holding because we won't know where we are. That convergence could bring all the light, like a sweet rush gushing in, or maybe it will just bring a blunt, brutal ending, and I won't care either way because it'll be a grown-up hard-won place. Come on into the light with me. Touch me.'

'I'm not ready for this.'

'That's as I thought.'

And as Carole E says this, he realizes that not only has he never really known her, far worse than that: he has forgotten her name. He reaches towards her but it is already too late.

Professor,

Are you still there? I've had it with this place. It's time for me to leave and I'll take the clay ball with me. The only handy container I have is an old plastic bag, a re-usable environmentally friendly bag-for-life.

I'm transferring the clay into the bag and lifting it, testing the weight. The plastic on the underside strains against the ball, but the handles seem to hold well enough. I'm allowing myself a moment to stop and look around the studio, I'm pacing the room, touching the chair-bed, the desk, the moulded plastic chair, the bookcase, the locker, the cabinet drawer, all these things that seem so real to me. I'm sitting down and thinking about what else I need to take with me. I'm trying to imagine a real object through writing and to hold on to all the paradoxes inherent to that aim. I'm imagining an object, a peach of an object. Why not a peach? I'm imagining a real peach, I'm writing that I'm imagining one, I'm really imagining it as I'm writing. I'm taking the peach, this soft and delicate newborn piece of fruit, and putting it into the bag-for-life.

I'm putting three other items into the bag, which are things that I require in case I come into contact with other people: a single woollen glove, a packet of three extra-safe condoms, and a hammer. Now, and without further delay, I'm leaving The School of Sculpture Without Objects and I'm re-inventing myself as an artist.

Z,

Before I go, and because I'm not planning to return, I'm forwarding another one of my stories to you. It describes my journey out of the School. It's called *Curtains*.

## Curtains

The student stands in the centre of the room, clutching the bag-for-life and unable to locate the door. Having been confined and infantilised by studenthood for so long, it is impossible to imagine the space beyond its boundaries.

A systematic search reveals an eight-by-four sheet of board that looks capable of hiding a door: the student moves it, but there is just a blank wall behind. It now leans against the bookcase that stands in front of the curtain. The tall locker won't budge, so the small cabinet is then pushed towards it and then thrust up against the bookcase too. The desk chair is placed on the table, and wedged against the locker and the cabinet. Although it is heavy, the student manages to lift the chair-bed in two awkward stages and put it upside-down on top of the whole configuration. There is still no sign of a way out and yet every item of furniture in the studio has now been moved so the entire pressure of the room is directed into the bookcase, that in turn leans backwards against the curtain and then into whatever it conceals. This screen has, until now, been mundanely unobtrusive in its presence. The student realises, because of its inconspicuous character, the one place that hasn't been searched is behind this very curtain, and paradoxically, its unobtrusiveness has now become the focus of attention, precisely because it is almost completely obscured behind the wayward stack of furniture.

The student paces anxiously around the studio, knowing that moving all the furniture again would be an arduous task, and there is no way it could be taken on, and that this is a really upsetting thought. The pacing doesn't help because this space which has been opened up has an air of expectance which is profoundly unsettling. The whole room has been disrupted and thrown off balance, re-orientated towards the curtain. Stopping and standing just to the one side of the furniture, the student looks more carefully now and sees a cavity in the structure. Because the bookcase is leaning backwards, it has created a gap just large enough to allow access to the drapery. Without further thought the student picks up the bag-for-life and squeezes inside the gap.

The curtain stretches vertically from ceiling to floor and persistently turns back in on itself in deep regular pleats. Exploring the sensations with quick fingers delving into warm folds (its texture is like velvet but not quite so plush; velour perhaps) the student discovers the point at which the fabric parts, puts a hand through that parting and finds a pane of misted wet glass and then realises there is a need to be less tentative and to push forward by plunging into the concealed cavity on the other side. Holding on to both a lungful of breath and the hope that this might really be the way out, the student squeezes in through the parting.

Standing between the fabric screen and the window: nothing is visible and no handle is evident, just a

wide expanse of glass without edge, a deadening black mirror dripping with condensation. The curtain (which has swelled up and opened like a wave swallowing a weak swimmer) falls closed behind the student who is enveloped inside, so swamped by damp shadows and dust, it's an effort to breathe.

On the threshold of the School, the student attempts to turn. An elbow must have knocked the leg of a table or a chair because the entire stack of furniture shifts, further contracting the space. With some difficulty the student manages to turn around but unable to find the opening that will allow access back into the studio, tries to push the curtain outwards, to get under it. No matter how much fabric is lifted there seems always to be more and a feeling of panic now surfaces. A stream of water all but flows down the window and on to the student's body. The liquid doesn't equate with condensation, it is far in excess of that.

The student wonders if it is possible to drown in a velour curtain, decides it probably isn't, but even if it is, this would be a pathetic end. The hollow centre of the student's stomach turns at the thought that at some point in the development of events a gross strategic error must have been made to have ended up here, trapped by the amassed contents of the room and for this peculiar confinement to be a self-generated space.

The student looks into the bag-for-life, can see the fruit, the glove, the packet of three condoms and the hammer, grabs the tool and has just enough space to swing it back and then thrust it into the glass. The window, the boundary, is so tough that the hammer bounces off the surface, striking the student's head with its claw, causing an excruciating pain. An angry swelling begins to emerge. Instead of stopping there the student slams the hammer against the window a second time. Again it bounces back to meet the same tender spot, this time breaking the skin in two places and drawing blood. Reeling and disorientated but galvanised by anger the student's whole body twists into a final powerful blow. The impact of the hammer is viciously intense but the glass remains stubbornly intact, unlike the student's forehead, which splits open and allows the hammer's claw to puncture epidermis, fracture bone and expose raw tissue. The heavy tool drags at weakened skin and tears a wider wound before it falls to the ground. Crying out and stumbling, caught inside the velour shroud, the student crashes into the stack of furniture that collapses against the curtain and pulls it away from its fixtures so that it tumbles onto the heap. The student slips to the ground with a catastrophic trauma to the head and a grotesquely bloodied face pressed into the impermeable window.

The student is startled to consciousness by a woman's face at close proximity. After all this time spent in unsociable isolation, it's unnerving to meet someone in the studio. A sudden spooky thought that she might be the School Terminator makes the student grope around for the hammer. It must have dropped

somewhere out of sight and this is distressing. It's not in the bag-for-life; there's just the peach, the glove and the condoms. Giving up on the hammer, the student looks at the intruder properly for the first time and is about to ask how she got in, when she interjects.

'Hello. I'm Carole E.' As she advances, her movement reveals the studio door that she must have walked through. She's swinging the hammer at her side. She extends her other hand and holds it in mid air for a second or two before letting it drop to her side. 'There's something wrong with your head. You've a nasty bruise, but it's not too bad. You didn't really dash it repeatedly with this hammer, did you?'

Beyond the wonder of seeing the door on the wall (where it must have been all along), there's the strangeness of another real voice in the studio and then the sight of the weapon in this woman's hand is deeply unnerving, nevertheless the student proffers a reply, 'I'm writing a story about making an object. I don't know if the object is real or not, because it's part of the story... I'm in a great deal of pain. I can't move. I made something out of clay. It might be a sculpture. I have to get out of here, but there's so much furniture on top of me and this grievous injury. Are you going to help me, or hit me?'

She says, 'Not yet. I want you to tell me a story',

'A story! I can't.'

Carole E crouches down, puts one hand on the floor and leans in towards the student. She raises the hammer slowly in her other hand, tips it's head forward, gently draws its cold leaden claw across the delicate skin of the student's throat and whispers, 'Come on, spit it out, or am I going to have to force it out of you?' She laughs. 'I'm joking. I know it's not easy to commit a thought to writing and to say it out loud. With words, there's nowhere to hide, it's all spelt out - text is exposure, so storytelling is precarious. It's also an intimate space - a voice, an ear, a mouth, an aural exchange is made, a proximity is engendered. I totally understand why you feel uncomfortable, but I really want to listen to your stories.'

The student, all-but spits at her: 'A double-bed with an orange bottom sheet covering its mattress, no other bedding, no other furniture in the room - a tongue slowly pulling out of her cunt feeling its way through swells of skin and dampening tufts of hair, now teasing her clit and making it glisten slowly shafting toes stretching backs arching bucking, hands on tits and pricks in holes, eyes wide in the shock of penetration, small half-dead eyes dreaming through it all minds disengaged and bodies entangled all four of them twisted together a woman at the centre of it all, liquid oozes out from deep inside her random four-letter words spill from her mouth reaching for the right word saying, ache sigh gush heat deep seep bite lick suck blow hard want love? No. Come? Oh, yes. And someone watching her silent lower mouth shaping an open vowel, no it's forming a word: more... You didn't like it, did you?'

Carole E had stood up during this narration. She has her hand on her hip and her weight has settled



to that side. With her other hand she keeps a firm grip on the wooden handle as she says, 'I hated the clichéd imagery and felt you weren't in control of the way the narrative drifted into male fantasy... I generally like sensual ideas, but I don't like pornography. Quite apart from any issues of degradation, exploitation and the lack of shared vulnerability, I find it weird that on the face of it, it seems as if nothing is hidden but actually the exposure is limited to the surface of things... Žižek says there's a strange misalignment between our experience of the excessive immediacy of the object world and the arbitrary system of signs that we impose upon it. So indulging in fantasy could be a way of acknowledging the excess that lies behind your words. But your story didn't even work as a fantasy, there's no excitement or mystery, no eroticism. I'm sorry, but it was just a scenario, a dream scene in which you can never go far enough because even that intimate space is polluted by received ideas and conventions. Every attempt to produce something subjective and excessive fails. But it's not about turning people on, is it? It's about writing. Tell me another?'

The student doesn't respond; transfixed by Carole E's presence, and all too aware of the hammer.

Standing still at the centre of the room, Carole E lets them wait in silence for a few moments until she starts speaking, much faster than previously, 'It's like you're trying to produce actual spontaneity in the writing but because you have to overlay it with thought-out words, you inevitably undermine your intentions and gritty verisimilitude isn't an answer either, it's just as absurd as fantasy.'

The student splutters in response, 'Should I just give up then?'

'No! I'm not saying that.' Carole E pauses and moves the tool from one to the other, giving herself a moment to work out what she's trying to say. 'I just mean, what you produce is writing, not fantasy. Although you evoke ideas about what some people might think is erotic, there's no actual touch in your work, no real contact or intimacy, there can't be, it's just words.'

The student's mouth opens and closes in thoughts about the sudden and curious manifestation of Carole E and the door, and then a question emerges, 'So how do you marry a belief in reality with the writing of fiction?'

'The only way I can understand fantastical words and ideas, is as something real, it's just that the nature of their reality is different to an object that has an independent existence.'

The student can't take any of this in. 'I just want your help to get me out of here.'

Carole E nods her head, 'You're half under the desk, but the furniture isn't piled on top of you, and your head wound doesn't look as serious as you make it out to be. It would be easy for you to move... Let me tell you something about objects.'

Finally tossing the hammer aside, she walks over to the desk as she speaks, 'I reckon that the subject

who sees the object as real, doesn't know it's real, but believes in it anyway, whereas the subject who sees the object as fiction, knows it's not real, but believes in it anyway. In sculpture, it's almost as if one can never actually make an object at all, only the fiction that surrounds it.'

Despite what seems like a raw and agonising injury, the student sits up and says, 'You're not making any sense. Why aren't you helping me?'

Bending down to get closer to the student again, Carole E replies, 'I *am* trying to help. I understand your situation. The chairs you sit on, the locker, the cabinet, the desk you write at, even that piece of fruit or the blank void of a sheet of A4, these ordinary things can be extraordinary in their objecthood if you make them believable as such.'

'It's the Final Show and I HAVEN'T MANAGED TO MAKE ANYTHING!' The student, cringes from the pain with this shout.

Carole E breathes in deeply and controls the delivery of her words, 'You're beginning to sound quite pathetic. You've been confined and controlled for a long time, and perhaps that's not such a bad thing. There has to be a withdrawal into a fantasy space before it's possible to create a substitute symbolic reality and to emerge as what might be called a subject. Do you understand?'

'I write!' the student tries to say this with as much triumphant emphasis as can be mustered, but the claim sounds hollow and the words drift away, their connection to meaning not taking purchase. 'My head has literally split open and you're lecturing me about symbolic reality!'

Carole E stands up as though she is about to leave. She kicks the hammer across the room and out of sight. She starts straightening her clothes, putting herself in order and speaks with a pragmatic briskness now. 'You don't have to stay. You exaggerate the extent of your injury. You also underestimate your ability to find a way out of here and make something different of your circumstances. Why not just get up and walk away? Come on. Come with me. Your furniture doesn't care about you.' She again extends a hand down towards the student, a persistent gesture that demands acknowledgement.

The student looks towards Carole E's waiting hand, and is unnerved by the sudden prospect of direct contact with another's skin, the heat of a body, the will and wishes behind it. Desperate to postpone their convergence, the student puts words in the space between them, 'If it wasn't for this mountain of furniture on top of me, the curtain that I'm caught up in and this massive and probably life-threatening laceration on my head, I could be so much more engaged with you.'

'Listen, there's all but a graze on your head. You're under the desk. The curtain's next to you. There's nothing actually preventing you from standing up and getting out of here.'

'The pain's getting worse. I think the wound is spreading, it's developing into something far more

serious... something sinister.'

'That's your fantasy.'

'I think there must be internal bleeding... possibly haemorrhaging.'

'I promise you, it really is only a surface wound.'

Carole E retrieves the uppermost sheets of typed-up stories from the studio floor and thrusts them towards the student, who instinctively shrinks from the advance. She pushes the paper into the student's hand and says, 'If you're going to tell me stories, you may as well read me your latest one. Read it out loud.'

The student grips the paper, gazes at the words and starts to read, 'Out', and then looks up from the page to say, 'It's a fictional construction.'

'Go ahead... I'm listening.'

## Out

I can't get up off the floor and out of the School because I'm virtually incapacitated by this prodigious head wound, the weight of furniture amassed on top of me, and all this plus the thickly oppressive curtain, swathing everything darkly.

I'm damaged, still and horizontal on the ground. I feel pessimistic. The wound continues to spread in its monstrosity; such a brutal gash might tear through my entire body. It inflames into a raging, demanding body in itself, a new sick being to which I am the impotent host. Here in the dark weirdly the wound starts to suck the strength from my body. As my frailty increases I sense its form develop alongside me. The wound builds its vigour by drawing on my worsening pain. I can just begin to distinguish its form more clearly now. It's an entirely repulsive pulpy mass of soft tissue, and still in the process of growing. In place of a mouth, a pulsating purple vein split half-open, spitting. Without warning the wound extends a hand as if by way of a greeting. It is a real hand with horribly substantial fingers emerging one by one. I can't make direct contact with that hand. I reach instead into the bag-for-life.

Everything in the bag is wet. I grasp the sodden fingers of the woollen glove. Although very pleased to have the glove at the ready, increasing weakness makes the action of putting it on physically challenging. The distressingly heavy clamminess of wet wool as it drags against my skin and the clinging prickle of the fibres is unbearable. I let the glove go. I speak with desperately rambling words, 'Is this it? Are you the extent of my imagination? Is this really it?' I hear a hideously throaty gurgle; the sick fucker's laughing at me, its veins buckle and tear, spilling blood. Fuelled by my anger and disgust, I push against the weight constraining me. Nothing seems to move. I try to stand again, but I can't get out. There's a voice in my head, Carole E's voice, spurring me on. I look directly ahead and can see the studio door and a clear path in front of me. I try again. There's a gradual shift, an easing of the pressure, and I finally drag myself from under the mound of furnishings, leaving the wound behind, and keeping hold of the bag-for-life.

I walk unsteadily across the studio, my legs are weak and my head pounds, but I'm determined. I stand by the door, breathless, touching the cool institutional handle and then I stop. I put my hand inside the bag-for-life and grasp the wet clay ball for the last time. Having spent too long submerged in water, it is now only about half its former size. I attempt to rescue it from the bag, instantly bursting it in my palm, destroying its coherence. It has all but disintegrated. As just a clump of muddy remains, the clay now feels like a more vulnerable material. In this ill-defined state it hovers, between being a thing and not being anything. Battered and misshapen, it's waiting to be re-formed, to signify something. But I don't want the clay to solidify into a representational form. I'm playing with it, enjoying the squeeze and squelch. This desire to keep the object

in action takes shape as a movement, a shifting of the matter from hand to hand, an anxious energy that sees the clay hardening, warming-up and then cooling, sticky and sensual.

My jaw stretches wide-open, the clay goes in and one hand begins to pull it out and then push it back again. My mouth slips indulgently, provocatively, up and down over its licked-wet surface, saliva forming a slimy film that masks the dirty taste of mud. Wondering if it would be suicidal to eat half a kilo of clay, I guess just one mouthful would be enough to choke on, and it would be the stupidity of the biting and choking that might give the act transformative meaning. I sink my teeth into it and bite off a great chunk causing a glutinous burst of mineral earthiness to surge towards my throat. I pause, slightly shocked, considering whether to spit or swallow.

The action ends with a clod stuck between my jaws. It's cold and abstract but it feels like a practice that needs to be expanded on, maybe even shared. If only there was another mouth available I would press our lips together and expel the earthy clump of gob down that other person's throat. I gulp the clay down and it lands in my gut, filling the hungry space, just as the door of the locker opens and Z steps out.

My stomach contracts with the surprise, forcing the clay up and out in a warm brown projectile, a direct hit to his face. Unable to take the next step, unsupported, his hand touches my skin, and I'm taken-a-back by the casualness of its contact. I can't figure it out yet, I mean what he's trying to do, whether he's trying to do anything or not, but everything just happens like it's natural to touch another person, inside, but we might be outside and he takes my packet-of-three and he says something like it's natural. The way he carefully turns my cold clenched fist over, I've never felt anything like that, the finger by finger opening of my hand and the placing of the soft fruit in my palm, that's what it feels like, warm.

Hand opens with another's hand, soft fruit in-between, shallow breathing formless. He notes my loss of composure.

He asks me, 'What made you come?' He asks again, more tenderly 'What made you come here?'

And I try to explain, but the narrative is fractured and I falter over the choice of words. I'm too busy watching his hand on mine to speak or to realise I'm through.

He says, 'Here take this, you'll need it.'

Without knowing how it's happened, I've got it deep inside, he's gone and I'm out.

INTERMEDIATE LAYER

THE STUDIO

## Writing With Found Objects and Imagined Sculpture

Now that the student has left the School, the objects in the studio are without their point of reference, shifting the circumstantial characterisation of the scenario to one of absence, remnants and traces. The student left with all of the printed writing that comprised the story and the fantasies so far. But there is a parallel text, evidently gradually accumulated by the student as a second attempt at producing an essay. It is a collection of notes, draft emails and letters, speculations and narratives that amounts to a summary of the student's practice - a self-contained text on writing and storytelling as a sculptural activity. This work, that might be considered a concluding essay, has been left behind, on the screen of the abandoned laptop:

**the student > desktop > essay > draft emails and letters**

### DRAFT LETTER TO A JOURNAL

I write this letter in response to the recent article 'The Art of Literary Art.'<sup>18</sup> Your article is at fault, but I hold my objections in reserve until the end of this message. I do not write to contend the essence of your argument, as we fundamentally agree. I acknowledge that you eloquently convey the pitfalls of literary art for both art and literature. Yes, literary content in art can become a shallow use of words as signs that are unproblematically self-referential, giving the word equivalence to the thing. And visual art can seem superfluous to a linguistic content that speaks over and above it. You go on to speculate on the benefits of literary art as you move neatly through examples of artists that have exploited the clash of cultures such as Lawrence Weiner, Frances Stark and Becky Beasley (fig. a).

You draw attention to the work of Weiner and you reflect on his assertion that his statements are '... functional purveyors of ideas... rather than signifiers inflected by a traditional literary culture.' There is an extended discussion of this same issue in the catalogue for Weiner's *As Far As The Eye Can See*. Weiner's text is seen as distinctly different from writing that attempts to create imagined objects for the reader

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<sup>18</sup> Prince, Mark, 'The Art of Literary Art', *Art Monthly*, no.338, July-August, 2010

because he '... stops short of suggesting a specific image'.<sup>19</sup> In other words, he doesn't attempt to represent a separate entity that is drawn in words, instead, the words are the object. It is suggested that Weiner's statements '... are not literary, since literariness means that language, in its performance, primarily refers to itself before it speaks of an object...'<sup>20</sup> But Weiner's argument is difficult to maintain, as he uses highly stylised specific combinations of words to suggest and present sculpture. You rightly ask, 'How different is this projection of an imagined reality through language from that found in poetic imagery?' His practice may refer to itself as sculpture, but it does so with words, and as you say, '... the line's authority derives as much from the fine-tunings of poetry... as from language embodying and prescribing a putative action.' In this way, Weiner suggests that sculpture is either in the mind of the viewer/reader if the work is literary, or in the physical words if the work is sculpture. Surely this is a dualistic position, when sculpture (like writing) can be both in the mind and in the words, simultaneously literary and visual/sensual – but I'll return to this point later.<sup>21</sup>

Before I come to my complaint, I note that the conceptual rejection of the literary in favour of the pragmatic captures your interest, although you do not mention Art & Language or Charles Harrison's text on the relative unproductiveness of dismantling categories.<sup>22</sup> Harrison writes, '... the possibility of artist's writing as art may depend on its being significantly rooted in artistic traditions as distinct from established documentary genres or literary traditions or traditions of theatrical experiment.'<sup>23</sup> It is not just that art uses words, but that art is able to assert and promote its own critical identity by taking control of its language.<sup>24</sup> Harrison astutely observes how in by-passing the medium's practical limits, the artist can potentially extend art's criticality whilst

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<sup>19</sup> Donna De Salvo, 'As Far As the Eye Can See', in Donna De Salvo and Ann Goldstein, *Lawrence Weiner: As Far As the Eye Can See*, Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, 2007, p.70

<sup>20</sup> Dieter Schwarz, 'The Metaphor Problem, Again and Again: Books and Other Things by Lawrence Weiner', in *ibid.* p.178

<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that Weiner's later works are resigned to their poetry and literariness.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001. Harrison sub-divides artists' writing under three headings '... writing conceived as documentary accompaniment to artistic practice, writing conceived as literature, and writing conceived as art.' p.3.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* p.27-8

<sup>24</sup> Harrison writes mainly about critical artist's writing and describes it as '...not straightforwardly an injection of language into art, but a militant assertion of art's implication in its own distributive and promotional structures, and of its adjacency to and implication in text – starting with those texts by which art's own expressive capacity and value were increasingly established.' *ibid.* p.21. See also Terry Atkinson writing that genre transgressing writing by artists is not simply, '... a matter of a transfer of function from that of artist to that of art theoretician, it has necessarily involved the intention of the artist to count various theoretical constructs as artworks... If this is taken up it usually means that the definition of art is expanded...' Terry Atkinson, 'Introduction', *Art-Language: The Journal of Conceptual Art, Vol. 1*, (May 1969), reprinted in Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1972, p.11. See also Joost de Bloois, 'The Artists Formerly Known As... Or, The Loose End Of Conceptual Art And The Possibilities Of 'Visual Autofiction'', in *Image and Narrative*, Issue 19, November 2007



maintaining a distinct character, as art.<sup>25</sup> But he goes on to brush aside literary writing as attempts to unite writing and visuality in the form of 'mental images.'<sup>26</sup> He says this as though literary art is an attempt to 'unite' instead of a utilising of language. Harrison likes the idea that writing conceived as art can also be critical or academic (e.g. *Art-Language*) but seems reluctant to apply the same to literary art. At least you suggest that 'Perhaps art has become a site for literary activity in order to fulfil a desire for a fully evolved narrative vehicle as opposed to... neat bundles of signs...' And I would add that, whilst critical and/or literary language extends the possibilities of art, the option of using literary language in writing conceived as art, should not be limited to voices that conform to the literary establishment and received conventions that might give 'literary' work a reputation of being uncritical. As things are, there is an unspoken understanding that links literary status to a privileged class. This has to change. Good writing is literate.

Having said all the above I now have to wonder if it would not be possible to employ your contention on literary art as a way of deconstructing your article from within? Is there not a problem with critical commentary, in that it presents its form as a neutral medium for content, somehow removed from the debates above? Your writing is a highly controlled literary, visual and material entity. The article is typeset according to the reprographic constraints of the journal itself, where even the typeface rigidly conforms as 'Art Monthly Serif'. The journal's content might be monotone, but that is an aesthetic choice in itself with its own visual fetish for the black ink, that aligns it with 'highbrow' journals and setting it apart from the easy-fix, colour-saturated glamour of glossier magazines. I think you're probably right that contemporary culture elevates 'information over perception' and, not just visual media in general, but 'digital images over the more demanding imaginative resources of language.' But you put your argument across precisely within the terms of your own and wider cultural conventions. There's a digital image on every page of your article, presumably to aid the descriptive language, and the vast quantity of information and facts enumerated in the text is an inevitable compromise. Your article works within a journalistic vernacular that approaches the object from the outside. Perhaps critical writing should acknowledge its own 'literariness' and visuality/sensuousness, and instead of attempting to just refer to objects from a transcendent position, it could address its own objecthood.

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001, p.19

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p.34

**the student > desktop > essay > draft emails and letters**

Dear Z,

I'm writing another essay, and I'm excited about it - after all the wrestling with ideas and fantasy scenarios around the objects in this studio, I'm convinced that there must be a way of writing that creates the object in the story. What I mean is, I want to write to produce the object - not just the material of the paper or the typesetting, but the story itself and the telling of it. I'm beginning with my notes on fantasy to narrate a methodical mode, and then I'll open it out from there.

And on the other side of this, beyond this essay, and out of the School, there's the prospect of you as no longer a mere apparitional manifestation of my confinement among these furnishings. I will sit here and write, between the desk and the doorway; between the grey A4 landscape of the laptop screen and the golden horizon of my departure. I imagine that we'll meet out in the open, in a boundless and unfurnished space.

**the student > desktop > essay > fantasy and imagination**

## NOTES ON FANTASY AND IMAGINATION

Fantasy, as a form of storytelling, pursues imaginative conceptualising beyond the everyday, without necessarily freewheeling into the transcendence of the surreal. Rather, it may venture through the extraordinary in the real.

Routine thought is augmented by fantasy, as Mary Warnock explains: in order to interpret the world, thinking has to be imaginative. She writes, 'Interpretation can be common to everyone, and in this case ordinary, or it can be inventive, personal and revolutionary. So imagination is necessary, I have suggested, to enable us to recognise things in the world as familiar, to take for granted features of the world which we need to take for granted and rely on, if we are to go about our ordinary business; but it is also necessary if we are to see the

world as significant of something unfamiliar, if we are ever to treat the objects of perception as symbolizing or suggesting things other than themselves.'<sup>27</sup>

This is my understanding of Warnock's assertion: Objective reality would be meaningless if we moved through it as cameras do, simply reflecting the object as an impression, or a non-epistemic perception. We understand objects as 'suggesting things other than themselves' because we see through a complex process of interpretation, using words, experiences, connections, memories, everyday associations and eccentric speculations. Perception necessarily involves such imaginative conceptualisation, (even to allow us to believe in the continuing presence of things when they are not looked at) and all of it contingent upon our particular state of mind at the moment of perception and the contextual specificity of the object's site. Although fantastical thinking may move towards the extremes of the imagination, it is still part of real and habitual perceptual activity.

At the core of my writing, many of the fantasy elements revolve around Slavoj Žižek and his ideas. What follows are notes on fantasy written in reference to how these elements interrelate. I have developed this text in five 'movements' as an example of a methodological process alongside the evolution from a theoretical interpretation of fantasy, to a fantastical re-interpretation of theory. Before and beyond these movements, there is a meta-narrative, a space and a practice within which such ideas and stories might be inserted.

## **Movement I: Direct Citation**

### **Slavoj Žižek's Concept Of Fantasy:**

a. '... how does an empirical, positively given object become an object of desire; how does it begin to contain some X, some unknown quality, something which is "in it more than it" and makes it worthy of our desire? By entering the framework of fantasy, by being included in a fantasy-scene which gives consistency to the subject's desire.'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Mary Warnock, *Imagination*, London: Faber and Faber, 1976, p.10

<sup>28</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989, p.119

b. 'In "traversing the fantasy" we do not learn to suspend our phantasmagorical productions - on the contrary, we identify with the work of our "imagination" even more radically, in all its inconsistency - that is to say, prior to its transformation into the phantasmic frame that guarantees our access to reality.'<sup>29</sup>

c. '... in the opposition between dream and reality, fantasy is on the side of reality: it is, as Lacan once said, the support that gives consistency to what we call "reality"... "Reality" is a fantasy-construction which enables us to mask the Real of our desire.'<sup>30</sup>

d. 'The pervert is thus the "inherent transgressor" *par excellence*: he brings to light, stages, practises the secret fantasies that sustain the predominant public discourse...'<sup>31</sup>

'... the power edifice... has to rely on an inherent excess [a fantasy] which grounds it... Power is always-already its own transgression, if is to function, it has to rely on an obscene supplement.'<sup>32</sup>

'... the relationship between prohibition and desire is circular, and one of absolute immanence: power and resistance (counter-power) presuppose and generate each other - that is, the very prohibitive measures that categorize and regulate illicit desires effectively generate them.'<sup>33</sup>

e. '... there is no subject prior to the Institution (prior to language as the ultimate institution): subjectivity is produced as the void in the very submission of the life-substance of the Real to the Institution... An interpellation succeeds precisely when I perceive myself as not only "that" but "a complex person who, among other things, is also that" - in short, imaginary distance towards symbolic identification is the very sign of its success.'<sup>34</sup>

f. '... what we call "reality" implies the surplus of a fantasy space filling out the "black hole" of the real.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London: Verso, 1999, p.51

<sup>30</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989, p.44-5

<sup>31</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London: Verso, 1999, p.248

<sup>32</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, London: Verso, 1997, p.26

<sup>33</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London: Verso, 1999, p.251.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* p.258

<sup>35</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991, p.viii

'... everyday reality... turns out to be an illusion that rests on a certain "repression", on overlooking the real of our desire. This social reality is then nothing but a fragile symbolic cobweb, that can at any moment be torn aside by an intrusion of the real.'<sup>36</sup>

'... reality is never directly "itself", it presents itself only via its incomplete - failed symbolisation, and spectral apparitions emerge in this very gap that forever separates reality from the Real, and on account of which reality has the character of a (symbolic) fiction: the spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality.'<sup>37</sup>

g. '... what fantasy stages is not a scene in which our desire is fulfilled, fully satisfied, but on the contrary, a scene that realises, stages the desire as such. The fundamental point of psychoanalysis is that desire is not something that is given in advance, but something that has to be constructed - and it is precisely the role of fantasy to give the coordinates of the subject's desire, to specify its object, to locate the position the subject assumes in it. It is only through fantasy that the subject is constituted as desiring: through fantasy we learn how to desire.'<sup>38</sup>

## Movement 2: Direct Interpretation

**An Interpretation Of The Above Citations in the context of a broader reading of Žižek's texts.**

a. Fantasy is not where we fulfil our desires. Fantasy is the process by which we transform everyday things into objects of desire. An excess of imagination in relationship to the object is a strategy that masks the trauma of loss (of the mother) that cannot be symbolised. We reconfigure this loss into desire in the fantasy-scene that we create.

b. We can interpret symptoms (like slips of the tongue) through psychoanalysis, but fantasy cannot be interpreted or fully explained in language, rather it is moved through or traversed. For Žižek, after Lacan,

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p.17

<sup>37</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, London: Continuum, 2005, p.241

<sup>38</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991, p.6

'traversing the fantasy' is the passage the subject goes through by experiencing how fantasy translates the traumatic into a fantasmic part of reality.

c. The idea that fantasy supports reality is one of Žižek's key assertions on this subject. This is not to say that reality is a dream, but rather that it is only in dreams that we are exposed to what is Real - our real desires, while reality is based on a fantasy that we are not aware of. It is not that we want to evade reality by dreaming, on the contrary, we actually invent a fantasy reality in order to escape the terrifying Real of our dreams.

d. Perversion is socially constructive in that fantasy sustains the dominant order by being its obscene supplement. This is a typical Žižekian inverted formula. Fantasy is essential to the socio-ideological edifice because it provides the element that does not fit into the social, thus defining everything else as normal. Fantasy is conventionally portrayed as something that is hidden, but it is this very notion of repression that eroticises fantasy. In this way fantasy becomes the other to the dominant social order. This very otherness sustains the dominant order by defining it as normal and fantasy as pathological. The dominant order needs fantasy to sustain its edifice of normality.<sup>39</sup>

e. A sign that interpellation by the institution is really successful is if one succumbs to the fantasy that one is not fully interpellated. The very act of declaring an awareness of one's own condition indicates that one is under the illusion that there is an outside of the institution – which is precisely what the institution wants you to think. The institution is at its most powerful when one thinks one has a degree of freedom. By writing in reference to the institution the writer simply proves how powerful the institution is and confirms the power of the prohibitive authority by presupposing it.

f. Without a constructed symbolic fiction we are left with a psychotic void. What we consider to be everyday social reality is actually just this symbolic fiction. At its extreme, this fiction becomes more spectral, a fantasy used in an attempt to cover what is chaotic and antisocial - the void of the real.

g. Fantasy teaches us how to desire, it provides the story through which desire is told.

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<sup>39</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol.3: The Care of the Self*, London: Penguin Books, 1990 and *Discipline and Punish*, London: Penguin, 1991. For Foucault, the technologies of domination repress the body and produce discourses of sexuality and the discursive subject of (subject to) power.

### Movement 3: The Above Enumeration Expressed As A Paragraph

What we consider to be objective social reality is actually just a symbolic fiction that we create in order to make sense of what is outside of, or before, or cannot be symbolised as part of the social. However, as it is not possible to use everyday fiction to completely repress the organic immediacy of the excessive, we deal with the surplus by imposing a spectral fantasy on it - to quote Žižek '... the spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality.'<sup>40</sup> We do not get what we desire in our fantasies, rather they are constructions that teach us how to desire. This fantastical spectral dimension is not a threat to the symbolic order, it is essential to it, because it provides the excessive abnormal element that makes everything else (the symbolic fiction) seem normal. The strategic deployment of fantasy and excess simply affirms the dominance of the power structure. Knowledge of the above does not result in greater freedom unless we withdraw from the narrative of reality, in which case we enter a dark and psychotic void.

### Movement 4: Indirect Interpretation

#### The Above Paragraph, Developed As A Story

Žižek's body is sitting in his office in the university, but his mind has drifted into semi-conscious thoughts about the objects that surround him: books, a computer, a printer, a table, a chair, a cupboard and so on. These things are part of what defines his role in this place. Everything has a story that contextualises it into his life, culminating in being here in the present - it all adds up. But not quite. Try as he might, there remains a surplus of stuff/things/matter that he cannot explain, contain or narrativise. Something does not fit, and to have caused such a disturbance, whatever it is must be very nearby, touching him even. He draws himself upright and begins to focus on the objects around him - looking for the cause of his disturbance. The slight shift of his position makes him aware of insistent indentations in the upholstered leather seat of the chair he's sitting on. The impression is not of his own form, instead, he can clearly detect the hollows made by some previous and uninvited occupant's backside. The sensation is not just of a warm seat, which would only make for a transient discomfort. Rather, what he cannot accept is the shape of the other's buttocks, the concave and double-domed impression of which now intrudes and irritates, bringing the disgusting excess of a stranger's body into intimate proximity with his own. Finding this unbearable, he turns the chair upside-down and uses his feet to expel the cushioned seat from its slot – it takes several hard kicks before it eventually pops out and on to the floor. He turns the chair back over and is confronted by a hole to sit on. He places the file over the hole in the chair, sits on it and briefly attempts to pretend that he is at ease, but it is

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<sup>40</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, London: Continuum, 2005, p.241

intensely uncomfortable and makes his body impractically high in relation to the desk. He wants to believe he has defeated the expectations of his context but he is now outside of a logical place. Try as he might, he is confronted by the reality that this precarious perch is not conducive to a sustained period of typing. He quietly picks up the seat, replaces it in the chair and just as he resigns himself to its concave depressions he discovers, to his delight, that the damage done by his foot has inverted the indents, all but eradicating the impression of the previous sitter. With spirits lifted, Žižek can now indulge in the fantasy that the chair is used by him alone.

## Movement 5: Storytelling And Theoretical Citation

### A Reconfiguration Of Stages 1-4

Žižek wakes in his bedroom following a distressing dream in which an array of potent terms bombarded his head with daunting imagery: The Real. Filling-out. Fantasy. Implication. Black hole. Reality. Surplus. He half-hears their discontinuous utterance like a rumour that threatens to expose the truth about his chaotic state of mind. To escape his dream, he must reconfigure these words into an imaginary form, a fantasy that will confirm his authoritative position in the institution. He springs from his repose, grasps a pen and notepad and, for fear of losing his dream thoughts in the gap between sleep and wakefulness, he rapidly scribbles them across page. With the notepad still in hand, he pulls on his clothes over yesterday's underwear and rushes along the street, across the road and into his university office. He immediately notices that, in his absence, things have been moved on his desk and it is a violation that prompts him to think of a different cluster of words - abusive ones that he could scratch into the surface of the desk - but his own theory tells him that the power edifice depends on such excessive behaviour to confirm its authority. Instead he begins translating from notepad to laptop and arranges the jumble of words into a sentence: 'The Real is a black hole, treacherous, outside of symbolisation and unimaginable, must be avoided, construction of reality does this, reality as fantasy hiding the unimaginable.' And a second attempt says: '... what we call 'reality' implies the surplus of a fantasy space filling out the 'black hole' of the real.'<sup>41</sup> Pleased with this, Žižek snaps the computer shut, picks it up and runs from his office, out of the university, across the road and back along the street to his room where he gets into bed, fully clothed, still clutching his laptop. He drifts anxiously into his dreams, slipping away from his sense of satisfaction. The fleeting image of the words arranged in this precise formulation sounds credible, he thinks, but a spectre haunts him and it is an ashen echo of his own face, blighted by the awareness that he depends upon a fragile symbolic delusion: a fantasy.

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<sup>41</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991, p.viii



the student > desktop > essay > art

## NOTES ON WRITING AND STORYTELLING AS ART

The found object is a particularly appropriate interest for artist's writing because there is a tension between the absence and presence of the object as artwork. In the same way that Jorge Pardo's lampshades or Richard Woods' floors are made as artist's works that become design, writing by artists is capable of disappearing into literature (figs. b and c). If an extensive text in the form of a book written by an artist is on a plinth in a gallery, it is out of action. But if that publication is in a bookshop it operates as book, i.e. part of the everyday. When it is read, the artwork should appear, and then disappear as it merges back into non-art on a shelf. The lampshades, the floors and the book are not simultaneously art and non-art, but they are always capable of being either. These works are made, then lost and found again. They might remind us that we make the world.

A story may create imagined objects. This is obvious. The imagined object is not a single statement, but is part of storytelling in fictional narrative. The imagined object is neither given three-dimensional presence nor depicted through drawing, but is formed in the imagination of the reader. Is it possible that the imaginative realisation of an object, rather than as something fully present in the world, may involve an intensive pursuit of the idea of its physicality? And if so, when relocating the physical object in writing, the manifest sculptural object could be replaced by a need for that object. In this way, the object may be an objective. Accordingly, sensual deprivation, hermetic isolation, plus a shift away from conventional sculptural practice could relocate and reconfigure the object as a visceral engagement with materiality. Indeed, in the writing of Stewart Home, Kathy Acker, Tom McCarthy there is an intensity in the presentation of physicality and sensual experiences, and a preoccupation with the voluptuous bodily presence of the object (their descriptions of the protagonist in the urban terrain figs. d, e and f). Check to see if this idea resonates with Barthes' 'language lined with flesh' or the 'voluptuousness of vowels', and if his reference to the bodily exertion of the voice finds analogous practice in the visceral impact of the words in the reader's imagination. Barthes refers to making language rather than meaning. Kathy Acker appears to do just this, to assert the incidents of collections of words over and above the narrative; Tom McCarthy is conventional by comparison - although he writes of material trauma, he does so with a voice that conforms to the established standards of structured and controlled novelistic formality; Stewart Home always has a strong narrative drive, and the many depictions of graphic sex in his writing are not indulged in as sensuous description, in fact, having searched carefully through

many of his books, I find that he writes with an insistently everyday style. It is not visceral material description that gives the language impact, it is rather his non-conformity and what looks like informality (but is obviously skilfully constructed) - that is discordant and provocative as a literary voice, making the writing materially assertive in the novel format. The voice is part of Home's practice. He performs his work in the context of art practices and institutions. Rather than reading, he recites the text from memory, shifting the literary address into a performance. Home produces many of his books by appropriating words, such as Victorian pornography and spam emails, which are found objects, re-used and arranged to form and thicken the textuality of the writing. This is consistent with his work in *Smile* (e.g. issues 9 and 10), the magazine of multiple origins - he is the key contributor but the content seeks to deny any particular authorial identity. These are dense publications, they mix humorous anti-establishment proclamations with art historical citation and storytelling.

Peter Osborne: 'The making of art in the form of written or printed texts might seem like a simple change of activity: from "art" (and artefactuality) to "literature", but this fails to grasp the peculiar function of texts in the institutional context of visual art. Texts acquire new, and inherently unstable, artistic and cultural functions by being placed in the spaces of art, and claimed as themselves artworks. How they function there is as much a product of the rules and critical orthodoxies governing such spaces, as it is of the character of the texts themselves.'<sup>42</sup>

A discordant practice may be dependent on its opposition to apparent constraints. Osborne sites textual work within its context: it is the 'Institution' that provides the imperative to produce the text, and it is the judgement passed by that institution that defines the work as text, or artwork, or both (or neither). Although Osborne's analysis declares artists' writing as 'unstable', this instability is not only in the conventions of writing itself. It is possible that the meaning/function of the context could be destabilised too, if it has to redefine its boundaries in order to accommodate the object. Lindsay Seers, Mike Nelson and Ilya Kabakov, tend to work with institutions but they exploit them to construct the necessary physical conditions for the encounter with a specific story.

The organisation of spaces for writing and reading is both a narrative process in-itself and a formal sculptural process. Notice how objects are placed, one after another, and the arrangement of objects in a room is

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<sup>42</sup> Peter Osborne (ed.), *Conceptual Art*, London: Phaidon, 2002, p.27

something that unfolds, like storytelling. And for the sculptor who writes, it is not insignificant that narrative trajectory has a shape.

#### MULTIPLE LINES LAYERED ONE ON TOP OF THE OTHER

The convention of stories within stories utilises parallel meanings across stratified spaces, as in the work of Jorge Luis Borges (return to Borges) or in a journey through the architectural and decorative accretion within The John Soane Museum.

#### A SERPENTINE LINE

The squiggly course of a narrative, as illustrated in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

#### A STRAIGHT PERPENDICULAR LINE

Joseph Torra's uncompromising spatial assertion of the continuous sentence as the formal embodiment of the first-person monologue.<sup>43</sup>

#### A DISCONTINUOUS/ DASHED LINE

Every story has a form, even where the narrative is non-linear and fragmented, as in Kathy Acker's writing.

### the student > desktop > essay > draft emails and letters

Dear Z,

I've just been looking at Barthes', *The Pleasure of the Text*. It's a deceptively diminutive book, seemingly slight and fractured but brimming with the potent energy of its words. In the final paragraph, on the very last page, Barthes makes reference to 'the grain of the voice'. I read the passage out loud to the room, projecting my voice beyond the page: 'Writing aloud is not expressive; it leaves expression to the pheno-text, to the regular code of communication; it belongs to the geno-text, to significance; it is carried not by dramatic inflections, subtle stresses, sympathetic accents, but by the *grain* of the voice, which is an erotic mixture of timbre and

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<sup>43</sup> Joseph Torra, *Tony Luongo*, London: Victor Gollanz, 2000

language, and can therefore also be, along with diction, the substance of an art...<sup>44</sup> I stopped and then re-read the passage, this time with dramatic emphasis and emotive inflection, directly counterposing the direction of the text. I'm not an actor. Whatever I said in my melodramatic performance was obscured behind my exaggerated and theatrical delivery. Feeling the rasp in my throat, I lifted the book closer to my face and lowered my voice as I continued to read from a little further on in the paragraph. These quieter sounds reverberated off the page in a more intimate recitation, '... the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language.' I stopped here. When Barthes talks about language being 'lined with flesh' he creates a visceral depiction of the voice as a substance in art. He's saying that the medium of storytelling is not neutral - it's a material presence. I need to practice my grainy voice and I'll use it when we're together.

the student > desktop > essay > the voice

## ON STORYTELLING WITH THE VOICE

Is the voice not located in a specific spatial context as well as the body?

Louis Marin: 'The oral-aural emission and reception, the narrative's formal expression is connected to the form of its content by a strict semiotic function. What the narrative will say - the very signification of what will be told is necessarily related to the very specific mode of saying and listening - that is of expectation and possible surprise. It is in this way that narrative space is the contingency of events par excellence.'<sup>45</sup> In other words, the presence of a live speaker produces a particularly provocative and expectant environment, where the what's-going-to-happen-next quality of narrative is heightened. The listener expects the story to be unexpected and contingent.

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<sup>44</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, p66

<sup>45</sup> Louis Marin, *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*, New York: Humanity Books, 1984, p.33

Marin points out the obvious in some ways: storytelling is not just the projection of the speaker, it is also the reception of the listener and the space in which it is told. (This might resonate with the idea of diegesis - the telling of a narrative to an audience in a particular space. I reckon a diegesis may even be a performance if it is theatrical, or, as a simple reading, it could be 'performative' - where it uses the voice and the story to intervene in the space of its pronouncement and allows that space to impact back and resonate through the story.)

In her 1975 performance, *Interior Scroll*<sup>46</sup>, Carolee Schneemann stands naked on stage, daubs herself with paint, then extracts a length of paper from her vagina. She reads aloud from the text written on the paper; she does this whilst continuing to pull it out of her body. The text consists of fragments of a conversation between herself and a filmmaker. The text, written by Schneemann, relates ideas promoting the male as logical and theorised in comparison to the identification of the female with emotion and intuition. Perhaps part of what dates Schneemann's work is the didactic demonstration of the body as the source of female creativity. She uses an emotive and intuitive physical display, but simultaneously gives a powerfully authoritative performance through her absolute control of text and the space. Schneemann combines the tension and vulnerability of her exposed presence with the unpredictability of the live event.

Tris Vonna-Michell writes and tells stories to a live audience. Vonna-Michell's work consists of first-person autobiographically referenced writings, memorised and rapidly delivered in breathless and agitated live instalments (fig. g). Visual props and small mementos are used in the performances such as egg-timers, photographs, slides and cassette recordings. It is purposefully unclear if these objects bare any evidential relation to the story told. The writing is printed into book sections of just a few pages each, undermining the fixity of material form through its partiality and its give-away status. This is fiction writing and reading but also artefact, read within the gallery and formed as spatially referenced narrative, saturated with a critical awareness of the contingency of the word as an object among other precarious objects.

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<sup>46</sup> Carolee Schneeman, *Interior Scroll*, performed at *Women Here and Now*, East Hampton, New York, August 1975.

the student > desktop > essay > draft emails and letters

Dear Z,

It's becoming apparent that dispersal is integral to the writing of my essay, and this lack of centre threatens a potentially catastrophic loss of composure for the text. I find it useful to think that the reader '... engages with the artifice of its linguistic expression as a condition of engaging with its argument... the essayistic work of art develops in practice, its surface elaborates a reflexive account of its own life as representation, and of the complex dialectical relationship between imagined reality and material genre.'<sup>47</sup> So I'm pursuing my various notes towards an essay with the belief that it will at some point coalesce, like the point at which a provisional collection of material can be called an object. I know it will still be a gathering of fragments and I don't want to overburden the audience with a scattering of self-indulgent samples of writing accompanied by a self-conscious apologetic introduction. Equally I can't patronise them by imposing a false unity on the text. I think I have to grasp the moment, grip the lead before coherence collapses. There's something else that's odd - I've been trying to piece together all my fantasmic thoughts, but you are absent from them. Where the hell are you?

the student > desktop > essay > the elaborated scenario

## STORYTELLING AND THE ELABORATED SCENARIO

*Everything is True, Nothing is Permitted*.<sup>48</sup> Refer to Mike Nelson (figs. h and i). A labyrinthine series of rooms, each an elaboration of a space evoked by a *Lonely Planet* guide to a state that no longer exists. The narrative extends to the book that accompanies the show - *A Forgotten Kingdom*<sup>49</sup> is a collection of short stories by other writers, pieced together with contents pages, bibliography, index etc from a series of different books. The writing is formed from found words to parallel the installation formed from found objects. Unlike Joseph Kosuth's hands-off presentation of found materials, Nelson clearly invests in the craft bringing objects

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<sup>47</sup> Charles Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001, p.8

<sup>48</sup> Mike Nelson *Everything is True, Nothing is Permitted*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2001

<sup>49</sup> Mike Nelson, *A Forgotten Kingdom*, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2001

together. The meticulous fabrication of environments for characters extracted from stories about lost places is metaphorically extended through the dislocating experience of the spectator moving through the book and/or the installation. This is reminiscent of the way Marin describes the work of fiction that has an extended formal presence '... on the level of the visible and readable the utopic schema is a 'producing product', an activity of fiction that is marked out and inscribed in the space of a discourse tied to spatial organization.'<sup>50</sup> Nelson conceptualises a spatially referenced narrative, and the space in turn, informs the story.

Ilya Kabakov's *The Untalented Artist and Other Characters*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1989. Kabakov's characters are developed through a reciprocal relationship with an unfolded context (figs. j and k). 'Each of Kabakov's installations tells a story, and in almost every case it is the tale of an isolated figure in an uncomfortable, menacing environment. The relationship with their surroundings is shown as an agonistic one: the character makes ironic his environment, and the environment reciprocates. The two levels of irony are generally witty, but their interplay is melancholic.'<sup>51</sup> Kabakov's fictional texts about the peculiar social constraints on the individual people dealing with life in restricted spaces, are activated within installations, and spaces, and their objects are in turn activated by writing. In tandem, Kabakov's *Ten Characters/ Albums*, are a series of stories presented as boxed, loose-leaf drawings. These 'albums' combine image and text in a more standard way for the artist to employ literary form than the mise en scene of his constructions which use the devices of theatre and literature to create space for a multiplicity of voices. Refer to Claire Bishop's exposition on Kabakov: he sees his work as 'total installation' because the viewer is immersed in a scene. He calls viewers 'actors' because his work is both 'theatrical' and literary. By creating the mise en scène as an element of storytelling, his work is like a book or a play or a dream into which the viewer/reader becomes psychologically absorbed.<sup>52</sup> (In a way, Kabakov reconstructs what Žižek describes as the 'fragile symbolic cobweb, that can at any moment be torn aside by an intrusion of the real.'<sup>53</sup>)

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<sup>50</sup> Louis Marin, *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*, New York: Humanity Books, 1984, p.11

<sup>51</sup> Boris Groys, David Ross and Iwona Blazwick, *Ilya Kabakov*, London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1998, p.54

<sup>52</sup> See Claire Bishop, *Installation Art*, London: Tate Publishing, 2005, p.14

<sup>53</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991, p.17

## the student &gt; desktop &gt; essay &gt; draft emails and letters

Dear Z,

I read this quote of yours, '... beneath the illusion that we "just look" at the perceived objects from a safe distance, freely sliding along them, there is the reality of the innumerable ties that bind us to what we perceive. While just looking, we are always hunting among objects, looking for what we desire or fear, endeavouring to recognize some pattern; on the other hand, objects themselves always "stare back", vie for our attention, throw at us their lures and endeavour to entrap us.'<sup>54</sup> I read this, then I stuffed the book in the small cabinet drawer along with my Forbidden Contact Declaration forms. In the past you and Carole E have materialised under my desk, or inside my tall cabinet, but you have never approached one of my drawers. A drawer might offer you a suitably ambiguous space, or an appropriate hiding place. A drawer has a peculiarly clandestine way of being, suspended within a meta-structure. It is as an object, at least partially concealed within another object, like a story within a story. It's a shifty, shifting thing that retracts and moves in and out of focus as both a façade and a container for other objects. Like sculpture's relationship to the reality of social space, a drawer alternates between presence and absence, movement and stillness, and it names an action that locates meaning in its transience. I think a small and concealed space may well demand a more imaginative story to contend it, like Xavier de Maistre's *A Journey Around My Room*. Maybe you've read it? It's a peculiarly solipsistic and fantastical first-person adventure written in 1794. De Maistre contemplates the universe from the constraints of a single room. The story becomes an extended metaphor for the consideration of the way in which the spirituality of his inner soul is contained by the physical needs of his outer body. He overlays spatial confinement with a temporality that expands as an arena for imaginative thought and he tells the story in a way that locates it but sets it free of constraint. You will be there when I get out, won't you?

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<sup>54</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, New York and London: Routledge Classics, 1992, p.261



the student > desktop > essay > drawer

## DRAWER

### A DRAWER IN 4166 SEA VIEW LANE

A Jorge Pardo drawer forms part of a cabinet in the kitchen in his House *4166 Sea View Lane*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1998 (fig. l). This drawer is something that functions as part of a real house and may simultaneously be seen as an artwork. Pardo himself says ‘... the work can no longer be about suspending your disbelief. It has to be about the implicating conditions... /... It’s close to Surrealism, but it operates on a fundamentally different level - it refuses to escape into the world of fantasy.’<sup>55</sup> In other words, for Pardo, the objects that he makes are not fantastical entities that we are able to pretend are real, rather they are real objects and their meaning unfolds in the world, as the narrative of the object working in reality. The meaning of a Pardo drawer is just like the meaning of any other object, it can be many things and simultaneously – it does not float off into a transcendental space but it always-already has a complex history and the potential or contextual versatility to be something else.

### A RUBBER DRAWER

The Fischli and Weiss hyper-realistic rubber drawer, *Schublade/Drawer* 1987 (fig. m), as part of their ‘Rubber Sculptures’ (1986 – 1988) is an object that is designed to unsettle expectations of a standard thing. As Catherine Gallagher says about fictionality, we take on ‘... a disposition of ironic credulity enabled by optimistic incredulity; one is dissuaded from believing the literal truth of a representation so that one can instead admire its likelihood and extend enough credit to buy into the game.’<sup>56</sup> Gallagher’s argument resonates with the experience of Fischli and Weiss’s drawer. At first sight the viewer may well believe in it, only to quickly ‘buy into the game’ as we become aware of it as a fantastical object and then engage with it on that level.

### CORAL REEF, BELIEF AND THE DRAWER

Does found object sculpture require the suspension of disbelief? A reader begins with disbelief when introduced to a fiction, but if the story is well told, the reader suspends that disbelief. That is the convention.

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<sup>55</sup> About the In-Between: Jorge Pardo speaks to Jan Tumlir, Los Angeles, March 1999, in Relyea Vegh and Chris Kraus, *Jorge Pardo*, London: Phaidon, 2008, p.132 and p.138.

<sup>56</sup> Catherine Gallagher, ‘The Rise of Fictionality’ in Franco Moretti (ed.), *The Novel, Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007, p.346.

Could it be the contrary impulse when interacting with sculpture that uses the matter of reality, because the viewer generally begins by believing in reality? The viewer believes in a drawer in their own living room, for example, but if they're told it's a sculpture they suspend that belief (rather than disbelief), and they probably choose not to put anything in it. However, this is further complicated by work such as Mike Nelson's *The Coral Reef*, Matt's Gallery, London, 2000 (fig. n). The installation is structured around three elements: fiction; sculpture; belief systems. Nelson's trigger for the structure is cited as Stanislaw Lem's *A Perfect Vacuum (1971)*<sup>57</sup> - a book of fictional reviews that culminates in a review of the book itself. Nelson's architectonic construction and the depiction of multiple belief systems are intertwined within the spaces, as he explains: '... the sequence of reception areas are all representative of a different structure of belief. So after the fake art gallery reception, you then step into a room behind a grilled wall as if you were at the back of a mini-cab office with an Islamic identity.' Crucially, the work turns back on itself - the final room is a slightly altered copy of the first one. Nelson says: '... the introduction becomes the postscript but you don't read it until you walk out.'<sup>58</sup> In this way, art and fiction are drawn into the other belief systems he depicts, all of which are apparently isolated ad-hoc structures that reinforce each other because they form an overall system. The meta-system might be seen as the circularity of belief in general - there is a tendency to look for signs and evidence that confirms the beliefs one arrives with. In a similar way to the reader who opens a book knowing it is a fiction, the viewer enters this work knowing it is a sculptural composition. In the entire installation there are many rooms to enter but not a single drawer to look into: it is comprised of surfaces. Although the appropriation of found materials and the attention to degraded detail makes the installation more substantial than most stage sets, it is still clearly false as a totality. It is sited in a gallery, so instead of being routed and lived in, it is made to look like it is lived in. This is not quite a Brechtian highlighting of artifice. Nelson's viewer is vigilant but knows the objects are credible in-themselves. This staged reality seems to mimic the insecurity and ephemerality of the contemporary environment outside the gallery (where commodities are not built to last, where permanent housing is a privilege, where jobs aren't for life if they're there at all, and where people think they've fallen in love when they've only exchanged emails). Could the heightened awareness of Nelson's viewer be sustained in the everyday? It is possible that our belief in things-in-general is simply about not noticing them. Refer to Martin Heidegger's argument that 'thingliness' is essentially 'uncommunicative' in that things stand back in their function and refuse to disclose themselves. Heidegger suggests that the things we find most difficult to conceptualise and put into language could be the

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<sup>57</sup> See, Tate, *Mike Nelson: The Coral Reef*, London: Tate Publishing, 2010

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

most 'thingly'.<sup>59</sup> For Heidegger, implements are generally denied or undisclosed, in that, so long as they function we do not notice them, if we have reason to pay attention to them, they probably fail as things. Consider that if they fail as things, they may become present as objects – things that demand critical attention. The attention we give to objects is (as Warnock says) perception rather than immediate sensory impressions. This understanding is not achieved by viewing things directly. In the everyday, just as we do with sculpture, we move between belief and disbelief and we might occasionally hesitate before sitting on this chair or opening that drawer. We can temporarily hold the object in suspension from the rest of reality, and here we perceive it through associations, interpretation, ideas, fantasy and storytelling, then we let it go again.

the student > desktop > essay > the absent subject

## STORYTELLING AND THE ABSENT SUBJECT<sup>60</sup>

When I leave this School people will see my body.

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<sup>59</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'The Origins of the Work of Art', in *Basic Writings*, Oxon: Routledge, 1993, p.157. He contends that 'The unpretentious thing evades thought most stubbornly.'

<sup>60</sup> In 'The Death of the Author', Barthes claims that 'Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.' Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, London: Fontana Press, 1977, p.142. Barthes' point is that the writer is absent in the space that writing creates because meaning is not in authorial intention but in the subject. The subject of the text is never present in the story but is deferred and pursued through its linguistic formulations. Writing then becomes the play of this absence. This absence of the subject is not necessarily filled by the presence of the author-storyteller. The storyteller may not be present as a subject, but the object that stands in its place is the body, the voice, the material circumstances and the story. This object may be elusive in its contingency, but it also persists as a presence. Note Rosalind Krauss' contention, the artist's presence is both an excess and a lack. See Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p.161-2. The artist indicates the work and yet also represents the work and so appears as supplementary or even superfluous. As an indexical sign of the work, the artist physically corresponds to it but also signifies it, as if the work is temporally absent from the artist.

the student > desktop > essay > imagined sculpture

## IMAGINED SCULPTURE

Take a moment to focus on Borges' depiction of the infinite book in the endnote to *The Library of Babel*. It is an extraordinary object, from within *Fictions*, a book of short stories. *The Library of Babel* is a story about a universe comprised of an endless series of hexagonal galleries that form a library. This athenaeum holds an infinite collection of books, as it contains every possible combination of letters and in every language. The imagined object is found in the brief endnote to this story. I cite it here in its entirety:

'Letizia Alvarez de Toledo has observed that the vast Library is pointless; strictly speaking, all that is required is a *single volume*, of the common size, printed in nine- or ten-point type, that would consist of an infinite number of infinitely thin pages. (In the early seventeenth century, Cavalieri stated that every solid body is the superposition of an infinite number of planes.) Using that silken *vademecum* would not be easy: each apparent page would open into other similar pages; the inconceivable middle page would have no "back".<sup>61</sup>

Whilst the main narrative, that describes the excess of limitless books and the pathetic librarians who live amidst them, consumed by a world of unfathomable passages and hopeless speculation on an eternity of print without end, Borges concludes the story with this endnote: it could all be contained in a single volume of normal size, if that book had infinitely thin pages.

This endnote has curious significance for storytelling. It does not simply describe an object within a narrative, but the figure of the object is the spatial and conceptual metaphor that forms the story: as the pages of the book are surely impervious, the form embodies the futility of its own impossibility; the logic of this endnote as a story within stories is taken to its ultimate illogical endless conclusion; what is constructed by this object is an allegory on the concept of infinity and an infinite concept of allegory. It is a form of storytelling that reaches back into itself further and further, on and on, forever, like the endless deferral of language itself. See Jacques Derrida's famous analysis of text in *Writing and Difference*: 'This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse... that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental

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<sup>61</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Fictions*, [1935-1944], London: Penguin Books 1998, p.74

signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification infinitely.<sup>62</sup>

Borges' phrase 'silken *vademecum*' denotes a portable reference book with extremely fine paper. It is a description that evokes an association with a sacred book, and it lends the object an inflated status even though its contents are effectively inaccessible because the individual leaves are too thin to be differentiated. The object is an idea of a book, but it does not function as one in the social space. Similarly, the two named characters in the text, promote the representation by layering the factual with the imaginary, and a play between what is recognised as meaningful and the ingenuity of suggestion.

The fantastical quality of this imagined object is surely epitomised by the last line: '... each apparent page would open into other similar pages; the inconceivable middle page would have no "back".' An intriguing proposition to consider; perhaps it is because the pages of the book are infinite that there is no centre page, and no point at which it changes from its beginning to begin moving towards a conclusion. Instead of a moving through beginning, middle and end, the story can only go on indefinitely. Most accretions to infinity gain in scale, whereas the materiality of the paper allows the external properties of this object to maintain a fixed size.<sup>63</sup>

Like Franz Kafka's 'Odradek',<sup>64</sup> this is an object that is impossible to make manifest in the everyday (one struggles to construct it in even in the imagination) but it persists as an idea. What fascinates me about this object figured by Borges, is the use of spatial organisation as a narrative process and the way the problematics of objecthood are embodied in the narrative space derived from the formal structure of stories within stories.

Storytelling conventionally produces imaginary worlds and imagined objects in the mind of the reader. It is precisely in this fashion that Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*<sup>65</sup> is effective as a work of fiction and in relation to the production of artwork, in that it creates imagined sculptural objects in fictional narrative. The protagonist, de-socialised and emotionally detached following an accident, has to think before making even the smallest

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<sup>62</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, London: Routledge Classics, 2001, p.354

<sup>63</sup> This may also allude to the mathematical notion that it is impossible to get to the point before zero because any number before zero is infinitely divisible.

<sup>64</sup> Kafka's Odradek in his story 'The Worries of a Head of Household' (also known as 'The Cares of a Family Man'), is a spectral entity, a meticulously described but completely indeterminable shape/being, that unravels in the process of being told. See Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, London: Penguin Books, 2007.

<sup>65</sup> Tom McCarthy, *Remainder*, Richmond: Alma Books Limited, 2006

movement. Through questioning the authenticity of his actions, he finds potential satisfaction in the re-enactment of his experiences. Using the social fabric as the matter of the work, the protagonist engages actions to fulfil persistent visions, memories and compulsions. There is a concern with the minutiae of materiality to the extent that it effects a nausea, an excessive sense of the pressure of matter and detail, a fullness that the protagonist appears to respond to by emptying the meaning from everything and with increasing nihilism. He is unable to engage with this fabricated world that has become a composition, devoid of consequence. With a multi-million pound compensation payment at his disposal, *Remainder's* protagonist is free to pursue ever-more elaborate stagings of spaces and events, in effect, fabricating a series of increasingly extensive installations. Total environments are constructed, including buildings, people and their actions. The particularity of the form is controlled through to the detail of every crack in the wall, the smell in the air, the cat that passes in the distance.

The locus of McCarthy's work is not in a materially manifest object but in the story itself, and the imagined objects it evokes. Look back at Warnock's consideration of the imagination as an essential part of perception, and see it in relation to art. As Mel Bochner writes,

'Imagination is a word that has been generally banned from the vocabulary of recent art... There is, however, within the unspecified usage of the word a function that infuses the process of making and seeing art... Imagining (as opposed to imaging) is not a pictorial preoccupation. Imagination is a projection, the exteriorizing of ideas about the nature of things seen.'<sup>66</sup>

The imagined object is a product of the artist's writing, not the image of the text, but the perception of a form and a material reality in general, generated by words and their associations. McCarthy and Borges present the obsessive materialisation of ideas as imagined objects through the appropriation of social space and time into a creative vision, complicating both literary conventions and the parameters of sculptural practice.

Finally, Borges reminds me that imagined forms in fiction, are not just shapes, they are shapes created with the words of storytelling, and these words have a precarious relationship to meaning. See *The Fearful Sphere*

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<sup>66</sup> Mel Bochner, 'Excerpts From Speculation [1967-1970], reprinted from *Artforum* (May, 1970) in Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1972, p.54

*Of Pascal*<sup>67</sup> in which Borges writes on the use of the sphere in metaphors for infinity. He makes specific reference to Pascal's interpretation of a long established metaphor, showing that Pascal '... felt the incessant weight of the physical world, he experienced vertigo, fright and solitude, and he put his feelings into these words: "Nature is an infinite sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." Borges then points out that Pascal's original manuscript reveals an important modification: "Nature is a fearful sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." The replacement of the adjective, from 'infinite' to 'fearful', shifts the metaphor, creating a different meaning, changing it from an abstract concept to an embodied and sensual, imagined object in-action. It also highlights the sphere as not just an imagined shape, but a shape made of words and the tension of their discursive formations. Every term makes a difference. The sphere is a fearful image of chaotic instability and insecurity that exploits the precariousness of writing, by depicting the consequences of an absent subject in the volatile flux of the object. In Borges' writing, the full destabilising effect of this de-centred object without parameters, is achieved by the precise use of critically pertinent words within a storytelling format.

#### the student > desktop > essay > draft emails and letters

Dear Z,

Having spent so long constructing you as the object of my desire, I'm starting to realise that when we do meet, you'll be less than that. You persist in propagating your own intellectual/pathologised self-mythology and I've been entrapped by it because it's what I was looking for in you. You are a fantasy construction of this space and the objects in it, delimited by this context. I'm trying to look for you beyond my fantasies but both you and Carole E are just part of the text, you're nothing beyond that. Clearly, the School has created a space for me and it's given me an object. I'm all too aware that I need the School so I can resist it. I stand up now and I concede to the room, 'Yes, I know I'm a product of this institution. What else could I be?' Of course I could stay here, just to keep hold of my stories about you and things as they are. Of course I can't. I don't know where I'll go, but it seems like I have to go there without you.

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<sup>67</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths* [1935-1960], London: Penguin Books, 1964

Dear Z,

Goodbye and thank you. You led me on a voluptuous path through the furnishings and fabrics that conspired to both constitute and alleviate the peculiar restrictions of my confinement in this School. I was carried along on your libidinal adventures, and I enjoyed the ride, really I did. But for the first time I can actually envisage myself on the outside, in a different context and with an entirely new set of objects. I've tried to imagine you there too, in my future, but I can't shift the fantasies forward. I used to want to run towards you, and on with you to another place, but it's obvious to me now that there's no more of our story beyond the deviant particularities of my studio. If I try to touch you outside of this space, you'll disintegrate because I've already sucked you dry. If I keep running in your direction, I'll end up back here and with you as just the desiccated husk of a character... So goodbye, Professor Z. If I ever catch sight of you again I'll have to walk straight past you. I'll walk away and I'll keep on going.

**the student > desktop > essay > writing**

## WRITING WITH FOUND OBJECTS AND IMAGINED SCULPTURE

Carole E had searched through all their spaces, looking for him, and as she now enters the final room she is at first relieved by his presence, then disturbed. He stands motionless by the cabinet that's in front of the window. He has his back to her, and one of his hands has an unnaturally fixed grip around the handle on the cabinet drawer.

Wary of approaching him directly, she sits down in the chair that is against the wall adjacent to the cabinet. She sees him in profile. The harsh light from the window exposes the tension of his countenance. He inclines his face in her direction and says, 'We don't see the ordinary things we live with. In fact we should avoid looking at familiar objects because we can't make a spectacle of the everyday without losing it. If we look directly, and try to scrutinize its ordinariness, the very quality we want to inspect will recede. The ordinary is transformed into the special. The withdrawal of the ordinary thing into its own banality is so essential to its definition, that the violating indiscretion of my regard doesn't bear thinking about.' He says this, then turns away from her.



From the side of the room, she has been watching his fingers caress the handle on the cabinet drawer. She shifts herself forward in the chair, curious to know what he keeps inside it. She's about to ask him, but as he turns away, she just catches the grey fog of indifference to her descend across his eyes and feels herself receding into the blurry impressions on the furthest periphery of his vision.

Talking aloud (but as if he's addressing the things in the room rather than a woman in the chair) he says, 'I knew something eccentric was happening from the moment I walked in. I was all but knocked sideways at the sight of this handle on the drawer. It's normally only just visible under the surface of this cabinet. There was something different this morning. I think it seemed more prominent. It hovered with a slippery translucent presence that unsettled my imagination. The impression it left on me was somewhere between my *sensory perception* of the real drawer in the room and my internal *idea* of it, because of course, they're two different things, they really are.'

While he talks Carole E gets up and moves from the chair. She walks to the bookcase that's next to the door. She absentmindedly picks up a folder and turns it over a few times in her hands. It's heavier than she thought it would be. She places it back on the shelf, then she deliberately nudges it just enough to tip it off the edge. It doesn't fall open but there's a sudden noise as it hits the floor.

He doesn't so much as glance in her direction. He says, 'I walked in here and I was so compulsively focused on the drawer, that when I moved my hand in the direction of the handle, the damned thing took hold of me. At least I think that's how it happened. I've been here like this all day, standing next to the cabinet... I can't let go of the handle, but I can't pull the drawer open. I want to lie on the chair-bed for a while... But there's something about the handle, it has a very particular physicality...'

Carole E stands in the middle of the room looking directly at the back of this head with her arms folded then she walks to one side of him and perches on edge of the chair. As he talks she breathes in and then exhales despondently. Her head inclines so that her hair falls over her face, with much the same effect as curtains drawn. From beneath her fringe she can just see the base of the cabinet and the lower half of his body. If he looks in her direction, he won't be able to discern her eyes. She feels herself withdrawing further into this enshrouded space and focuses on contemplating the mysterious undulations of his trouser fly.

He says, 'It has a bluish knob about two centimetres in diameter with a rounded head, undisturbed by grooves or engraving. The top of the dome has been rubbed to a glossy sheen, while the depths of the underside, where the handle recedes into the base, are matt and dusty - untouched. But the thing that really strikes me is... it's standing back-ly. Yes, I think that's right. If the drawer simply stands back, then it'll be holding itself in the moment of back-standing. But it isn't. It's standing back-ly, because the description - the

standing back as a way of being, and the temporal event of the narration - the movement backwards are conjoined.'

She had closed her eyes in an attempt to penetrate his strange and tenebrous monologue but now she jumps up and strides towards him.

With his back to her he says, 'The thing is, as I hold this handle - or it might be more accurate to say that *I'm* gripped by *it* - something in me is caught between holding on to the moment, not wanting to move things on, and a curiosity about what might be in the drawer. I'm wondering if I've put something of great importance in the cavity and repressed my memory of it. Perhaps my resistance to opening it is to protect myself from the trauma of its contents. Yes, it suddenly seems possible that I once saw someone else opening it and secreting a disturbing and provocative item inside.'

She's right next to him now. He shuts his eyes and carries on with his reflections in low undertones. She's close. She manoeuvres herself still closer until her body is pressed into the space framed by the cabinet, his arm, and the rest of his body. She's directly in front of him. She's so close that little gusts of articulated breath flurry through his teeth and escape from his mouth. She lifts her face, inhales slightly and imagines invisible utterances coalescing with the saliva on her tongue and slipping down her throat. Improbable contents for the drawer begin to materialise in her imagination with the randomness of unfettered conjecture. She thinks, 'Open the drawer. Open the drawer. Just open the fucking drawer!'

He says, 'I have an odd dream-like memory of seeing my own disembodied hands reaching out to this very drawer under the cabinet. One finger sweeps over the bluish surface of the handle. The drawer is then pulled open and something is placed carefully inside before these hands ease away, solicitously. I don't know if it really happened.'

She thinks he may well have dreamed about the drawer, but the story is not so different from his current protracted encounter with the handle. She guesses that like any other real object, the drawer could have a fantastical narrative attached to it and the meaning of this drawer could be in a continuous flux of uncertainty in terms of its status, its description, its purpose, how it is perceived, the extent to which it is believed in, the ideas and narratives that emerge from it and circulate around it.

He pauses, and in the first real interlude since his monologue began, he finally looks directly into her face, returning her gaze. He opens his mouth.

In a flash, her eyelids with their fringed skirt of lashes, swing down and up again as she stands up straight. With her clear and impassioned voice she says, 'You'll stay attached to the handle until it feels hot and damp with the sweat in your palm and then you'll hold on even tighter. You're afraid to move because you suspect

this drawer has no resistance to its action. It only requires a minimal gesture, the slightest tug retracting your arm towards your body and the drawer will slide open.'

There's a new and petulant stubbornness in his tone 'This drawer is *my* thing. *I'm* articulating it, and I'll hold on to *my* idea of it. I'm not moving.'

She says, 'Oh really, well I've got my own ideas about it... open the drawer! Isn't it obvious now? Opening the drawer will definitely *not* mean a direct confrontation with the object, instead it's just the beginning of another narrative within your rather constrained story. Your fixed point could unfold into endless complexity and uncertainty. The object will continue to escape us. The drawer contains an infinite world in a finite space, no less than an entire universe in an ordinary drawer.'

He says, 'Somehow, so long as I don't open the drawer it contains a possible-ness, a sense of possibility in-itself, and that potential, by definition, can't actually exist anywhere. It has to remain undisclosed. Like desire, it's lost if it's realised... I don't really want to know what it might contain, I don't want to conceptualise the characteristics of a universe that doesn't exist.'

Carole E shakes her head, 'No', she speaks with powerful alacrity, 'No, on the contrary, I'm determined to conceptualise the universe in the drawer. Let's see it now... It's made up of infinitesimal spherical planets. The largest of these planets is too small to be seen by even the most powerful microscope. The existence of this mini metagalactic system is and can only be a matter of conjecture but let's assume it to be a place of great mystery and suspense. As a cosmos without suns it's entirely dark. Every time the drawer is opened and light pours in from the neighbouring universe outside, one or more of the tiny translucent planets inside bursts then fizzles into non-existence along with any attendant life forms.'

He closes his eyes. His eyes remain closed.

She says, 'The interior of the drawer is a beguiling thing, it doesn't float off into a transcendental space, but it has a complex history with the potential or contextual versatility to be something else. The life of an impalpable being on one of the mysteriously inconspicuous dark spheres within the drawer is an unknown and unseen existence that's both hopelessly precarious and insistently optimistic. It's an idea in an undisclosed object.'

She moves away, leaves the room and walks outside. She stops on the other side of the window and looks back in at him. He's still standing there, holding the handle. Nothing has changed.

At the very edge of his perception he is aware that she has left the room and that she is about to move still further from him. He nearly lets go of the drawer handle, but he can't. In a graceless contortion he leans towards the window, continues to hold the handle, and speaks to her through the glass without actually looking at her.

Carole E leans further forward and blows warm air from her mouth onto the window and watches the quivering edges of a vaporous mass forming on the surface between him and her. As she breathes in, the circle of moisture retracts. Her perception momentarily penetrates the window - eyes, a face threatens to transpire - she can't help but smile. She takes another breath, exhales and shifts her focus back to the minimal opaque form reforming on the glass, achieving a careful discretion in her parting gaze.

SURFACE

THE SCHOOL OF SCULPTURE WITHOUT OBJECTS

## School of Sculpture Without Objects > headed paper

### Inspection Report

This report is a summary of the main findings of the School of Sculpture Without Objects further to the inspection of the studio and according to the information gathered at the premises. The inspection does not perform environmental testing and/or address regulatory compliance. The report refers only to the conditions at the time of inspection. The findings of this report are not intended to be used in conjunction with any legal proceedings.

Room shape:	Rectangular.
Walls and ceiling:	Plaster-board. Evidence of dampness and mold. In need of extensive repair or replacement. In an unacceptable condition.
Floor:	Linoleum tiles. Shows signs of wear.
Doors:	One door, located in centre of north wall. MDF and hardboard. Defective.
Windows:	One window, located on south wall. Dysfunctional.
Furnishings:	One desk, located in centre of room. Metal legs, chip-board and Formica top. Extensive damage to surface. One desk chair, located beside desk. Moulded plastic. In an advanced state of wear. One chair-bed, located next to the bookcase. Compounded synthetic fibres. Maladjusted. One tall locker, located on south wall. Steel. Major defects. One small cabinet, located next to desk. Steel. Irregular handle on drawer. In an unacceptable condition. One bookcase, located next to chair-bed on west wall. MDF, eight shelves. Ageing. One curtain, located on floor. Mixed synthetic fibres. Damaged beyond repair.
Computing Facilities:	One printer. Old. One laptop. Shows signs of wear.
Lighting:	One desk lamp. In a generally poor condition. One ceiling light. Fluorescent. Old. Remains 'on'.
Fire detection systems:	None apparent.
Heating:	Gas-fired, hot water system. One radiator located next to tall locker. Remains 'on'.
Air conditioning:	Wall thermostat. Remains 'off'.
Ventilation:	None apparent.
Student:	Absent.

#### REPORT CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

This report finds evidence of failings of environmental control, poorly maintained furniture including extensive wear, damage and miscellaneous faults. It is recommended that the fixtures and furnishings are comprehensively extracted from the studio and permanently ejected from the School. Subject to this removal, and taking into account the absence of the student, the overall condition of the studio is deemed to be: satisfactory.

IMAGE LIBRARY

THE IMAGES APPEAR IN THE THESIS,

KEPT IN THE LIBRARY OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART, LONDON.

image library > absalon essay

i. Absalon, *Cell No.4*, prototype, 1992  
Wood, cardboard, white paint  
240 x 404 x 210 cm

ii. Absalon, *Cell No.1*, prototype [detail], 1992  
Wood, cardboard, white paint  
245 x 420 x 220 cm

iii. Louise Bourgeois, *Red Room (Child)*, 1994  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable



image library > absalon essay

iv. Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Management Maintenance Unit, Model 003*, 1992  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable

v. Absalon, *Cell No2*, 1991  
Wood, cardboard, paint  
180 x 260 cm

vi. Robert Morris, Installation view of exhibition at Green Gallery New York, 1964  
Wood painted grey  
Dimensions variable

## image library &gt; seminars

1. Fischli and Weiss, *Untitled (Rotterdam)* [detail],  
Museum Boijmans van Beunigen, Rotterdam, 2003  
Mixed media installation  
Dimensions variable

2. Lasse Schmidt Hansen, *Making Things* (in 3  
parts), [detail] 2009  
3 framed b/w photographs  
Ed. 3 + 1 A.P., each 15 x 25 cm

3. Joe Scanlan, *Nesting Bookcase*, 1989-1995  
Wood, plastic, fabric, paint, metal, rubber, screws  
Dimensions variable

4. Joe Scanlan, *Nesting Bookcase*, 1989-1995  
Wood, plastic, fabric, paint, metal, rubber, screws  
Dimensions variable

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5. Richard Serra, *Hand Catching Lead*, 1968  
[Stills from Serra's film]

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6. Christopher Burstall, *A Question of Feeling* 1970  
[Still from BBC documentary on the Locked Room]

7. Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965  
Photograph of chair to scale, chair, photographic  
enlargement of dictionary definition  
Dimensions variable

8. Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965  
Photograph of chair to scale, chair, photographic  
enlargement of dictionary definition  
Dimensions variable

image library > seminars

9. Siah Armajani, *North Dakota Tower*, 1968  
Texts and drawings on paper  
Dimensions variable

10. Lawrence Weiner, *Statement of Intent* [1969],  
Museum of Hasselt, Belgium, 1994  
Text installation  
Dimensions variable

11. Lindsay Seers, *It Has To Be This Way*, Matt's  
Gallery, London, 2009  
Mixed media installation  
Dimensions variable

## image library &gt; writing with objects

a. Becky Beasley, *Brocken (VI)* (*Without it he felt that he could never open his favourite window in his Viennese domicile again. The point was that only an 'identical' object could help him in this matter...But the real point was still to come.*), 2009  
Black American walnut, brass, steel  
80 x 36 x 8.4 cm

b. Jorge Pardo, *Restaurant in Berlin*, Abgeordneten-Restaurant, Paul-Löbe-Haus, Berlin, 2002  
Walnut wood, colored-spackle inlay, blown colored glass, polished aluminium, light fixture, 186 lamps, tables and chairs  
950 x 1950 cm

c. Richard Woods, *Logo No 14*, The Permanent Collection, The New Art Gallery Walsall, 2005  
Floor installation mdf and gloss paint  
Dimensions variable

image library > writing with objects

d. Kathy Acker *The Empire of the Senseless*  
New York: Grove Press, 1988

e. Tom McCarthy *Remainder*  
Richmond: Alma Books, 2006

f. Stewart Home *Memphis Underground*  
London: Snowbooks, 2007

image library > writing with objects

g. Tris Vonna-Michell, *Finding Chopin*, Jeu de Paum,  
Paris, 2005-9  
Performance and mixed media installation  
Dimensions variable

h. Mike Nelson, *Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted*,  
Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2001  
Mixed media installation  
Dimensions variable

i. Mike Nelson, *A Forgotten Kingdom*, 2001  
London: Institute of Contemporary Arts



image library > writing with objects

j. Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment*, from *Ten Characters*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1989  
Mixed media installation  
Dimensions variable

k. Ilya Kabakov, *Sitting-in-the-Closet Primakov* [detail],  
from *Ten Characters / Album*, 1972-1975  
Loose-leaf book in box  
508 x 350mm

l. Jorge Pardo, *4166 Sea View Lane* [detail], Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1998  
House installation  
Dimensions variable

image library > writing essay

m. Fischli and Weiss, *Schublade/Drawer*, 1987  
Black rubber  
48 x 43 x 14 cm

n. Nelson, Mike, *The Coral Reef*, Matt's Gallery, London,  
2000  
Mixed media installation  
Dimensions variable

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Gander, Ryan, *Loose Associations X*, Whitechapel Gallery, London: 2011  
(Lecture, Performance)

Garcia, Dora, *Instant Narrative*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2008  
(Typewriter, Typist, Video, Performance)

Gilbert & George, *The Singing Sculpture*, Nigel Greenwood Gallery, London, 1970  
(Performance)

Hammons, David, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, Cooper Square, New York, 1983  
(Snowballs, Rug, Performance)

Judd, Donald, *Untitled*, 1964  
(Light Cadmium, Red Enamel, Galvanized Iron)

Kabakov, Ilya, *Sitting-in-the-Closet Primakov* from *Ten Characters / Album*, 1972-1975  
(Loose-leaf book in box)

Kabakov, Ilya, *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment*, in *The Untalented Artist and Other Characters*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1989  
(Mixed Media Installation)

Kerbel, Janice, *Remarkable - Faintgirl*, 2007  
(Poster)

Kosuth, Joseph, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965  
(Photograph of Chair to Scale, Chair, Photographic Enlargement of Dictionary Definition)

Kosuth, Joseph, *Titled [Art as Idea (as Idea)] [meaning]*, 1967-68  
(Photographic Enlargement of Dictionary Definition)

Lowe and Thomson, *The Harang-Utang Letters*, 1993-1999  
(Text on paper)

Metzger, Gustav, *A Series Of Spoken Word Retrospectives*' Curated By Mathieu Copeland, New York: Swiss Institute Of Contemporary Art/Performa07, 2007  
(Performance)

Morris, Robert, *Installation at Green Gallery New York*, 1964  
(Wood Painted Grey)

Nelson, Mike, *The Coral Reef*, Matt's Gallery, London, 2000  
(Mixed Media Installation)

Nelson, Mike, *Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2001  
(Mixed Media Installation)

Nelson, Mike, *To The Memory Of H.P. Lovecraft*, Hayward Gallery, London, 2008  
(Mixed Media Installation)

Pardo, Jorge, *4166 Sea View Lane*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1998  
(House/Installation)

Pardo, Jorge, *Restaurant in Berlin*, Abgeordneten-Restaurant, Paul-Löbe-Haus, Berlin, 2002  
(Walnut Wood, Coloured-Spackle Inlay, Blown Coloured Glass, Polished Aluminium, Light Fixture, 186 Lamps, Tables and Chairs)

Piper, Adrian, *Ten Commandments of Philosophical Writing*, 1992  
(Text on Paper)

Salcedo, Doris, *Untitled*, 1998  
(Wood, Cement, Metal)

Scanlan, Joe, *Nesting Bookcases*, 1989-1995  
(Wood, Plastic, Fabric, Paint, Metal, Rubber, Screws)

Schmidt Hansen, Lasse, *Billy 1/294.346.752*, 2005  
(Edition of Differently Composed IKEA Shelves)

Schmidt Hansen, Lasse, *3017/3107*, 2008  
(Mixed Media)

Schmidt Hansen, Lasse, *Making Things*, 2009  
(3 x Framed B/W Photographs)

Schneeman, Carolee, *Interior Scroll*, at 'Women Here and Now', East Hampton, New York, 1975  
(Table, Text on Scroll, Performance)

Schwitters, Kurt, *The Merzbau*, Hanover, 1923-1943  
(Mixed Media Installation)

Seers, Lindsay, *It Has To Be This Way*, Matt's Gallery, London, 2009  
(Mixed Media Installation)

Serra, Richard, *Hand Catching Lead*, 1968  
(Film)

Stark, Frances, *I Must Explain, Specify, Rationalize, Classify, Etc*, 2008  
(Vinyl Paint and Inlaid Laser Print on Paper)

Tan, Xu, *Keywords School*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2009  
(Mixed Media, Installation)

Tatham, Joanne and O'Sullivan, Tom, *The Slapstick Mystics with Sticks*, Frieze Art Fair, London, 2004  
(Performance)

Tutti, Cosey Fanni, *Magazine Actions 1973–1980*, Tate Triennial, London, 2006  
(Printed Matter Installation)

Vonna-Michell, Tris, *Finding Chopin*, Jeu de Paume, Paris, 2005-9  
(Mixed Media Installation, Performance)

Vonna-Michell, Tris, *No more racing in circles — just pacing within lines of a rectangle*, Focal Point Gallery, Southend-on-Sea, 2010  
(Mixed Media Installation, Performance)

Weiner, Lawrence, *Many Colored Objects Places Side By Side To Form A Row Of Many Colored Objects'*  
Ghent, Belgium, 1982  
(Text Installation)

Weiner, Lawrence, *Statement of Intent*, [1969] Museum of Hasselt, Belgium, 1994  
(Text Installation)

Woods, Richard, *Logo No 14*, New Art Gallery Walsall, 2005  
(Floor Installation)

Zittel, Andrea, *A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit Model 003*, 1992  
(Mixed Media Installation)

## SELECTED WEBSITES

<http://a.aaaarg.org/> (Conversation Platform) ongoing

<http://www.cabinet.uk.com/index.php?tris-vonna-michell> 2/6/2010

<http://www.dict.cc/> 14.2.2010

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/artifact> 10/3/2010

<http://www.doragarcia.net/allthestories/> ongoing

<http://www.ilya-emilia-kabakov.com/> ongoing

<http://www.interviewmagazine.com/blogs/art/2009-05-28/venice-preview-elmgreen-dragset/> 6/11/2010

<http://www.jorgepardosculpture.com> 22/3/2011

<http://language.conf3xt.net/> (Language to be Looked at and/or Things to be Read) ongoing

<http://www.laurabartlettgallery.co.uk/view-artist/8#> (Becky Beasley) 12/11/2010

<http://www.mattsgallery.org/artists/nelson/exhibition-3.php> 1/2/2011

<http://www.mattsgallery.org/artists/seers/exhibition-1.php> 18/1/2011

<http://www.thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk/search/?do=%3E&creator=woods&what=collection> 22/3/2011

<http://www.reinhardhauff.de/artist.php?id=11&task=works> (Lasse Schmidt Hansen) 18/1/2011

<http://www.stewarthomesociety.org/> ongoing

<http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue9/yearlockedroom.htm> 5/11/2009

[http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue8/fischliweiss\\_flowering.htm](http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue8/fischliweiss_flowering.htm) 4/5/2009

<http://www.thegalleriesatmoore.org> (Philippe Vergne, Absalon: The man without a home is a potential criminal) 25/3/08

<http://www.thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk/search/?do=%3E&creator=woods&what=collection>

(Richard Woods, Logo No.14, 2005) 22/3/2011

<http://www.thingsthatfall.com/nestingbookcase.php> (Joe Scanlan) 18/1/2011

[http://www.303gallery.com/artists/mike\\_nelson/index.php?exhid=115&p=images](http://www.303gallery.com/artists/mike_nelson/index.php?exhid=115&p=images) 1/2/2011

<http://www.wdw.nl/project.php?id=152> (Tris Vonna-Michell) 2/6/2010

<http://www.wdw.nl/persfoto/vonna-michell/index.htm> 2/6/2010

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hSDbAo2WMk> (Simon Faithfull, *Escape Vehicle No.6*) 23/12/2010

<http://www.zittel.org/work.php> 14/12/2010

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX ONE

	THE STORY OF THE PROJECT	THE STORY WITHIN THE STORY	THE STORY WITHIN THE STORY WITHIN THE STORY
PROTAGONISTS	KATRINA PALMER	Katrina Palmer/ THE STUDENT	Katrina Palmer/ the student/ Z AND CAROLE E
PLACES	KP'S STUDIO	kp's studio THE STUDENT'S STUDIO AND THE SCHOOL OF SCULPTURE WITHOUT OBJECTS	kp's studio / the student's studio and the school of sculpture without objects/ FANTASY SPACE
WRITTEN MATERIAL	THESIS	Thesis/ STORIES ABOUT THE STUDENT'S STUDIO AND THE SCHOOL OF SCULPTURE WITHOUT OBJECTS	Thesis/ stories about the student's studio and the school of sculpture without objects/ Z AND CAROLE E STORIES
OBJECTS	EVERYDAY THINGS-IN-GENERAL	Everyday things-in-general/ APPROPRIATED AS FOUND OBJECTS	Everyday things-in-general/ Appropriated as found objects IMAGINED SCULPTURE

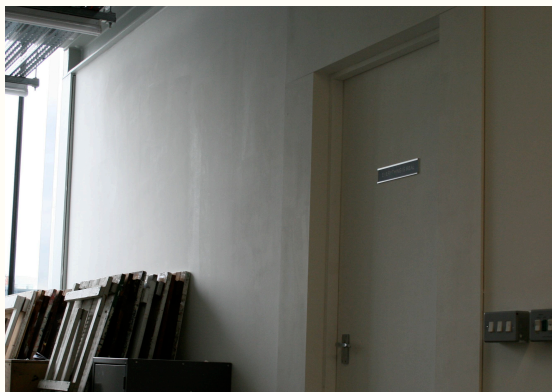
## APPENDIX TWO



1.1 Katrina Palmer, *Everything is Real (Scenario)* [detail], Royal College of Art, London, 2010  
 Invigilation desk, tables, chairs, cabinets, door, interchangeable sign, large room, 2 books  
 Dimensions variable



1.2 Katrina Palmer, *Everything is Real (Scenario)* [detail], Royal College of Art, London, 2010



1.3 Katrina Palmer, *Everything is Real (Scenario)* [detail], Royal College of Art, London, 2010

*Everything Is Real (Scenario)*, 2010

(See figs 1.1-1.7)

Scenario / Description: The context is a group show. There is an invigilation desk in the corridor on which the following items are laid out:

- Information sheets about the works and artists in the show.
- Invitation cards.
- 'Pick-a-Colour' cards (see below).
- A stack of copies of a paperback book, *The Dark Object*.

On the first floor, at the top of the stairs, there is an assemblage of used furniture including paint-stained tables, chairs and cabinets, which have been folded and stacked in a recess. Adjacent to this recess there is a closed door. An interchangeable sign-mount affixed to the outside of this door bears the sign: 'Everything is Real'.

The door opens to a large room. It is empty of all furnishing and clean, although it shows traces of wear and messy activity. The floor is heavily marked with multi-coloured traces of paint. The walls are white but with screws holes, staples and an array of layered stains and markings that appear to have accrued over time.

There are two A4 paperback books on the floor: one blue, one orange. The books contain mainly blank sheets: some plain, some coloured, interspersed with a scattering of incomplete texts. Although some of the texts are common to both copies, much of it is not. If their content is put together, there will still be many blank pages.



I.4 Katrina Palmer, *Everything is Real (Scenario)* [detail], Royal College of Art, London, 2010



I.5 Katrina Palmer, *Everything is Real (Scenario)* [detail], Royal College of Art, London, 2010



I.6 Katrina Palmer, *Everything is Real (Scenario)* [detail], Royal College of Art, London, 2010

#### Book One (Orange Cover, Blue Text)

Blank  
 Copyright  
 Title Page  
 Blank  
 Contents Page  
 Part One  
 Surface  
 Surface (Blue) x 6  
 Blue x2  
 Blank x2  
 Sub-Stratum  
 Blank x 10  
 Interface  
 Blank x 6  
 Core  
 Blank x 3  
 Pink  
 He Wakes With A Gasp x 3  
 Blank x 2  
 He Wakes With A Start x 3  
 Blank x 2  
 He Touches The Thing (Pink) x 3  
 Blank x 2  
 Pink  
 Blank x 4  
 You Must Know (Pink) x 4  
 Blank  
 She Let Us Sit In Silence (Pink) 3  
 Blank x 3  
 Glossarial Storehouse  
 Blank x 2  
 Chair  
 Blank x 7  
 She Holds His Face  
 Fantasy Diagram  
 Blank x 2  
 Storytelling  
 Blank x 3

#### Book Two (Blue Cover, Orange Text)

Blank  
 Copyright  
 Title Page  
 Blank  
 Contents Page  
 Part One  
 Surface  
 Surface (Pink) x 6  
 Pink x 2  
 Blank  
 Sub-Stratum  
 Blank x 9  
 Interface  
 Blank  
 The Knot (Grey) x 2  
 Blank x 2  
 Clay (Grey) x 2  
 Blank  
 Summary of Discussion (Grey) x 2  
 Blank x 3  
 The First Thing To Go x 2





1.7 Katrina Palmer, *Everything is Real (Scenario)* [detail], Royal College of Art, London, 2010

I Held The Handle x 3  
 Grey x 2  
 Blank x 3  
 Core  
 Blank x 3  
 Make More Whole  
 Blank x 2  
 You Must Know  
 Blank x 4  
 He Clings  
 Blank x 12  
 Part Two  
 Glossarial Storehouse  
 Blank  
 Green  
 Chair  
 Green x 2  
 Blank x 2  
 In A Clear And Impassioned Voice (Green) x 2  
 He Closes His Eyes x 2  
 Blank  
 Fantasy Diagram  
 Blank  
 Fantasy x 2  
 Blank (Green) x 2  
 Storytelling  
 Blank x 3



2.1 Katrina Palmer, *'Pick-A-Colour' (3-Minute Readings)* [detail], Royal College of Art, London, 2010

Large room, door, interchangeable sign, 1 table, 2 chairs, 2 books, invitation cards, pen, flip-chart, reader  
 Dimensions variable

### 'Pick-A-Colour' (3-Minute Readings), 2010

(See figs. 2.1 – 2.3)

Description / Action: This reading takes place in the room as described in the above scenario. On this occasion the interchangeable sign-mount bears the sign: 'Reading in Progress'. On the floor in the corridor, adjacent to the door, there are three stacks of cards: green, beige and blue. The text on all the cards lists times and says *Katrina Palmer Invites You To 'Pick-A-Colour' 3-Minute Readings By Selection*. Inside the room there is a paint-stained table and two chairs – one either side of table. A woman is sitting at the table, on one of the chairs. The table is situated near the wall, far from the door. Close by, there are two books on the floor. The following items are on the table:

- A flip-chart.
- A pen.
- Invitation cards - one of each colour.



2.2 Katrina Palmer, *'Pick-A-Colour' (3-Minute Readings)* [detail], Royal College of Art, London, 2010

The woman invites the visitor to sit down and pick a colour. She consults a colour-coordinated list of



2.3 Katrina Palmer, *'Pick-A-Colour' (3-Minute Readings)* [detail], Royal College of Art, London, 2010

story titles on her flip-chart and says: "You have chosen *The Knot*". She picks up one of the books, locates the text in the book and reads.

**Story Synopsis:** The central character is a student who is apparently preoccupied with the need to produce an artefact. The question of whether the student's desk could be a suitable work is considered alongside concerns about what narratives might revolve around such an object.

The woman finishes reading and marks a cross on her chart. The visitor leaves the room.



3.1 Katrina Palmer, *Everything is Real (12-Minute Readings)* [detail], Royal College of Art, London, 2010  
Tables, chairs, cabinets, door, interchangeable sign, large room, 3 books, reader  
Dimensions variable

*Everything is Real (12-minute Readings)*, 2010

(See figs 3.1 – 3.2)

**Description / Action:** This reading takes place in the room, as described in the above scenario. The door bears the sign: 'Everything in Real'. There are two books on the floor. A woman enters the room carrying a third book. It is the same size as the blue and orange ones on the floor, but it is yellow. She changes the sign on the door to 'Reading in Progress'. She reads from the book.

**Story Synopsis:** The central character violently extracts an enormous lump that has been stuck in someone's throat. The lump features in the reading as a bloody sphere that turns in the air, dripping blood and gore. Additional objects in the story are the torn body and the desk that it lies on. The increasingly apprehensive central character speculates on what narratives might emerge from a sphere that was once stuck in a throat.



3.2 Katrina Palmer, *Everything is Real (12-Minute Readings)* [detail], Royal College of Art, London, 2010

The woman finishes reading, walks to the door and changes the sign back to 'Everything is Real'. She leaves the room and closes the door.

## A Note On Paper

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