

Point de vue Five object(ion)s from which to begin

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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FIVE OBJECT(ION)S *from which to begin.*

One

I clear my mind to walk into an empty room; a triumph of austerity.

Carefully hung photographs line the shiny walls. Each frame is carefully positioned in relation to its neighbour, gracefully distanced. The glass atop the paper does not disrupt.

Landscapes in soft, though oddly brilliant, colours.

A cluster of images depicting a nude man on his bed.

On the far wall, however, is a series of tightly composed shots, every one of them a glove. A brown glove, a blue glove, a grey one. To the right is a tall, transparent box filled with the actual garments – a troubling accumulation of fabric.

And the thought occurs to me, To hell with Plato and his Pomo revisers, I'd rather look at the photographs. A glove, after all, is just a glove. The torn, somewhat dirty examples collected here don't mean anything.

But a photograph is not a glove. Where a glove becomes a thing (and I don't mean to deride the usefulness of things), a photograph can become a document – an object, if you will.

Two

I mean "object" in the broadest possible understanding – indeed, in all possible understandings.

OBJECT: *something material, perceptible to the senses; something that when viewed stirs feeling; something mental or physical toward which thought is directed; the goal or end of an activity; a noun or noun equivalent denoting the result of the action of a verb.*

Sidestepping a semantic trap, I want only to underline that I mean more by "object" than simple mass and density, more than a synonym for "thing." I want to invoke a denotation that is both material and implicated in process and activity. An object that is, but also takes part in action. An object that is not simply looked at, but is read.

Of course, it should be unnecessary to add at this juncture that not all objects are pictures, and that even among those that are, there is a significant variety. Pictorial representation has long since left any debate about illusory space or "fourth walls" in its wake and I will not touch on such particular formal considerations here, my project being more general. Besides which, there are whole categories of object (music, novels, some performances among them) whose pleasures are not, or are not merely, visual. More and more evidence accumulates

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suggesting that the joys of the gaze may simply be the medium for another, more primordial delight, the pleasure of the encounter.

Three

And every object is a possible meeting. Argue as we might, the inescapable transience of the human lends each lingering presence that value. All that remains of our movement through the world and the world's language are such objects. They are created deliberately to mark our passage, and in doing so become simultaneously artifact and process. They are a recorded specificity of time and place and a part of the movement through time and place.

Wedding photographs. Hilliard's "Ermine Portrait" of Elizabeth I. Personal journals. *Henry V*. The gaps between them are not so vast, but the places that they occupy are different. One holds on to the private, the other marks out the public. An arbitrary division, I admit, but one that adds to the pleasure of a host of encounters.

Nor does the lingering presence that I'm proposing depend on a binary opposition to some *vita brevis*. No object is eternal, a fixed, unmoving sovereign device. Constantly caught in the process of reading and reinscription within culture's mutations, objects – textual and image based – are simultaneously ephemeral and enduring. One need only look at the snapshots from one's adolescence to make that determination. How much more reinscribable might Caravaggio's religious commissions be, encrusted with the tumult of warring churches? How likely would a reading such as Bersani and Dutoit's have been before our own day?

Unlike criticism, unlike much theory, the principal goals of which are explicatory and androgical in nature, objects are unstable signifiers, and this may be precisely their greatest value. They remain works in progress – floating, tentative, always new in the moment when we come across them.

Four

For some years the art object spun round in an unforeseeably new process; it was "dematerialized." It vanished in a cloud of theorizing; dazzling, efficient, and, in the space of decade, recuperated – the major practitioners canonized.

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Minimal and conceptual art began as projects of de-commodification whose fundamental strategies were reduction or trivialization of the art object. Lucy Lippard's *Six Years* is one of the most thorough sources on the matter. In her preface, she recognizes the materiality of these works while insisting on their "deemphasis of material aspects,"¹ an oddly accommodating admission that fails to acknowledge their most remarkable success. After all, in those half-dozen years, a handful of artists, though failing to banish the art object, redefined and enlarged its possibilities.

"Art works" were made of photographs depicting a series of actions executed outside the gallery context, typewritten pages outlining the activities of an artist, and, contrarily, texts requesting that the reader undertake a specific number of actions. Maps marked with the record of series of walks were displayed, and a bullet hole in the wall, labeled as such, was exhibited. Unheard-of items that sparked a vehement debate about the manner in which "art" might be made. These artists, focussed on the body, the documentary, the recuperated, stripped the object from a place rooted in a very difficult idealism and worked to undo the tradition of the masterwork.

They made an art that was self-consciously aware of its specificity, and of its situational relationship to what surrounded it. An awareness that grew, ironically, from these strange, rarefied new objects themselves – a map, a page of instructions – rather than the theorizing around them. These objects "know" that they are not separate from the world but mark a place in it.

Five

In some ways – important ways, I would argue – every art object is a place in the world, a place that seems something like a crossroads.

An object is a site of confluence where the discourses of a given time and place, an individual subject and the forces that constructed him, a viewer and his formations, in turn, meet. It marks a specific

moment's sense of what art might be, and years – or minutes – later may mark another's reading of what it ought to be. It is made by one person (or more) but occupies a place in the ongoing discussions of humanity that is quite independent of it.

In some respects, the privileging of the object I propose is a partial response to Foucault's notion of the author as a regulatory function.² The object's blankness is a paradoxical kind of generosity in that it imposes nothing of the categorical, so present in both "the author" and "the subject." The object is larger in its possibilities, offers more than a reader response to hang our project on. This generosity is a factor of the physical presence of the object itself, its embodiment, the inhumanly unchanging shape and structures that must constantly be made sense of or abandoned. Where there is no vessel, discourse slips away; our language and our meanings are that fluid.

Barthes, in "The Death of the Author," speaks of language knowing no person, but only a "subject" that suffices to hold it all together.³ A true enough assertion in some respects, but it is possible to go a step further.

All issues of persons, agency and authors aside, only the object – solitary, separate from its maker and its viewer alike – marks the place where discourse meets discourse. The object, grammatical or other, I would argue, is what disrupts the flood of discourse – a great rock in the river – managing and freeing the orgies of meaning, marking the place where viewer and maker meet, a foothold to make one's way across.

For these reasons and from these starting points, I would put aside Barthes's talk of the birth of the reader and the death of the author. The trope sounds a little too predatory. In the end, in the moment where we stand before something singular and ask it to mean something for us, an impossible and necessary task, the object requires no deaths. It is an incarnate hope. The object is an act of love.

Peter Dubé

1. Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972, Etc.* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p. 5.

2. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 113.

3. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 145.