

The OBJECT: What it constitutes, and its role in our experience of reality.

By Amber Hearn

In these times so heavily saturated with technology, we can be taken to another space or time in just a click and given an experience so dense with stimulation that we become in some ways completely detached from the physical world around us. The question therefore arises, what is the importance of the object? Where does it belong as a tangible 'real' physical thing in this simulated reality that we are living so much of our time in? Is the direction we are taking as a society removing the need for the object and can we exist simply in an intellectual space of contemplation, void of external phenomena?

Endeavouring to find the significance that the object holds in our experience of this world, as a tactile sensual one, was critically important when formulating the groundworks for what became *Found and Made*. All the artists gently yet powerfully remind us of what it is to be 'real'. Through their use of found materials and their own evident process we are reminded of our connection and bodily experience with the objects that surround us in this world which we are often so removed from whilst functioning in the cyber realm.

French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty speaks of our experience of 'being'. By 'being' he is referring to our bodily relationship with the three-dimensional world that we inhabit. Ponty discusses the role our senses play in decoding these surroundings, translating them into our internal perception of what we believe to be our reality. This idea of 'being' is an important and fundamental aspect to Ponty's philosophy. I will refer to this term of 'being' whilst discussing *Found and Made*.¹

Ponty's writing is an expansion on the existing philosophical field of Phenomenology, which is the study of the nature of phenomena (things we experience consciously and bodily). His account of phenomenology creates its own definition of our encounter with phenomena, most importantly a clear annotation of our life world, and the direct account of our experiences void of psychological origins and explanations. Phenomenology has become for

him a pure description of our 'being in the world'. We are not experiencing it from an outside contemplative view but in fact inhabiting it and perceiving it.²

Perception is essential to Ponty's philosophy; as to distinguish our experiences of the world we must first understand what the nature of being a "perceiving subject" means. That is to say, how we are different from the objects that simply exist spatially in the world, is that even as we exist as spatial objects, we are also engaging with that space through our perception. To 'be' in the world, in the sense that we are part of it, we must have that aspect of perception. Therefore, we do not simply exist in the world, we inhabit it as we react to it and as it acts upon us. We are engaged and connected.³

When looking at the work of Pollyxenia Joannou, particularly 'Cotton Wadding' and 'Packing Felt' stacks, we are given a gentle suggestion of the sensations of touching fabric: soft, sometimes prickly, safe, secure. These are all things that come to mind for the viewer when encountering this work. The possibility of them representing home and security is also felt strongly in Joannou's work, as we think of the security, or lack of, which is often associated with the concept of home.

"Felt & Wadding Stacks" (2006) was a piece that set me off in a direction in which the use of certain materials read as a metaphor for protection and safety. The layering is forming lines of sediments; layers of time, years; of history."

- Pollyxenia Joannou

We are given an insight into Joannou's own history and relationship with the concept of home. This is something that is relatable to all who encounter this work.

The experiences being reminisced here are conveyed through the simple and modest material - light and unobtrusive - like the revisitation of a memory. We can feel what Joannou feels. A tiny insight into her perception and sensual experience of 'being' is alluded to.

Similarly, Annelies Jahn's work is subtle in its suggestions surrounding her experience of being. We see a tiny rolled loop of tape presented in a small perspex box. This speaks to her large acrylic lying piece which is a measure of her own body height. There is a nice marriage of the body and the object here. The large and the small, the micro and the macro, the opposites.

This tiny loop is in a space that also feels somewhat like home. It is safe, protected. This is something that the body can often provide us with; safety and protection, a boundary from the world around us. Annelies has chosen to break that boundary by involving her body within her objects. Her acrylic body measure piece lies as if she is lying. It replaces her body in the space and her body becomes the object as it senses the floor and the people viewing it. There is a real sense of interaction between the viewer and this piece. The Measure is 'being' in the world, just like the artist.

When looking at the work of Michael Bennet and Joe Wilson, a nice relationship is held surrounding opposites. The rough, textured, and raw elements captured in Bennett's work oppose the smooth, pristine, clean, and flat presentation of Joe Wilson's pieces.

Friedrich Nietzsche discusses in his book *Beyond Good and Evil* that one cannot exist without the other. To know good, we must also know evil. To define day, we must know what night is. Thus, in our third dimensional

experience of life, we must also understand opposites in objects;⁴ rough vs smooth, light vs dark. Each gives the other its place in existing, and without both, nothing would be.

This pull and tug between the two, whom give each other life, is distinctly felt when confronted by the presence of Bennett's and Wilson's work side by side. This beautiful and powerful combination gives life to the space, activating it and creating tension and movement. The viewer is invited to join in a conversation about opposites: life and death, light and dark. All of which create our existence, an existence that wouldn't 'be' without the 'object'.

When defining the term object, one often thinks of a bowl, a plate, or a chair. However, the body also holds its place as an object in the work of Machiko Motoi. Motoi positions herself within her performance piece, placing her body amongst the ceramic objects (a collection of work by Ngala Nanga Mai Artists made with her direction). Machiko engages herself with the ceramics and follows this by engaging with her audience. The relationship of the body with the external object is a reminder of the interrelation that lies between ourselves and that which is around us. Although we are different to these objects, in that we do not just exist in the space but are reacting to it as it acts upon us, (as discussed earlier in relation to Ponty's phenomenally), there is also an argument to be held concerning our similarity and connection to these objects.

In the most recent developments of 'String theory', scientists are theorising that we, as matter, are vibrating as billions of string particles, not the originally assumed circular particle. Therefore, when our bodies encounter an external object, we are in fact blending together in vibration with the string particles of that object, becoming one in a sense. This is an interesting hypothesis to incorporate into the experience of 'being' and our relationship to the objects that surround us. It appears that we, as a body, when we encounter these objects, become one with them. This lends credence to the idea that the body is in fact an object too. ⁵

Overall, when dissecting the nature and importance of the role of the object, it is safe to say that the significance of the object and the handmade or found material can be detected in the role they play in giving us a real 'flesh' experience of this world through touch. The artists all remind us of this sensation: it is touch that binds us with another object. Although an experience can be created in the mind through seeing or hearing, it is through touch that we are grounded into our bodies and allowed to reach out and connect with our surroundings, all our other senses bring us inward. Hearing or smelling something translates in our brain as a sensation. Although this is also the case with touch, we are at the same time reaching outward as we react and engage as a perceiving subject.

There's something truly unique about the object's inability to be fully experienced online. A two-dimensional representation of the object can be presented, yet to truly experience the object in all its tangibility, it must be done so in person, through the physical presence of the viewer.

This 'flesh' experience of being an active participative body, fusing us with the objects we encounter, is a vital part of the future of art. If all art can be experienced online, then the gallery setting will be dead.

To conclude, after discussing the object's role in our experience of reality in a saturated technological age, it is important to note that the object provides a real 'flesh' experience of art. This distinctive experiential encounter is necessary to grasp the specific properties the work possesses.

Without the object the future and direction of art in the physical and tangible world is questionable. Whether this is of concern can be argued and has been argued by many. However, it seems we hold some innate perceptive and aesthetic attachment to the object and the experience it provides us with. Perhaps what needs to be debated is whether we are ready to lose this or not?

Notes

1. Eric Matthews, *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, (Acumen Publishing, 2002), 23.
2. Thomas Baldwin, *Reading Merleau-Ponty*, (Taylor and Francis Group, 2007), 5.
3. Matthews, *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 48.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, (Dover Publications, 1997), 128.
5. W. Lerche, *Recent Developments in String Theory*, (Theoretical Physics Division, CERN, Geneva, Switzerland), 2.