

Everything

*Everything is a short essay that explores curation in relation to a wider circulation of material things. First printed in **Curating; the Contemporary Art Museum and Beyond**, edited by Anna Harding, Art and Design Magazine 1997*

Everything

Some Things

Implicit within contemporary institutions of display - stores and shops or museums and galleries being the most common examples - is the idea of curation. Curation, suggests the ability to define an ordered sequence of objects within a wider material economy. We are often encouraged to experience this wider material economy as excessive, chaotic and remorselessly accelerating.

A collection of curated artifacts exhibited - that is, a set of things selected as special and sometimes displayed - may be called 'permanent' or 'temporary'. 'Permanent' implies sets or sequences of objects being relatively slow moving in their passage through culture; Roman Glassware for instance, in relation to the speed of other material economies, say, stainless steel saucepans. In opposition to this, a temporary collection, represents a set of objects specifically assembled, perhaps momentarily, around a theme, event, fashion or season; Sculptors Drawings from the 20th Century or New Knitwear.

The display of curated artifacts, whether permanent or temporary, defines a material space classification. As such the enclosed collection crystallizes the structure of the singular and the serial, objects are either offered up as unique, or displayed as a coherent set. The collection distills the multiple yet related taxonomic structures evolved to define and manipulate other, more diverse material economies. As a peculiar pattern of accumulation, the collection holds the promise of an imagined closure, and consequently is a well known paradigm for perfection.

Objects which join collections through their display evolve as narrative elements, held in a material form. On an institutional level, objects can become a significant marker within a narrated history of Greek sculpture; the Venus de Milo in the Louvre for example, and specified as singular. Equally my birthday present from Rachel, that strange teapot, now on my mantle-piece, is serially produced. The teapot becomes singular in my narration of it. I use the artifact to indicate a particular event, exchange or friendship, the teapot allows me to order experiences, and later to recount them. Susan Stewart's engaging book *On Longing*, uncovers the particular qualities of relationships which adhere to the souvenir. Stewart detects nostalgia -an attempt to suture the felt lack between experience and its representation- at the heart of the manufactured souvenir, and eventually, through her narration, the souvenir collapses down into the drives that haunt the collected object.

Unfortunately, within institutional display, the artifact is condemned to a passive social and material relationship, dominated by the eye and a fashionable sense of order. Display, is ideologically charged, it forces diverse behavior into prescriptive patterns. Consequently, curation craves the authentic, ever more desperate tactics are deployed to mimic legitimate, perhaps more playful, material relations. Recently, amongst other things, galleries through their artists have invited you to take away old clothes Christian Boltanski, read the books they suggest Douglas Gordon, offered to be useful to you Cesare Pietroiusti, planted Marram grass in your grounds (Maria Eichhorn, and hired the gallery out to local community groups for the duration of the exhibition Renee Green. Galleries have opened in failed industrial or thriving

retail spaces, they pretend to be restaurants, cafes or soup kitchens, they want to be Museums, or even colonize domestic spaces. Less mobile institutions of display, museums and department stores routinely reach for complex theatrical devices; lighting, sound, smell, or major set-building, in an attempt to contextualize their depicted artifacts. It was Marcel Duchamp who alerted us some time ago to the power -or curse- of the institutions of display, they simultaneously transform everything they contain to the level of the art object -an artifact manufactured almost exclusively for display- which nullifies everything valuable they might embrace. Unable to replicate a material behavior which is -as we shall see- already the symptom of something else, institutional artifacts obey their prescribed syntactic forms, they rarely slide, slip or spill.

Everything Else

As our material culture becomes increasingly abundant, as we evolve into more discerning consumers, any thing, as part of a particular network of exchange is experienced in a subtle relationship to other extremely similar objects. Equally rarefied economies exist for the appreciation of differences in paintings, antique furniture, as well as training shoes.

Increasingly, clothes, tools, art, bibelot, gifts, souvenirs and rubbish are seen as the markers without which social life would disintegrate. All economies of things, are subject to a whole gamut of ideological constraints mediated through often competing ideas of correct and incorrect usage. This is to begin to model the whole material world as an active participant in the configuration of social relations, rather than its passive reflection. Careful attention to material practices has made it possible to question lazy distinctions between art and tool, good and bad, or priceless and rubbish. In turn this exposes the means by which the play of difference and similarity within any defined set of artifacts allows the relativity of values to be extruded into being, and set to work: older, limited, cleaner, unique, smaller, valuable, faster,

If, as many anthropologists and psychoanalysts believe, our intimate notions of self and the complex workings of society are constructed in our articulation of things, we become synonymous with our patterns of accumulation. From lovers gifts to the GATT trade negotiations, we literally curate ourselves into being. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has developed the term *habitus* to describe the learned material practices appropriate to your social aspirations. How a particular interest group - Bourdieu is able to slip between more inflexible class structures - extends its influence over a given material terrain is often the fight for the dominant interpretation of the same thing. Using a close contextual method of interpreting material behaviour, Bourdieu shows how the struggle to accumulate, classify and display artifacts is a competitive process. The aggressive nature of this activity is the contest for symbolic capital, to which Bourdieu attributes all the actual cultural force of financial capital, which is why the conflict is so fierce.

Bourdieu intends the tussle for symbolic capital to extend - of course - through all levels of culture, to what is seen to be the appropriate use and interpretation of every image, text, object, sound and space. What, how, and with what should you cook, for instance. How should you store the utensils, in racks, from hooks, rails, magnetic strips, drawers, shelves or stands. The kinds of fine classification and control that operates around seemingly slight domestic tasks cannot be contained by utility or notions of efficiency alone. Objects associated with activities cannot be lazily contrasted with things more habitually set aside for display.

In the lived space its often the location which empowers the thing, as an object of display, as opposed to any quality assigned to the artifact itself. I am thinking now of the mantle-piece, certain kinds of shelving, occasional table tops, window-sills or remaindered space on

bookshelves. As much as objects help to define the context you find them in -you would not expect to find a carving knife, kept with the toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, or dental floss (unless its a Hitchcock film)- things, clearly influence the activities carried on around. And yet the variety of situations in which we encounter objects often modifies the quality of attention we extend to them. The same object appears to change its symbolic potential as it moves through an assortment of contexts, that toothbrush may well appear in the Design Museum, a Department Store, in a friends bathroom, a stall in a flea market, or a contemporary art exhibition.

The above are recognized as clearly defined places for encountering things, and in many respects authorize the behavior they contain. In contrast, the lived space fractures and distorts all contexts, this seems to be where acquisition and display is most fluid and radical. Where accumulation evolves into conscious curation, by setting aside artifacts in designated spaces as display, before returning and dissolving into the expected pattern of things. Things that are manufactured as readymade symbolic; paintings or their reproductions, souvenirs, silver or ceramic giftware, birthday or anniversary gifts can be woven into relationships with temporarily symbolic artifacts, beer mats, driftwood from the beach or monogrammed towelling robes smuggled from hotels. In the lived environment, things can engage in many of their social forms, as souvenir, art, gift, utensil, or rubbish, almost simultaneously. Any object can move effortlessly between these genres, as circumstances arise; records rarely played, may be fingered and admired by other enthusiasts, books bought and arranged, but never read, crystal giftware could prop open the door, or washing up bottles transformed into desk-tidies, anything, could slide into pure display and return again. Perhaps the Institutions of Display are quoted as points of reference in this whirlpool of material practices, but they cannot contain them. More extraordinarily, we instantly recognise and interpret this shocking diversity of behavior, and make judgements accordingly.

Objects that become potential for display are often merely diverted from their prescribed patterns of use; the driftwood found walking on the beach with a lover, a beer mat from that Belgian bar or a towelling robe from an expensive hotel, are not where they belong. The narration, derived from Susan Stewart, weaves the object back into a sense of order. It is this by relation to, and difference from, an expected material path that generates the potential for meaning and value.

Shocking, and endlessly inventive, are the fluid and diverse strategies by which people transform artifacts into lived environments, which both form and reflect their sense of self. There has been an enormous amount of recent work generated by Material Culture studies (1) a branch of social anthropology- which tries to determine the appropriate uses of things. Once established, the diversions, abuses, and inventions can be compared and interpreted.

Inevitably, the diversity of material behavior offers an infinite lexicon of variables. Attempts at definition tend to degenerate into crude marketing terminology. The subtlety of material culture slips through language, things, resist translation. Clearly, as the institutions of display stifle the spontaneity which objects possess in their encounters in routine material life, the majority of curation, although experienced, goes unacknowledged.

(1) For a fine example see Daniel Miller *Appropriating the State on the Council Estate* in **Reading Things**; you can read the introductory essay **The Alibi of Use**.

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The Alibi of Use

Reading Things: the Alibi of Use is a short essay that introduces the theme of the publication **Reading Things**. The text explores the possibility of utility offering some resistance to the semiotic free-fall of some (and then very fashionable) post-modern theory.

The footnotes are missing
Reading Things: the Alibi of Use

The substance of our material culture, refracted through the advertising media, is an increasingly dominant site for the struggle to represent an individual's most powerful desires, aspirations and fears. In the industrial countries, we are constantly encouraged to associate and identify, both physically and psychologically, with a bewildering range of things. From Tampax to Trade sanctions, these consumer choices - if media theory is to be believed - may embody the last remaining coherent space of personal and cultural representation.

Any analysis of the object -outside the field of anthropology and its more recent offspring, Material Culture Studies- has traditionally concentrated on the production of things by industry. This analysis has taken the form of market research, target sampling, advertising and statistics. Such a particular representation tries to identify gaps for the profitable manufacture of commodities, to effectively locate, isolate and eventually stimulate demand. Clearly this is a warped perspective, it may account for what, or how many things are in circulation, but it does not begin to offer any understanding of how they are actually used.

The theme of this book lies in attending to things as they fall from the commodity loop into their rich and varied lives. How exactly are objects patterned with meaning and value, how for instance do they begin to trap historically transient experiences - for example Love beads, Ben Sherman shirts or safety pins.

Most of our material world, like the iceberg, lies beneath our threshold of our comprehension. Things flow past us, rest silently as a sediment and quietly shape our consciousness. If our experience of time is dovetailed into the representation of the present, the object, like the pop song, can snare the fleeting moment as it falls away into memory.

How people actually utilize things is extremely resistant to representation. I hope through the diverse contributions presented in this book, to establish and then play back some of the procedures of use, against tactics for art. I would recognize it is often only the shift in context, the suspension of utility that separates the two.

I must begin by acknowledging the fact that art objects' representational hegemony has been fatally threatened by the explosion of, and increased psychological investment in material things. No longer does it seem desirable or possible to situate a boundary between reality and its representation. The strategy of playing dumb utility against the chatter of aesthetics has been tirelessly repeated during the past eighty years; it was Marcel Duchamp who initially slipped the urinal into the stream of aesthetic objects.

What I may suggest to be more productive is to recognize that all objects can be brought to the level of speech, and to consider instead the mechanisms for producing and structuring meaning across the spectrum of material culture.

The Book

The presence of an artefact, its relations, contexts, functions and associations, in short its rich life, concretely exists and simultaneously participates in a discursive and "textual" space. No object is an island - even the smallest grommet is named, its properties are catalogued and printed, its efficiency or function can be discussed in magazines, its values and uses are swapped in bars, we could argue over its beauty, in effect it enters discourse. There is no autonomy for things however desired; an artefact inevitably grows a textual appendage. This parallel yet connected textual space intervenes in the realm of material things, it frames physically and conceptually at any given moment what may be possible.

Driving a 500mm self-tapping Supa Screw into a sheet of Birch 5ply is not - as in this instance - only a textual appearance. That concrete performance may have taken place to construct the chair you are reading this from.

What I want to bring to mind is the dependency of a text on a set of procedures that elude, or at least resist writing. It would be a mistake to take a particular act of transcription, for the practice itself. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the specific, detailed, local and concrete realm of things. The description of the Supa- Screw action unfolds within its own material economy. Is the screwed joint additionally glued, lapped, bolted or nailed? Is the screw capped, domed, chromed or countersunk. Is the head damaged by a blunt bit? Is the head slotted or Phillips? Is the ply varnished, faced, stained, splintered, rough cut or sanded? This potentially endless list of variables would allow you, the reader of the material text, to recognize if the chair is well or badly, carefully, sloppily, lovingly or mechanically made.

What I want to underline in attending to this multitude of concrete difference, which could be physically apprehended in an instant, is the impossibility inherent in transcribing a material syntax.

This book recognizes the inescapable condition of being neither contiguous with, nor totally separate from its subject, the field of physical material culture.

The Commodity

No contemporary writing of the object could ignore the realm of the commodity, viral in its expansion; no host has been so receptive as the field of material culture. The recent decade seems to have been blinded by the lightness of the commodity. No longer perceived as the physical by-product of industrial production, or the despised excess of labour from Marxist analysis, the commodity is a universal solvent acting upon the boundary between all things. Houses, water, body parts, transport, to a range of public services, these have all been effortlessly commodified. The efficiency of hospitals, education and the police have been infected by a market driven logic: the imposition of trade sanctions - the withdrawal (a strike) of trading - is used as a weapon that precedes more violent hostilities. Democracy itself has been confused with the freedom to consume, witness the changes unfolding in Central Europe.

The commodities preferred mediums are markets -abstract or concrete- and their propaganda department, the advertising media.

Commodity objects lend themselves to being severed from their material presence, they are easily flattened down into an economy of visual signs. De-materialized and transparent they wantonly slip and slide un-anchored in time or specific context. As passive carriers of meanings, as pure signs, they are at the mercy of a medium cynically dominated by 'life style' advertising and the projected desires of targeted "aspirational clusters". Commodity discourse attempts to close the troubling irregularity of objects in use. In this respect the aim of advertising remains constant, to regulate, and control the production of meaning at the moment of the objects' appearance into a field of vision. The most base tactic is to eroticize all aspects of the object. For example, there is a wealth of difference between a carburettor and a plastic banana, their specific spheres of use would normally preclude their contact.

But it is just possible to imagine advertising conflating the two in a sheen of soft focus seduction to more effectively enter their prospective markets.

What I want to bring to attention here is that commodified objects yield easily to the play of semiotic analysis. Inseparable from the effects of their promotion, seductive in their excess and abandon, it is not surprising a media biased theorizing has accompanied the material excess of the last decade.

As if to acknowledge the modern commodity as the most powerful collective site of representation, art practice has increasingly mirrored heightened strategies of consumption, in the form of extreme products. I am thinking of the American artists Jeff Koons or Haim Steinbach for instance. What these and other artists have done is to take the mechanisms of display, the transparent objects, the gloss, the greed, in short the language of commodity fetishization, and to feed them back into the advertising media. A kind of homeopathic tactic, where a concentrated or extreme product, something hopelessly thin and shimmering attempts to engender some temporary immunity to the whole market seduction.

The difficulty, no, the necessity, if we are to move beyond this increasingly rhetorical position is to try and see through the glittering, reflective sheen of the modern commodity. Perhaps if we begin to chart the object's encounters in the babble of use, the natural resting place for invention and memory, we may encourage some resistance. Things here seem closer to their being, worn, expressive, stripped of hype and glamour, in the relative economies of use and need. This is where, I believe, an objects real life begins, moving from hand to hand, being bought, thrown out, collected, displayed, broken, sold, recollected and re-displayed. Something closer to the flea-market economy.

Of Use

The Use of things, in the broadest sense, is not a space necessarily made manifest by their own production. It is clearly impossible for every individual to intervene at the level of manufacturing. Instead procedures have evolved for ways of articulating existing objects often imposed by a hostile economic order. I am thinking here of a whole spectrum of prosaic gestures, from assembling the furnishings for a room, to choosing what clothes to wear, or more obviously charged actions, for example black youths wearing deerstalker hats.

In this sense of anyone can slip through prescribed material typologies. It is possible for instance, to walk consecutively through a museum, gallery, shop or flea market, browse through catalogues, magazines or newspapers, watch some TV, buy a hat, receive a present and find something beautiful in the street on your way home. What I want to emphasize and encourage here is not only the feeling of use or practice as a space untouched by advertising, but also a process for empowering the person who is subject to industrial production. Effectively, I am proposing switching focus and inviting everyone to step into the author's/producer's place.

Perhaps it is through this multitude of possibilities that individuals write themselves into the dominant material text, and alter its fabric. An equivalent could be the construction of sentences within an established verbal vocabulary and syntax. As Michel de Certeau proposed: "consider the use of things as analogous to the speech act within the linguistic system"

There manifestly exists a syntax of use. Certain arrangements of things conform to our sense of propriety. I might recognize a beautifully made gesture, like the way cut tennis balls protect towing brackets on cars, as well as acts of transgression - plasticine used to stem the flow of water from a leaking pipe joint. These actions may constitute enunciation, a parallel to the construction of a verbal sentence, transposed to the material text. These momentary expressions, like the joke, pun, the apposite phrase, elude transcription and only conventionally enter vocabulary as they congeal into cliché. Coat hangers used as car aerials might be a good example. It would be foolish to propose a formal grammar of things. This may form part of the Design Museum's project, similar to the conservative linguist who tries to impose the idea of proper usage. The best I can hope for is a momentary snap shot, in an effort to engender a heightened sensitivity to the articulation of the material lexicon.

By attending to the rich collisions of objects, the playful frictions, the linguistic diversity of culture is mirrored in the dialects, slang, and vernacular of use.

The relative economy of use may allow our attention to wander over the particulars of a material syntax, the joins, fits, slips and ruptures of material culture. The discontinued bags for your old vacuum cleaner may turn up in a flea market, next to the carved soapstone African head, 3/8 pop rivets, and that old Beastie Boys tape you once owned and gave away. Perhaps the repair, customizing, DIY, improvisation, something recycled, all these activities would repay attention. This local inflection, generated by the friction of use requires the most detailed reading, and is it seems to me, the most resistant to representation.

How can we re-coup the abundant production of things that rest between self-conscious design, outside the morphology of tradition, or fall through the rationalism of market forces. What is left is the pink plastic suction hook that never works. This is not to retreat into the realm of kitsch, but to attend carefully to moments of industrial capital's failure.

Only here may lie exposed, in the suction hooks re-inscription, the unauthorised inventiveness of use

Use in its purest sense is the inverse of the commodity, it does not yield easily to metaphor.

This statement approaches a Marxist theory of use where use value is a privileged relation prior to any act of Exchange. For Marxism use is assumed to operate directly upon need, it is the very heart of the object, its moral foundation.

A functional object has a metonymic relationship to meaning while in service, the effect and implementation of its function can be juxtaposed to produce a figure of meaning by contiguity. Outside of its immediate context, stripped of its function, in a museum, gallery, or photograph for instance, an object operates more conventionally like a sign in written language. While it is conceivable to theorize away any absolute value of and to erode distinctions based qualitatively upon function. Jean Baudrillard -amongst others- in his earlier writings, helped sever the link between a Marxist use value and the establishment of a concrete, absolute need.

'Commodities induce the logic of utility and mobilize the psychology of need in order to perpetuate themselves.'

There remains the certainty that an object, lets imagine a parachute, at its most basic either works or it does not. The simple test is you either jump, plummet to earth and die or your descent is slowed and you survive. It is possible to play with the semiotic difference of those actions, to luxuriate in the endless possibilities of signification, but there is a bottom line, a referent, some resistance.

The basic purpose of slowing a fall, brackets the form of a parachute - it could not be made of sponge, or be completely rigid, or too heavy, etc,- in some sense the form and action are reciprocally defining. Sharp things move more quickly through the air than blunt things. What I hope to make evident is that the relationship between form and function, or sign and referent, in use, fails to be arbitrary.

I am straying close to an ideal of most closely associated with a certain "high" Modernism.

Perfect use would render the object invisible, this may be the ideal of Supa Screws, or Fischer Nylon Anchors, or microprocessors. Only in excess of their sublime function do they begin to represent. Unfortunately no degree zero of utility exists, there is no direct drive between form and function a gap always exists. There is no ideal parachute. Use opens itself to language; corrupted, language frames use, and the two enter a reciprocally binding relationship.

I have no desire to reintroduce a mechanistic relationship between form and function, nor do I wish to confuse a pure vale for use, with the sense of resistance that I have suggested. I cannot pretend the grounding of interpretation within will arrest the semiotic free fall" of recent theory.Â

It`s impossible to regulate for a useless corkscrew beautifully holding the door open. But I would suggest we can look to material objects that operate around the locus of function for some opposition. Use could begin to operate as a brake, generate friction and slow the constant acceleration of a media saturated interpretation. If the commodity is characterized by arbitrariness, use is not.

Material

I would like to step closer and pay some attention to the possibilities of physical materials themselves. There exists an infinite lexicon of characteristics, rough, light, sticky, matt, porus, spongy, dense, hard, and myriad methods of construction, riveting, gluing, welding, screwing, etc. These properties can act as discriminants within a formal system through which meaning is structured. Simply put, rough means primitive, smooth means cultured. This lexicon of difference between materials, is obviously not neutral or fixed, but clearly structured by its immediate social and temporal context.

The ability to differentiate, to structure meaning as it coalesces around wood products, metals, fabrics, and ceramics for instance is not to exclusively bind meaning to their physical attributes, but certainly to recognise affinities adhering to their particular characteristics. The properties of materials such as wood, are slowly learnt, sieved through experience, communicated across generations and accumulate within our culture. How do you arrive at the thickness of a Hickory broom handle? Wood currently connotes something natural, old and domestic, it`s tensile strength is utilized in handles, doors, tables and chairs, it`s warm to the touch, stable, and cosily familiar.

This rather nostalgic view of the slow accumulation of experience has in relatively recent times been framed and ruptured by the qualities of modern plastics. How can the fluid properties of plastic, the frightening diversity of its forms its endless potential for manufacture be accommodated into our slowly accumulated material lexicon? Plastics have no coherent material characteristics, no signature. Wood was used for its relative lightness, versatility and tensile strength, but plastics are a changing continuum of often contradictory potential. Simultaneously transparent, opaque, porous, impervious, light or dense, spongy or shiny. Compounding this diversity of characteristics, plastics leave discrete traces of manufacture, not the all too visible joints, screws, glues, nails and bolts, the myriad fixings of a previous age. We are accelerating into the realm of complex moulding, Mylex, Styrene, Polyethylene and silicon all of which leave virtually invisible evidence of production. Look at any plastic toy it appears as if from nowhere, our level of manufacture has descended to the chain of its molecular composition.

With time we are becoming more sensitive to plastic's presence; as we see it bleached, faded and abraded on the beach, its frailties emerge. It ages rather sadly, the patina of time degrades rather than enhances its qualities. What's glaringly apparent is almost any attempt to repair plastic products fail. Once broken, the thin synthetic skin gives no adequate mechanical fixing, it repulses all traditional techniques. Instead glues, solvents and a degree in chemistry are required. Inevitably we are persuaded to dispose of the object and purchase a new one. Clearly our engagement with modern products is less physically substantial, denied the play of the bricoleur, repair becomes obsolete, we are forced to retreat as intervention is removed to the level of consumer choices.

Ominously, the impact of plastic technology has reverberated through more established materials, wood has now mutated into M.D.F, Stirling board, Chipboard, and various compressed residue products. Wood is now a consistent material without grain, all the vagaries of nature are erased, its moving towards total fabrication. We are in real danger of losing the ability to recognize the properties of our material environment.

My intention in sketching the stereotypes of a material grammar is to expose the potential embedded in materials themselves. I have no desire to retreat into sentiment, I would prefer instead to hold contradictions up for scrutiny. To be familiar with the living syntax of material-in-use reaffirms materials as richly patterned with meaning. The relevance, it seems to me, lies in being able to recognize several distinctions simultaneously -economic, technological, ideological and philosophical- as they cling to the differences between, say, a plastic and galvanized bucket.

A material lexicon I suggest, like the constantly revised dictionary, holds the limitless well of physical grammar.

Of Uselessness

I would like to step back, and overlay this lexicon of material properties with a vocabulary of use-less things.

The thing, with no recourse to use, an art object for instance, is caught between the form it appropriates and the materials and methods of its construction. For a use-less thing there can be no retreat into the comfort of a reciprocally binding relationship. In place of the plimsoll line of function; taste, and various aesthetic criteria pretend a concrete affiliation to utility.

In establishing the coincidence of two traditionally distinct material vocabularies; for the practice of art and a wider realm of things. I would like to stimulate awareness of the

conscious production of value and its exclusions, not to defend an autonomous sphere. Tentatively, I suggest the apprehension of art can only take place through our experience of things.

I would like to anchor the practices for art firmly within a wider sense of material culture. What we are now moving through is a fluid field of potentiality, with a set of changing procedures bracketing the manufacture of art. This is to recognise that the context, gallery, museum, or book induces the heightened awareness peculiar to arts apprehension, by effectively cancelling any recourse to immediate use.

This book -like the gallery- condemns the objects presented to their fate as signs. Perhaps to resist this condition, the visual projects enclosed mirror the tactics of the shopper I introduced earlier. They wander through prescribed typologies of things

Presented here are objects extracted from the relentless tide of availability, from furniture, existing art objects, utensils, things from distant cultures, toys, a sink plunger, commodified things, found, bought or stolen things, deeply personal things, invented objects, hand made things, industrially manufactured things, things completely resistant to comprehension. The intention is to reflect the playful collisions of objects within material culture, weaving metaphor into dumbness, exposing fissures and leaving ruptures in the otherwise seamless flow of things.

An alternative is to concentrate on the minute difference in activities of use. Activities that slip below the received level of comprehension.

What both tactics share -even through their suspension in photography-is the desire to retain the rich `babble of use`. They attempt to frustrate the introduction of arbitrary sign exchange, and instead ambush the maximum of readings between the energy released on contact between things. I may go further and suggest the objects depicted appropriate the alibi of use. Alibi, as the term implies is to reach for corroborative evidence, to lend some credibility to a weak and unsubstantiated event. By calling to mind objects cemented in specific, but disparate contexts, the alibi of use is an endeavour to return the referent to representation.

What I would want to submit through the range of activities encompassed by this book is that things that cohere around a sense of use may offer temporary resistance to, and allow the introduction of some responsibility into, the current endless play of ungrounded representation. This book sets itself in opposition to the arbitrary nature of the object as sign in our highly commodified material culture. While simultaneously acknowledging material culture as perhaps the natural resting place of representation.

This text introduces the publication **Reading Things..**

chance projects

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the enthusiast has the same relationship to capital as the gift to the commodity

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