

OBJECT OF DESIRE

Brother Joseph McNally Gallery
Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore
LASALLE College of the Arts
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Artists

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Object of desire

‘It is a thing just like any other, a thing like you and me.’¹

This text is an object of its own, just as significant or insignificant as any other thing in this room. It’s an experiment behind the labour of this show, a self-questioning about how objects are positioned around us, and our own objecthood. If you are in doubt, perhaps you are already in the right mindset to experience this space and the things that it contains.

In her essay ‘A thing like you and me’ (2010), artist Hito Steyerl writes about how a commodity is not simply an object, but a concentration of social forces, embedded with tensions and hidden movements. But what about the art-object; an object which is a special kind of commodity? Art-objects gain value through recognition by cultural institutions, where they are seen, documented and distributed. Apart from their specific material attributes and the sensations that these create, art-objects are always seen as being something more—that is, more than simply material objects. They are objects of desire, endowed with special attention and meanings.

Philosopher Slavoj Žižek describes how this quality of the art-object as being ‘more than it-self’ allows us to create ideologies from it; ideologies that reflect human values. Through this process, objects (as well as art-objects) become containers of human fantasies.² In turn, these fantasies feed back into our political and material reality. This process of filling art-objects with human desires becomes a mechanism for revealing or reinforcing ideas of value; ideas that support current hierarchies. It also often obscures the artist’s original intention.

As Žižek points out, these fantasies contained in the object are what enables us to enjoy them as objects, as well as

our own objecthood.³ But when faced with the constructed or illusory nature of these fantasies, we often feel as if our existence is threatened, as if our lives were based on the integrity of their illusions. This confrontation makes me think of the film *Arrival* (2016), directed by Denis Villeneuve. Its story revolves around the arrival of aliens that try to give humans a new tool: a language that would change humans’ perception of time and matter. Yet, instead of being seen as a gift, this tool is perceived by the humans in the film as a threat towards humanity. The loss of the fantasy, or of the ideals behind our desires, is often more threatening than the loss of any actual object.

Accepting this awareness, and considering the ways in which the values of objects are constantly being determined, we are led to wonder—what exactly is being validated through objects? Who or what is producing their value?

‘The starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the “here” of the body and the “where” of its dwelling.’⁴

In her essay, ‘Orientations Matter’ (2010), Sarah Ahmed emphasizes the need to focus our attention on an object’s background and ‘arrival’. By ‘arrival’, she means how an object assumes a social role; a role established through generations of repeated activity or use. Such arrivals of objects are often forgotten, especially in objects whose values are taken as given. In her text, she also describes how spaces accrue meanings, which make certain bodies feel more ‘in place’ than others.⁵ Applying this concept to art requires us to look at given histories of art, and to reflect on the perspectives and values which continue to shape our views of art-objects.

This text is a beginning; an attempt to reconstruct how I see objects and my own

objecthood. Awareness of my orientation towards things and spaces could be a way to influence, and to be in touch with, the desires and values which are accumulating around them. It could also create a way for me to be more in touch with myself and others. What is at stake in any discussion about the reorganization of the values and desires of objects are which bodies—human or non-human—will be given a place or a voice. Could an art-object’s participation in this social construction of desires be something to consider? Could recognizing the agency of objects help us to **see ourselves as things acting upon other things?**

Perhaps we are on the brink of realizing a new materiality, one that is not passive but interactive, self-organizing and transformative. Maybe, and instead of mourning the loss of the fantasies which surround objects, I can side with the object—to try and see a potential future for myself and for others within it.

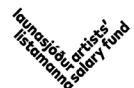
Dagrún Aðalsteinsdóttir

Notes

1. Hito Steyerl, *The wretched of the screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 51.
2. Slavoj Žižek, *The sublime object of ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 2008), 92.
3. Žižek, *The sublime object of ideology*, 92.
4. Sarah Ahmed, ‘Orientations matter’, in *New materialisms: Ontology, agency and politics*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 236.
5. Ahmed, ‘Orientations matter’, 24.



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