What Have You Left Me?

This is a tale of ownership, either by design or default. Discreet objecthood was a great dream, doomed for failure as soon as the excesses of ’70s surface treatments, materials, and combinations took hold, thanks in part to affordable matching living room sets. Objects lead to things lead to stuff. Dematerialization of the object my foot.

What I should do is write about this change, the transformation from objects to things to stuff. I’ll leave that to Bill Brown, who said, in part, in his essay “Thing Theory”:

“We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relationship.”

His conception of things is much more complex; and stuff is even farther along in the story, stemming from things mixing with objects, and, well, stuff that you just don’t know how to characterize. For example, what do houseplants and doilies do? What happens when houseplants are set upon doilies made by someone we love? For now, the excerpt from Brown’s essay will make do.

Danielle Gustafson-Sundell and Melissa Pokorny are obsessed with stuff, with the items you try not to see. In a store, you just might pick up some of the materials both artists use in their sculptures and set the materials down just as fast. Others you buy without a moment’s thought. These are complex sculptures, balancing age, value, class, co-dependency, crassness, cliché, literalness, and caricature in — statistically speaking — equal measure. Partly this complexity is maintained because the sculptures remind you that there is always some other way to make something, a way you have forgotten, or wished you could forget. Both Gustafson-Sundell and Pokorny often create sculptures incorporating these disregarded methods, and if the sculptures don’t have expiration dates, they should.
And even if an object is made to last forever (a stainless steel sculpture by Jeff Koons, possibly), there is no guarantee that it won’t look completely dated in the not-too-distant future — the way a ‘50s rocket ship and The World of Tomorrow looks almost quaint to us today. If, as Smithson quotes Vladimir Nabokov, “The future is but the obsolete in reverse,” the contours of the present might be described as the obsolete in progress.

— Robert Nickas, Entropy and the New Objects

However, never mistake expiration or obsolescence for irrelevance or for distaste. Both Gustafson-Sundell and Pokorny specialize in sympathetic objects that include nasty materials. The sympathy is in the tradition of the literary genre, begun in the 18th century, where novels were written from the point of view of an object or an animal, to make palpable relations between the subject of the story and people. The nastiness is perhaps a side affect of spoilage, combined with the afterimage of class embedded in the materials. As viewers we embarrassingly think in terms of middle- to lowbrow, though only when we mistake ourselves as removed from the cheap and mass-produced materiality. The reality is that these rugs, stands, plastic dogs and fabrics did not arrive by mistake. After all, these materials are in truth expensive. One certainly wouldn’t spend good money if you thought them ugly, though you might find something about them a little repulsive, maybe. This repulsiveness would most likely stem from their manufacture — like the way the scale is a little less than full size (as if left in the dryer too long), the way every monogram is a sign for a distinct personality, the way the sentiment of the objects almost slides into kitsch, but still conveys emotion, and the heartfelt warmth only polar fleece can provide. Every faux surface or cheap appliqué is wanting for authenticity but instead only based on a true story, like a T.V. movie. Gustafson-Sundell’s and Pokorny’s sculptures embody the attachments and repulsions we have for stuff. They become craft coupled with failure, both of seamless execution, or most importantly, our failure to not identify with the materials and forms in our surroundings.

Removal, or framing by, say, turning a bookshelf into sculpture or precariously setting fake bricks on a dog’s head, causes the death of the functional object. Which isn’t to refuse the possibility of an afterlife. Once the objects have been given these additional
Danielle Gustafson-Sundell,
i’m always waiting for you (wind chimes),
2005, driftwood, upholstery tacks, kitchen string, silverware (installation detail).
Courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.

Danielle Gustafson-Sundell, *i feel anything can happen*, 2005, 8’x10’ nylon pile beige area rug monogrammed with *dlgs*, the artist’s initials in felt and velvet (detail). Courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.
reasons for being, any resulting encounter with this transformation is a new combination of a set of objects and a subject, at times illustrative, that forms relationships only tangentially accessible from the outside. Objects, changed into zombies — or the living dead, if you prefer — of a sort, wandering things minus the hunger for human flesh. This is the line at functional death that can never be rationally crossed. In other words, all this stuff meant something to somebody, somebody who is no longer here, or there. Now you have to make sense of it all, decipher things always in relationship to other things.

Rather they are things, just things, criss-crossing back and forth between the animate and inanimate with the poet as the point of mediation, the question insistently posed, the question that makes us seem no less foolish than wise: How is it that the distinction between subject and object, between me and things, is so crucially dependent on life and death? Why is death the harbinger and index of the thing world, and how can it be, then, that death awakens life in things?
— Michael Taussig, “Dying is an Art, Like Everything Else”

Let us imagine that I find myself one day in charge, both legally and emotionally, of more things than I have ever owned in my life. A houseful of things. Enough subject-object relationships for a lifetime. Stuff. None of these things, in their current state, seem functional; they are almost metaphors or symbols, maybe allegories. These things were not so distant from me, but just distant enough that some I dislike, some I adore, some I ignore, based solely on personal taste. This is not the end of my judgment. Some are heirlooms, some items I remember or recall, some I may have bought originally, or had given to me, and others I cannot even fathom a guess of where they came from, or why. There are more judgments required of me than I can ever be prepared to engage. I don’t know sterling from plate from costume.

Suddenly this hodgepodge of objects that until now I tended to pass casually becomes a series of things that effectively monogram a space. Discreet objects but certainly not autonomous, imbued with life only because of their interrelations as a group. Stuff butts up against stuff. Pulling any thing out of its current context is a violation of its life. It is important to note here that since the
time of the Greek philosophers, there has been a persistent and fervent belief that death initiates the metamorphosis of a person into a thing, if such a transformation is possible. Or maybe the reverse is true, every object is now, potentially, a newborn subject rather than an object. This estate, such as it is, is an assortment of co-dependent sentient artifacts. Everything has value, this is not the question. The question is: What things do I attach myself to, and why can I not detach myself from the items to which I feel no connection? Even before this question can be resolved, the next question: The things here that I dislike, why does it guilt me so much that I dislike them? Now that the objects must be separated from each other, how can it be ethically done with deference to their new positions as subjects? Is there a manner, in dealing with objects given meaning and life through a removed subject, to maintain a stable subject-object relationship, through the continually unfolding questions of who, what, why, when and where, what next?

Now, let us imagine the last two paragraphs are about this exhibition. And the many strange, jerry-rigged construction, worn-through use value, and nearly anecdotal aesthetics of the sculptures. After all, death need not be mortal, it can simply be that the person who assembled the objects is no longer nearby to answer our questions. In these combinations, the spell that objects can cast decidedly clouds our minds. How can we clean out this closet? Relive the histories of these objects? Where to put all this stuff? As John Giorno said in Completely Attached to Delusion, “I’m a thief in an empty apartment and I’m giving it all away!”

The irony is these are questions we should be asking ourselves regularly of our surroundings, before we are forced to. And certainly our understanding and encounter of Gustafson-Sundell’s and Pokorny’s sculptures would be richer if we did. Rugs, shelving units, plants — both real and artificial, goop, patterns and fabrics, cast animals, wood, silverware, Plexiglas mirror … how can we possibly reconcile all these objects into a coherent sense of thingness? They are a collection of fetishes, commodities, abject stand-in, treasure and heritage. How can they be anything but stuff? These materials matter, because they are the things with which a life is built and lived according to desire and ability. Contingency is imbued into every object the moment it is
selected by a subject. The closer to us this subject is, by relation, association, profession, class, or taste, the more contingencies we recognize let loose upon what was once a simple object, but is now a complex and seemingly live thing. When that person (subject) is no longer with us, the contingencies become extreme and a dynamic force of their own. This then awakens a series of emotional and ethical responses to the materials at hand. In short, the psychological overload of a heap of stuff. Bob Dylan, many years ago sang:

“Yes, my guard stood hard when abstract threats
Too noble to neglect
Deceived me into thinking
I had something to protect
Good and bad, I define these terms
Quite clear, no doubt, somehow.”

His back pages? How about my bottom drawers?

Anthony Elms is an artist and writer. He also is the editor of WhiteWalls and assistant director of Gallery 400 at UIC.

Spin/Spun: Melissa Pokorny and Danielle Gustafson-Sundell
Monday, Aug. 29 to Saturday, Oct. 8, 2005

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Barbara Wiesen,
Director and Curator

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Danielle Gustafson-Sundell,
was that all there was, 2005, wood,
copper paint, three houseplants in pots,
a piece of paper push-pinned to one of
the structures that says the word wow.
Courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.
Gahlberg Gallery
College of DuPage
425 Fawell Blvd.
Glen Ellyn, IL 60137-6599
(630) 942-2321

www.cod.edu/ArtsCntr.gallery.htm