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From Nothing – Mimetic Seeing and Making

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Abstract

Mimesis has held a central role in art making since ancient times as a primary means of apprehending the real. This exegesis is an explication of the various mimetic functions that have endured in modern and contemporary art practises such as the readymade and its sculptural simulation. I consider key works by Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp, John Cage and Peter Fischli and David Weiss, examining their relationship to the concept and practise of mimesis. I address mimetic representation and replication in dialogue with philosophers such as Arthur Danto, Gorgio Agamben, Jean Baudrillard, Maurice Blanchot and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei. This research asks if there is a fundamental difference between the mimetic activity in ancient Greek statuary and in modern and contemporary art practise through an exploration of the connections between trompe l'oeil and the quotidian as reciprocal and interdependent. Additionally, the exegesis seeks to clarify the complex relationship between formal philosophical thought and the operations of creative labour, highlighting points of intersection and divergence between two distinct modes of 'thinking'. This distinction positions philosophical thought within mentally constructed concepts and artistic thought within mentally constructed images. The discussion provides a setting for my studio practise and brings into question the process of mimetic replication as a necessary additional step in the production of my work following the initial creation of a sculptural assemblage. In both activities—the configuration of found objects and the casting of their copies—I have discovered that the sculpture's conceptual effect is echoed in the physical enactment of its fabrication. This exegesis is therefore an elucidation of my studio process, where the concerted acts of seeing, configuring and manufacturing retrieve representational sculptural objects from nothingness.

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Certification

I, Hany Armanious, declare that this thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the conferral of the degree Doctor of Creative Arts, from the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Hany Armanious ____________________

28 March 2021

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Chapter 1

Introduction

According to Carl Jung, ideas constantly recur, persistently holding and challenging us to engage. Such a set of persistent ideas—around mimesis, representation and replication—have helped signpost and direct the research that comprises this exegesis. In the recounting of certain episodes within my studio labour, a key concern repeatedly surfaces: my reliance on the found object and its subsequent facsimile as a central artmaking strategy. Here is something so obvious and as ancient as representation itself, that I might have ignored and overlooked it if not for its niggling persistence. Once possessed by this set of ideas, I wrote, in an attempt to scratch this phantom itch, or to at least illuminate it. Throughout this exegesis, I converse with a range of critics and theorists, who offer ways to reconsider the relationship between mimesis and my own art practice. Running parallel to this academic conversation, I discuss some artists—Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, and Peter Fischli and David Weiss—that have, until now, held little interest for me. They serve as important examples of art's protracted tussle with representation and the 'real'.

Chapter One begins with a consideration of Arthur Danto's ongoing intellectual engagement with Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* (1964), which sets up an investigation into what I regard as the uneasy relationship between philosophy and art. Danto states that "when philosophy first noticed art it was in connection with the possibility of deception" (Danto 1983, p.1-2). This statement forms one of several strands that my exegesis unravels: firstly, the idea that philosophy follows art and not the other way around; and secondly, that philosophy notices "the possibility of deception" (Danto 1983). Why "possibility"? Does this refer to a latent potentiality or an ability to deceive that is not always activated? And as for "deception", this can only allude to the central issue of the mimetic function in art. I set Danto's position against Giorgio Agamben's 2014 lecture 'Resistance in Art', where art making is presented as a gesture of restraint and negation or, what Agamben calls, "in-operativity" (2014). This can be partially understood as a sabotage of the normal functions of a language or, rather, a system that results in poetry. Although Agamben does not directly refer to mimesis, his notion of the

suspension and simultaneous accounting of the perceived object better conveys the epiphany of the *Brillo Box.* Agamben's proposition offers an alternative to Danto's eschatological reading of Warhol's practice, where Danto's theories appear to lay claim to the creative act rather than provide a space for it. This is especially true when Warhol's art practice and Danto's theory aligns so closely that the individual agency of the artist appears compromised. Danto declares, "It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art possible" (1964, p. 581).

For Danto, Warhol's art was deeply philosophical, and in 'noticing this', Danto declared that art had reached its final physical manifestation before dematerialising into pure idea. On the other hand, Agamben's view is that due to art's refusal to comply with any paradigm of final resolution, it operates in a state of "contemplation and *im-potentiality*" (2014). Contrasting these texts tests specific theoretical models against my own experiences as a maker and observer, which is perhaps more in keeping with Agamben's embrace of indeterminacy over resolution. This chapter is a conversation with and around the subject of mimesis and the novel ways that artists such as Warhol and Duchamp embrace mimetic representation.

Chapter Two puts Jean Baudrillard's *The Conspiracy of Art* (2005) in dialogue with my 1993 sculpture *Mr. Big.* Here, I recall my experiences in the 'Aperto' section of the 1993 Venice Biennale, and re-evaluate my time there considering Baudrillard's condemnation of much of the work in that exhibition. The chapter explores notions of the quotidian, or the everyday, underscored by Baudrillard's views on nullity and waste, which helps me look more closely at my use of discarded objects and detritus. As with Danto, Baudrillard singles out Warhol, and to a lesser extent Duchamp, as the primary forces shaping Western art in the twentieth century. Echoing Danto, Baudrillard also claims that Warhol has no worthy successor. Baudrillard lashes out at contemporary art, disavowing it for what he calls "the storming of reality", invoking an all-encompassing artistic strategy that potentially devours its subject by blurring the artificial with the real (Baudrillard 2005, p.27). How Baudrillard differentiates the feats of verisimilitude and simulation in contemporary art from those of Warhol and Duchamp is initially unclear. Equally unclear is why he dramatically—and necessarily—alludes to Warhol as art's end. The chapter then moves to a discussion of John

Cage's 1952 composition *4'33"*. The piece is an alternative approach to simulation and the quotidian, as exemplified by Cage's famous statement, "I have nothing to say and I am saying it" (1961, p. 109). Cage's approach to art production, which includes working with randomly generated signals both aurally and visually, grew from his interest in Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism and the *I Ching*. Such an approach pre-empts Baudrillard's rage and illustrates how an artist could simply redirect a viewer's attention to sensory data that might have been overlooked, leaving little room for conceptualisation and pointing to a vast field of perception that one can simply awaken to. Cage provides a glimpse at the wonder of life as it really is, if only, as he puts it: "one gets one's mind and one's desire out of its way, and lets it act of its own accord" (Cage 1961). This attitude, perhaps mystically esoteric, is generally kept at a safe distance in academic environments but brought into sharper focus in artistic ones. The difficulty of bridging the two is analogous to dancing on the head of a pin.

Art and philosophy (and mysticism for that matter) all engage with the allusive notion of *being.* Martin Heidegger speaks of the "pure beholding" that is at the heart of *being,* and claims "beholding" as "the foundation of western philosophy" (Heidegger 1962, p.215). It is here, in this "beholding", that the relationship between philosophy's quest for ontological truth and art's promise of "pure perception" is negotiated, even redeemed. This relationship, between perception and existence, or the perception of that which is immediately present, is key to understanding how the ancient world regarded mimesis and how the mimetic underscores creative labour across time.

Chapter Three begins with an overview of "The Classical Concept of Mimesis" by Göran Sörbom (2002), who explains that for the Greeks of antiquity, mimesis was regarded as a common human trait for apprehending and representing the world, where the concept of 'Fine Art' did not exist. *Minemata* was how the ancient Greeks referred to paintings, sculptures, poems or plays, and what Plato called "man-made dreams produced for those who are awake" (S*ophist* 266C). These productions were sequences of image impressions, with each stage of the transmission being mimetic. First, the real object or event that creates a mental image (*mimemata*) is recalled and then, it is reproduced in the desired way (*mimema*). Both functions of apprehension and their retelling would constitute what is now commonly referred to as 'the arts'. Moreover, mimesis in antiquity

was most valued when it conveyed something of the inner life of its subject, even at the cost of inaccurate or exaggerated renderings. This would suggest that the "pure beholding" Heidegger (1962) speaks of, can be traced back to a time in human history where the imitation of life was synonymous with not only the affirmation of life, but more importantly, the cognisant recognition of one's immersion in life itself. Such activities were woven into the everyday social fabric of ancient Greece, yet, as Sörbom points out: "The innovation of the 18th century was to regard these explorations as goals in themselves (autotely) and to give them an institutional place of their own in western society and culture (autonomy; the artworld to use Arthur Danto's modern term)" (2002, p. 20). If Sörbom's estimation is correct, then the institutionalisation of artistic endeavour in the eighteenth century, where "the establishment of aesthetics became an intellectual and academic pursuit" (2002, p. 20), was the point where Western art and Western philosophy took to the dance floor. And if Danto is correct, then philosophy asked for the first dance. However, the skill with which they move is reliant on the music 'being' played in the background.

The development of the studio work that is part of this research was never a clearly demarcated process of thinking and planning followed by action and realisation. It is better described as an attempt to set aside aspiration and exertion in favour of attending to whatever objects might be in front of me. Under these conditions, the majority of the work, which is comprised of assemblages that look like moths was conceived. Once the manipulation of found objects was complete, the additional procedure of deliberation and difficult labour began. While in some cases the 'manipulation' is simply an act of recognition without physical modification, the objects are eventually reproduced and, in a sense, memorialised in their casting as life-like replicants. Each step, whether tacit noticing or labour-intensive material re/production, involves and arguably relies on a mimetic manoeuvre.

In his essay 'Simulated Ready-mades' (1994), Boris Groys discusses the life-like sculptures of Fischli and Weiss, proposing that the viewing of a classical ready-made sculpture (e.g., Duchamp) requires an internal "spiritual interpretation" in order to see the quotidian in a new light. This new light is difficult to sustain due to the ever-present possibility of the object reverting to its everyday value. But when the commonplace is simulated, as it is with Fischli and

Weiss (and also Warhol, Koons, Gober and many others), that possibility is eliminated, and the object is permanently fixed in its incongruent 'thingness'. The thingness that is revealed by the facsimile object tells us more about the object than the object itself. It is a hijacking of the object's sight impression so that it goes on to exist only as image. Both 'thing' and 'image' share similar qualities of detachment from their previous lives, and as Maurice Blanchot puts it, show themselves as "linked to the elemental strangeness and to the formless weight of being, present in absence" (1982, p. 258). Blanchot elaborates on this sensation through an extended contemplation of a corpse, proposing that a person's visage is always hidden until the arrival of death, which bears the true semblance or image. This 'Cadaverous Resemblance' is echoed in Groys' simulated readymade, where one is no longer perplexed by a layered narrative but presented instead with what Blanchot calls "pure image" (1982, p. 259).

It is odd that in a discussion of sculpture one is led to think about imagery and surface appearance. Perhaps these sculptural practices are more aptly described as the production (or removal) of façades and veneers. How then would sculptural practices differ from the work of the master propmaker? In Sörbom's ancient Greece, there was no difference since there was no concept of Fine Art and all such activities were mimetic. The modern answer could be that theatrical props function in a subordinate role as background to the mimesis of the performance, but the props on view in the art gallery *are* the central performance. The prop in the gallery can be seen to function as an exposition of mimesis itself through *trompe l'oeil*. Moreover, the prop in the art gallery is a device that entraps and rehabilitates the peripheral, the overlooked or the unremarkable, where the commonplace is illuminated and held in what Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei calls *ecstasy*.

Throughout each of the chapters are brief citations from Gosetti-Ferencei's chapter 'Ecstatic Mimesis in Trompe L'oeil', which has become a touchstone for much of my thinking on the relationship between mimesis and the everyday. Her 2007 book *The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature*, in which the chapter appears, explores modernism's (at times, unacknowledged) indebtedness to the phenomenological engagement with the everyday. Gosetti-Ferencei's incisive study has provided the necessary compass to navigate what at first seemed like impossible speculation on the origins of

creative work and brought back into focus the foundational instinct of imaginative imitation through word, gesture, object and image.

Overall, this exegesis seeks to re-evaluate the significance of the mimetic faculty as a way of articulating the comprehension of the real and the everyday. These processes have been central to my work for a good part of my career and are linked to practices both ancient and contemporary. Given the fundamental nature of the mimetic urge, the subject has provoked much thought and discussion within philosophical discourses. This research then, is firmly situated within such discourse.

Chapter 2

The work that is carried out in my studio often sits outside discursive experience and demands a tacit awareness that is more visceral than intellectual. However, in order to discuss my work, I have found a language that opens up the ideas which up until now I had not fully articulated. In this first chapter, I consider the divide that sometimes exists between practical studio work and speculative thinking as a way to initiate an understanding of my work methods. The main texts discussed in this chapter are Arthur Danto's 'Art, Philosophy, and the Philosophy of Art' (1983) and Giorgio Agamben's 'Resistance in Art' (2014). Each offers starkly contrasting views on creative labour; Danto claiming art, specifically Andy Warhol's, as intrinsically philosophical, and Agamben suggesting that the creative act is one of resistance or "in-operation" of functional structures. Both approaches also speak directly and indirectly to mimesis and shed light on the imitative as a fundamental urge in art making. This is pertinent to my studio practise where mimicry and facsimile have become the drivers of my sculptural explorations, almost by default, and often without question. In this regard, and for the purposes of this discussion, Warhol acts as a stand-in for my own practise whilst being a case in point for Danto's speculations on art's relationship to philosophy.

Beginnings

I have undertaken the studio work for this research through a sequence of discrete activities that engage existing objects. The initial steps involve the selection and isolation of the objects I want to work with, which are often the discarded or damaged material from my studio, workshop or home. This process is not straightforward as it requires that the pieces come into my peripheral view rather than being actively sought out. This is the tacit awareness mentioned above that relies more on physical sensations and what I call 'unresolved sentiments' than on any specific intellectual work. 'Unresolved sentiments' are the underlying attitudes and feelings that aren't enacted directly but which might surface in response to certain objects when seen in a new way. This process invites an engagement with scrap items, which are sometimes rendered imperceptible by their very banality, in order to attain full recognition through an ancillary act of awareness. This seeing is also aided by the obvious remaking and replication of

the object, which broadens the scope of possible choice by emphasising that virtually anything can be copied. In the beginnings of visceral response, recognition and selection, a commitment is made through the appearance of an object that I had not previously fully appreciated. The objects retrieved from obscurity are placed together in a clear space and allowed time to provide clues on what could happen next. This is a time of observation and rearranging, of trying to balance one thing on top of another, or simply placing certain objects next to each other to see how they relate. These simple and rather 'dumb' manipulations align with the conventions of what is broadly called assemblage art. Some items might remain mute for weeks or months until a slight shift in placement or the introduction of another element suddenly transforms a simple object into an engaging sculptural problem. This rudimentary arrangement of found material is further refigured when it undergoes the process of mould making and casting, where its constituent parts are realistically replicated in coloured resin. The relationship of the found to the everyday, as exemplified in this replicative process, evidences the interplay between mimesis and the quotidian, and is an underlying question in this exegesis, which I will first explore through Danto's reading of Warhol.

Danto's Warhol

In his essay titled 'Art, Philosophy, and the Philosophy of Art' (1983), Arthur Danto states that 'aesthetics' are of no interest to him as a philosophical thinker. He cites John Passmore's 1951 essay, 'The Dreariness of Aesthetics', to illustrate the divide between the theory of art and the plethora of art practice. Passmore denounces the dullness of formal aesthetics, pointing to its pretentiousness and the way it was "peculiarly unilluminating" since it deals with the incomparably interesting subject matter of art and beauty, but in ways which unintentionally diminish art's power (Battin cited in Passmore 1986, p. 11).

As a formally trained philosopher and painter, Danto had a passion for both art and philosophy yet kept both instincts separate; he was unable or unwilling to reconcile the two distinct modes of activity. He stated that he was never interested in discussing art within the discipline of philosophy until he encountered Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* in a New York gallery in 1964, recognising the work as

fundamentally philosophical (Danto 1964). This moment was an awakening. Realising the possibility of addressing current art within a philosophical framework through a chance encounter with a deadpan facsimile of a mass-produced object, Danto embarked on a life-long career in art theory and criticism, which ultimately included his much-discussed essay 'The Artworld' (1964). Danto was already aware of the work of the Pop artists of his day and familiar with much of Warhol's work up to this point, but *Brillo Box* offered a significant revelation. According to Danto:

> … the Warhol show raised a question which was intoxicating and immediately philosophical, namely why were his boxes works of art while the almost indistinguishable utilitarian cartons were merely containers for soap pads? Certainly, the minor observable differences could not ground as grand a distinction as that between Art and Reality! (Danto 1983, pp.1-2).

Danto elaborates on this idea adding: "it cannot be forgotten that when philosophy first noticed art it was in connection with the possibility of deception" (1983, p. 2). By "deception" it seems reasonable to assume that Danto is referring to mimesis: the creation of a convincing likeness of a given thing. Theories of mimesis can be traced back to the earliest philosophical concepts, namely Plato's theory of imitation. However, the motivation to imitate through image, word or gesture, as a means to arrive at a specific outcome is evident well before this in some of the earliest known art, such as the Chauvet cave paintings in southern France. Why then does Danto understand the Brillo boxes as a radical shift given that imitation is a dominant impulse in art across cultures and throughout human history? If Danto claims that the imitative in art is an essentially philosophical proposition, why then has this not always been so?

In the early 1960s, Warhol tried unsuccessfully for years to be accepted as a serious artist in New York where he was already a well-established and highly sought-after graphic designer (*Andy Warhol: A Documentary* 2006). Pop Art gained momentum as a reaction to the dominant (and sanctioned) post-war movement of abstract expressionism. Artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and James Rosenquist dominated the scene with their depictions of everyday, banal items and materials sourced from advertising and mass media. However, their treatment of these subjects involved a painterly lyricism, which was often limp and messy, owing much to the gestural painting of their

predecessors such as Jackson Pollock or William De Kooning. Warhol finally gained recognition when he consciously removed any sign of the artist's hand in his work, purposefully removing paint drips from his paintings. In a 1980 interview Warhol describes a studio conversation that led to his renouncing the gestural mark:

> At five o'clock one particular afternoon [probably in the summer of 1960] the doorbell rang and De [Emile de Antonio] came in and sat down. I poured scotch for us, and then I went over to where two paintings I'd done, each about six feet high and three feet wide, were propped, facing the wall. I turned them around and placed them side by side against the wall and then I backed away to take a look at them myself. One of them was a Coke bottle with abstract expressionist hash marks halfway up the side. The second one was just a stark, outlined Coke bottle in black and white. I didn't say a thing to De. I didn't have to—he knew what I wanted to know. 'Well, look, Andy,' he said after staring at them for a couple of minutes, 'One of these is a piece of shit, simply a little bit of everything. The other is remarkable—it's our society, it's who we are, it's absolutely beautiful and naked, and you ought to destroy the first one and show the other.' That afternoon was an important one for me (Warhol in Hackett 1980).

This conscious act of removing the mark of the artist's hand within the artwork and replacing it with an entirely mechanical and cold technique was what gave Warhol a seat at the Pop table. After this initial breakthrough, he extended this technique to print-, film- and sculpture-making, which ultimately gave rise to the Brillo boxes. Ironically, the Brillo boxes today are often noted for their simple construction and the tenderness of the brushwork and colour matching. In other words, their warmth and hand-made qualities emphasise their materiality. Contrary to the commonly held view that the shock of the Brillo boxes was their realism, I propose that these objects were fairly rudimentary approximations of their sources, even in their day. Rather, the performative act of creating these works imbued them with their particular force and audacity. In this sense, the selection of the referential subject and the process of its reproduction galvanises the work's physical presence beyond its material articulation.

Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei addresses the subject matter of mimesis in ancient and contemporary art in her book *The Ecstatic Quotidian* (2007):

> Though in radical ways announcing a new era in the history of art, heralding postmodernism in art, it is not unimportant that the *Brillo Box* is, as an ironic mimetic enactment, also prefigured by ancient forms of rhyparography—the depiction of the common, vulgar, or insignificant—and resonates with other post-Renaissance and modern forms of trompe l'oeil. Affinities among these works, despite significant differences, suggest the persistence of mimesis as a means to reflect upon phenomena, upon the appearance of the everyday and its vulnerability to transformation (2007, p. 238).

The Roman philosopher Piny the Elder briefly discusses the work of a famed painter of small pictures in ancient Greece called Peirakos. He was later named Rhyparographos*,* which translates to 'painter of dirt or low things', due to his choice of mundane or pedestrian subject matter. Though regarded as an inferior painter by his peers, his small paintings were known to fetch higher prices than the larger scale and thematically grandiose works of his contemporaries. 'Rhyparography' is now a term closely associated with mimesis and its cousin, *trompe l'oeil*. Aristotle even speaks of "the animals we most despise whose effigies please us the more exact they are" (Aristotle in Danto 1974, p. 15).

Leaving aside the question of the quotidian, various non-western traditions understand the act of making a copy of a person or object as an intimate exchange with supernatural forces, where the act is as sacred as the object itself. Considering levels of fidelity and likeness alongside cultural significances around creative acts, the question remains, what is the fundamental difference between an ancient painted recreation of a life-like object and Warhol's Brillo boxes? Or does Danto simply understand the Warhol work as somehow radically conventional? I direct this same question at my own sculptural work. Danto offers this explanation in 'The Art World':

> What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo box is a certain theory of Art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art and keeps it from collapsing into the real object...without the theory, one is unlikely to see it as art…To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld (1964, p. 581).

In this essay, Danto sets out to define "the *is* of artistic identification" through an

extremely complex analysis of pairs of predicates and their opposites in a most perplexing and opaque system of formal logic (1964, p. 577). This analytic approach, which does little to bridge the chasm separating art practice from philosophy with all its worthy and noble intentions, recalls Passmore's articulation of the dullness and hyperbole of formal aesthetics, to which Danto here appears to fall prey. As perilous and discursive as it may seem, Danto presents a carefully engineered bridge of sorts, pre-empting the question of why and for whom:

> The philosophical question about the nature of art, rather, was something that arose within art when artists pressed against boundary after boundary and found that the boundaries all gave way – if you were going to find out what art was, you had to turn from sense experience to thought. You had, in brief, to turn to philosophy (2014, p. 6).

Warhol's *Brillo Box* was already doing its work as art with or without Danto's imposed theories ('imposed' because of Danto's assertion that "without theory one is unlikely to see it as art" [1983, p.1-2]). Here 'theories' can be extended, as Danto proposes in this essay, to also mean the institutional framework or the bracketing of art—what he names 'the artworld'. Artifice demands that we suspend our disbelief as if we are viewing a staged performance, with a collective consensus that it is a play on reality, a make-believe. This make-believe is sanctioned by the academy or museum—the artworld—which hosts and disseminates whatever this illusion conveys. Perhaps it is when the play with reality becomes difficult to distinguish from the real that the structures which bracket the action become more necessary, even central to understanding the artwork. This may be where, after pressing against boundaries to find out what art is, one turns from sense experience to thought, or as Danto calls it, philosophy.

In making a convincing likeness, a degree of technical skill and craft is required to fabricate the work. While 'fabricate' suggests construction or production, it also denotes deception or lying. Thus, a fabrication can refer to a building process as well as the perpetuation of a falsehood. Is this the 'deception' that Danto tells us philosophy first noticed in art, a deception that is somehow ingrained in the act of art making? Similarly, the word 'act' can mean a definitive or decisive gesture of agency, but also to pretend or to take the place of another. Such etymological slippages reveal the depths of meaning in familiar concepts

and offer alternative ways of engaging with ideas and looking at art. 'Reflection' serves as another example, meaning both a mirroring as well as a state of deep contemplation. Each of these seemingly simple words—fabricate, act and reflect—exemplifies the mimetic principle of opposition, conveying notions of both truth and falsehood, volition and submission, internal and external.

Danto is primarily concerned with what differentiates the imitation from the original and points to contemporary institutions of academic thinking and authority as the only means through which to verify this distinction. However, Danto makes no attempt to consider how Warhol's effigies differ from other examples throughout art's history and before his 'artworld'. Following this logic of verification, the effigies created by tribal cultures were framed by the magical functions they served in a specific narrative, engendering their conceptual and occult utility. Greek statuary represented the belief system and cosmic order within a particular cultural framework and was therefore inseparable from its theoretical and theological underpinnings. In each case there exists a kind of theory that prevents the work from "collapsing into the real object" (Danto 1983, p. 1-2). This would suggest that reflections on the nature of appearance, which can be accepted as philosophical activity, predate the event Danto recognises in the *Brillo Box.*

In 1981 Danto had a previous epiphany, deciding that with the *Brillo Box* the history of art had come to an end, there was nothing more to be achieved and, as he puts it, art had now become philosophy (1998 p.,134). "Andy had by nature, a philosophical mind, he was really doing philosophy by doing the art that made him famous", Danto later wrote in his biography of Warhol (2009, p.135). Danto never made clear what philosophy 'Andy' was doing (unless he assumed the reader's latent understanding of the philosophical context implicit in the process of mimetic apprehension). Additionally, Danto fails to sufficiently recognise that these same issues, philosophical or not, had been raised by Duchamp almost fifty years earlier when he placed everyday objects into a gallery and consecrated them as already-made art. Although Danto acknowledges Duchamp's contribution, he nimbly sidesteps the crucial factor of Warhol's *Brillo Box* as an imitation not of reality as he would have us think, but as the imitation *of another's art*. The *Brillo Box* was Warhol's response to Duchamp's ready-mades. By creating lifelike replicas of readymade art objects, Warhol used art to ape art, revealing the

potential function of mimesis as pastiche or commentary. Whilst Duchamp had succeeded in dispensing entirely with imitation, through his use of the real, Warhol wilfully and discreetly reversed this gesture, one more move in the game, but by no means the final word (Menand 2010).

This brings us to the question of why I take the additional step of replication after arriving at an interesting assemblage of readymade components. Is it an elaboration on art aping art? After all, my work can easily be classified within the, sometimes ignoble, genre of junk sculpture. Does reproducing it in plastic make it any better, any smarter? Is its value enhanced through a material transformation? These are questions I address in more detail in the following chapters but are necessary to foreground here.

Warhol, with his carefully studied, dumbed-down rhetoric, had a deep and thorough engagement with twentieth-century art and was in fact a savvy modern art collector. He was involved to the point of obsession with the art and culture of his era and would not have settled for the reading of his work as a mere re-staging of a Dada strategy. The recent 2017 survey exhibition of Warhol's graphic work at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, *Adman: Warhol before Pop*, curated by Nicholas Chambers, featured many sketch books and drawings made long before his entry into the art world, that reveal a facility for figuration and sensitive line drawing. The great number of drawings on view were clearly influenced by the work of Henri Matisse and attested to Warhol's abilities as a master draughtsman as well as an artist highly attuned to mid-century humanist themes in European figuration. One could easily mistake these early sketch books of Warhol with those of Jean Cocteau or Pablo Picasso. Although the Warhol of Pop Art appears to counter such romantic forays into idealised figuration, these sensitive studies reveal a thorough understanding of graphic art canons, laying the groundwork for his emergence as a Pop icon.

The great irony is that in Warhol's final arrival at the pinnacle of Pop, his work simultaneously challenged *and* reinforced dominant artworld ideas. In the case of *Brillo Box*, Warhol conformed, in many ways, to Clement Greenberg's modernist discourse, which stringently rejected Pop Art, demanding that avant-garde art be self-reflexive and explore its own formal possibilities, making its subject the artwork itself (1939). This is precisely what Warhol achieved under the guise of what Greenberg refers to as 'kitsch', which interrogates the very mechanisms of

the mass image machine through the exploration of its own formal possibilities, ultimately mirroring it back onto itself. Neither Greenberg's Kantian exhortations nor Danto's end of art pronouncements could adequately contain Warhol's total immersion in the art of his time. The expansive nature of Warhol's work, with its relationship to both his culture and the practises of the distant past, was such that certain theorists could choose to only address aspects of his work that were relevant to their particular lines of inquiry and disregard the irrelevant facets of his practise. As a result of this selective critical engagement with Warhol's work, the more subtle, and possibly more profound, qualities have been overshadowed by the shocking glare of the Pop statement itself.

Withholding

Philosophy thinks with concepts, and art thinks with seeing. The word see not only denotes vision but also understanding. I have recognised this difference in the ways that I function as an artist, which does not involve any specific intellectual work but demands a degree of mental equilibrium. This state of resigned uncertainty is particularly important early in the development of a piece when I am essentially working indiscriminately. That is, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, without any specific aim other than to stay open to the regular stuff around me. These critical first steps are more often than not taken outside the studio when I'm going about my daily business, moving around, taking it all in. Perhaps this experience is better described as the secession of thought in the face of so much sensory data.

Having recently taken up full time work in an art school as a lecturer in sculpture, I spend more time around students' work than my own. Outside my office is an external area where students carry out messy work that needs ventilation and open space. Here I have come across a plethora of abandoned projects in stone and wood, bits and pieces of steel and ceramic, discarded polystyrene and cardboard, all with the traces of labour and effort gone wrong. I began to collect these abandoned objects and brought them home to display on my work bench and allow them to percolate. These were another order of found objects that I had not previously considered utilising. I did not go looking for these things nor was I pursuing the idea of recycling other people's daubs, yet it

made perfect sense to repurpose these partially formed attempts at fashioning as raw material for new work. These objects are interesting not because they are discarded sculptural exercises, but because they are unique objects generated by forces outside of myself and which I had no hand in. By absolving myself of the imperative of mark-making and reclaiming these raw gestures as authorless, I retrieve the manipulated object's intrinsic and simple significance without the complication of its intended resolution. It is an exoneration of the object's seeming failure as well as a reprieve of my own disinclination to apply my hand.

Agamben elaborates on Aristotle's assertion that "potentiality is essentially defined by its possibility of *not* being exerted" (2014). Agamben proposes that actuality is not the only outcome of potentiality, but another choice that is inherent and entirely integral to potentiality. He calls this "intimate and irreducible resistance to actuality", "impotentiality" (2014). This non-creation or potent 'not doing' is an inner resistance within the creative act that tempers the blind drive of potentiality and is present in all great art:

> The potentiality 'not to' is a resistance internal to potentiality which impedes its exhaustion in the act and obliges potentiality to turn towards itself and to become a potentiality that contains its own impotency…Great poetry does not only say what it is saying but also speaks about the fact that it is saying. Painting is the suspension and exposition of the potentiality of the site just as poetry is the suspension and exposition of language (Agamben 2014).

Agamben describes a restraint that brings about poetic forms, which results from a subversion of the mechanisms of creative work, or rather, suspension as a means of insight. In my case, the im-potentiality is twofold: firstly, the discovery of unfinished sculptures by others that are re-presented as a new gesture is possibly a sublimation of the urge to leave a mark, and secondly, the programmed simulation of these objects without embellishment is an active silence. These acts of withholding reveal something of the creative process itself, where restraint and constraint can serve as vehicles for new expression. The withholding also speaks directly to the mimetic principle in Warhol's art, where he consciously quells all claims of individual imagination in favour of a simulation of prefabricated imagery and common merchandise. The mimetic act is in itself a denial and resistance to the expectations of creative work in its subordination to the effect of

realism. Warhol's achievements become clearer when we recognise the subtlety and strength of what he was *not* doing as perhaps a more fitting form of appraisal. It is the potentiality of 'not to' which inscribes itself as 'an inner mannerism in every true artwork' (Agamben 2014).

The mode of active disengagement, or a 'poetics of in-operativity', is helpful in understanding much of Warhol's output. We see this not only in the *Brillo Box* but also in his early films such as *Empire* (1964) and *Sleep* (1963), in which a long and single meditation on an unremarkable subject becomes charged through the relentless unmoving gaze of the camera. The charge is brought about by the viewer's fluctuation between the poles of objectivity and subjectivity, empathy and ambivalence: a surrender to 'im-potentiality'.

Work

Franz Kafka's short story 'The Great Swimmer' (1922) includes the acceptance speech of an Olympic swimmer upon her homecoming. Her confession echoes Agamben's "in-operativity":

> Honoured guests! I have admittedly broken a world record. If, however, you ask me how I have achieved this, I could not answer adequately. Actually, I cannot even swim, I have always wanted to learn, but have never had the opportunity (Kafka 1922).

How can the effort invested in the task of creative work be quantified? Certainly, there is time spent acquiring the necessary skills needed to manipulate one's chosen medium be they visual or literal, but these are only the tools and means of creative labour and not creativity itself. This is the point where art and philosophy begin to diverge: when philosophy's drive for quantification (and qualification) demands that the immaterial labour of art become visible (or in academia, measurable). The real paradox however is that although art's incongruity is generally accepted, one is forced to continually reiterate and expound on the same conundrum in order to secure and maintain the trust of institutional power. The conundrum is in the unspoken expectation that art engages with the ineffable or irrational by whatever means - yet this engagement is then made subject to empirical criteria.

Agamben approaches the central issue of artistic labour through the notion of

‘work’, citing Aristotle’s questioning of the work of man. The answer is that the human is born without work and the worklessness of humans forever remains a potential state. Substituting the word ‘work’ with ‘purpose’ allows for a better understanding of Aristotle’s inquiry. Aristotle was so disturbed by the idea of humans as fundamentally without *ergos* (proper work) and therefore without the possibility to be defined by work, that he quickly abandoned the discussion (Aristotle in Agamben 2014). Agamben sees this active state of inoperativity as a defining quality of humanness and the true domain of art, as well as the only type of real work and available only to the poet:

> Contemplation and in-operativity are the metaphysical agents of becoming human…Freeing one of any social or biological testing or vocation opens one to those peculiar forms of worklessness that we are accustomed to mean art. The most appropriate paradigm for this operation, this activity which seeks in making inoperative all human work is poetry itself. What is poetry if not an inoperation in language *on* language that deactivates and renders inoperative the usual communication and information functions of language in order to open it to a new possible use? (2014).

Could not the same apply to Warhol’s deactivation or disabling of the vernacular, exploiting images of celebrities or car accidents, where strategies from the virtual to the shamelessly decorative unwittingly succeeded in defusing some of the collective trauma of his time? By purposeful eradicating authorship or any other recognisable material virtuosity in his work, as exemplified by the *Brillo Box*, Warhol succeeds in “render[ing] inoperative the usual communication and information functions of language”. By naming his studio ‘The Factory’, Warhol knowingly plays with notions of labour and production thereby creating an arena where another kind of work can take place. The work that Warhol carries out in his Factory is not the manufacture (fabrication) of products we normally expect from industry. Instead, the Factory was a site for subtle gestures of mirroring (reflection) that disrupted or made inoperative the “usual communication functions” (Agamben 2014). The Factory was, in a sense, a front for an enterprise, which, although it embraced the idea of mass production and consumption, actually engaged in a radical stasis or resistance to action that was combined with a capitulation to prefabricated imagery as its primary mode of production. Agamben’s view of the creative act as gaining power through the withholding of

potentialities in a deliberate resistance to a final resolution speaks directly to Warhol's overall project, and more significantly to the mimetic in art making in general. Is this then a point where art and philosophy actually meet on their own terms? And what does this mean for Danto's eschatology—that Warhol's *Brillo Box* is the point where art became philosophy and therefore the end of art?

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Chapter 3

The previous chapter examined Agamben's notion of the workless state as the true domain of creative activity, where 'doing' is inverted as a resistant act of potentiality. In this chapter, I expand this inversion and elucidate how such an oxymoron can come to be - how 'not doing' becomes a more potent form of doing. This oxymoron offers a particular lucidity, an impossibly light grip on an undertaking that is utterly illusive yet palpably present, again evidencing the relationship between the 'everyday' or the known and its transformation through an act of mimetic apprehension. This slippery relationship, that encompasses a sense of total acquiescence combined with conscious action, has been a spectre in my studio since my early career. I will discuss this balance that exists between artistic acts of volition and those of total submission as an underlying process in the work of Warhol, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage in order to tangentially explore my own studio work. I also provide an anecdotal account of my first inclusion in a major international exhibition in 1993 to provide some background on how I initially came to use waste material in my sculpture and why it is still an important part of my practise. My primary point of reference is Jean Baudrillard's *The Conspiracy of Art* (2005), which offers a nuanced discussion on 'nullity' as a quality both of degeneration and malaise in contemporary art on the one hand, and also of artistic singularity and transcendence. Warhol and Duchamp figure prominently amongst the collection of essays and interviews in *The Conspiracy of Art*, as they do in Danto's thesis, where they are put forward as critical figures in contestable territories.

Painter of Dirt

As long as art was making use of its own disappearance and the disappearance of its object, it still was a major enterprise. But art trying to recycle itself by storming reality? The majority of contemporary art has attempted to do precisely that by confiscating banality, waste and mediocrity as values and ideologies, raising originality, banality and nullity to the level of values or even perverse aesthetic pleasures. Of course, all of this mediocrity claims to transcend itself by moving art to a second, ironic level. But it is just as empty and insignificant on the second level as it is on the first level. The passage to the aesthetic level salvages nothing;

on the contrary, it is mediocrity squared. It claims to be null - " 'I am null! I am null!' - *and it truly is null* "(Baudrillard 2004, p. 27).

Baudrillard proposes the 'storming of reality', calling for the manipulation and movement of waste and banality to a higher aesthetic order. There is nothing intrinsically banal or mediocre about 'reality' as such. To condemn contemporary art for its 'storming of reality' would also condemn the very foundations of most art making, past and present, Western and non-Western, for its interactions and interpretations of the world, where the 'storming' or a concerted scrutiny of perceived reality, is intrinsic to the labour of art. There are two possibilities here that illustrate this elevation of waste: the use of detritus as subject and material in art practice, and the simulation principle in art. By conflating these two ideas, Baudrillard distorts 'the storming of reality' or the attempted reproduction, even representation, of virtually any *thing* around us, as no different from picking over garbage as a final and desperate act of futility.

Baudrillard does not address the long and intimate relationship that mimesis has with the quotidian, which brings us back to Rhyparographos's 'painter of dirt', whose practise of rendering common subjects gained him greater recognition than that of his ancient Greek counterparts' faithful representations of loftier narratives. Rhyparography has consequently been widely employed in the language of much contemporary art and popular culture where depictions, be they literary, visual and especially cinematic, require elements of everyday disorder, the regular pulse of normalcy, to engage the viewer or audience in a deeper way. Consider for example the 'fly on the wall' films of the Dardenne brothers or the photographs of Jeff Wall or the sculptures of Isa Genzken, all of which display a controlled informality verging on chaos as a primary aesthetic strategy. Baudrillard's objection to the vapid nullity he sees in contemporary art is a critique of the quotidian in contemporary art (waste and mediocrity) and the mimetic in contemporary art (the storming of reality) is similar to the derision piled upon Rhyparographos by his contemporaries, who deemed his choice of subject matter sordid and therefore undesirable.

The Conspiracy of Art was in large part written by Baudrillard as a reaction to the 1993 Venice Biennale. In a 1996 interview with Ruth Scheps, Baudrillard explains:

> I remember saying to myself after the 1993 Venice Biennale that art is a

> conspiracy and even an “insider trading”: it encompasses an initiation into nullity and, without being disdainful, you have to admit that everyone is working on residue, waste, nothingness. Everyone makes claims on banality, insignificance; no-one claims to be an artist anymore (Baudrillard 2005, p. 56).

This fallen state of the artist, Baudrillard argues, is the weakening of the foundations of value where art engages in an orgy of surplus and excess. He contrasts this view of contemporary art with what he describes as his belief in ‘form’:

> …I don’t use form in the aesthetic sense. For me, form has nothing to do with focusing positively on something, nothing to do with the presence of the object. Form rather has to do with challenge, seduction, reversibility (Baudrillard 2004, p. 84).

Mr Big

Rereading this essay for the first time since its initial publication in 1996, I was suddenly reminded of my own experience of the 1993 Venice Biennale, where I exhibited for the first time in an international context and in the context where Baudrillard had partially formulated this critique. This same Venice Biennale could also be a marker of the beginning of my professional career when, at the age of 31, I was invited by the Venice Biennale director Achille Bonito Oliva to participate in the Aperto section of the exhibition. The show, entitled *Emergency/Emergenza* featured work by 120 emerging artists including: Matthew Barney, Maurizio Cattelan, Félix González-Torres, Gabriel Orozco, Damien Hirst, Kiki Smith, Rikrit Tiravanija, Paul McCarthy, Janine Antoni, Rudolf Stingel, and many more. A roll call of artists, many of whom are now considered icons of that time, presented at the cusp of an international art explosion in the early 90s. According to its Wikipedia page, ‘the show became a cult event of the ‘90s, managing to frame what was happening at that time’ and curators often quote the model as a source of inspiration (2020).

The show was innovative in its engagement of a team of curators with varying focus, rather than following the usual structure of a single curator’s vision. The exhibition was therefore extensive and tried to address an early sense of

globalisation and fragmentation that was then becoming evident in the art world. The show had no single cohesive curatorial thread other than highlighting the diversity of emergent art practice and its ever-expanding plurality, which in itself was another innovative proposition.

My personal experience with this exhibition was fraught with difficulty. Upon my arrival to the exhibition building, I was told that a space had not been allocated for the installation of my work. It was like showing up at a formal dinner to discover that although I was on the guest list, my name had been omitted from the seating arrangement. In the following days as I waited for a possible position for my work in the Corederia it became evident that the Director of the Biennale had included me in this show without clearance or discussion with any of the ten curators who formed the 'curatorium'. At one stage, out of frustration, I tried positioning my work between two alcoves already colonised by other artists, occupying a kind of thoroughfare. Moments later I was being yelled at in a booming voice to keep my garbage away from their space. This dilemma continued for almost a week, I shuffled my work around the exhibition hall without a place to rest, stateless, and somewhat 'put out', to say the least. Finally, I was randomly squeezed into one of the ten sub-themes of the exhibition, a last - minute imposition, and allocated a space near the exit. There, I showed *Mr. Big*, a revised version of an installation from the previous year titled *The Relativity of Perfection* and first shown at the 9th Biennale of Sydney, *The Boundary Rider*, in 1992. All of this occurred before I had explored the possibility of casting and replicating objects and sought to reconfigure specific found objects in gallery spaces, not as a provocation of what constitutes an artwork, but instead to coax out a poetic dimension utilising the flimsy, the soiled and the broken.

In its first and initial iteration, the work had comprised a collection of objects and furniture I had salvaged from my father's flat. My father lived alone in a housing commission flat in Redfern and was a terrible hoarder. He lived like an eccentric in a chaos of mismatched and broken kitsch objects gleaned from the footpaths of the housing estate, his choices becoming ever more decrepit and stranger as he aged. The extreme state of his domestic conditions was a source of embarrassment and repugnance for me, but also fascinating in its sheer anarchic abandon. This tension reached its threshold when during one of my visits to his place, my usual disgust and horror began to give way to the aesthetically

compelling in a collapse and reversal of value. After all, he regarded his collections of Barbie dolls, which he dressed in packaging tape and the several heavy velvet armchairs crammed side by side in his lounge room, as grand adornments to his squalid lodgings. In my father's total acquiescence to a kind of gaudy, high baroque entropy, I was finally able to put aside my shame and simply behold the extraordinary objects that his system had generated. It was an alchemy of repurposing, from the rubbish pile to his lounge room, in the very particular way that he laid out and arranged his salvaged items like magical talismans. It seemed logical that I could then repurpose these objects a second time from the lounge room to the gallery space. It was here in his lounge, and not in an encounter with a surrealist artwork in a museum, that I woke up to the potential and potency of the found object. In my father's dishevelled dwellings was the assisted readymade that had undergone some bizarre intervention and modified in a visually arresting way.

My father was happy for me to take away any object that I liked, and I began showing them as sculptural components within installations, usually with minimal intervention or sometimes I would just play around with their display. Mostly I spent time curating and organising them as worthy of attention. *The Relativity of Perfection* was the culmination of this process. As the title suggests, through the recalibration of taste (value), it was possible to find an alternative place of beauty, which in the case of the objects retrieved from his flat, were disarming in their unselfconsciousness and nakedness, but also surprisingly classical and pure. This was an outsider art that was never intended for display outside of its own context, and I was the anthropologist who cashed in on its primitive charm.

It is important to note that although this work came out of a familial narrative, it was not in any way diaristic or positioned within the discourse of what could be loosely called identity art. This was not a poem about my personal history or the pain of my people. For me it was an alternative approach to formal artmaking, pushing content and the political dimension into the background (without completely denying it) and foregrounding the impersonal and purely visual. This approach could be seen to parallel a modernist utopian tradition, where form is function, arriving at a harmonic balance, however, it always runs the risk of sliding towards what is now called 'poverty porn'. This tension, between the sensory experience of the objects' visual presence and the erasure of their

previous circulation (even though their previous lives at times threatened to rudely reassert themselves), situated the work in the realm of a minimalist idealism, rather than any kind of socially concerned *arte povera.*

One year later in Aperto, *Mr. Big* appeared to have contradicted this formal expression of the readymade with an overt gesture of control and self-consciousness. This pivot was largely due to the introduction of a figurative collage element that I used as a structural device for the objects. These were white cut-out cartoon characters depicting animated credit cards that I copied from the local ATM machine's display screen. They were early digital emojis that I would encounter on a daily basis whilst managing my limited finances on the nearest ATM. Oversized and dopey, these theatrical and ghostly anthropomorphized rectangles were attached to the objects as incongruent supports and extraneous embellishments, hovering around the work, threatening to disappear, or to simply fall asleep.

The figures were double-faced flat shapes that needed to be viewed in the round (although there was very little to see, other than their precarious and rudimentary construction, composed of pencil and felt marker drawn on white laminated MDF that had been cut to shape then attached to a few impoverished pieces of furniture). Each element, either a found object or cut-out figure, was in an active state of emptying out or evacuating, bleached of any possible meaning other than their own movement toward dissolution.

Where the first version *The Relativity of Perfection* sought a redemption of the object, the elaboration, *Mr. Big*, was an almost violent rejection of the object and objecthood. Even the title was chosen in an arbitrary way as it just happened to be the name of the typeface I had chosen for the catalogue, an irony whose full force was felt only when confronted with the big art world scene. Although this revised sculptural tableau appeared more measured and knowing than it had previously, it was nonetheless borne of processes which I did not want to fully control but could tacitly direct. I can now see that there was no loss of faith in this reworking, rather, an intensification of an alignment with a hidden order that permeates all objects, and all artmaking.

Mr. Big was a conscious, if not self-conscious, submission to the haphazard, the coincidental or fortuitous. Whether my attempt was successful, or even worthwhile, is secondary to the fact that it is an approach that I consistently return

to in my art making process, especially now. These early forays in working with junk that found its way to me rather than me to it, were the formative moments of my methodology, where my interactions with the material demanded a particular openness, equanimity and tact. Further, the final effect of the installation in all its rarefied grubbiness, was a kind of haunted unease; an unseen, vaguely menacing atmosphere had insinuated itself there. It had a spookiness that I had not intended but welcomed as an immaterial element. The disconcertion was enhanced by the piece's final placement near the exit of the show, literately a non-space that was easily missed or ignored. Therefore, the drama and degradation of the *Aperto* experience was in keeping with the non-rational processes I had engaged, and was in this sense appropriate, even auspicious.

It is highly unlikely that Baudrillard would have noticed my work—an anomaly tucked away—in the exhibition. However, if we view *Mr. Big* through the lens of his commentary on contemporary art, his critique neatly maps onto the main characteristics of my work. It is not entirely implausible that he encountered the piece while it stood in wait, uninstalled and seeking asylum. By offering up *Mr. Big* now to Baudrillard's chopping block, I am interested to see if it can withstand such scrutiny, and whether this scrutiny could shed light not only on the work itself, but also on the conditions of its presentation. Do Baudrillard's proclamations about the 'initiation to nullity' and the conspiracy of art's 'insider trading' correspond with or contradict Danto's proposition of an 'artworld' as the sole mechanism capable of art's creation and the single sanctifying platform by which one can engage with contemporary art? And how does this 'initiation to nullity' relate to *Mr. Big's* gate crashing the inner chambers of the international 'hot art' of the day? Additionally, on which side of Baudrillard's polarities does *Mr. Big* sit? On the side of nullity as waste, nothingness and dejecta, or on the side of form as 'challenge, seduction and reversibility'? Possibly the work falls in both camps, necessitating the articulation of a third category.

Ready-made

The Conspiracy of Art is best viewed as a polemic gesture towards culture as a whole that does not single out any specific artwork or practitioner. However, there is a sense of shaming and accusation in its moral indignation. Ultimately

Baudrillard denounces contemporary art as "striving for nullity when already null and void", or as Sylvère Lotringer puts it in his entropic introduction to *The Conspiracy of Art*:

> Going nowhere, art came to nothing—and everything—simply staying there, grinding its teeth, losing its bite, then losing the point of it all. It is now floating in some kind of vapid, all-consuming euphoria traversed by painful spurts of lucidity, sleep-walking in its sleep, not yet dead, hardly alive, but still thriving (2005, p. 21).

Taking into account the broader context of his writing, Baudrillard believes that the excessive, fruitless search for total knowledge leads to a kind of delusion. This pursuit is caught in a web of sign values and relations which are impossible to untangle, leading to a seduction of the human subject by the object. Baudrillard names this state 'hyperreality', wherein simulation becomes authenticity to the extent that the world we inhabit becomes a type of museum where many aspects of our lives are so profoundly aestheticized that we become trapped in a 'Disneyfied' reality, or a 'trans-aestheticisation of banality'. He attributes this constrictive mode to Duchamp predominantly:

> Duchamp set in motion a process in which everyone is now implicated, including us. What I mean is that in daily life, we have this 'readymadeness' or this trans-aestheticization of everything which means that there is no longer any illusion to speak of…We are all compromised (Baudrillard 2005, p. 62).

What is this illusion that has been lost? It seems that Baudrillard refers to art's 'storming of reality', be it as mimesis or in Duchamp's case, the re-contextualisation of objects, which Baudrillard sees as having robbed us of a once grand illusion.

During my stay in Venice in 1993, I visited the Palazzo Grassi where there was a major exhibition of Marcel Duchamp, entitled simply *Duchamp* to coincide with the Biennale. This was an extensive presentation of many of the artist's famous and also lesser-known works, and my first encounter with so many iconic pieces only previously seen in reproduction. The show was carefully curated and designed, giving each work optimal viewing space amid the opulent surroundings and diffused light of the Palazzo, making it possible to contemplate the show in an unhurried and detached manner. The most striking feature of this experience was

the visual appeal of the works on display, particularly the readymade sculptures. The famous *Bottle Rack* (1914) appeared as a formal spatial proposition which utilised a pattern of concentric rings, spaced and stacked with their rods protruding, resulting in an entirely totemic structure of sorts. Even more arresting was the well-known snow shovel titled *In Advance of a Broken Arm* (1915), with its narrow arm meeting the elegant, shiny curve of the metal spade, the scale and proportions of which were so delicate and visually striking that I found myself beholding something exceptionally beautiful in its exoticism. These objects were not shocking in their everydayness, because they are not the things that *we* are accustomed to seeing every day. At best, they represent an idea of the everyday in 1914. It is difficult for today's viewer to fully experience the impact of Duchamp's original gesture due to the distance we have from the industrial design of his day. The common store-bought item of 1914 can only be regarded today with the nostalgia and charm we ascribe to the otherness of old-world relics. The intended shock of placing these common objects in a gallery is now replaced with the shock of their unfamiliar beauty. In this sense, the event of Duchamp's readymade, which sought to objectify art as idea without the constraints of aesthetic entanglement or any need for visual acuity, is now undone and returned to form, leaving us with the difficult task of separating the conceptual gesture from its retinal registration. This shift can also be seen in an early Jeff Koons sculpture comprising four vacuum cleaners in a vitrine called *New Hoover Convertibles, New Shelton Wet / Dry 5-Gallon, Double Decker,* (1981), which today suggests a retro 80's chicness rather than amplifies the banality of an urban condition.

To complicate matters further, the snow shovel was the first readymade that the artist produced after his move to the United States in 1915 from France (toutfait.com) where there was no such object in production. Duchamp had apparently encountered a snow shovel for the first time in America and presented this unfamiliar object as an example of the commonplace to his American audiences. Seemingly, Duchamp selected the snow shovel because of the novelty and strangeness with which he regarded it, even though an American audience would not think the same. These inconsistencies allow for the consideration of whether the inception of the readymade was in fact completely non-retinal or more likely, games of visual pleasure. Part of Duchamp's legacy is to alert

modern audiences to the fact that all things shine and will only do so when allowed full expression. This might be at odds with how Duchamp is generally canonised as a tactical player in twentieth-century art, whose reframing of the objects at hand into objects of art, is most famously exemplified in the urinal *Fountain* (1917), which scandalised an entire culture to the point of no return. Historical distance has delivered Duchamp's sculpture as something we can only access now as a mere historical fact, concept, text, public intervention or record of an idea, yet we still must contend with the material object and the grand old mystery of its sculptural physicality, now twice removed from its social and cultural enactment. One can only speculate whether Duchamp could have foreseen this possible degradation and how he might have imagined the readymade to function beyond his own time. One clue is in another etymological slip in the word 'fashion', which can mean a dominant aesthetic style, but also to physically make or shape.

To complicate things further, many of Duchamp's early readymades, such as *Fountain* and *Bottle Rack*, were either lost or destroyed and needed to be remade by specialist artisans for consequent exhibitions later in his career. The readymades attributed to Duchamp that we now see in museums and often in books are in fact carefully crafted reproductions since the mass-produced 'originals' have long been out of circulation. This necessarily replicative process serves as a yet another stumbling block in how we view these works of 'the commonplace', so far removed from their source that they threaten to undermine their own logic.

Baudrillard's claim that Duchamp's readymade was the catalyst that turned the entire world into a type of museum could be better understood as a statement about the forces of industry and market control rather than an indictment of our disengagement with the real. The 'trans-aestheticization', which he laments as having robbed us of a 'superior illusion' (or, the grand traditions of subjectivity) and replaced it with 'analytical explorations of the object', seems to have folded in on itself, where now it is suddenly possible to find expressive elements or 'superior illusion' in these analytical explorations.

Nowhere

For Baudrillard, Andy Warhol stands out as one of the very few artists who succeeded in what he called 'the withdrawal of the creative act' (Baudrillard 2005, p. 44) and in so doing, declared him 'the founder of modernity'. In a 1990 interview titled 'Starting with Andy Warhol', Baudrillard argues that Warhol does not belong to any avant-garde or utopia:

> He settles his accounts with utopia because contrary to other artists who keep deferring the idea, he enters into the heart of utopia, into the heart of nowhere. He identifies himself with this nowhere, he was this nowhere place that is the very definition of utopia. He managed to move through the space of the avant-garde and reach the place it was striving to occupy, nowhere. But while others still relished the detour through art and aesthetics, Warhol skipped steps and completed the cycle in a single stroke (2004, p. 44)

How do Baudrillard's proclamations of Warhol's genius manoeuvre of 'entering into the heart of nowhere' compare with his later outbursts that decry art's 'nullity' by "confiscating banality, waste and mediocrity as values and ideologies"? It is not immediately clear where Baudrillard makes the distinction between the 'nullity' of art that so enrages him and the utopia of the 'nowhere man' he sees in Warhol. Surely this 'founder of modernity' had indeed not only utilised, but claimed mediocrity, waste and excess as the very building blocks of his artistic enterprise, employing all the strategies that Baudrillard rallied against, and leaving a rich legacy to so many artists working in the latter part of the 20th century. From the American photorealist painters of the 1970s to the hyper-consumerist aesthetics of Koons in the 1980s, and on to the massive 'anything goes' moment of the 1990s as seen in *Emergency/Emergenza*, banality, excess and perverse aesthetic pleasures were encoded as the key ingredients in the mainstream cultural soup. In other words, the centrality of the quotidian, the well-traversed tradition of uncovering beauty in unlikely places, to which I am also a beneficiary, is evident in much twentieth-century art. Yet Baudrillard regarded many of these projects as 'mush' or pretentious repetitions, contrasting Warhol's work, which 'freed us of aesthetics and of art' through an ultimate cool indifference, but more importantly, through 'his gift for dramatization' (2005, p.

43). Baudrillard separates Warhol from his contemporaries by proposing an artist like Lichtenstein was merely re-aestheticizing social residue in a lyrical manner whereas in Warhol's hands, residue becomes "pure substance…giving enigmatic force back to banality" (Baudrillard 2005, p. 46). This distinction would suggest that the potency of Warhol's work is due in large part to his cold, machine-like system of production, a system that would exhibit high drama as a result of its profound indifference so severe that it becomes "a poetic operation of tremendous singularity" (Baudrillard 2005, p. 62):

> Nullity, however, is a secret quality that cannot be claimed by just anyone. Insignificance - real insignificance, the victorious challenge to meaning, the shedding of sense, the art of the disappearance of meaning - is the rare quality of a few exceptional works of art that never strive for it (Baudrillard 2005, p. 27).

How is such a manoeuvre possible if it comes about without any directed effort or 'striving'?

The notion of "the victorious challenge to meaning" is echoed by Agamben's thesis on the resistance of 'doing' as the crux of artistic flow:

> What is poetry if not an in-operation in language on language that deactivates and renders inoperative the usual communications and information functions of language in order to open it to new possible use (2014).

The distinction between effort and intent is important here. Effort implies an exertion of thought and action whereas intent is activated from within one's own being. Intent is, in a sense, the silent witness that connects consciousness with the phenomenal world. This is not only the site where ontology and the creative strike a tacit deal, but also where doing philosophy or art can become interchangeable behaviours. This might help explain Danto's view of Warhol as a philosopher as well as Baudrillard's "exceptional works of art that never strive for it" (Baudrillard 2005, p. 27).

I operate within this atmosphere in the studio, where trying often leads to frustration and relinquishing any sense of mastery can result in exciting and fresh possibilities. While this development is contingent on incidental factors, certain parameters must be widened to allow for this indeterminacy. My system of working relies less on interacting with the found and more with recognising the

given. In not seeking out objects or subjects to work with but rather remaining alert to what is already there, I reorientate myself around items that are so present and obvious they are usually ignored. Exemplary and essential components in the work completed for this studio presentation are blocks of cardboard, some bottle caps or a piece of packaging foam. In this instance, the parameters have been widened to include the ever-expanding minutiae but also narrowed to include only that which is at hand. This demands a certain *intent* rather than a conscious *effort,* which I carry out with a degree of unquestioning and uninformed trust.

The twentieth-century composer, John Cage, is recognised as an important exponent of artistic indeterminacy and an artist that explicitly challenges meaning, who also exemplifies Baudrillard's conceptualisation of nullity (Cage has claimed, "I don't have anything to say and I'm saying it" (1961, p. 109). Cage's method left all to what he called 'chance operations', which allowed for the incidental to enter the working process, then diligently and precisely be recreated, often as sound performance. Amongst Cage's prolific output one work of particular significance, *4'33"* (1952), is an entire composition based on chance operations in which the performer sits at the piano in readiness. This was an example of Cage's method of letting sounds be themselves: a musical composition in three movements, where the pianist does not generate any sound except for the occasional opening and closing of the keyboard cover, and the 'music' is the ambient sound in the room for the duration of four minutes and thirty-three seconds. *4'33"* is also an example of an engagement with what is at hand. Cage actually wrote the piece note-by-note and in doing this carried out a mimetic action that allowed his audience to participate in the piece's creation. The piece encourages the listener to become aware of the actual experience of listening, widening the aural field where even the sound of a cough becomes interesting. Cage claims the basic material of music as pure sound, which allows for the equal impact of both sonic presence and absence.

Cage supports Gosetti-Ferencei's discussion of *trompe l'oeil* which, in her view, reflects the constitution of the everyday, raising questions about our fallibilities of perception. Her thesis makes the case for the persistence of *trompe l'oeil* as a mimetic strategy which,

> …renders the quotidian ecstatic, for the viewer becomes gradually aware of the way the appearance of the most everyday things are indebted to the

structure of perceptual expectation and its build-up of habits (2007, p.217).

Cage confirms the view that contained within the quotidian, more than anywhere else, is the possibility of ecstatic experience where the mimetic is activated as a state of heightened attention. This possibility is linked to Cage's regard for eastern philosophies that call for the dissolution of ego as a means to awakening. Setting aside an assumed knowledge about the 'self' clears a perceptual obstacle and allows life to be seen in its fullness.

Is this the 'storming of reality' that Baudrillard decries? Or is it an entry point into what he calls 'the heart of utopia' or 'the heart of nowhere'? In Cage's *4'33"* there is an emphasis on the background and a refocusing on the peripheral that requires one to attend to the spaces *around* sound with a new awareness. For Duchamp, this was the awareness of that which is hidden in plain view, requiring the same quality of receptivity alluded to by Agamben, where volition and submission operate in tandem.

When thinking about this approach in the making of my other recent work (not included as part of this thesis), which takes as its content the paint spills and splatters that occur outside of the picture frame, the question arises as to where the limits of this periphery might be. These works are photographs of the accidental smudges and drips left on a painter's studio wall which are then printed directly onto the gallery wall utilising a vertical inkjet printer. If the central focus of the finished work is now that which lies at the edges, what then are the peripheral elements that sit outside of *these* observations? Where is the periphery of the periphery? If we continue to zoom out towards an infinitely receding horizon of all that hides in the margins, is that where we sense, in this perpetual non-arrival, the 'special insignificance' to which Baudrillard alludes?

Heidegger points to a primal entanglement of philosophy's pursuit of 'genuine truth' with art's trust in 'pure perception'—or philosophy's effort and art's intent:

> Being is that which shows itself in the pure perception which belongs to beholding, and only by such seeing does being get discovered. Primordial and genuine truth lies in pure beholding. This thesis has remained the foundation of Western philosophy (1927, p.215).

This age-old tussle continues to play out on the compacted ground of mimesis.

Chapter 4

Minemata

Included as the first entry in the comprehensive volume *A Companion to Art Theory*, published in 2002, is Göran Sörbom's chapter titled 'The Classical Concept of Mimesis'. That the subject of mimesis is chosen to open this exhaustive collection of "specially commissioned articles which provide a convenient overview of the latest trends and critical directions [in art theory]" is significant. Being the lead essay in the vast compendium speaks not only of the primacy of what is termed 'mimesis', but also of the instability of its meaning over time. Sörbom introduces the term as what the Greeks of antiquity characterised as:

> the basic nature of painting and sculpture, poetry and music, dance and theatre, i.e. things we today call works of art, most of them agreed that such things were *mimemata* (in singular form *mimema*), the result of an activity they named *mimesis* (2002, p. 19).

Central to Sörbom's thesis is the idea of an ancient conceptual separation between what one knows intellectually and what one knows sensually. The mimetic faculty was considered to be within the field of the senses and was the common ability to "see and hear individual things where no such things are at hand" (Sörbom 2002, p. 26). Sörbom expands:

> The mimetic faculty is twofold in nature; every human being has the ability to see or hear *mimemata*, for instance in shadows and reflections in water, but only some persons have learnt the skill and practise (the *techne*) of producing *mimemata*, i.e. "manmade dreams for those who are awake" in Plato's formulation (2002, p. 27).

Such human dreams existed as pictures or objects designed to trigger the mimetic faculty in the viewer, producing a mental image of the external object represented. The metaphor used by the ancients for this process is a kind of pressure that pushes its shape upon the senses leaving a negative imprint of its image minus its matter. This same process of an impression stamped onto the mind is how Sörbom interprets the ancients' understanding of the initial perceptive or apprehensive act of creating a mental image. This analogy closely corresponds to the process of mould making, where an object is defined by the negative space it leaves in a soft

material. The difference between the two functions of perception and representation is that with perception, the mental image resembles the external object encountered, whereas the *mimema* can and does not share all of the properties with the representation: “If it did, it would not be a *mimema* of that thing but a second example of it” (Sörbom 2002, p. 22). While seemingly straightforward, this is not simple, as this process requires the *mimema* to only partially resemble its referent, which should result in “a mental image representing something particular and contingent which it in itself it is not” (Sörbom 2002, p. 22). Therefore, the *mimema* must, by its own definition, be a generalisation that only approaches the external object as a type of description that cannot be confused with the thing itself.

The external model for the *mimema* can also be a composite of qualities of tangible objects configured into a single idealisation. These ideals were most valued when realised as lifelike *mimemata*, quite different from the modern sense of naturalism or realism. The quality of a composite lifelikeness was a representation of “life in its most obvious potential—Life was defined as the interplay between body and soul”.

> So, the claim for lifelikeness was far from a wish for realistic copying of individual things, but a wish to represent man’s most valuable property, namely that of being a living body-soul unit…The ability to represent the body-soul unit is the remarkable innovation of the classical period which changed the whole history of picture making and picture understanding (Sörbom 2002, p. 26).

To summarise, the classical notion of mimesis was a human faculty common to all as an act of perception or apprehension of the world. But the creation of *mimemata* was possible only to those with the acquired skill (*techne)* to produce a *mimema*, such as a painting, a play or a poem. These results were regarded as intangible impressions pressed onto the mind as approximations of the given subject or object, predating the notion of Fine Art. The source material for these depictions could be a combination of several forms to create a hybridised ideal or even just a product of imagination. The *mimema* was highly regarded when it testified to the interplay of internal and external life forces present in the subject and therefore presenting as if animate.

Can the theory of mimesis, in the classical sense, be useful in understanding

later representational art practises, particularly contemporary practises that utilise lifelike depictions and facsimiles? And are these later practises concerned with revealing something of the hidden nature of visible world, or do they function in some other way?

Moths

Having retrieved the incomplete sculptural exercises from the art school yard and deciding that they could be utilised as components in my own work, I then set about arranging and organising them in different ways to try and see what they could do. One piece was a fragment of hard wood, rectangular in shape that had been sawn roughly along its plane in an attempt to make it thinner. The cuts did not go all the way through, leaving a wafer-thin flap along its surface. This was a particularly obnoxious piece of wood bearing the marks of a struggling circular saw, making it look like a botched attempt at slicing dense bread. I moved it around my bench for months, confounded by its uselessness, until I stood it on its end. For a moment it resembled some sort of insect, then it was just a piece of wood again. I then propped it atop a block of thick corrugated cardboard, and it instantly appeared to be a moth. There was no doubting its 'mothness' in the colour and texture of the wood's rough surface and the slight opening of its wing formed by the flap of the incomplete cut. Its 'realism' was finally confirmed by perching it onto the edge of the cardboard block, making it seem weightless and poised. I then decided to add antennae made of wire as a final animating gesture. This was what can only be described as a joyous moment. So special that, I thought, it could not be repeated. Some days later I turned my attention to a piece of fired terracotta that had been haphazardly fashioned into a kind of hollow cylinder. The clay had been reinforced with chicken wire which was now partially exposed during firing. At first, I resisted the urge to try and make it into another moth, then decided that it only needed something to fill the hollow for it to have an internal body and so that the terracotta shell could resemble wings. It was at this point that I sensed the tension between the assertion of control in order to affect a desired result and the more passive approach of letting the material lead. However, the prescription of a moth was in many ways as intangible as my primitive way of trying to describe it. I pressed on, realising that the internal body

also needed to culminate in some sort of pointy head for it to have a front and a behind. I looked over at my kitchen bench and saw a baguette that could fit this purpose. The baguette was too thin for the hollow of the cylinder, but its crusty end sticking out of the front of the ceramic sleeve certainly resembled an insect head. I now only needed something to fill the gap between the bread and the ceramic shell. I then sprayed the cavity with expanding foam which held the bread in place and caulked the gap, making it look like a cannoli. Unfortunately, at this point, the nozzle of the expanding foam canister failed and blasted out foam onto the wall and bench, leaving piles of slowly growing epoxy clouds all over my apartment. I managed to rescue the sculpture and contain the mess using big pieces of cardboard.

The foam that was applied to the sculpture eventually settled around the tip of the baguette, which was now embedded in the terracotta cylinder to look like the furry collar of a moth surrounding its dark little head. I set this object on a four-legged plastic stand that had been used as a prop for another sculpture and suddenly another moth came to life. This iteration was very different from the first but undoubtedly a moth with its wings tightly drawn in and its fluffy head poking out. I continued creating other moths over the next months, using bits and pieces found at the art school and elsewhere. The shape and weave of a flattened old basket became the extraordinary silky pattern on moth wings and thus easily transformed by simply attaching it to the wall at a slight angle. I even recognised a moth in a discarded cello body that had no neck.

These actions would all classify as classically mimetic by recognising something where that thing does not actually exist. This is the mimetic in an act of new awareness, an act of seeing likeness and similitude. To be more exact, these activities were more like adventures than simple imaginings. Such exploits were always unpredictable and would come about from a series of small clues that I would watch and follow, as if on a safari, over a period of minutes or sometimes weeks, to arrive at a thing—often a moth—that I had not anticipated.

The moth sculptures also adhere to Sörbom's additional analysis of mimesis through their composite nature, where the creatures only announce their arrival when there is a sense of sentient reality discerned beyond their component parts. These were hybrid forms, made of disparate found elements that eventually came together to convey a coherent living form, a description less concerned with an

accurate rendering than with a convincing impression of vital life.

Simulated Readymades

'Representation' implies an interpretation of the thing presented and takes liberties with its subject in order to convey certain qualities—as in my initial assemblages of moths. 'Replication', however, strives for a fidelity and realism that mirrors its subject without need for poetic devices or idealisation—this is the territory of *trompe l'oeil*. Replication is necessarily methodical, requiring particular technologies, leaving little to chance and adhering to a prescribed sequence of steps and procedures. Yet both representation and replication are grounded in mimesis in that they both rely on the external referent as their source.

I complete my moth assemblages through an act of replication—mimesis now as *techne*. They are cast to look as close to the original conglomeration of found objects as possible. Although this serves a unifying function of its constituent parts, by simply remaking the whole thing out of a single substance, the final result looks very much like the original aggregation of found elements.

This is quite different from say, Picasso's famous sculpture, *Bull's Head,* 1942 comprising a bicycle seat attached to handlebars, cast entirely in bronze and which resembles the horned head of a bull. Picasso's bronze cast is a single dark colour that is closer to the shadow of the original than the actual object, acting more as a representation of the assemblage (the representation of a representation) instead of its simulation. The re-renderings that my moth depictions undergo allow the work to function as both representation and replication, portrayal and clone, in a double layer of mimetic operation whilst not exclusively one or the other. It could be here, in the push and pull of trying and not trying, of control and compliance, that the fabricated and the given are merged, perhaps providing an example of creative labour as both quantification and qualia.

Sörbom's description of mimesis as an apprehension of reality instead of a slavish copying offers a pathway through the phenomenal world to better inhabit it. But what does "apprehending reality" actually mean? Why not just say 'seeing reality' or 'witnessing reality'? 'Apprehension' has three separate meanings: firstly, it can mean comprehension or recognition, secondly, a sense of trepidation or doubt, and thirdly, an act of seizure or grasping. The combination of all three

meanings gives the full sense of ‘mimetic apprehension’ as a type of cognisance that must include some uncertainty in order to take a hold on something. And so, with my convincing replications of a sculptural assemblage, there exists a perpetual sliding between recognition, doubt and capture, cognisance, uncertainty and holding.

In a 1994 essay titled ‘Simulated Readymades’, Boris Groys discusses the work of Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss, arguing that nature produces and “he who lives in and with nature also produces—but it is the wise who *reproduce*” (1994, p. 33). Groys explains the two approaches to decommissioning objects from their use value and subsequent refiguring as artworks. The first is the long-established practice of the readymade in which the reframing of everyday items into art objects demands a perceptual leap on the part of the artist and the viewer. Groys describes this leap as a crossing of the invisible threshold that separates art and reality:

> It is defined by the individual’s inner, purely mental decision to see things differently; it acquires mythical dimensions. Crossing it begins to resemble a religious conversion, an inner enlightenment that allows us to see the familiar from a new angle and to contemplate what is hidden below surfaces (1994, p. 34).

Groys provides a spiritual interpretation that encourages a refocus on the object’s pure appearance, stripping it of its sign value and disabling its normal circulation (1994, p. 34). But the readymade can always be returned to the kitchen or the hallway from whence it came, and none would be the wiser. The threat of the readymade or found object’s potential reversibility problematises the perceptual shifts required for its existence as an object of art and therefore casts doubt on this “spiritual interpretation”. A peculiarly discombobulating quality of the readymade and the found object that is built into their realisations is the constant oscillation between art and reality. The “inner enlightenment”, as Groys puts it, is unsustainable, usually momentary and sporadic. Yet Groys places the casting of spiritual doubt in the second category of objects; the fabricated copy such as the carved, lifelike sculptures of ordinary objects by Fischli and Weiss.

In the early 1990s Fischli and Weiss produced numerous sculptural installations comprised of facsimiles of utilitarian objects carved in polyurethane. These were installed in galleries, with some appearing as if workers had suddenly

abandoned their stations. The piece, titled *TABLE* (1993), depicts a worktable strewn with tools, paint cans, buckets, dried up paint rollers and brushes, sticks and rags, all carved in polyurethane and carefully painted to an exacting realism. The overall effect is that of an urgent repair or chaotic renovation that was carried out in a frenzy of spilt paint and excessive haste, where the artisans had suddenly departed, leaving behind a grand tableau of disarray. Another work from 1993, *VASE,* in contrast to *TABLE,* depicts a single, unadorned ceramic vase placed on a plinth. *VASE* is also a carved and painted replication, but without the theatricality of *TABLE*, sitting so inconspicuously and unassuming to the point of sheer immodesty. Although the two works differ dramatically in their subject—one alluding to a specific activity or narrative while the other is a statement of utmost singularity—they both share a tacit celebration of the excavation and visualisation of their visages. There is a sense of revelation in the material articulation of their detail: the more banal the feature, the more revelatory. For example, in my representation of a moth, the unlikely collision of a baguette and expanding foam may at first seem jarring and rather drastic. Yet when these two elements are reconstituted as a lifelike, coloured cast, their relationship becomes a source of fascination, offering an alternative mode of visual engagement. The subtlety of their shape, colour and surface comes to the fore precisely because they have been carefully crafted, forcing a heightened scrutiny of and delight in these features. This takes precedence over any initial displeasure at ruining a good piece of bread with epoxy foam.

Groys proposes that Fischli and Weiss attempt “desecrate modern art’s mystical pretentions underlying the practice of the readymade” (1994, p. 37). His essay concludes with the assertion that the individual’s necessary inner transformation in the face of readymade object is, in a sense, a type of technology which twentieth-century art deploys to compete with broader technological market forces:

> Peter Fischli/Davis Weiss do not like modern technology…above all they reject the technological improvements—namely the practice of the readymade—that has been so successfully employed in the enactment of artistic efficacy that the speed of the fine arts today easily rivals the speed of modern technology. And indeed, is there anything faster than changing one’s inner gaze? It is only because such change has become the essential

> technology of art in our century that modern art learnt to compete in the economic arenas of our society (Groys 1994, p. 37).

If Groys insists that the basic practise of the readymade is fraught with the mystical overtones of the viewer's internal transformation, and that these internalised responses in the viewer can be seen as a type of technological development (which Fischli and Wiess oppose), then what do we make of the mysterious transformations, both on the part of the viewer and the object, inherent to the technologies of the sculptural facsimile and *minemata*? The reproduction of reality as graven image or idol does not necessarily desecrate what it describes, instead it increases the possibility of deeper contemplation and wonderment. Groys alludes to this early in the essay about the Fischli and Weiss facsimiles:

> We are radically confronted by a surface which cannot be penetrated because it conceals nothing but void. The polyurethane used by the artists is merely a physical metaphor for this void…They produce a pre-scientific, pre-philosophical world that deals with only two things: what we see with our eyes and, as additional information, how what we see with our eyes has been created out of nothingness. It was once possible to find this information in the Bible—nowadays people look for it in exhibition catalogues (1994, p.33).

Groys here acknowledges the "pre-scientific and pre-philosophical world" that such practises invoke and unambiguously declares them miraculous but contends that the lifelike sculptures by Fischli and Weiss are somehow ironic and therefore stand against spiritual interpretation. This, he says, is a result of replacing the classical model of the readymade, which requires "the light of inner enlightenment", with a (somewhat cynical) revival of hand crafted replicants. For Groys, the simulation of the readymade is an undermining of modern art's pursuit of the sublime, pointing to a pragmatism of irony and distrust by engaging antiquated methods of representation, such as carving. For me, there is little trace of cynicism or distrust in these artists' simulation works; on the contrary, they highlight a primal drive to copy and mime, as exemplified in its revival of arcane and ancient practises. There is even a sense reverence or worship in the attention to the minute detail of these counterfeit scenes of workshop mayhem.

During the casting processes in my own work, there is always a great excitement and thrill in the removal of a cast from its mould. Even though I'm

well aware of the technology involved in the process, I never cease to marvel at the sheer magic of the arrival of an object out of nothing. With every cast, I am astounded by the simple and profound manifestation of articulated reality from void. This sensation is more exaggerated in my particular casting process where the colour is mixed into a clear resin before each coloured resin mixture is carefully poured into its corresponding recess in the mould. When set and demoulded, the piece emerges whole and complete with little need for any kind of painting or finishing. This moment of revelation, which Groys describes as a thing created out of nothingness (Groys 1994), often feels more like a supernatural event than a technical process. This was the case when removing the cast of a moth assemblage from its mould. The sculpture slowly appeared as I tore back the silicone where, for a moment, I was profoundly uncertain whether I was exposing the coloured resin cast or the blackened sheets of plywood the assemblage was originally made of.

In her discussion of *trompe l'oeil*, Gosetti-Ferecei quotes Baudrillard:

> As a genre, trompe l'oeil is an extremely conventional and metaphysical exercise—is such a highly ritualised form precisely because it is not derived from painting but from metaphysics (Baudrillard in Gosetti-Ferecei 1988, p. 231).

I recognise the important distinction between painting and *trompe l'oeil*, though I have sometimes regarded my casting to be akin to painting in its reliance on working with layers of liquified colour that harden into a kind of three-dimensional picture. But there is something more vital in the *trompe l'oeil*, which is better articulated by the dictionary definition of metaphysics as "phenomena beyond the scope of scientific inquiry" that transcends the laws of nature (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2021). Baudrillard is correct in seeing *trompe l'oeil* as a highly ritualised form because of its direct address to the laws of nature, to the point of hubris.

Gosetti- Ferencei later extends her discussion on *trompe l'oeil*, noting that it,

> …exposes the everyday experience in its perceptual contingency, its dependence upon fallible perception, and its vulnerability to ecstatic reflection—the ordinary givenness of everyday reality is disturbed—in the viewer affected by trompe l'oeil, doubt has been implanted (Gosetti-Ferencei 2007, p. 219).

The implanted doubt is caused not just by illusion, but by the fact that we are susceptible to visual manipulations. The deception or 'trick of the eye', must announce its fraudulence in order to complete the feat; it must tell us what it is not for it to truly enchant. These metaphysical practises do not preclude the presence of humour and play, of which there is ample evidence in Fischli and Weiss as well as my own work, but this should not be confused with what Groys misconstrues as the artists' ironic use of antiquated techniques.

Things

When Fischli and Weiss simulate quotidian objects, they are not, as one might think, engaging in some elaborate ruse to hoodwink their audience. What they are doing is a kind of 'de-naming' or 'un-identifying' in order to gain a new understanding of their subject. That is, the process of recreating any given object results in the object's permanent loss of previous identity. The process of imitation does not seek to define in the conventional sense, but to clear a semantic breathing space around the object. It ceases to be the *some*-thing of its intended purpose and becomes *the* thing. A 'thing' is special because it contains both the indefinite and the specific. It signifies that which cannot be named, the audaciously ambiguous and at the same time, the hidden character or essence of the matter. This is the readymade that is rendered irreversible by its copy and finally seen in all its strangeness and particularity. It is a play between the congruous and incongruous, which can certainly provide a space for "spiritual interpretation" (Groys 1994, p.37).

In his essay titled 'Thing Theory', Bill Brown explores the "specific unspecificity that things denote" (2001, p. 3):

> You could imagine things as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialisation as objects or their mere utilisation as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems (2001, p. 5).

These excesses of the object, which are typically hidden in normal function, pour forth when reflected in their re-presentation and re-creation, particularly in sculptural practice where the object occupies real space. Although both the readymade object and its simulation may appear identical, the very contrivance of

the reproduction enshrouds the object with a particular sanctity and beauty—an aura of absolute uniqueness. This might also help explain the aesthetic appeal of the reproductions of Duchamp's lost or destroyed readymades.

Before Brown ironically turns to a passage from A. S. Byatt's novel *The Biographer's Tale* (2000) where the protagonist, a doctoral student fed up with ideas and theories, longs for the real world and tells himself that he 'must have *things*', Brown begins his discussion of thing theory with a series of questions about the necessity of theory and the desire for the existence of immutable, uncomplicated 'things':

> Is there something perverse, if not archly insistent, about complicating things with theory? Do we really need anything like thing theory the way we need narrative theory or cultural theory or queer theory or discourse theory? Why not let things alone? Let them rest somewhere else—in the balmy elsewhere beyond theory. From there, they might offer us dry ground above those swirling accounts of the subject, some place of origin unmediated by the sign, some stable alternative to the instabilities and uncertainties, the ambiguities and anxieties, forever fetishized by theory. Something warm, then, that relieves us from unnecessary abstraction (2001, p. 1).

Can mimetic apprehension relieve us of unnecessary abstraction and theoretical thought? Wherever that "balmy somewhere else beyond theory" might be, it is something I instinctively pursue as a perceptual experience. Such perceptions are in the functioning of the sense organs, the strange chemical and electrical string of events within the physical body that activate the imagination before the intellect.

Image

Usually, the likeness of an object tells us more about the object than what we thought we knew of that object. What we perceive now becomes only image, an incredible image untethered from its previous questionable identity. By relinquishing conceptual assumptions and concentrating on surface appearance, the *mimema* is set in the illusory realm of image making, or possibly, mirage making.

In 'The Space of Literature', Maurice Blanchot discusses the object's relationship to its image, which in turn highlights the image's alliance to the

imaginary (1955). Blanchot's meditations on the image offer a succinct account, albeit in poetic form, of the remoteness of reflection, which "appear more refined than the object reflected" (Blanchot 1955, p. 256). Blanchot calls this the object's double when he asserts that,

> …it is linked to the possibility for objects to 'appear', to surrender, that is to the pure and simple resemblance behind which there is nothing—but being. Only that which is abandoned to the image appears, and everything that appears is, in this sense, imaginary (Blanchot 1955, p. 259).

The connection between the imagined and the image is echoed in Sörbom's chapter as "man-made dreams produced for those who are awake". Mimesis, in this classical sense, is a type of conjuring where a detailed landscape can be seen on the surface of a rock, or in the case of *mimemata,* a human-made rendering which evokes a reality that is not actually there. In both cases, the imaginary works at the forefront of such transfigurations.

The relationship between the image and the imagined resonates with Bill Brown's indefinite yet definite 'thingness'. Regarding metaphysics, both Brown and Blanchot declare insight beyond the initial sign value of the article. Both similarly describe the suddenness of objects becoming things or images, particularly when damaged or deactivated, which also recalls Agamben's 'in-operativity':

> We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us; the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production, and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily (Brown 2001, p. 4).

By analogy, we might also recall that a tool, when damaged, becomes its *image* (and sometimes an aesthetic object like those Andre Breton loved). In this case the tool, no longer disappearing into its use, *appears*. This appearance of the object is that of resemblance and reflection; the object's double, if you will (Blanchot 1955, p. 257).

In each case there is 'the appearance' of things or images emerging from a pause in normal function, when an object withdraws from normal utility and reveals the genuine version of itself. Blanchot extends this concept, likening it to a cadaver, which he calls the 'The Cadaverous Resemblance'. When the dead are

removed from us and we look on a lifeless body, "the mourned deceased begins to *resemble himself*":

> Himself: is this not an ill-chosen expression? Shouldn't we say: the deceased resembles the person he was when he was alive? 'Resembles himself' is, however, correct. 'Himself' designates the impersonal being, distant and inaccessible, which resemblance, that it might be someone's, draws toward day. Yes, it is he, the dear living person, but all the same it is more than he. He is more beautiful, more imposing; he is already monumental and so absolutely himself that it is as if he were *doubled* by himself, joined to his solemn impersonality by resemblance and by the image (Blanchot 1955, p. 256-257).

Blanchot's meditation on the power of resemblance through the absence of life force at first seems opposed to Sörbom's analysis of the mimetic in classical art, where the body/soul interplay is prized. Blanchot continues:

> This magnified being, imposing and proud, which impresses the living as the appearance of the original never perceived until now…this grandeur, through its appearance of supreme authority, may well bring to mind the great images of classical art. If this connection is justified, the question of classical art's idealism will seem rather vain. And we might bear in mind the thought that idealism has, finally, no guarantee other than a corpse. For this indicates to what extent the apparent intellectual refinement, the pure virginity of the image is originally linked to the elemental strangeness and to the formless weight of being, present in absence (Blanchot 1955, p. 258).

At first, this passage contradicts the classical view that mimesis seeks to describe soul in flesh, where Blanchot maintains that the absence of life from flesh reveals a truer image of a being. Yet both views would support the ancient idea of an impression that describes that which is no longer there. From a footprint in wet sand one can see the trace details of the person's tread, their gait and the particularities of their toes possibly better than one could when overwhelmed by a real-life encounter with the foot. Even more significantly, the imprint suggests how outlandish and marvellous this *thing* we call foot is.

Voiding

Not all of my interactions with the material I gleaned from the art school resulted in an interpretation of a moth. The image of the moth was something that I was open to but could only bring about with the right combination of elements. During this time, I came across a block of limestone in the sculpture yard, approximately thirty centimetres cubed, the top of which had been partially and crudely carved, leaving two rough cavities in its upper surface. This block had been left outside in the soil under a tree, where it became stained and blotchy around its base. It was an intriguing object that had an undeniable presence, especially when I took it inside and set it on the floor of my apartment. For months I could not figure out what to do with this thing. As much as I liked it, there was no entry point for a possible interaction with it because it was so self-contained and perfectly proportioned. Then, one night after taking out the recycling, I noticed that I had left a glass jar behind, sitting on the floor next to the block. Suddenly, there was a dialogue between the two objects; the block now looked monumental and solemn next to the empty clear vessel that now appeared to have some odd ceremonial function. The more I contemplated this pair of objects, the more they suggested a vanishing or dramatic departure of some kind. These were the remains of an evaporation of sorts, whose traces could be seen in the two cavities on top of the block and insinuated in the stark emptiness of the jar. This enigmatic relationship was a sufficient signal for me to proceed with their casting.

Making a mould of an open jar with a solid bottom is a very difficult task. The vessel needs to be filled with liquified silicone that then overflows and covers the external surface of the jar. Once the silicone sets, it forms a solid block of rubber that becomes locked inside the jar whilst also enveloping the jar's outer walls. The only way to remove the jar from its mould is to smash the glass and carefully pull out individual shards through the millimetres wide channel of its cylindrical wall. As unpleasant as this was, it was critical that the jar be cast as a single hollow vessel, not in two halves. This painstaking process was the most direct way of creating the cast without visible seams. Next came the casting of the jar, which involved pouring clear resin into the narrow channels of the mould to replicate the glass. This process was also problematic because the viscosity of the resin did not allow for its free flow into the fine recesses of the mould and threatened potential

air locks, which would cause gaping holes in the final cast. If anything went wrong during these perilous steps, I would need to start the whole process. I eventually circumvented the pouring issue by using a very slow setting resin that would take a full day to settle into the mould and let the bubbles slowly rise before hardening. After a week of curing, the piece had become sufficiently brittle to de-mould, however, I faced the same problem in removing the resin jar from the block of silicone rubber. Rather than breaking the jar, as I had to make the mould, the silicone had to be cut away piece by piece from the inside of the jar. After hours of pushing sharp blades into the silicone mass and slowly removing small fragments of the rubber, the empty jar was finally birthed whole.

The casting of the limestone block was much easier, requiring a simple five-sided silicone jacket. The staining and discolouration around the base of the block had impregnated the porous stone which in turn had transferred onto the surface of the silicone mould. When the piece was cast in a resin pigmented to match the overall colour of the stone, the stains and blotches transferred once again onto the resin cast, blemishing the base with the actual dirt and mildew of the original. The high fidelity of the cast stone surface, with its every splodge of muck and carved gouge, made it almost indistinguishable from the original.

The reason I have outlined the fabrication process of this particular work is to foreground the conceptual connection that sometimes exists between the casting process and the sculpture itself, when method and subject meet. The jar in particular speaks to the filling and emptying necessary in the moulding and casting process. It is both a container and an object that needs to be contained, transforming from liquid to solid. These fundamental processes of flooding and evacuation, holding and being held, forming cells for empty space, all correlate with the tenor and essence of the glass jar itself. Similarly, the block of limestone, which shows the concerted removal of material to create hollows and voids, demonstratively recounts the microcavities that interface with the absorbent surfaces in its remaking. This is where the sheer physicality of the making can overlap with the riddle of creative labour—where the manual toil becomes analogous to and symbolic of the object's underlying intimations. Here again we find a way to unlock meaning in the very words assigned to these activities. The word 'cast' is used to describe a projection or throwing into remote spaces. There is a sense of unknowability in casting something out into the expanse. When we

cast a fishing net or light, we go forth into emptiness but with the hope of retrieving fish or seeing more clearly, neither expectation guaranteed. 'To cast' can also be to define or claim, as in casting a vote, casting a shadow, or casting a spell. Common to each application of the word is the sense of directed energy pushed outwards, which is necessarily subjected to a passage through the undetermined as the very means of its realisation.

Having completed the casting process, I placed the jar and the block side-by-side on the floor as I had first seen them. There was now an even stronger sense of something funerary and departed, recalling the profound emptying that Blanchot sees as an idealism "that has no guarantee other than a corpse…the formless weight of being presence in absence" (Blanchot 1955, p. 258). I eventually realised that the jar I had cast was the very same jar that I had to urinate into whilst recuperating from bladder cancer surgery weeks before. This was the result of the sudden discovery of a tumour that needed urgent removal from my bladder, and I remembered the doctor's term for emptying the bladder was 'voiding'.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This practice-based doctoral research project has elucidated the impetus behind my studio methodology. Through a combination of philosophical investigation and reflection, I have appraised my work's connection to its historical artistic precedents as well as identified divergences. In doing so I have focused on two key antecedents for the studio work conducted as part of this research**.** These are possibly two of the most discussed works of the twentieth century: *Brillo Box* and *Bottle Rack*, which have presented a set of problems concerned with the transition of everyday artefacts into artworks. In many ways, these works act as stand ins for my own practise, allowing me to objectify my studio activity, which is often carried out intuitively and wordlessly. The transition of the everyday object into an artwork has been beholden to institutional validation and aesthetic legitimacy as determined by various philosophical measures and certain members of the artworld. While these institutional mechanisms have played a role in sanctioning the transformations, they do so predominately by providing a setting, both temporal and physical, where these procedures can be carried out. This raises the question of whether the artistic transformation of objects is dependent on institutional framing or not.

Both *Brillo Box* and *Bottle Rack* are alike in that they engage with quotidian objects as their primary mode of operation, but they differ radically in their secondary mode of production. Each serves a mimetic function in that they both represent something which they are not. Even as an unaltered object, *Bottle Rack* has been separated from its normal utility and allowed to exist in its primary condition as pure image, no longer an object in a cellar but instead, a more authentic version of itself.

The two works differ in the additional act of simulation that *Brillo Box* employs or *trompe l'oeil* as the second mode of operation. *Trompe l'oeil*, which can be thought of as an amplification of mimesis, has been historically deemed a lesser art form that merely deceives the eye and impresses with technical virtuosity. But behind the retinal trickery is an agitation that challenges our habitual processing of sense data. Of particular significance is *trompe l'oeil's* dependence on the depiction of the inconsequential or quotidian, rhyparography's

reminder of a pre-philosophical moment. What then, does the quotidian quality that both works share, actually refer to? If it is the mundane, the commonplace, the unremarkable, then the implication is that we live as if only partially conscious and everything within our range of vision is always remarkable and exciting to behold. What warrants being labelled average, mundane or ordinary? Nothing, really. Not even a carton of soap pads or a drying rack could be truly called 'uninteresting'. The idea that a representation of a boring object plucked from our generic reality can be transformed into a new sensation simply through its simulation is only partially true and appeals to those who refuse to look or are already bored. Granted, to actively surrender one's full attention, as a maker or a spectator, does help us to awaken slightly to the vastness around us. But to categorise this perceptual realm as existing within measurably 'common' or 'extraordinary' spaces, only perpetuates the sluggish visualisation of "political ordering of representation" (Gosetti-Ferencei 2007, p. 224).

The underlying function of artworks like *Brillo Box,* and in many ways *Bottle Rack*, is to dispel any notion of the pedestrian, the banal or the routine. It may then follow that their institutional framing does not necessarily help enact these intentions but instead, hinders them by virtue of the indexical nature of museological structures and the high/low categories that ensue, which ultimately result in a diminished experience of the work. This is clearly a generalisation, but one necessary to reclaim a forgotten sense of childlike awe that has been adrift in an ocean of isms and theoretical speculation. This is the effort in turning away from the shadows on the cave wall to find not only the forms that create them but the light source beyond. With this in mind, perhaps all art is in some way mimetic and the quotidian does not exist.

The moth sculptures which form a large part of my studio presentation are pertinent to this discussion in that they represent lifeforms that are mostly static when we encounter them. One usually only sees a moth in flight when it's trying to get away or speeding towards a light. More often, we see household moths in complete stillness, clinging to a surface like a delicate wood shaving. Their presence is striking because it seems they imagine that they can't be seen in their motionless resolve. It is as though they pretend to be statues of themselves, hoping to rest unnoticed, which makes the endeavour even more outlandish. In this way, moths engage in a mimetic activity of subterfuge. To construct objects like these

insects with bits and pieces of scrap material brings life into inanimate stuff precisely because they are static their perfect stillness and posturing now becoming the sculpture's animating feature. Sheer good fortune brought the image of a moth to mind when first regarding that piece of badly cut timber, which conveys the marvel of transference through a mimetic act. Such a transference references the traditions of static, stand-alone sculpture, where the deficit of sculpture's defining immovability, its stationary paralysis, becomes its profit and charm. The moths' mimesis not only relies on superficial similarity, but also on behavioural mimicry. Looking at these works, one imagines that they could suddenly vanish in the blink of an eye.

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Appendix 2

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Other Supplementary Materials

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