

An Inhospitable Object

Becky Shaw

In 2006, while pregnant, I had a very strange dream. I dreamt my partner died, in a park, of a disease where blood escaped through unwounded skin, like a British Ebola. It was distressing but also very beautiful, a domestic rather than an exotic *pieta*. In the dream I then went home and in the words with which I woke up: ‘I looked for you in the objects’, I manually examined every object in my home to see if my partner was *in* it. I have no idea what the person being *in* the object might constitute but every image I have is like a cartoon. On one hand the animate metaphor feels crudely right, like the naughty broomsticks with faces *in* them in *Fantasia*. On the other hand though, this physical metaphor in no way reaches the strength of feeling that the dream evoked.

While likely the result of hormonal activity, the dream still seemed to touch on something I had been unable to reconcile for a long time to do with whether there really are ideas, or some essence of an individual, *in* things. I am aware that when thinking about ideas *in* things I am being willfully crude, or even childish- side-stepping the sophistication of semiotics, and the whole body of material studies research that describes human relationships with objects.

In my desire to get to the ideas *in* things, or the place where subjective perspectives lie *in* things, I am reminded of Bill Brown writing about ‘the idea of things and the ideas in them’.¹ Brown refers to Baudelaire, who explains in his *Philosophy of Toys* that the ‘the overriding desire of most children is to get at and *see the soul* of their toys.’² As Brown speculates, perhaps children take toys apart because literally they expect to find the animated soul inside the thing. This crude understanding of inside and outside is described by Baudelaire as a first experience of the ‘melancholy gloom’ that characterises the human response to the soullessness of modern life.³ Brown describes it as ‘a lesson in the insufficiency of the desired object’.⁴

There are many – too many – texts and books about how one can look *into* objects and read their social stories. These are a bit like self-help books-in that they are fascinating, and addictive; I find myself thinking, *oh, just one more...* The discipline ‘Material Studies’ is constructed entirely around this compulsion, as seen in famous texts like Arjun Appadurai’s *The Social Life of Things*⁵ and Daniel Miller’s many texts.⁶ While I salivate over the biographies of objects as much as anyone, I remain frustrated and fascinated by how the object’s story must always be *told*, whether in speech, text or sound, etc. Verbal language is always the favoured way to undo an object’s biography. I still do not fully understand why the object cannot communicate this aspect of itself in its material qualities. Obviously massproduced objects are designed to show no trace of making, but even in the handmade object, a full life story is not apparent.

Questioning whether ideas can be *in* things and then made articulate leads me to a couple of points to consider. Firstly I am led to the viewer of art, whom I know has a subjective relation with the thing. However, I want to think less about this and more about the attempts artists make to communicate what is *in* things – often through trying to communicate process. We are very familiar with strategies of art as process and I have tried these strategies too, but I remain frustrated by the way these works (for me) lack a sense of conclusion. I want to re-examine some of the ways that process-based art might articulate an end point rather than celebrate inconclusion. If we make work where the process is what carries content, can this be communicable in a final, static object?⁹ Crudely, I am pre-occupied with knowing how you make something – a thing, rather than always a text about a thing – that can communicate its own making. The most significant example I have for an object that does this is Robert Morris’s 1961 work *Box with the sound of its own making*.⁷ The work does what the title says, and includes the sound recording of a wooden box being built played in the interior of the same box. The object is both a static present thing to look at and also a space that communicates the human life that literally goes *into* making something. The work is like the child’s desire made real, it allows us to have the toy and also to see its soul.

Artists making process-based works, at this historical moment, sought to dismantle the fetishisation of the final work and its commodification, as Morris writes:

Such work which has the feel and look of openness, extendability, accessibility, publicness, repeatability, equanimity, directness, immediacy, and has been formed

by clear decision rather than groping craft would seem to have a few social implications, none of which are negative. Such work would undoubtedly be boring to those who long for access to an exclusive specialness, the experience of which reassures their superior perception.⁸

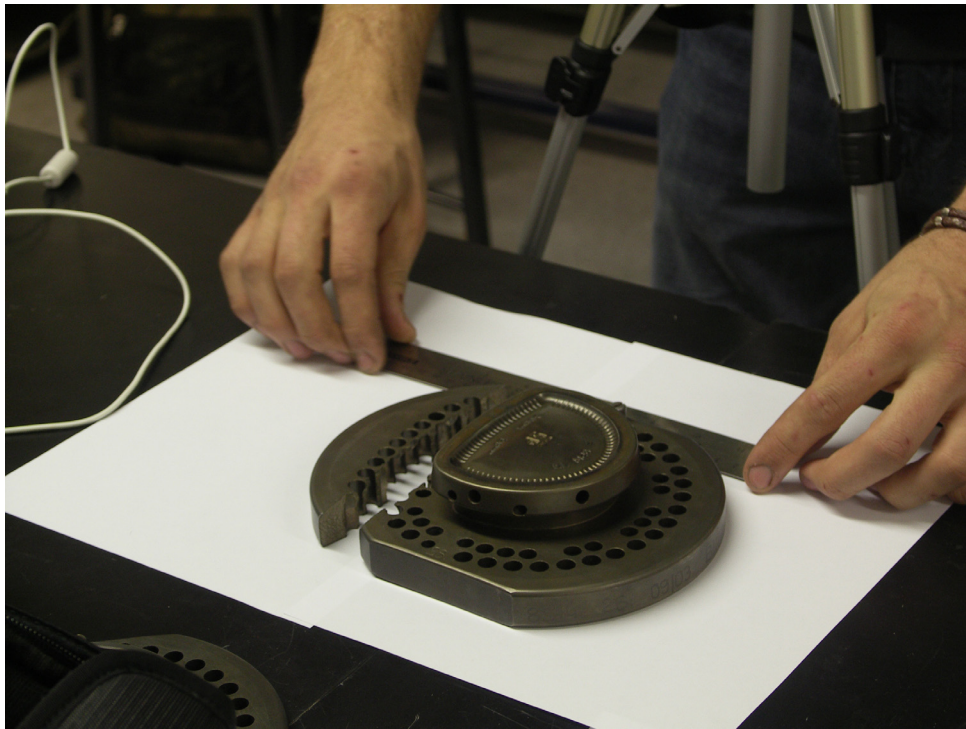
Morris describes a work where the decisions that inform making are open and communicable to a public without specialist aesthetic discernment. This seems an egalitarian and hospitable notion, connecting the process of making art with the types of making that most people engage in, in the work of daily life. However, works that claim to be without specialist aesthetic language may often produce the opposite affect. As a non-art-educated public may expect the need for specialist knowledge to appreciate art, so art that encourages them to see their own daily skills as akin to art may be unintelligible. Because of this problem I am curious to know why we consider the exposition of what is in a work to be hospitable or generous.

In 2005 I was commissioned by Sheffield Contemporary Art Forum to make a work in response to Gavin Wade's fictional character and curatorial device, Tony T.⁹ Tony T was a skateboarder who hated the intrusion of public art (other peoples' perspectives) on what he considered his space. To respond to this I set up a work period with a course in Forensic Engineering at Sheffield Hallam University. The course teaches students not to design objects to solve problems, but rather to examine existing objects and what happens when they fail. Forensic Engineering may be used to understand manufacturing faults as well as to contribute to investigation of criminal or accidental acts. Tony T took apart a public artwork to understand his own relation with it and to oppose it. Likewise, Forensic Engineering seems to take things apart to find out what is *in* them. In the following I present the narrative of how this work developed, with the intention of exploring a number of different moments of hospitality: when the relationship between artist and host becomes difficult; about how the resulting 'thing' can be presented; whether it is possible to have process made communicable in a still object.



Forensic Engineering laboratory

I spent several weeks attending lectures and workshops in Forensic Engineering. I found the teaching environment strangely comforting and familiar, reminding me of the laboratories where my father worked. In contrast to working in an art school, the teaching methods and assignments were also comforting as they involved the ascertainment of fact through a series of scientific processes that could be done 'rightly' or 'wrongly'. The students in one particular module were



given a number of failed or broken objects and tasked with establishing the cause of the incident.

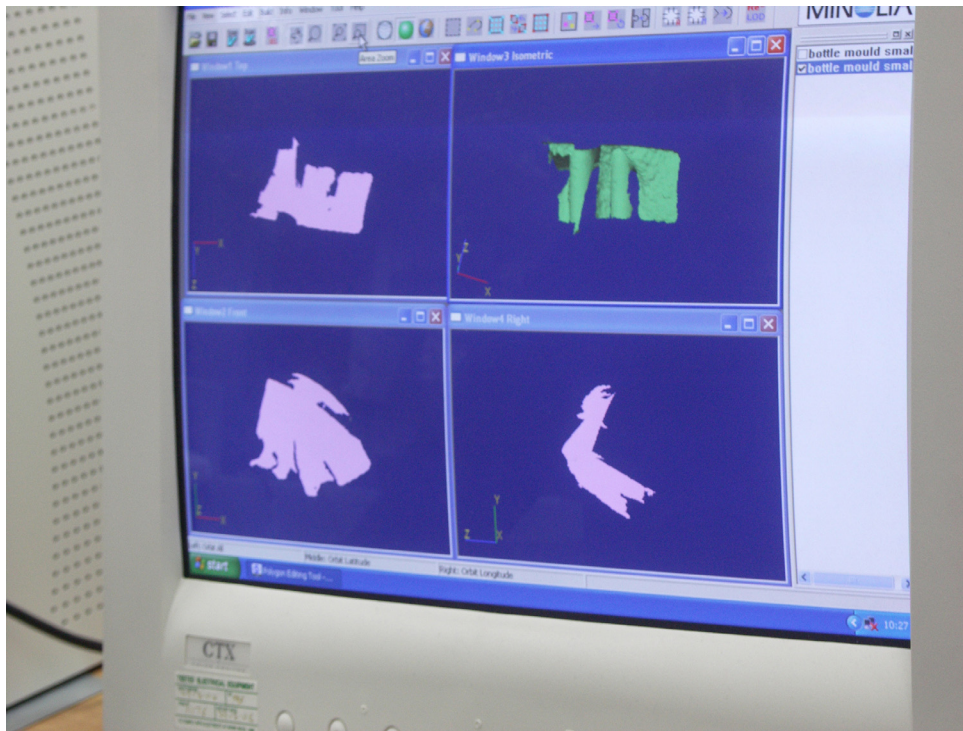
Forensic Engineering broken object

One thing in particular interested me, a circular heavy metal disk with a number of holes drilled through it and riven in two by a huge cartoon-like crack. The object is a ‘non-object’, a mould to make another object. It is the base of a mould to form a glass bottle. In the middle of the mould is a trademark for a well-known brand of vodka. Not only is the object broken but also it is a fragment, separated from the two other parts that would have formed the whole bottle.

The students must use a small number of scientific techniques to tell the true story about what happened to the mould. Like the environment, their task is comfortable, there is no doubt that the truth of the object is not simply inside it, waiting to be made articulate. The students first document the object photographically, including a ruler in the images to verify the object’s size. The students then examine the mould in a regular microscope, looking into its interior to calculate the grain size and to find evidence of problems in the way grains lie. The students then cut into the mould, taking a tiny sliver to make a slide. The preparation of the slide involves a number of processes, including chemically cleaning off surface grease.

I watch two students and a member of staff put the slide into an electron scanning microscope. (ESM) The lecturer explains the equipment to me. The ESM is a black box, a chamber where gas particles are charged so they stick to parts of the slide or at least bounce off parts and pass through others to make the chemical ingredients visible. The students see rogue oxygen bonded into metal molecules when there should be none. They spend a long time looking at the fracture edge, looking for tears and twists that can communicate the hidden faults that lead the mould to fracture under pressure.

I decide that I want to copy the object, I do not quite understand why. I ask the forensic engineering staff how I would copy the object. The ‘original’ shape of the mould was cast, then drilled. However, when asked how to copy the object, engineering staff sent me not to a forge but to Metrology. Metrology – the science of measuring – is the name on the door of one small room. Metrology has a technician, an ex-railway engineer, who in addition to working with students to measure is tasked with using laser scanners to do external contracts to bring in revenue. To do this, the technician receives components from the motor industry and verifies their size or makes an exact copy. He has one translation of a Japanese manual to help him and he has been having a lot of trouble with the technology.



Nets

The technician very generously agrees to copy my object. Each complex piece of the mould (now cut into three by the students) must sit for hours while the scanner photographs it incessantly, building up a series of vectors to form a net to describe the exterior of the form. The fracture edge is so complex that the net produced has gaping holes or overly complex surfaces where the serial scans will not fit back together. After hours of work the technician resorts to the metrology machine and hopes to knit a CAD image of the disk with a scanned fracture edge. This is not wholly successful either, so he calls on the help of the man who runs the Rapid prototyping machine and together they mock up something. To try to capture the surface of the fracture edge they input a digital image of a Yorkshire terrier's rough coat. They make the prototype using a plastic resin. On the surface of the plastic model is a strange relief drawing, like a diagram. Somehow some of the information inputted has produced this diagram, but it bears no relation to the original object. It is as if the catalogue of processes we attempt is embossed into the object.

I then ask the University how to cast the piece in metal and I am referred to Metalwork and Jewellery, where they say they can cold cast the object using a type of vinyl mould. The resulting form will not be made of bronze (the metal of the original mould) but will be in a cold resin, a plastic with metal in suspension. To decide which cold resin to use I just have to look in a catalogue and pick the most accurate colour match. In contrast to the techniques used by the students to look *inside* the object, my copy is only of *outside* form.

For the past three years I have started to get ready to take the object back to Forensic Engineering. My plan was to ask a new group of students to analyse my object to find out what had 'gone wrong' with it. I planned that they might subject my object to the same processes of analysis that they did their 'original', and then supply me with a report describing the cause of the fault. However, something prevents me from completing this step. The student's analysis will be completely different to that of the first 'original'. The object's interior grains, if it even has them, will not be ripped, as the copy is not at all 'broken'. In addition, the layered plastic of the prototype will have a different chemical fingerprint when subjected to the black box of the ESM. While I do not know how the students will begin to determine what fault they are being asked to analyse, it feels that somehow I am duping them or ridiculing them in their quest for objective truth. The copy, then would be an unwelcome guest, its conditions of making not opening up the opportunity for the students to consider the philosophies and beliefs that underpin their practice. If I cannot allow this part of the work to happen, what then is the future for this strange object?

By allowing the University to dictate the means by which the copy was made, the social context of making was folded back into the form of the object. The story of making, what is *in* the thing, should be apparent in the etched drawings now on the surface of the object. But this is of course not the case, the object does not speak without an accompanying verbal narrative. Also it is the plastic interior that could articulate most strongly the problem of what is *in* objects, by not having an interior, or at least not the right interior. And, of course, while the qualities of the object are visible to the human eye, or through instruments, it is still not possible to gain any understanding of them without the narrative. Ironically, in my search to make a process-based work that articulates its own making through finished form, I have made something inconclusive. I could simply go ahead and put the object on display, or exhibit it with the ‘original’, and it might have some impact, but none of this would communicate the flawed making history locked up in it. Predictably I have not been able to escape the significance of verbal or spoken language in communicating what is *in* objects, but I gain a new fascination for how closely entwined verbal and material languages are, maybe they are even the same thing.

NOTES

1. Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, pp. 1–20.
2. Brown, *A Sense of Things*, p. 6.
3. Brown, *A Sense of Things*, p. 6.
4. Brown, *A Sense of Things*, p. 6.
5. Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988.
6. See Daniel Miller, *Stuff*, Cambridge: Polity, 2009; *A Theory of Shopping*, Cambridge: Polity, 1988; *The Comfort of Things*, Cambridge: Polity, 2009.
7. Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture 1–3', in *Art in Theory 1900–1990*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 821.
8. Morris, *Art in Theory 1900–1990*, p. 821.
9. Sheffield Contemporary Art Forum <<http://www.artsheffield.org/spect/>>