

Beyond the readymade:

Found objects in contemporary South African art

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Abstract

The use of found objects is evident in a range of contemporary artmaking practices. The use of found objects can, however, no longer be understood as a rupture from tradition as they were in the early decades of the twentieth century when they were first used by Picasso and later by Duchamp, because found objects have become part of a longer genealogy in art making. A new approach is needed in order to understand the significance of the use of found objects in contemporary art. This study explores the significance of the use of found objects in selected contemporary South African artworks in order to move beyond an understanding of the use of found objects as the anti-art gestures like those of the historical and neo-avant-gardes. I propose that a shift in focus, from the idea of the found objects as anti-art, to an exploration of the changing ontological status of the found object as it moves through different social fields is one such new approach. Chapter one introduces the study, while chapter two outlines the research methods and theoretical frameworks used. Chapter three explores the meanings that objects accrue in everyday practices, while chapter four focussed on the difference between artworks and more quotidian objects. Pursuing the question of the manner in which the ontological status of the object shifts as it enters into and becomes part of the field of exhibition, chapter five considers the ways in which meanings are constructed for objects in the field of exhibition through the conventions of display. I explore the ways in which artists make use of or invert these conventions as a means of challenging the field of exhibition. Acknowledging that the objects are also active agents within this process, in chapter six I explore the manner in which the materiality of found objects contributes to the meaning of the artworks, and by extension, I consider what new possibilities of meaning a focus on the materiality yields. In the final chapter, I use the concept of the everyday to draw the themes that have emerged throughout this study together. I conclude by situating the contemporary South African art practices within the genealogy of the avant-garde.

Key words: Found objects, Siopis, Alborough, Seejarim, Materiality, The Everyday, Contemporary South African Art

Declaration

I declare that this is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university.

_____ day of _____ 2016

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Chapter one

Introduction

Bulalazonke! An isiZulu word meaning 'kills everything'. This is just one of the poisons available from street vendors in Johannesburg. *Bulalazonke* has a special place in *The Portable Hawkers Museum* (fig. 1.1) which I created in 2003 as part of a series of artworks that explored the ways in which museums reinforce power relationships through their practices of collecting and display. *The Portable Hawkers Museum* collection consists of items bought for R10 or less from street vendors in Johannesburg. The items in the collection are inexpensive, yet they are valuable commodities for those who purchase them.



Fig. 1.1 Alison Kearney, *Souvenir or I love the Portable Hawkers Museum*, 2003. Postcard (edition 300); Photographic documentation of a public performance with *The Portable Hawkers Museum* in Newtown, Johannesburg.

More recently I created an interactive artwork titled *Put something in to get something out* (2006) (fig.1.2), in which I invited visitors to the exhibition to swap objects with me in the gallery for the duration of the exhibition. Participants were asked to record the reasons for the exchanges they made. I was thus left with a record of the transactions, and a collection of other peoples' objects. It was important that I did not choose the objects that comprised this collection, which I used to make my next series of works titled *Offerings*, (2008)¹.

Through *The Portable Hawkers Museum's* collection I explored objects as indexes of the place and the people where they were bought. In *Put something in to get something out*, I explored the nature of the collection and the relationship of the collection to the collector. With *Offerings* I was exploring the nature of the collection and the relationship of the collector to the collection. At the time of making these works, I did not consider the implications of using found objects for theorising art.



Fig. 1.2 Alison Kearney, *Put something in to get something out*, 2006. Mixed media, interactive installation. Detail. The Premises Gallery, Johannesburg.

It was after reflecting on my own use of found objects in works such as those described above, that I became interested in other contemporary South African artists' use of found

¹ This series of works was exhibited at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, in January 2008, in an exhibition titled *Offerings* and then travelled to The KZNSA Gallery in Durban, in May 2008.

objects. I was increasingly curious about the theoretical implications of the use of found objects in contemporary art.

From representation to *re-presentation*

The idea of the 'found object' is built around the distinction between artworks and what Danto (1981, vi) refers to as "mere things" (quotidian objects). When artists select quotidian objects to be used in artworks these objects move from everyday social practices and are embedded in the discourses of art where different sets of cultural practices are at work. In this process, the objects (now distinguished from other objects like them that remain part of everyday social practices) become 'found objects'. A found object may be a whole object, or a fragment of an object that can be used as material, and is altered as it is joined to other objects when embedded in an artwork. The scope of this study is too narrow to survey each instance of the use of found objects in artworks throughout the twentieth and twenty first centuries, however, I will briefly discuss some important and foundational instances of the use of found objects by way of introduction.

Picasso's inclusion of an actual piece of rope and a piece of oil-cloth with a design of chair caning printed on it in his *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912)², is arguably one of the first instances of the inclusion of found objects in Modern art. Golding (1959) points out that this assemblage was made at a time when Picasso and Braque had been experimenting with collage in their so called Synthetic Cubist phase between 1911 and 1914. Evident in the

² Pablo Picasso, *Still-life with Chair Caning*, 1912. Oil on oil-cloth over canvas edged with rope. 29 × 37 cm. Musée National Picasso, Paris.

Synthetic Cubist experiments with drawing and painting carried out by Braque and Picasso, is a concern with, among other things, time and space, implied in the representation of objects. Artworks such as *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912) suggest a spectator that moves through space and time, observing the objects from multiple viewpoints. The images also point to a particular time and place through references to the Parisian daily paper in the stencilled letters "JOU"³. In including found objects in artworks Picasso's and Braque's praxis marked a shift from representations of elements from everyday life, to the inclusion of the actual object. This shift is also evident in the difference between works such as Braque's *Le Portugais (The Emigrant)* (1911)⁴ in which fragments of words from newspapers and other still life objects were 'drawn' on the picture plane, and Braque's *Fruit Bowl and Glass* (1912)⁵, a collage including fragments of paper with a faux wood veneer, that were pasted onto the surface of the drawing, suggesting a wooden table. In the process of becoming part of a collage, the newspaper cuttings and faux wood veneer were removed from everyday circulation, to become part of the *representation* of everyday life. In these artworks, the actual objects (the bits of paper and the oil cloth) introduce the illusionistic representation of other objects (chair caning and faux wood grain). The oil cloth and the panel represent something beyond themselves; the cloth is a piece of cloth but it signifies a chair because it mimics chair-caning and the paper is a piece of paper that represents a wooden veneer. In contrast to this, the piece of rope in *Still life with chair caning* (1912) is a signifier for itself as 'rope'. The inclusion of the real rope, which sits within the frame of the canvas, but nevertheless acts as a frame around the entire image, 'ties' all together. Once the rope and

³ See (Harrison 1993, and Poggi 1992, Golding 1959) for detailed discussions of Cubism.

⁴ Georges Braque *Le Portugais (The Emigrant)*, 1911. Oil on canvas. 116.8 x 81 cm. Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel.

⁵ Georges Braque, *Fruit dish and glass*, 1912. Charcoal and cut-and-pasted printed wallpaper with gouache on white laid paper; subsequently mounted on paperboard. 62.9 x 45.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

the cloth are part of the artwork they are no longer *merely* a piece of cloth and rope.

Further, these artworks are not only 'windows onto the world'; they literally include fragments of the world, elevating the mundane to the status of art.

Golding (1959) argues that it was Picasso's and Braque's elevation of the mundane to 'high art' that challenged the notions of the work of art as the expression of technical skill and beauty of that time. The use of collaged fragments from everyday life could be interpreted as a representation of the increased mechanisation of other forms of production in modern Europe⁶. Further, Golding (1959) argues that in recognising art-making potential in non-art materials, Picasso's and Braque's early experiments with collage and assemblage led the way for later avant-garde experiments with everyday objects in artworks⁷. Corroborating this view, Godfrey (1998) has suggested that in introducing new ways of representing the everyday, thereby challenging the conventions of art making at the time, *Still life with chair caning* can be understood as a precursor to conceptual art.

⁶ For example, the invention of the lithographic printing processes (see Benjamin, 1968).

⁷ An example of further experimentation with collage and assemblage can be seen in the work of Kurt Schwitters. Through his 'Merz art' Schwitters extended the use of collage and assemblage to the creation of artworks, architecture, poems and even stage designs. His artworks were made from discarded materials from everyday life, which he collected. Some of the materials he used included street car tickets, bent wheels, twine, tissue paper, tins and bits of wood and other discarded debris (Schmalenbach, 1967). According to Schwitters' manifesto of 'Merz art', which he refined and espoused in numerous publications, including letters and his *Merz* magazine, the two main criteria of 'Merz art' were a rejection of objective representation and the use of any and all materials (Schmalenbach, 1967). Schwitters asserted that his innovation was that he treated all materials as equal in his collages made of formerly non-art materials and junk. Schmalenbach (1967) argues that Schwitters viewed this non-hierarchical approach as liberation from the limiting concerns of oil paint.

Duchamp's readymades

While linked in their use of previously non-art materials and unorthodox methods, Duchamp's 'readymades'⁸, nevertheless mark a significant shift from the way Picasso and Braque used found objects in their assemblages. Duchamp designated 'whole' industrially produced objects, such as a bottle rack, a snow shovel and a urinal, that he did little to change, as art; by contrast Picasso and Braque included fragments of real things in their collages, reconstituting those things in the new environment of the artwork. According to Alberro (1999), Duchamp distinguished between 'assisted' and 'unassisted' readymades. An 'unassisted readymade' is an industrially produced object, that the artist has not *apparently* changed, but which has been designated as art, for example Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* (1914)⁹. This he placed in the gallery space without adding anything to the object. Assisted readymades such as *Fountain* (1917)¹⁰ and *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919)¹¹ were noticeably physically changed by the artist. For instance, *Fountain* (1917) consisted of a urinal that was turned on its side, placed on a plinth and signed 'R. Mutt'; *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) was a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*, on which Duchamp drew a beard, a curly moustache, and added the title *L.H.O.O.Q.* While Duchamp did little to the physical appearance of the 'unassisted readymades', he nevertheless changed the objects in three significant ways: he placed them in the field of exhibition, gave them titles and attributed their authorship to himself (by labelling them his art works). Artworks such as *Bottle Rack* (1914) and *Fountain* (1917), thus

⁸ Godfrey (1998) points out that 'readymade' is the term invented by Duchamp for an object from the outside world which is claimed or proposed as art.

⁹ Marcel Duchamp, *Bottle Rack*, 1914. Galvanized iron bottle rack. No dimensions recorded. Lost, 1915. Replica, 1961, Collection Alexina Duchamp, on loan to Philadelphia Museum of Art.

¹⁰ Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, (1917), Replica 1964. Porcelain. Dimensions unconfirmed: 36 x 48 x 61cm. Tate Modern, London.

¹¹ Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919. Rectified readymade: pencil on reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. 19.7 x 12.4 cm. Private collection.

took Picasso's and Braque's challenging of the conventions of art making further because Duchamp succeeded in *almost* removing the hand of the artist from the art making process¹². Buskirk (2005, 2) argues that a consequence of Duchamp's readymades is that

...the removal of the artist's hand rather than lessening the importance of artistic authorship, makes the sure connection between work and artist that much more significant.

Further, the kind of object Duchamp selected was industrially produced, not the hand crafted unique object associated with works of art. Claiming a non-art object as art, is paradoxically a kind of 'anti-art' art, because what Duchamp proposes thereby, is that this thing, which was selected because it is not art, is art because he, an artist deemed it so.

Thus, Grois (2008) points out that Duchamp's readymades exemplify the modernist preoccupation with paradox. Godfrey (1998, 6) argues that the readymade presents art as a question or a challenge, asking, "Could this be art?" or "Why is this art?", because it denies both the uniqueness of the art object, and the artist's hand in making the artwork.

Duchamp's gesture represented what Heartney (2008, 40) refers to as "the original sin of modernism". The readymades, understood as anti-art artworks, challenged the nature of art, notions of authorship and the originality of art at the time in which they were made.

Duchamp is thus credited with having opened the way for the varied use of found objects in art since his first readymades of the early twentieth century.

¹² The implications of this will be discussed in depth in relation to Benjamin's (1968) notion of the aura of art in chapter four.

The use of found objects in European modernist art

After the early avant-garde experiments with collage and found objects by Picasso, Braque and Duchamp, European and American artists throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty first century have continued experimenting with incorporating objects from everyday life into their artworks in gestures that have been interpreted as a means to challenge the conventions, and later, the institutions of art. For example, the Surrealists made use of found objects, combined in bizarre and unexpected ways in their sculptures and installations to evoke a sense of the subconscious, irrationality, the inexplicable and sexual innuendo. Such uses of found objects are evident in Man Ray's *Gift* (1921)¹³, in which an iron is rendered useless because of the tacks glued onto the flat plate forming a spikey spine that would shred any garment it was used on. Meret Oppenheim's *Object: Breakfast in Fur* (1936)¹⁴ also renders a tea cup useless for drinking out of because of the fur covering the whole. In Oppenheim's *My Nurse* (1937)¹⁵, white high heels are faced down, bound and served on a platter, as if they were a roast chicken. The heels are positioned facing outwards, with the result that the shape created by the sides of the shoes in the centre of the object looks suggestively like a vagina between parted legs. A sense of the uncanny is evoked in the Surrealists' transformation of commonplace objects into Surrealist sculptures, since quotidian objects were rendered strange¹⁶. In the examples mentioned above, the

¹³ Man Ray, *Gift*, 1921. Replica c.1958. Painted flatiron and tacks, 15.3 x 9 x 11.4 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

¹⁴ Meret Oppenheim, *Object: Breakfast in Fur*, 1936. Fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon. Dimensions variable. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

¹⁵ Meret Oppenheim, *My Nurse*, (1937). Shoes, silver tray. Dimensions variable. Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

¹⁶ The concept of the uncanny is attributed to Freud. In his 1919 essay, (1966) reproduced in *The Uncanny (Das Unheimliche)*, Freud described the uncanny as the "the feeling of unease that arises when something familiar suddenly becomes strange and unfamiliar" (Masschelein 2011, 1). Although, by the end of the twentieth century, the concept of the uncanny is not limited to the definition of the word, Freud's conception of the uncanny is related to the meaning of the German word "*unheimlich*" (Masschelein 2011, 7). Freud stressed that the German word "*unheimlich*" is not directly translatable, but is a word concept approximating the

sense of the uncanny is heightened because the objects used remain recognisable despite their transformation. Indeed, if the objects used were not recognisable, viewers would not perceive the transformation, and the sense of the uncanny would be lost.

The Surrealists also used found objects to create installations that activated the total space of display as was the case in the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* (1938) in Paris and the *First Papers of Surrealism Exhibition* (1942) in New York, both of which Duchamp was instrumental in organising and curating (Kachur 2001, xvi). In these Surrealist exhibitions, which can arguably be understood as precursors of installation art, viewers were immersed in the artwork. The bodily experience of being *in* the work heightened the sense of the uncanny caused by the use of objects in bizarre combinations and strange juxtapositions, as is evident in Duchamp's *1200 Coal Sacks* (1938)¹⁷, made of approximately 1200 coal sacks filled with newspapers so as to look as if they were filled with coal, which were hung from the ceiling of the exhibition above a coal brazier that stood on the floor below. Kachur (2001) points out that in this work the coal sacks were made uncanny because they were out of place in the field of exhibition, and it is unusual to find heavy objects hanging precariously above one's head. The Surrealists were most interested in exploring ways to tap into and represent subconscious experience. Although their installations and sculptures challenged convention through their subject matter and how and where these artworks

negative of 'familiar' or 'homely' (Masschelein, 2011). Freud (1966) drew attention to how the word concept "*unheimlich*" is more than merely the negation of what is familiar since it conjures up the familiar ("*heimlich*") in the process of negating it. The uncanny embodies both familiarity and strangeness simultaneously.

¹⁷ Marcel Duchamp, *1200 Coal Sacks* (1938). Installation including approximately 1200 jute coal sacks, stuffed with newspapers and a coal brazier. Dimensions variable. Collection Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris.

were presented, the Surrealists did not pose questions about the nature of art, and artistic authorship as Duchamp had¹⁸.

The use of found objects was later taken up and became common amongst American Pop artists: among others, Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg, and Robert Rauschenberg all used everyday objects as materials in their work. These Pop artists made use of found objects as a means to break down the distinction between art and everyday life, in reaction to the Greenbergian doctrines of Abstract Expressionism, that sought to elevate art making and the artist above and beyond the realm of the quotidian¹⁹. In a discussion of the relationship of the so-called “neo-avant-garde” of 1960s New York to the historical avant-garde, Foster (1996) argues that, far from mimicking the practices of the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century, neo-avant-garde artists in the 1950s and 1960s in America and Europe built on the foundational moves of the historical avant-garde. Following Foster (1996), Buskirk (2005) argues that as successive artists made reference to artistic precedents established by Modernist artists who came before them, they often brought together multiple sources and distinct approaches. This is partially evident in the works of the American artist Robert Rauschenberg. Joseph (2003) points out that Rauschenberg combined discarded found materials and objects with art materials and personal memorabilia in apparently random groupings on the surface of his ‘combine paintings’. Danto (2013, 21) argues that Rauschenberg’s use of everyday objects as materials for his sculptures “brought reality into art in the early fifties”. Within Rauschenberg’s ‘combine

¹⁸ The Surrealists also presented their artworks in installations in galleries, restaurants shop windows and other public places (see Kachur 2001).

¹⁹ See Greenberg (1940) in Harrison and Wood (2003) for Greenberg’s argument regarding the value of abstraction.

paintings', Krauss (2002) points out, each part of the collage seems to have the same importance, and demands to be looked at as a unit and also in relation to other elements. Rauschenberg's seemingly non-hierarchical treatment of collaged elements added an awareness of the experience of looking to his work. Krauss (2002, 41) argues that

...what Rauschenberg was insisting upon was a model for art that was not involved with what might be called the cognitive moment (as in the single- image painting) but instead was tied to the *durée*- to the kind of extended temporality that is involved in experiences like memory, reflection, narration, proposition.

Krauss (2002) further argues that it was through Rauschenberg's particular way of working with collaged materials that he introduced the idea of the space of the artwork as similar to the spaces of memory. For Krauss (2002), in 'combine paintings' such as *Small Rebus* (1956)²⁰, the collaged elements such as the family snapshot, the reproduction of Titian's *Rape of Europa* (c.a. 1560- 62) and the child's drawing, all seem to share an equal presence on the surface of the painting. That the space of the artwork evokes the space of memory, is plausible, Krauss (2002) asserts, because Rauschenberg's treatment and use of images transformed the convention of pictorial reality at the time.

The use of 'found objects' has, since the heyday of Pop art, become part of postmodern art making practices, from sculptures, to installations, performances, and even as props in performance art. The inclusion of found objects challenged the nature of art making, the traditional status of the art object as a unique product of the artists' manufacture, and called into question the relationship of art to everyday life. In line with contemporary

²⁰ Robert Rauschenberg, *Small Rebus* (1956). Combine painting, 88.9 x 116.84 cm. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. The Panza Collection. (Reproduced in Joseph, B.W. ed. 2002, 51).

international art making praxis, a number of contemporary South African artists incorporate found objects in various ways in their works. For example, found objects have been used in different ways by Usha Seejarim, Alan Alborough, Kay Hassan, Kendall Geers and Penny Siopis.²¹

Theorising the use of found objects in contemporary South African art

The use of found objects can, however, no longer be understood as a rupture from tradition as they were in the early decades of the twentieth century when they were first used by Picasso and later by Duchamp, because found objects have become part of a longer genealogy in art making. A new approach to theorising the use of found objects is needed in order to understand the significance of the use of found objects in contemporary art. This study explores the significance of the use of found objects in selected contemporary South African artworks in order to move beyond an understanding of the use of found objects as the anti-art gestures such as those of the historical and neo-avant-gardes.

The implications of the found object on the nature of art have been discussed by theorists such as Danto (1981), Foster (1996) and de Duve (1996). However, questions of the manner in which the ontological status, and thus the meanings, of objects change as they move from one set of social practices into the context of the production and display of artworks, are not considered by these theorists. I propose that a shift in focus from the implications of the found object on the nature of art to the manner in which the ontology of the object changes

²¹ For an overview of these artists' works and biographies see Perryer (2004).

when it is embedded in art is one means to move beyond the construction of this praxis as anti-art. Therefore, this study focusses on the manner in which the object *qua* object changes when it becomes part of art. Questions that emerge in this process are: what do these objects bring to the field of exhibition, and in what ways does the displacement of objects from everyday practices and replacement in the field of art cause us to understand those objects differently? Because objects are culturally embedded, they are inflected with a variety of possible meanings, related, but not limited, to their materiality, and the contexts in which they were formerly located, used and exchanged. When incorporated into artworks, such objects bring with them associations and chains of signification from their former contexts. I therefore consider the meanings that accrue to objects when they are part of everyday social practices, and the manner in which these meanings influence interpretations of the artworks in which the objects are included. I draw on a range of theoretical frameworks that enable 1) an exploration of the manner in which the ontology of the object as object shifts when the objects become part of artworks; and 2) an exploration of the manner in which chains of signification associated with incorporated found objects contribute to the possible meanings of the artworks.

The significance of the study

There are a number of reasons why this study is worthwhile and may be of interest to other scholars of South African art, and scholars interested in the interstices of anthropology and art history. Through focussing on the different ways in which found objects are used by selected contemporary South African artists, this study contributes to the contextualising of this praxis within contemporary South African art and contemporary and historical

international art practices. Thus, not only will this study enable consideration of the significance of the found object beyond the construction of the found object as anti-art, it will also contextualise contemporary South African art practices within broader historical art practices. Since little literature exists regarding the use of the found object in South African artworks, this study constitutes primary research in the field. It will offer new insight regarding the ways in which South African artists use found objects, and new theoretical lenses through which to view this practice.

The approach to art history that I have adopted advocates the use of a range of theories from different disciplines to inform the analysis of artworks²². Integral to my research is a questioning of the ways in which the social meanings that accrue to the found object contributes to the meaning of the artwork. In answering this question, I investigate the meaning of objects from a material culture studies point of view²³. In drawing on material culture studies, my research furthers an inter-disciplinary discourse across art and anthropology. Woodward (2007) points out that material culture studies is an interdisciplinary area of study that is broadly concerned with the uses and meanings of objects and object- human relations. Woodward (2007, 3) states that a primary concern of material culture studies is

...how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity.

²² The approach to art history that I have adopted is outlined in chapter two.

²³ Woodward (2007, 3) points out that the term material culture “emphasises how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity”.



Fig. 1.3 Usha Seejarim, *Venus at Home*, 2012. Installation view of a solo exhibition of the same name at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg. Photo by Alison Kearney. Image courtesy of the artist.

Scope and limitations

The selection of artists and the type of found objects that I focus on in this study purposely limit the scope of the study. I concentrate on artworks by selected contemporary South African artists in which recognisable objects, from the everyday world around the artists, have been incorporated 'whole'. Thus, the found objects I am interrogating are not "readymades" in Duchamp's terms described above. They are not objects that have been declared stand-alone 'artworks'; however their inclusion in artworks does mean that they will be held up to a particular kind of looking to which they were not formerly subject. For example, Seejarim's (2012) use of recognisable used mops, brooms and irons as materials to

create the sculptures in her body of works *Venus at home* (fig. 1.3), (discussed in depth in chapter six) are differentiated from cases in which artists use parts of found objects to create other objects, for example when Nicholas Hlobo uses rubber tubing as material for sewing in works such as *Ndiyafuna* (2006)²⁴ (fig. 1.4).



Fig. 1.4 Nicholas Hlobo, *Ndiyafuna*, 2006. Mixed media, including jeans, rubber, ribbon. 110x 170 x 100cm. Private collection. ©Nicholas Hlobo. Courtesy STEVENSON Cape Town and Johannesburg.

²⁴ Jantjes (2011) points out that the title is an isiXhosa word meaning “search”, “desire” or “yearning”.

In this study a found object is also differentiated from ‘found materials’, where fragments of found objects have been used as the material of the artwork, because of the material qualities of those fragments of objects, rather than the use of the object in its entirety. I am by no means suggesting that the use of found materials is not significant; rather, that consideration of the many instances of the use of found materials is beyond the scope of the study. Within this, of course there are difficulties when trying to fix on definitions, and formulate categories for artworks that to some extent purposefully elude definition, as Bois, Buchloh, Foster & Krauss (2004) point out. These complexities will be discussed within the study. One such complexity is that I have included instances, such as Alborough’s untitled *Standard Bank Young Artist Award* (2000) works (fig. 1. 5), in which objects are used as materials, because the objects used are recognisable, and remain ‘whole’.



Fig.1.5 Alan Alborough, untitled *Standard Bank Young Artist Award*, 2000. Mixed media Installation detail, Monument Gallery, Grahamstown. Image courtesy of the artist.

I am aware that there are a number of contemporary South African artists who use found objects in different ways in their work. The scope of this study is too small to explore all of them in relation to the question of the ontological status changes that occur in the process of making the art works in which they are embedded because this is not a survey. Rather, my research seeks to identify and analyse specific practices regarding the use of the found object through an examination of the following contemporary South African artists: Usha Seejarim, Penny Siopis and Alan Alborough. I selected their artworks because they exemplify well the arguments I make about different ways in which found objects are used in contemporary South African art. They also reflect a range of postmodern art practices where artists use multiple modes of production in their art making processes, including assemblages, collages, installations, interventions, performance and video art. All three artists have been formally trained at university, and operate with knowledge of broader discourses of art. My choice of artworks was guided by identifying 'strong instances' of the use of found objects in particular and different ways. The works that I focus on were made between 1994 and 2015. Where appropriate I will refer to examples of works that, while they are not the focus of the study, may expand the range of the discussion. For example, I discuss older works made by Siopis to contextualise her more recent practices, as well as refer to works made by other artists by way of comparison. I return to a discussion of key works in different chapters throughout this thesis.

Creating pathways

In his exploration of the lines that we encounter as we journey through life, social anthropologist Tim Ingold (2007) equates different kinds of lines with different modes of journeying. Ingold's (2007) twin concepts of lines along which we journey and wayfaring as a mode of journeying provide useful metaphors for my research, reflected in the unfolding of the arguments in this thesis. Ingold (2007, 41) describes the thread (a type of line), as

...a filament of some kind, which may be entangled with other threads or suspended points in three dimensional space.

Further, Ingold (2007, 75) argues that a line that goes across a landscape "is a connector, linking a series of points arrayed in two-dimensional space." This study is divided into seven chapters that together form a thread, woven with filaments from art history, sociology and anthropology. Throughout the study, I have been a wayfarer, traversing across and along the lines of a theoretical landscape. While journeying I have created a pathway (my argument) that connects points as if joining the dots of a dotted line. The thesis unfolds along the pathway I have made. Each chapter develops the line of argument, to explore the significance of the use of found objects in contemporary South African artworks. Like the wayfarer, through my argument, I make lines of connections that are themselves a trace of the landscape I have traversed. My research journey has involved meandering at times, and then walking the same paths over and over. As I revised, re-wrote, re-conceptualised and re-shuffled these chapters and thoughts, each time traversing a seemingly familiar path, I noticed something not previously seen. Something of this iteration is present in the thesis as I return to artworks in different chapters, in order to make new points, or elaborate on ideas.

The route

Chapter two outlines my theoretical approach to the study. In it I discuss my approach to art history, and make my own position with regards contemporary South African art clear. I discuss the context in which this study has been undertaken, and the context in which the selected artists are working. Chapter three focuses on questions of objects and objecthood in order to uncover the possible meanings of objects when they are still part of the commonplace, before the objects become part of the artwork. I draw on social-anthropological theories regarding the meanings that are attached to objects as they move through social spaces. It is however not an anthropology of art, nor is it concerned with artworks that use anthropological methods as part of their art making practices as Schneider *et. al.* (2010)²⁵, are concerned to do. Rather, I use social-anthropological discourses on the meanings of objects to explore some ways in which quotidian objects are inscribed with meaning. An understanding of some of the ways quotidian objects are inscribed with meaning is useful for understanding the implications of the shift in the ontology of objects as they move from the field of everyday social practices into the field of art. Conceptions of what differentiates artworks and other sorts of objects are explored in chapter four. I draw on Benjamin's (1973) discussion of the 'aura' of authentic works of art, and Danto's (1981) discussion of the transfiguration of the commonplace, in order to investigate the manner in which the ontological statuses of objects *qua* objects change when they are embedded in artworks. In chapter five, I consider the field of art as a

²⁵ Schneider *et al.* (2010) seek to develop new practices that draw on both anthropology and art. They are concerned with developing new possibilities of practice in anthropology and art where the disciplines use methodologies from each other, specifically in which anthropologists start to explore the possibilities of visual and other sensory material as part of their research methodologies. Schneider *et al.* (2010, 3) refer to these as instances of "border crossing". I am not proposing the boundary crossing that they are. This study is an art historical project that looks at which anthropological theories are useful for an understanding of art works.

discursive field, in which conventions of presentation and use construct meanings for those objects and artworks on display. I explore the manner in which Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough make use of or invert the conventions of the field of exhibition in order to frame the found objects they use in particular ways, thereby constructing meanings for those objects. In chapter six I explore the manner in which the materiality of the objects used affects the meanings of the artworks. I consider some of the problems of the concept of materiality as it has been used by art historians, and, drawing on social anthropology, I argue for a broadening of the concept of materiality for a discussion of artworks that incorporate found objects. Finally, in chapter seven, I explore the manner in which the use of found objects can be understood as an exploration of the everyday. Drawing together the threads that have emerged throughout this study, I situate the contemporary South African art practices within the genealogy of the avant-garde.

Chapter two

Positioning myself

Towards a critical art history

In this study, my analysis of the artworks that exemplify different ways in which found objects have been used by contemporary South African artists is situated within the discourse of critical art history. Critical art history is characterised by what Bois, Buchloh, Foster & Krauss (2004, 22) refer to as a “methodological eclecticism” where a number of formerly distinct critical theories are brought to bear on the reading of artworks, which often do not fit into discreet categories²⁶. Bois *et al.* (2004) point out that this mixing of theories makes it difficult to claim any one theoretical framework as exclusively valid. Within critical art history, which is influenced by post-structuralism and deconstruction, meaning is understood as being constructed by discourse; that is, meaning arises out of the theories that are used to generate meaning rather than existing prior to analysis. A question that emerges is, in what way can any meaning be obtained within an approach to analysis that suggests that the meaning is contingent on the analysis, and is therefore always situated, relative, and plural? A further problem arises in that the art historian is faced with

²⁶ This kind of methodological eclecticism arguably has its roots in the ‘Iconology’ of social art historian Erwin Panofsky (1955). Underpinning Panofsky’s (1955) Iconological approach is a Pierceian Structuralist Semiotics that interrogates the context in which the artwork is made as a sign to be decoded with the other signs in the artwork. Panofsky’s (1955) Iconological approach therefore called for an understanding of the artwork in the context in which it was produced and also in the context in which it was analysed. Bal & Bryson (1998) point out that post-structuralist criticisms of Pierce’s model challenge fundamental tenets of art history by questioning even those things that social art historians, such as Panofsky, took for granted, for example the notion of the context and author.

trying to construct meanings for artworks, while at the same time being cautious of declaring any fixed meaning. For Elkins (1997), the problem of constructing meaning leads to art historians becoming increasingly tentative about making proclamations about what artworks mean.

Moxey (2001) offers a solution, arguing that after deconstruction all that any art historian can do is to *persuade* their readers through the manner in which the argument is constructed. Moxey (2001) suggests that in order to make persuasive arguments, critical art historians must be explicit about the theories they draw on and their stated position in relation to those theories. This enables readers to evaluate the validity of the arguments against the art historians' stated position and use of theory. Moxey's (2001) approach resonates with the methodological eclecticism that characterises the critical art history advocated by Bois et al. (2004). In *The Practice of Persuasion*, Moxey (2001) demonstrates his approach by using a range of theories to analyse particular works of art in view of his critical understanding of how these theories could be 'practised'. Moxey's (2001) approach to art history enables him to make connections between seemingly unrelated works. For example, he draws together gender theory and notions of high art versus popular culture in his comparative discussion of seventeenth century Lutheran pamphlets and Barbara Kruger's 1980s text and image combinations²⁷. By drawing on a range of theories, and juxtaposing art forms from different periods in art, Moxey (2001) is able to construct an argument about the didactic purpose of so-called 'lower' art forms. Finally Moxey (2001)

²⁷ Works in this series include *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)* (1981) and *Untitled (I Shop Therefore I Am)* (1987), in which Kruger uses found black and white images, juxtaposed with aphorisms set in Futura Bold typeface, to create artworks that emulate advertising billboards and posters. For more on Barbara Kruger see Moxey (2001) and Hess (2001).

argues that it is through her appropriation of so-called 'low art' forms, that Barbara Kruger subverts notions of gender and the hierarchies of art. Moxey (2001) is thus able to construct a persuasive argument about the connections between seemingly disparate artworks through the manner in which he draws the theoretical frameworks underpinning his study together. Following Moxey's (2001) approach to constructing a persuasive argument, my aim is to construct an argument for the possible significances of the use of found objects in contemporary South African art through drawing on theoretical frameworks that speak to the meanings of objects in society, and the meaning of art.

On context and meaning

Moxey (2001) points out that being explicit about the theories used when making a persuasive argument is not as simple as it may appear. The first problem he poses lies in trying to explicate the reasons behind the choice of theoretical framework: why one is better than the other when more than one could be used. Moxey (2001, 88) also cautions against the idea that the historian has the

...capacity to subject the values of the past to intense scrutiny and rigorous criticism, as well as to articulate the cultural aspirations of his or her own times.

For Moxey (2001) these activities are problematic because art historians are motivated by conscious as well as subconscious drives, and therefore cannot always fully account for their biases²⁸. Further, the academic choices art historians make are influenced by the theoretical paradigms and ideologies of the time in which they are working. These paradigms may be as

²⁸ The same could be said for artists, who he points out, make both conscious and intuitive decisions when artmaking, and may themselves not know the reasons for the choices they make. Theorists might interpret artworks differently to the artists who made them.

invisible to the art historian as water to a fish, or air to a mammal. Nevertheless, Moxey (2001) advocates that critical art historians should discuss their positions and biases as much as they are able. Here also, Moxey's (2001) caveat, that the argument should be persuasive, is helpful, since if you are able to convince your audience then your argument will hold sway.

A further complication for any art historian trying to adopt a critical art historical approach is that what counts as 'context' is not as straightforward as it first appears. Following Culler (1981), Bal & Bryson (1998) argue that the 'context' is constructed as much as the artwork itself is constructed, particularly because the historian chooses what to include in a discussion of context. Since the historian makes this choice, Bal & Bryson (1998) argue, the 'context' that is presented may not be any simpler to decipher than the artworks being analysed. This caveat is reinforced by Pinney (2005), who is critical of the implied automatic connection between context and artwork in art historical analyses that indiscriminately propose that artworks are products of the context in which they were produced. Pinney's (2005) point is that art historians should be cautious of too easy a fit between context and artworks, and should not presume that the context is homogenous.

Bal & Bryson (1998) argue that a post-structural semiotic perspective is useful when reading art in context, since post-structuralist semiotics examines the relationships between text and context, in order to understand the possible meanings of socially determined signs. They regard semiotics as a perspective that raises worthwhile questions within the

methodological concerns of art history, furthering the analyses that art historians pursue. In particular they point out that post-structuralist semiotics offer a useful framework for questioning the meaning, or 'semiotic potential' of objects, since it is a type of supra-methodology that is brought to bear on the analysis. They argue that a post-structuralist semiotic analysis of artworks includes a focus on the social production of meaning, taking into account the manner in which the meaning of a sign is related to its place in a system of use²⁹.

This approach is particularly useful for me since I am investigating the signifying potential of objects as they move through different social fields. Further, a critical understanding of how the signs are framed by the social practices of which they are part is essential to my study, since I am focussing on the ways in which the meanings of objects change as they move from one set of social practices to another. The realisation that the manner in which the context is presented is a further construction highlights the need for art historians to be explicit about their constructions of context. This includes the theoretical frameworks art historians use, and the manner in which they encounter the artworks discussed. Thus, within critical art history, the contexts in which artworks are made and presented, and the historian's construction of the context should be foregrounded as part of the analysis³⁰.

Moxey (2001, 110) suggests that in such an approach to analysis,

²⁹ I am aware of contemporary critiques of the semiotic approach, such as Boivin's (2008) contention that not all things are language-like, as social semioticians suggest. However, the semiotic approach seems to me to be appropriate for a study of art forms such as those under investigation in this study, because they have been purposely made to communicate some kind of message to an audience.

³⁰ Taking the critique of 'contexts' even further, with reference to semiotic modes of enquiry, Culler (1981) suggests that instead of 'context' we speak of the "framing of signs", since contexts, like 'signs', are constituted by various discursive practices, systems of value and semiotic mechanisms (Culler cited in Bal and Bryson 1998, 243). While I find this conception of context useful for my study, I will not use the term 'framing

...the production of knowledge manifests the circumstances in which it takes place, as well as the interests of those involved.

Further, considering the constructed and constructing nature of discourse, the idea that the art historian constructs the context as much as she constructs the interpretation, could be extended to a consideration of the extent to which the discourse also constructs the art historian. An approach to analysis that draws on social semiotics, that is situated in critical art history not only proposes possible meanings for the artworks, it also shows the art historian's construction of the past through her selection of theoretical frameworks. In the process, readers are made aware of the manner in which the art historian is looking, implying that the art historian is constructed by the theories that she uses. Bal (2002, 136) puts it thus:

we could also ask in what ways are we, as theorists, who succumb to particular disciplinary practices, objects/agents/subjects of framing?

When engaging in a critical art historical analysis such as the one adopted in the present study, the framing *of* and being framed *by* discourse is inescapable.

Establishing a clear position

The necessity of taking a clear and stated position in order to make a persuasive argument as proposed by Moxey (2001) is reiterated by Bal (2007). She argues that in order to engage with concepts in a rigorous way, art historians must make their position and their use of words that designate 'concepts' explicit. Bal (2007) points out that through making their

of signs' as suggested by Culler (1981) because it may become confusing in chapter five in which I consider the ways the field of exhibition 'frames' the found objects.

understanding of concepts explicit, art historians can evaluate concepts against their objects of study to see the manner in which concepts work to affect our understanding of material culture. This is helpful for thinking about how objects are made meaningful, because it suggests that one of the ways that objects are endowed with meaning is manifested in how we choose to interpret them.

Taking a lead from Moxey (2001) and Bal (2007), I have attempted throughout this study to make my position clear. My position is informed by a critical art historical understanding of meaning as fluid and discursively constructed by the context in which the objects of study appear and the art historian's own position in relation to that which she studies. Further, my analysis is informed by my 'insider' position as a contemporary South African woman artist and academic. I have engaged extensively with found objects in my own art making praxis. As stated in the introduction to this study (chapter one), my reflection on my own praxis provided the initial impetus for the study. My critical art historical approach is informed by theories of looking at art that are concerned with the social contexts of production and display of the works. Following Moxey (2001), who establishes the possibility of using different theoretical positions for approaching individual case studies, I draw on a range of theoretical discourses as I build my argument. These can broadly be categorised as 1) social anthropological studies of material culture 2) critical art historical and philosophical discourses on the found object in art, and 3) sociological and philosophical explorations of the everyday.

Social anthropological studies of material culture

Social anthropological³¹ approaches to material culture are broadly concerned with the relationship between objects and humans. Westermann (2005, xviii) argues that social anthropologists look at objects in terms of the ways they can be said to represent aspects of a culture, or as one of the ways society represents, and, similarly, Woodward (2007, 85) points out that a principle idea in social anthropology is that

...objects do cultural work related to representing the contours of culture, including matters of social difference, establishing social identity or managing social status.

Westermann (2005, xi) points out that, historically, anthropology and art history have made uncomfortable bedfellows, because of the different ways that art historians and anthropologists analyse objects. Yet, despite their seeming incompatibilities, Westermann (2005, xi) points out that the disciplines of art history and anthropology seek each other out. Art historians are drawn to the social anthropologists' understanding of "...social processes, cultural rituals, exchange mechanisms and mythic self-narration" (Westermann 2005, viii). These are used by art historians to help explain the ways in which images and objects are encoded with meanings by and for their makers and consumers. Social anthropological approaches to material culture are useful for this study because they point to the complexities of understanding the possible meanings of objects, and draw our attention to the manner in which cultural products are entangled in processes of social and cultural reproduction. I draw on social anthropological theories of objects in order to develop an

³¹ Throughout this study I have used the term social-anthropology because the discipline of anthropology is very broad, and I am only concerned with theories around society and culture as they pertain to objects.

understanding of the possible meanings we attach to objects, before they are embedded in the field of art.

Discourses on the found object in art

I draw on a range of art historians and philosophers who explore the implications of the found object in art. For example, I refer to and build on Danto's (1981, 1997) philosophical enquiry on the ontology of art. Danto (1981) recalls that it was after seeing Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964)³², on exhibition at what was then The Stable Gallery in New York, that he became interested in a philosophy of what art is, because from that point on all definitions of art must include Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* as art. Tracing Warhol's gesture, of presenting *Brillo boxes* as art, to Duchamp's readymades, Danto (1981) systematically considers the impact of the readymade on the ontology of art as art³³. Danto's (1981) theory is important for my discussion because it contributes to an understanding of the difference between art and commonplace objects. Such an understanding enables an exploration of the manner in which the ontology of objects shifts as they become part of the field of exhibition. While Danto (1981) explores the implications of Duchamp's readymades for art, he does not address the implications of meaning for the objects as objects. I address this question through drawing on cultural anthropological theories of the meaning of objects.

Sociological and philosophical explorations of the everyday

³² Andy Warhol, *Brillo box (soap pads)*, 1964. Synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen on wood. Each 43.3 x 43.2 x 36.5cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

³³ Danto's (1981) argument and the implications of it for this study are explored in chapter four.

The significance of found objects in art is contingent on the binary of artworks and mere things. In trying to understand the shift in the ontology of the object as it moves from everyday practices into the field of art, I draw on a range of explorations of the relationship of art and the everyday, including Benjamin's (1973) notion of the 'aura' of art, Bourdieu's (1993) theories of the field of cultural production, and Johnstone's (2008) exploration of art and the everyday. I consider theories of the everyday, and their implications for artworks that incorporate objects that were formerly part of the everyday. This theory is helpful in understanding the ways in which these artists explore and understand the everyday in their work.

Contextualising this study

Having outlined the theoretical frameworks used in this study, I will briefly discuss the historical use of found objects in South African art by way of contextualising this study. A brief discussion of the historical use of found objects by South African artists, and the social and political histories that informed those usages is necessary in order to frame the discussion of contemporary South African artists' use of found objects. The historical use of found objects is entangled in South African art history, which is marred by the history of Apartheid. Although the social and political landscape has shifted since South Africa's first democratic election in 1994, the field of contemporary South African art continues to be influenced by the past from which it has emerged.

The historical use of found objects by South African artists is situated within experimental and conceptual art practices of the 1970s and 1980s. In his exploration of South African conceptualism, Richards (2002, 34) aimed to

...grasp conceptualism beyond perceptions of prim, calculated, anaesthetic practices aimed at cauterising material messiness, sentiment, sensuousness.

In order to arrive at his definition of South African conceptualism, Richards (2002) drew on Godfrey's (1998) four conditions of conceptualism. Following Godfrey (1998), Richards (2002, 37) argues that the term "conceptual impulse" is useful for connecting art practices that demonstrate the conditions for conceptual art of the 1960s from different spaces and times across the globe. For Godfrey (1998), the conditions for conceptual art are the use of found objects, self-reflexivity, 'documentation' of artmaking processes, and a strong link to language. Applying these conditions for conceptualism to South African art practices, Richards (2002, 38) identifies three broad categories of conceptualism present in Southern African art of the past four decades: "*textuality, political conceptualism and the persistence of materiality*". A use of found objects is present in all three categories of conceptualism identified by Richards.

Textuality

Textuality refers to artworks that have a strong link to language, "ranging from language to literatures to narrativity, orality; that is the spoken, written, printed and otherwise manufactured word" (Richards, 2002, 38). This impulse is evident in Willem Boshoff's scripto

– visual *Kykafrikaans*³⁴ (1978- 2003) series, which the artist describes as “*visual literature*” (Boshoff). A use of narrativity is also evident in Geers’s use of found objects, to which he attached narratives, through the use of text.



Fig. 2.1 Kendall Geers, *Brick*, 1988. Found object and text. Dimensions variable. Johannesburg Art Gallery collection. Image courtesy of the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

Kendall Geers’s *Brick*, (1988) (fig. 2.1), exhibited as part of the exhibition *Inside/ Outside* (1995) curated by Julia Charlton for the *Africus Biennale*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, is an interesting example of Geers’s use of narrative to construct meaning for found objects. The artwork consisted of a brick on to which Geer’s stuck a piece of paper, with text printed on it. The text, in Times New Roman, resembles an enlarged newspaper clipping. The text tells the story of how a grandmother and her two grandchildren were killed by a fire started by a

³⁴ Kykafrikaans is an Afrikaans word that is translated as “look at Afrikaans” in English. These works, made of Afrikaans poems that are arranged to form images on the page turn the written words into an image, thereby enabling viewers to look at ‘Afrikaans’.

heated brick being used in place of a hot water bottle, which was in their bed with them. This kind of accident, along with suffocation from smoke, was common at the time the artwork was made, and tragically still frequently occurs in winter in South African informal settlements, which consist of unstable, makeshift houses built from pieces of corrugated metal, and whatever building materials can be found³⁵. The presentation of the object in the context of the exhibition and the narrative transforms the brick from a quotidian object, in to art, and suggests that this is *the* brick. The story attached to this brick enables viewers to think differently about what bricks are used for by different people. This highlights that as objects are part of social life, so they acquire multiple meanings which are contingent on the roles the objects play in the social sphere.

Political conceptualism

Richards's (2002, 38) second category, *political conceptualism*, includes artworks that are concerned with "cultural resistance to those oppressive cultural forms and practices which have dominated our cultural history"³⁶. For Richards (2002, 37) *political conceptualism* "continues a long romantic tradition of the idea of art as liberation". This type of conceptual practice is evident in assemblages and sculptures made in the 1970s and 1980s by Michael Goldberg and Lucas Segae. These artist's works have become associated with so-called 'resistance art', largely due to the political overtones of their works, and the manner in

³⁵ At the time of revising this text, a newspaper headline in Johannesburg read "Five kids die in shack fire" (*The Star*, 11 August 2015).

³⁶ The term "culture" is used in a loose way by Richards. The repressive cultural forms to which he refers might not be cultural at all but rather an imposed regiment of living, such as the contemporary mineworker contexts explored by Goldberg, which are discussed below. The objects used in Goldberg's piece would be incomprehensible without an understanding of both 'traditional' Black South African cultures and knowledge of mineworkers' living conditions in South African mines through the twentieth and twenty first centuries.

which both artists have been canonised by their inclusion in Williamson's (1989) book *Resistance art in South Africa*³⁷. More recently, both have been paired through the inclusion of their sculptures on *Ngezinyawo- migrant journeys* (2014)³⁸ (fig. 2.2), an exhibition at Wits Art Museum³⁹, curated by Fiona Rankin- Smith, in collaboration with Peter Delius and Laura Phillips, which explored the effects of the migrant labour system that built the South African economy.

³⁷ While Williamson's book has been criticised for its lack of inclusivity of Black South African artists, and the dubious sub-categories under which artists are classified in the book (see Pissarra 2006), it remains one of the few books, which attempts to represent South African artists of all races published before 1990. In the introduction Williamson (1989, 8) states:

...this book concerns the ways the artists of [her] generation responded to the truths made clear by the events of 1976, the issues [they] addressed and the work that followed. It is also about the growth of the ideas that art is not necessarily an elitist activity, and that popular cultural resistance has a vital role to play in the life of the community and the struggle for freedom.

It is this last statement in particular that has garnered much criticism for the book, as Pissarra (2006) points out, because most of the artists featured were formerly privileged as white artists, and continued to become well known practising artists into the 1990s and beyond, because of their identification as resistance artists. A further irony is that David Koloane, who was among Williamson's critics, himself benefited enormously from being identified as being part of the resistance. These issues are complex and beyond the scope of this study. For more on these debates see Goniwe, Pissarra, and Mandisi (2011), Pissarra (2006) and van Robbroeck (2011b).

³⁸ This exhibition was pioneering in bringing together artworks, photography, archival documents music and other forms of expression, made by artists and migrant workers from the southern African region, in order to explore the social and cultural effects of migrant labour in Southern Africa. For more on the exhibition and the issues it explored see Delius, Phillips, and Rankin-Smith (2014).

³⁹ Wits Art Museum, which opened in its new location at the University of the Witwatersrand on the corner of Bertha and Jorison streets Braamfontein, 2012, was formerly known as University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries until 2002.



Fig. 2.2 Installation view of Lucas Seage's *Found object II* (1981) in the foreground, and Michael Goldberg's *Hostel monument for the migrant worker* (1978) in the background, with a photographic image of a hostel room by Eli Weinberg on the back wall, as exhibited on *Ngezinyawo- migrant journeys* (2014), Wits Art Museum. Photo: Fiona Rankin-Smith. Image courtesy of Fiona Rankin-Smith and Wits Art Museum.

Goldberg's sculptures, for example *Hostel monument for the migrant worker* (1978) (fig. 2.3), were characterised by the use of provocative objects in sculptural assemblages that commented on social and political issues at the time they were made. *Hostel monument for the migrant worker* (1978) was made from metal bedframes, grey flannel blankets, and clocks evocative of the prison-like regime of living imposed on migrant mineworkers residing in hostels.



Fig. 2.3 Michael Goldberg, *Hostel Monument for the Migrant Worker*, 1978. Metal bed frames, wood, animal horns, grass, blankets, clocks. Wits Art Museum collection. Image courtesy Wits Art Museum.

The stacked bedframes, with such a small sleeping area, reinforce the image of a claustrophobic, regimented life that was the reality for many mine workers as photographs of mine workers' sleeping quarters such as Eli Weinberg's photograph in fig 2.2 reveals. The horns of cattle are included as they are signifiers of wealth in most Southern African cultures and wood and grass are materials relating to a rural life that many of the migrant labourers who travelled to work on the mines left behind.



Fig. 2.4 Lucas Seage, *Found object II*, 1981. Mixed media, wooden bed, glass, metal chain, and bible. Dimensions variable. The South African National Gallery collection. Image courtesy of The South African National Gallery.

Seage's *Found object II* (1981) (fig. 2.4), is another example of what Richards (2002) refers to as *political conceptualism*. *Found object II* (1981) (fig. 2.4), is a wooden bed frame with sawn off legs. In place of a mattress, there is a canvas blanket, covered with bits of broken glass. Sleep or rest is impossible on such a hard, uncomfortable, glass-strewn bed. A piece of wood is placed at one end of the bed instead of blanket or pillows. A bible, with its characteristic red dyed page edges, is chained to a piece of wood, held on to the other end of the bed with ropes. The ominous chain and prominent lock suggest that there is no escape from the elimination of African custom via religion, as suggested by the bible. The rolled up, unused,

coarse flannel blanket, typical of those given to mineworkers and prisoners, is yet another sign that the bed is not slept in. This bed appears to be more of a torture device than a place of rest.

The persistence of materiality

The final category described by Richards (2002, 38) is “the persistence of *materiality*, *whether as body, or the stuff of the world*, and the work between.”⁴⁰ For Richards (2002, 38) it is ‘*the persistence of materiality*’, that distinguishes South African conceptualism from other forms of conceptual art. Richards (2002) argues that African conceptualism appears more concerned with materiality than the American and European conceptual art of the 1960s, because of the political and material circumstances of art making in South Africa in the past four decades. Richards (2002, 38-39) states:

My contention would be that in South Africa the political and material circumstances which conditioned art production have produced a kind of dialectic between craft and conceptualism, the manual and the mental, where the hand (and by implication the body and materiality) was not simply rejected; where passion for conventional art media and the value of the hand and work interlace with a strong relationship to materiality, embodiment, language, consciousness of insurrection and dissent, an open attitude to found objects, and a preoccupation with documentation as a species of historical witnessing of ephemeral and traumatic events.

In the works by Goldberg and Seage discussed above, the materials used have particular social and political resonances. The political potency of the artworks lies in what the found objects are, and the manner in which the objects have been assembled to create the works.

⁴⁰ It is in this category that Richards locates Alan Alborough’s works, citing in particular Alborough’s *Heathen Wet Lip* (1997), a site specific installation, exhibited at the South African National Gallery. This work is discussed in detail in chapter six, in relation to notions of materiality.

Thus, in these works the '*political*' is entangled with the '*the persistence of materiality*', and both are linked to the social and political conditions under which the works were made.

South African art in the 1970s and 1980s

A brief discussion of the political climate of the late 1970s and 1980s (when *Hostel monument for the migrant worker* (1978) and *Found Object* (1981) were made), is helpful in order to understand the context from which Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough's uses of found objects emerged. I do not want to be reductive – however engaging fully with these issues would be another PhD study. Rather, I want to highlight certain tensions that are part of the discourse of contemporary South African art, that are part of the context in which the artworks that this study focuses on have been made and viewed.⁴¹ The divided political climate was reflected in the divided South African art community. When *Hostel monument for the migrant worker* (1980) and *Found Object* (1981) were made, there was ongoing insurrection against the entrenched Apartheid laws that were passed in the 1950s. Artists and writers in South Africa during the late 1970s and 1980s were divided along racial and political lines. In racial terms, the mechanisms of Apartheid ensured that non-white artists were not really considered part of the canon of South African art, other than in racist, paternalistic discourses that emulated Apartheid discourse, as Van Robbroeck's (2011a) discussion of Esme Berman's (1983) *Art and Artists of Southern Africa* shows. Van Robbroeck (2011a) points out that even books such as Gavin Young's (1988) *Art of the South African*

⁴¹For a detailed time line of events, that chronicles South African political history, alongside world history, South African art history and world art history see all four volumes of *Visual Century: South African art in context*, Editor in chief Mario Pissarra (2011).

townships,⁴² which aimed to address the dearth of literature on the art of black South African urban artists, used Apartheid categories that Younge himself acknowledged were offensive, and problematic. In the introduction to *Art of the South African townships*, Younge (1988, 8) acknowledged that

... the term 'township art' is offensive to some. However, segregated residential areas are still a legal requirement in South Africa and it seems therefore appropriate to focus on the townships as a site of mobilization for the development of a 'new' South African culture.

Williamson's book has been criticised for its lack of inclusivity of Black South African artists, and the dubious sub-categories under which artists are classified in the book (Pissarra 2006, van Robbroeck 2011a). According to Van Robbroeck (2011a) books, such as Younge's (1988) *Art of the South African Townships*, Williamson's (1989) *Resistance art in South Africa*, and Jamal & Williamson's (1996) *Art in South Africa: the future present*, played a big role in establishing certain canons of South African art that lingered into and affected the art of post-apartheid South Africa.

Politically, South African artists (of all races) were divided regarding the role that art should play in resisting Apartheid. Peffer (2009) points out that during the 1980s, South African artists were pressured from resistance movements, for example the Black Consciousness Movement (whose figurehead was Steve Biko), to take up the struggle, and make political statements through their art. This attitude is captured in Seage's statement regarding his work. Seage (cited in Williamson 1989, 65) stated:

⁴² In South Africa, a township is a suburb or city, formerly officially designated for black occupation under Apartheid Law (Dictionary).

I try to crack the apartheid system, even if it is a tiny, tiny little crack I manage to make. My message is directed to the man in the street, hence I use symbols he can easily identify with—such as a reference book, a bible, chains, a primus stove. I regard art as a weapon against injustice.

Books such as Williamson's (1989) *Resistance Art in South Africa* promoted the idea, shared by artists including Seage, that a committed art should serve the struggle for democracy through its political message. In the Introduction Williamson (1989, 8) states:

...this book concerns the ways the artists of [her] generation responded to the truths made clear by the events of 1976, the issues [they] addressed and the work that followed. It is also about the growth of the ideas that art is not necessarily an elitist activity, and that popular cultural resistance has a vital role to play in the life of the community and the struggle for freedom.

It is this last statement in particular that has garnered much criticism for the book, as Pissarra (2006) points out because most (but not all) of the artists featured were formerly privileged as white artists.⁴³ Williamson's (1989) book gave those artists represented a place in the struggle, thereby cementing their place in a Post-Apartheid South African canon⁴⁴.

Not all artists and writers agreed on the role of art in the struggle against Apartheid. Peffer (2009) points out that writers such as Njabulo Ndebele, for example, advocated for artists to be making art that was not in service of political ideals, but that was driven by the artists' interest in art. Interestingly, even in discourses of art for art's sake, such as Ndebele's, there

⁴³ A further irony is that David Koloane, who was among Williamson's critics, himself benefited enormously from being identified as being part of the resistance. These issues are complex and beyond the scope of this study. For more on these debates see Goniwe, Pissarra, and Mandisi (2011), Pissarra (2006) and van Robbroeck (2011b).

⁴⁴ The extent to which those artists who benefitted from being white during Apartheid, and who benefited after the end of Apartheid for being construed as 'resistance artists', is a question worth pursuing, but is unfortunately beyond the scope of this study.

was an entanglement of art and politics, because everyday life was inevitably political in Apartheid South Africa, as Ndebele (1991, cited in Peffer 2009, 178)⁴⁵ recognised:

There is not a single black artist today whose work does not reflect the human concern in his or her community. And they need not be reminded of this... My work, like most urban-bred black artists, has unavoidably been influenced by the township environment. The squalor, grit, grime and dongas of Alexandra, where I was born, have been my only source of inspiration, of form, colour and content in my work. It is for this reason that I feel my work should challenge the expectations and perceptions imposed by social conditions and discrimination with whatever available resources.

This point is reiterated by Younge (1988, 8), who argues that the use of discarded materials by 'township' artists was not always "a matter choice". Implied is that these artists were forced by their economic impoverishment, brought about by the unjust political system they were subjected to, to use whatever materials were at hand. Under these circumstances, even art that has no overt political message has a political dimension. In the context of Apartheid South Africa, where everyday bureaucracy was steeped in racism, the use of materials that pointed to the everyday, as well as the depiction of everyday events was politically charged. A similar argument is made by Maurice (2011), who criticises the narrow definition of 'resistance art' as art with an overt political message, calling instead for an understanding of artworks that in their non- traditional or/ non-conformist use of material are a form of cultural resistance, that has political overtones. For example, the fragmented surfaces of Sam Nhlengethwa's collages that depict aspects of everyday life such as can be

⁴⁵ Njabulo Ndebele, *Redefining relevance in rediscovery of the ordinary: essays on South African literature and culture* Johannesburg COSAW, 1991: 65 reproduced in Peffer (2009, 177).

seen in *PUTCO Strike*⁴⁶ (1987), can be thought of as metaphors for the literal and structural violence of the times.

The cultural embargo and its aftermath

Between the 1970s and the late 1980s South Africa experienced a cultural embargo that was imposed in 1961 by the international community as a means of protesting against Apartheid after the Sharpeville massacre of 1960, but only really enforced after 1968.

Friedman (2011) points out, it would be wrong to assume that all South African artists were banned from every international art event in the 1960s, for example Sidney Kumalo and Michael Zondi represented South Africa on an exhibition in Venice in 1966, and Dumile Feni was included on the São Paulo Biennale in 1967. Friedman (2011, 31) states that it was only “from 1968 onwards, (that) South Africa was prohibited from participation in the Venice Biennale and excluded from international academic exchange”.

Pissarra (2011, 181) points out that the cultural embargo was meant “to prevent international artists from coming to South Africa” and “denying an international platform to what, in the liberation movement, was termed Apartheid culture”. The cultural embargo had an effect on the art produced in South Africa during the embargo, and affected the manner in which South African art was perceived in the international art arena after the

⁴⁶ PUTCO stands for Public Utility Transport Company, a private bus company started in 1945 after the Metro bus strike of 1944. During the heyday of Apartheid PUTCO busses were a primary means of transport between the Johannesburg city centre and various, racially segregated townships, far outside of the CBD. In recent years the company has made attempts to shift its image, for example through offering its staff opportunities to buy shares in the company through Black Economic Empowerment initiatives in 2006 (for more on the history of this transport company see Unknown, PUTCO).

embargo was lifted. Enwezor (2009) argues that the cultural embargo resulted in the development of a particular idiosyncratic style, since South African artists were making artworks in relative isolation. However, while the impact of the cultural embargo was that South African artists were no longer invited to international art exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale after 1968, it is a myth that South African artists were working in total isolation, unaware of trends in the international community. Individual artists including Penny Siopis, Willem Boshoff and David Koloane travelled and worked abroad⁴⁷. Further, Pissarra (2011a) points out that during the cultural embargo a number of international artists and art critics visited South Africa (most notably Anthony Caro, Kenneth Clark, Roger Scruton, Clement Greenberg and Edward Lucie-Smith), and organisations that supported the cultural embargo helped to fund the growth of community art centres such as the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA) and the Thupelo Workshops⁴⁸. Pissarra (2011a) argues that despite these pockets of international exchange, the cultural embargo was *felt* because it was part of the broader international campaign against Apartheid.

After 1990, when the cultural embargo had been lifted, interest in South Africa as an exemplar of social transformation, and in the art that was perceived to document and explore the social transformations was unprecedented⁴⁹. Enwezor (2009) is critical of the

⁴⁷ For an in depth discussion on the effects of the cultural embargo for South African artists in South Africa and those forced into exile see Friedman (2011), and Pissarra (2006, 2011a). For more on the role of community based arts centres see Pepper (2009) and Rankin (2011).

⁴⁸ Tragically, and rather ironically, as Pissarra (2011a) points out, when the cultural embargo was lifted, a number of community arts centres like FUBA lost their funding, and were forced to close.

⁴⁹ Not all artists were equally placed to benefit from this new local and international interest in South African art and artists. There was still a divide, largely along race lines, between (white) artists, trained in the academy, with the cultural capital and knowledge of Western art discourse to take part in the Western art world, and untrained (black) artists, who lacked resources, access to a formal art education, and the entrepreneurial skills needed to be part of the art world. Thus, Smith (2011) points out, it was a fantastic time for those who could be everything.

international focus on South African artists as a homogenous group. Enwezor (2009, 16)

states that the category 'contemporary South African art'

...is obviously an artificial construct, used more to conceive narratives of a post-apartheid ideal than to examine the proper conditions of artistic practice that exist in the contingent circumstances of the socio-politico-cultural transitions that were reshaping discourses of South African-ness.

Smith (2011) argues that, during this time, South African artists were exploring their identities and becoming part of the international art community, with the eyes of the world upon them. Smith (2011) suggests that this led to an era of experimentation and a concern with cultural identity. It is against this backdrop that my study of the uses of found objects in contemporary South African art is situated.

Chapter three

Ontologies of objects

The objects used by Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough

This study is limited to an analysis of contemporary South African artworks which incorporate found objects that have been used ‘whole’, and are therefore recognisable as independent elements from the everyday social field that have been brought into the field of art. In trying to understand the implications for art of the incorporation of such found objects into artworks, it is worthwhile to consider the ontological status of those objects as objects, before they are included in the field of art. The ontological status of objects is linked to the manner in which objects are endowed with meaning as they move through social fields. Thus, an investigation of some ways in which meanings are attached to objects when they are part of everyday social practices is helpful in order to understand what objects *are*. An understanding of what objects *are*, before they are part of art, will assist in clarifying the manner in which the ontological status of objects shifts once they are incorporated into to artworks.

This chapter begins with an exploration of the kinds of objects used by Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough, because these are the objects that this study focusses on. Subsequently, I consider a range of social anthropological theories that explore the meanings that are

attached to objects within everyday social practices. My discussion of specific artworks highlights the manner in which Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough draw on the social meanings of the found objects they use, when creating their artworks.

The kinds of objects used by Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough, though not all quotidian, are associated with the everyday in terms of use and/ or value. For example, most of the objects used by Seejarim are part of her everyday life, appear unremarkable, are of little monetary value, and variously point to her and others' experiences. Used bus tickets, bits of detritus found while walking the city streets, used toothbrushes, mops and brooms, *kwick lock* bread bag sealers, soap bars, and pins are among the objects Seejarim uses. Seejarim collects many of the objects she uses while walking, or obtains used domestic objects from members of her social network. Seejarim also makes use of bought objects. At times, the particular place from which the objects are bought is significant, for example, the buckets used to create *Christmas tree* (2005) (fig. 3.1) were bought from a general store in downtown Johannesburg, close to the site where the tree was installed, and immediately recognizable to the community around this site-specific installation.



Fig. 3.1 Usha Seejarim, *Christmas Tree*, 2005. Found objects including buckets and Christmas lights, metal. Commissioned by Anglo American and de Beers, exhibited on Main Street, Johannesburg, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 3.2 Usha Seejarim, *Kwick bath*, 2005. Kwick lock bread tags. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 3.3 Usha Seejarim, *Pin Code*, 2005. Installation view. 140 000 house hold pins. 6.5m x 11.4m circumference. MTN Cellular Network collection. Image courtesy of the artist.

When Seejarim needs objects in large quantities, as in *Kwick Bath* (2005) (fig. 3.2), a life size replica of a bathtub made from thousands of *kwick lock* bread bag sealers; or for *Pin Code* (2005) (fig. 3.3), a hanging sculpture made from 140 000 house hold pins for the head offices of MTN Cellular network in Johannesburg, she buys the objects directly from the manufacturers (Seejarim, 2013).

Items such as Seejarim's used bus tickets that bear the traces of their use are markedly different from the bought objects, such as buckets, safety pins and *kwick lock* bread tags that Seejarim also uses. The bought objects are in pristine condition, and therefore have no trace of use (and no former social life that the trace of use implies). Where it is present, the

trace of use becomes part of the signifying system of the artwork. While the bought objects are not strictly 'found' objects, they fit into the definition of found objects used in this study, because they are objects from the world, recognisable, and used whole, in artworks.

The mass-produced, disposable, cheap, objects, purchased from factories, which Alborough employs as his art-making materials, similarly lack traces of former use⁵⁰. These new objects nevertheless have particular associations as useful objects, common to the world outside of the field of art. Alborough makes use of quotidian objects such as plastic cable ties, 500ml plastic cold drink bottles, pegs, plastic tables, batteries and 20 pence coins to construct complex sculptures that seem at odds with the banality of the objects used⁵¹. This can be seen in *Playful pieces I and II* (1999) (fig. 3.4), which exemplify Alborough's methods of working with found objects as materials. The ubiquity of the mass-produced, plastic pegs and cable ties stands in contrast to the labour intensive and intricate sculptures that Alborough constructs using these materials⁵². In works such as *Beautiful objects: asterisk* (1997) (fig. 3.5), where plastic pegs, coins and cable ties are attached to create an intricate sculpture, the contrast is emphasised through the title which reminds us to look more carefully at the sculpture, and which suggests that even the commonplace can be beautiful.

⁵⁰ Many of these objects are purchased from the factories that produce them before they are put into circulation (pers. comm. Alborough, email 12th August 2013).

⁵¹ Although 20p coins are not common in Johannesburg, they are common in London, where Alborough made use of them when completing his Masters in Fine Art at Goldsmith's College in 1996.

⁵² The links between facture and the aura of the artwork are explored in depth in chapter four.



Fig 3.4 Alan Alborough, *Playful Pieces I and II*, 1999. Plastic pegs, cable ties, coins. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

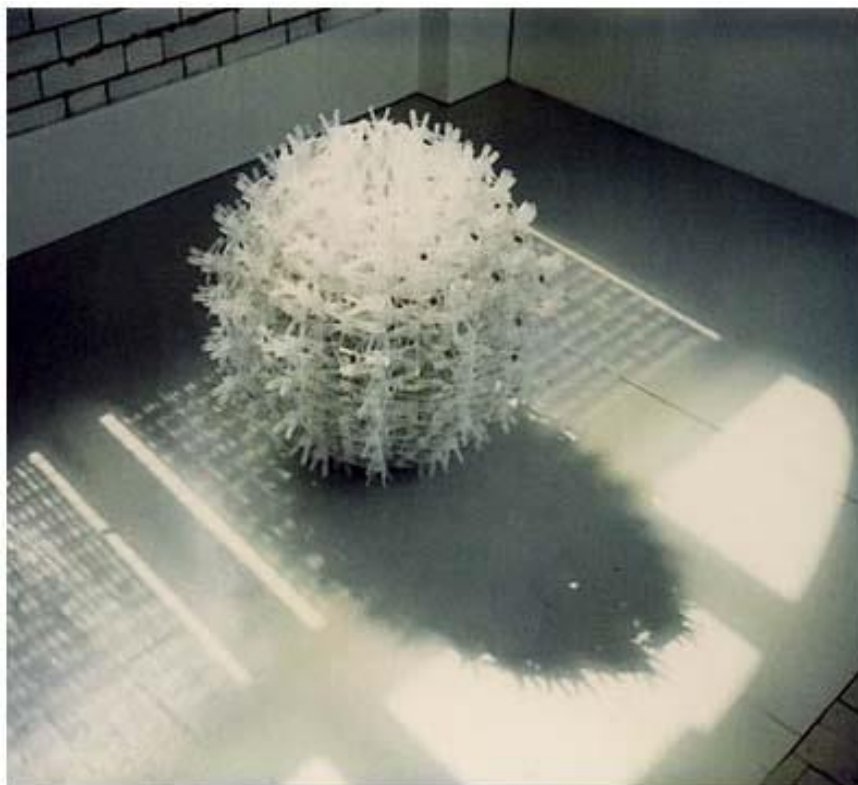


Fig. 3.5 Alan Alborough, *Beautiful Objects: Asterisk*, 1997. Plastic pegs, cable ties, coins. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

While Siopis sometimes uses 'cheap' things, for the most part the things she uses are not ubiquitous. Siopis makes use of a variety of objects from her personal collection as well as borrowed objects from individuals and public museum collections. The artworks and objects borrowed from public museum collections, such as the Standard Bank Collection of African Art housed at the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries, which Siopis exhibited alongside her personal collection in installations such as *Permanent collection* (1995) (fig. 3.6) and *Sympathetic Magic* (2002)⁵³ have a different value to the objects that make up Siopis's personal collection.



Fig. 3.6 Penny Siopis, *Permanent Collection*, 1995. Multimedia installation with the Standard Bank Collection of African art housed at the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Editions.

⁵³ These installations are discussed in depth in chapter five.

The objects from the museum collections have been removed from everyday circulation, and preserved as part public art collection, signalling that these artworks and objects have additional social significance.

Many of the objects in Siopis's personal collection were collected by generations of women in her family, and were passed onto the artist when her mother immigrated to Australia (Siopis in Atkinson, 2005, 73). Siopis also make use of objects she purchases at second-hand stores, and personal souvenirs, for example, commemorative plates she picked up at political rallies in the early 1990s. Speaking of her relationship to things, Siopis (cited in Mbembe 2005: 124) says that

...in a nutshell, my encounter with objects is an encounter with that strange familiarity we call the 'uncanny.' Objects are sentient things that force us to think and reflect on our relations with the object worlds we inhabit.

The objects in Siopis's personal collection have different statuses: some of her objects have monetary value, while others are trash, yet they have sentimental value that cannot be measured in monetary terms. Some of the more unusual objects used by Siopis include taxidermied animals, human and animal bones, the skin of a popped balloon, her son's first tooth and his umbilical cord, which would be considered pollutants or dangerous parts of the body in some cultures. Siopis's collection of objects are tied to events in Siopis's biography and are therefore entangled with Siopis's history and memories; they are her inherited heirlooms, associated with a particular class, and linked to a particular time in South African history. Siopis (in Atkinson, 2005, 73) states:

I am interested in these objects because of how they show what we are forced by circumstance to leave behind. In this case, force of circumstance was my mother's illness. We invest objects with memory and emotion. Objects are memorials- sometimes and socially significant, sometimes highly public and symbolic.

Siopis has repeatedly used her personal collection in a range of installations that variously explore the possibilities meanings that accrue to those objects, through placing them in different relationships and situations. For example, Siopis used her collection to create installations for such as *Reconnaissance 1900-1997* (fig.3.7), *Charmed lives* (1998), *Sympathetic Magic* (2002), *Snare* (2002) and *Time and Again* (2014/ 2015).⁵⁴ Siopis's collection of objects has since become iconic as her collection; however, the objects were first used in *Reconnaissance 1900-1997*, exhibited at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, 1997. Siopis states that the time frame referred to in the title spans across the life times of three generations of women in Siopis's family: her grandmother, her mother and herself. Siopis (in Atkinson, 2005, 73) states that

...the date in the title (1900 - 1997) stems from the idea that a person's memory covers something such as 100 years, because you inherit the memories of people who have come before you.

The objects are heirlooms that connect the three generations of women. Atkinson (2005) suggests that in this installation, the objects are presented as if they hold the memories of the women whose lives they 'witnessed'. Implied in this reading is that as the objects were passed down across generations, so were the memories. When personal objects are presented publically, viewers are invited to scrutinise them, make their own associations and to interpret them. In this process, the personal objects that are linked to the artist's

⁵⁴ The implications of each reinterpretation of these objects in each new presentation will be discussed in chapter five.

personal histories, become part of shared public memories and histories. Thus, this installation speaks of Siopis's familial relationships to objects, and also creates new relationships for the objects on display.



Fig. 3.7 Penny Siopis, *Reconnaissance 1900-1997*, 1997. Detail of installation at Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Editions.

In examining details of *Reconnaissance 1900- 1997*, (1997) (fig. 3.8), it becomes clear that this is a strange collection of things: ornaments, jewellery, family pictures, and ethnographic pictures of 'natives', memorabilia, sporting equipment, pangas⁵⁵, domestic items such as

⁵⁵ A panga is a broad heavy knife, used to cut thick vegetation, but which can also be used as a weapon. In Southern Africa pangas have an additional association, as they were used to assert tribal identity, for example

bowls, decorative spoons, lace gloves, and even plaster casts of hands, and little figurines, to name a few. The eclecticism of the collection is reminiscent of an eighteenth century cabinet of curiosity. But these objects were not presented randomly as curiosities, they were grouped together and presented in discrete piles, which Atkinson (2005, 72) described as “memorial piles.”

The title, *Reconnaissance*⁵⁶ points to processes of surveying, an inspection of a situation/ resources. It is as if through sorting, categorising and presenting the objects she inherited, Siopis is inspecting her familial legacy, thereby establishing her own place within broader social contexts. A survey is carried out in order to ‘prepare’ for something; in this case an unnamed future event- perhaps the future installations, each of which explore different relationships for the objects on display, thereby constructing different possibilities of meaning. The word *reconnaissance* has an additional connotation: to survey the resources of the ‘enemy’, suggesting conflict of some kind. If read in this light, it is not clear who the ‘enemy’ that these objects potentially point to might be. First because the eclectic array of objects, variously point to the diverse communities with South Africa, and also point to Siopis’s Greek, Catholic and South African heritage: within this mix there are enemies and friends on all sides.

The ambiguity is heightened through Siopis’s arrangement of objects. There were a range of classificatory systems at work in this installation: some objects were grouped according to

by members of the (mostly Zulu) Inkatha Freedom Party during the political unrest in the early 1990s, in advance of the first democratic elections in 1994. Inkatha is an isiZulu word meaning ‘spear’.

⁵⁶ Reconnaissance is defined as “the process of obtaining information about the position, activities, resources, etc. of an enemy or potential enemy...A preliminary inspection, of an area of land before an engineering survey is made...From French, *reconoistre*- to explore, recognise” (Collins Dictionary).

colour, while others seem to be grouped according to material: porcelain, bone or leather things were grouped together. At other times objects were placed next to other objects creating surprising relationships and associations. Atkinson (2005, 72) suggests that “...in these surprising configurations there is latent violence”. This is evident in the juxtaposition of boy’s cricket bats next to a pile of pangas, or the little girls’ ballet shoes next to a figurine of a black woman in silver handcuffs (fig. 3.7), which elicit associations of privilege and excess at the expense of the exploited classes.



Fig. 3.8 Penny Siopis, *Reconnaissance 1900-1997*, 1997. Detail of installation at Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Editions.

Grouping them together in this way also gives the objects a new significance - we look at them differently when they are next to each other. The unusual juxtaposition of objects that seem so dissimilar, heightens a sense of the 'uncanny.' In Freud's (1919) theory of the uncanny, the blurring of the boundaries of what is strange and familiar is perceived as unnatural and therefore threatening and frightening⁵⁷. Atkinson (2005, 73) argues in relation to this work that:

...our sense of the uncanny arises in part from the collision of the collective field of national history/memory and the individual's specific powers of recall. It is also in the juxtaposition of the sentimental with the savage, the innocent with the jaded, the delicate with the violent.

Objects and meaning

It is common cause in art history and material culture studies that objects are inscribed with meaning through use, and in relation to other objects in a system of use. The understanding that objects are inscribed with meaning in relation to other objects and things in a system of use draws on a semiotic model of understanding.⁵⁸ Central to the semiotic approach, as Woodward (2007, 85) points out, is the idea that meanings are established relationally through a broad set of associations. Underpinning this system of analysis are the ideas that

⁵⁷ For an in depth exploration of the manner in which artists of the twentieth century have explored notions of the uncanny see Masschelein (2011).

⁵⁸ According to Boivin (2008), in anthropology, a semiotic approach to material culture was advanced by post-processual anthropologists like Tilley. Tilley (1990, 19) argues that material culture is "a symbolic medium for social practice". Implied in this approach is that all material culture is 'language like' because objects can be understood as symbolically representing the social practices and structures to which they are tied. Boivin (2008) criticises the post-processual semiotic approach to material culture because, she argues, this approach looks *past* the objects to what they *represent*; within this, Boivin asserts, things are always understood in terms of something else. In his exploration of the anthropology of art, social anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998), whose theory of the agency of art will be discussed in chapter five, is equally critical of the semiotic approach that treats all material culture as language like. As has been discussed in chapter two, in art history, a semiotic model has its roots in the iconography of Panofsky, and has been advocated by cultural theorist Mieke Bal and art historian Norman Bryson (see Bal and Bryson 1998). Despite the criticisms against semiotic analyses that treat everything as language like, certain aspects of the semiotic approach, for example the idea that meaning obtains in context, and that things should be understood in relation to other things in a system of use, articulates well with the critical art historical analysis used in this study.

1) objects can refer to things outside themselves; and 2) objects embody broader cultural communication to do with status, success, gender etc. Because we do not have meanings for those things that we do not have some relationship with, or that we do not recognise in some way, it must be concluded that meanings of objects are always relational.

When objects are part of everyday life, their significance is tied to the broad social (political, economic and/or religious) practices of which they are part. Thus, the meaning of objects is not fixed, but must be considered in relation to the context in which we encounter them, and our own frames of reference, which influence our interpretation. These ideas are useful for considering the found objects that artists use, because our associations with the objects will influence our interpretation of the artworks in which they are enmeshed. For example, knowledge of bus tickets, and associations with travelling on busses can assist in an analysis of Seejarim's, *Cash ticket, ash ticket* (1999) (fig. 3.9), a collage Seejarim created out of her own and fellow commuters' used bus tickets, which Seejarim collected while journeying by bus, from her home in Lenasia⁵⁹ (a suburb south of Johannesburg) to Doornfontien (an area of the Johannesburg inner city) while she was an undergraduate student at the then Wits

⁵⁹ Lenasia was formerly designated as a residential area for South Africans of Indian decent, as a result of the Group Areas Act of 1950 which segregated people of different races, designating where members of each race group could live (Online). As a result of the Group Areas Act, many of the previously racially mixed suburbs around city centres were dissolved and inhabitants were forced to move to specially zoned, racially segregated townships. Typically non- white populations were made to live far outside of city centres, and had to commute to work in the city. An example of this was that the so- called 'Indian' population of the formerly racially mixed suburb of Fietas were forced to relocate to the purposely created 'Indian' township, *Lenasia*. (For more information on the history of Lenasia see Carrim (1990) *Fietas: A Social history of Pageview: 1948-1988*). Although the Group Areas Act was repealed by President F.W. De Klerk in 1990, in 2014 the population of this area largely remains South Africans of Indian decent. Some people choose to remain part of the community in which they grew up, and to which their identities are partly linked, while others, who may want to move, do not have the economic means to move. Seejarim grew up in Lenasia and continues to live there with her family.

Technikon.⁶⁰ Though the viewer may not have travelled on the same bus journey, she can draw on her experiences of catching other buses to reflect on Seejarim's journey, how often it was made, and how much time it took and who made it.

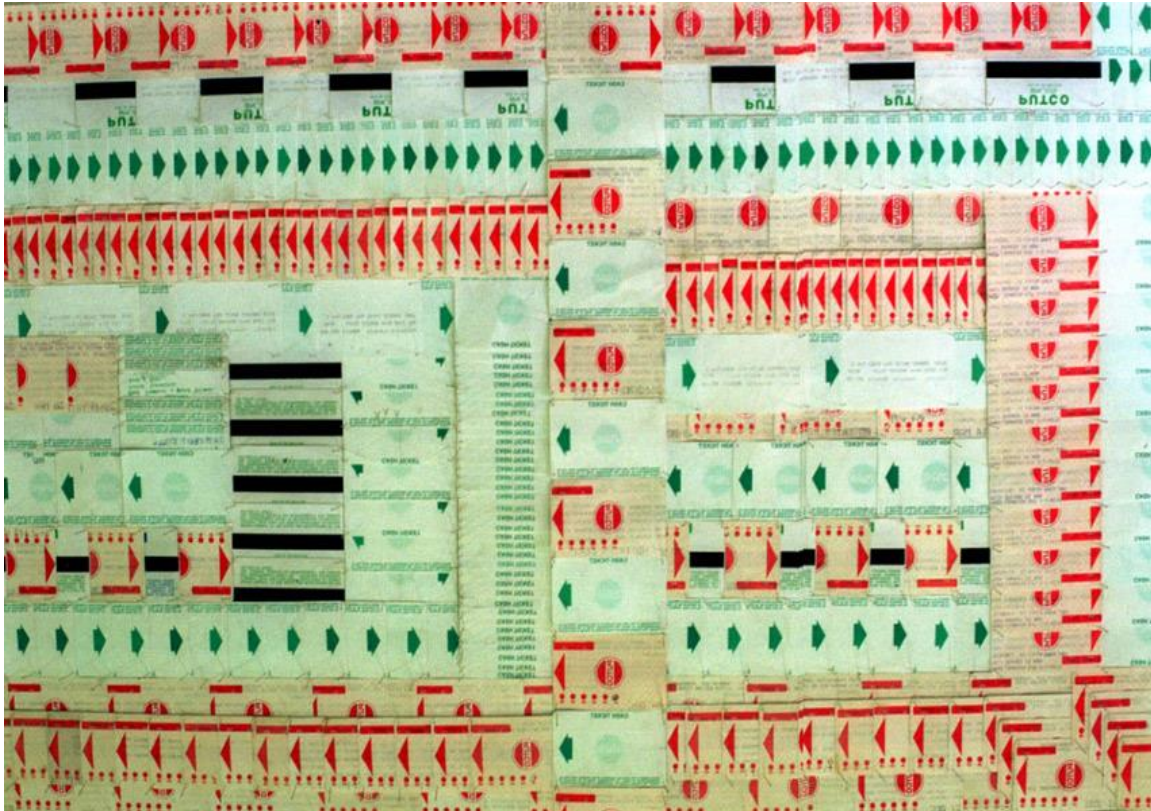


Fig. 3.9 Usha Seejarim, *Cash Ticket Ash Ticket*, 1999. Used bus tickets, card, pins. Dimensions unknown. Image courtesy of the artist.

A closer look at the artwork reveals that the tickets used to create *Cash ticket, ash ticket* were PUTCO bus tickets, collaged together to form an abstract pattern. The colours of the tickets refer to the types of tickets available: daily, weekly or monthly. The tickets were arranged so as to create patterns from the printing on their backs or fronts. In some areas of the collage, the printed arrows that indicate which way to insert the ticket into the ticket

⁶⁰ 'Wits Technikon' is the colloquial name for what was formerly The Technikon of the Witwatersrand, a tertiary college that was merged with The Rand Afrikaans University, and Vista University to become The University of Johannesburg in 2005 (Unknown).

machine on the bus were arranged so as to point in a single direction. As my eyes follow the arrows around the picture plane I feel as if they are being taken on a journey. When the tickets overlap, the gaps between the arrows narrow, enhancing the sense of movement created by the lines and arrows. Some tickets display the PUTCO logo, which ironically resembles a no-entry sign. It is made of a red round circle, with a white band in the middle that has the word PUTCO in red letters. When the arrows point to the PUTCO logo, or to the black magnetic strips on the tickets, my eyes pause, creating a break in their journey around the artwork. Go, stop, go, stop; I argue that the staccato movement of my eyes as they follow the rhythm of lines round the image can be read as a metaphor for the bus journey the tickets provide access to, which is over an hour long. The side view (fig.3.10) of this collage reveals that the tickets are held in place with pins that stick out creating their own landscape such as pattern. The side view also heightens the sense of movement that is created from the arrows.

Some knowledge of the context in which these works were made reveals that it is significant that these are PUTCO bus tickets. In South Africa PUTCO bus tickets can be understood as indices of race and class because PUTCO busses were historically used to transport non-whites to their various, segregated townships, far outside of the CBD during Apartheid. Even though the Group Areas Act of 1950, which determined where people could live, was repealed in 1990, many non-white people, who have low-income jobs and cannot afford private transport, continue to live in the townships far from their places of employment, and have to commute long distances for work.

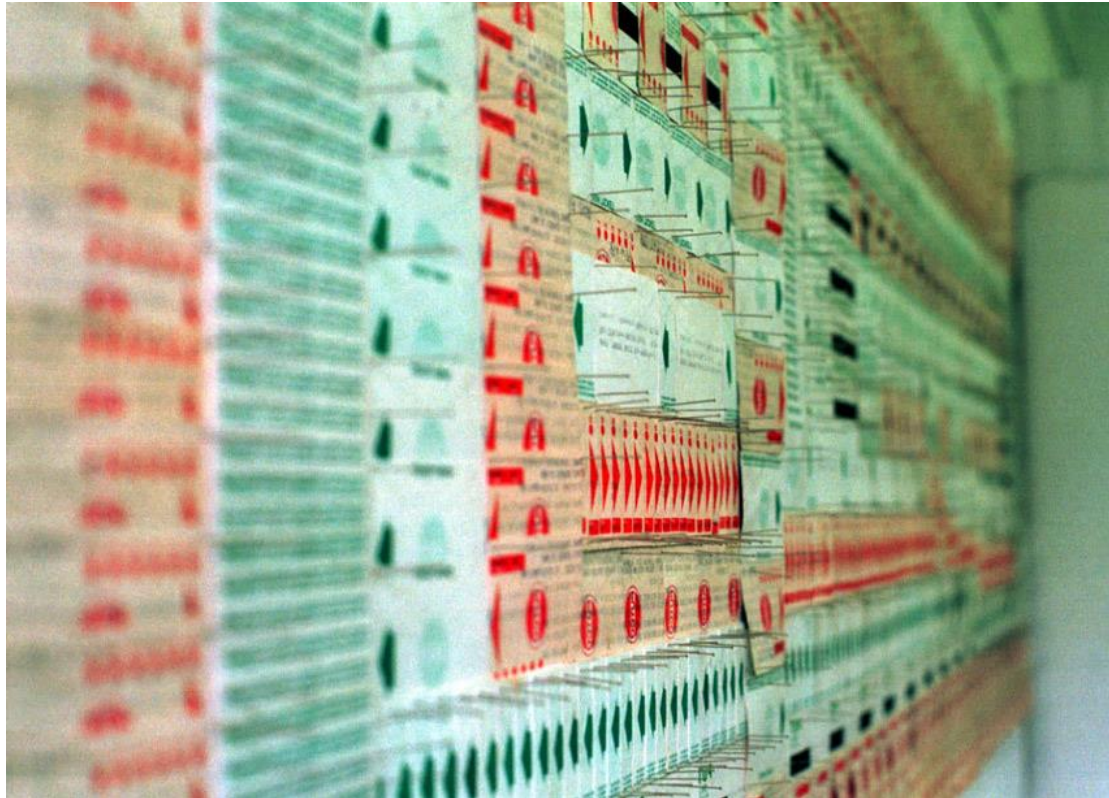


Fig. 3.10 Usha Seejarim, *Cash Ticket Ash Ticket*, 1999. Side view. Bus tickets, card, pins. Dimensions unknown. Image courtesy of the artist.

While the work does not explicitly interrogate the experience of being on the bus, the bus tickets used point to shared experiences of commuting, and in the context contemporary South Africa, also point to race and class. The artists' use of her and fellow commuters' bus tickets thus points to an aspect of the artist's identity within a complex post-Apartheid South African society.

The psychological significance of objects

In addition to the social significances that objects may carry, objects also have psychological significances, because, as Woodward (2007, 137) points out, "...objects assist important dimensions of human psychological development". People mediate their sense of self

through forming relationships with objects that fulfil a particular emotional need. These objects are referred to as “transitional objects” in psychoanalytic theory (Woodward, 2007, 137). It should be noted, as Woodward (2007) points out, that within psychoanalytic theory, the transitional object may not be a concrete object such as those used in artworks. Rather, following Freud (1905), who used the term ‘object’ to refer to anything a person used to satisfy libidinal drives, Woodward (2007) understands the transitional object as someone or something outside of the agent, onto which certain ideas are projected.⁶¹ Objects thereby come to remind us of people, places and experiences, or become surrogates for the dead, or absent, or as a link to others. Objects are therefore often used as mnemonic devices – and they are thus dangerous because memory is not predictable.

In his study of the role of objects in the mourning process, Miller (2008) and his research team interviewed participants in their homes, asking them about the significance of objects they inherited from loved ones who had passed away. The objects that Miller’s (2008) participants inherited can be thought of as transitional objects that have come to stand in for the absence of a dead loved one. This study made tangible the manner in which people endow objects with personal and psychological meanings. Miller (2008) presented some of the individual case studies (selected out of a larger study), in a book titled: *The comfort of things*. The book is written in a narrative style. Each case study is presented as a chapter. When interviewing participants, Miller (2008) and his research team found that the relationships that participants had with their objects revealed much more about the participants’ personalities and characters than the researchers anticipated the objects

⁶¹ For more on Freud’s use of the term “object” see Compton (1985).

would. Through the associations that the object might hold for their owners, the objects are powerful connectors of the once living person to the new owners of the objects⁶².

Siopis harnesses the power of objects as surrogates for presence of an absent individual in her work, *Milk and Blood* (1997)⁶³ (fig. 3.10), *Milk and Blood* (1997) consisted of three custom-made wheel chairs that Siopis borrowed from the Johannesburg Hospital archives.



Fig. 3.11 Penny Siopis, *Milk and Blood*, 1997. Details of installation with found objects from the Johannesburg Hospital Archives, exhibited at the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Editions.

⁶² The manner in which objects connect people is explored by Siopis in the work *Will 1997- (1997)*, which is discussed in chapter five.

⁶³ Penny Siopis's *Milk and Blood* (1997) was exhibited on *Purity and Danger*, curated by Siopis with Rayda Becker, and held at the Wits University Art Galleries, 1997.

The wheelchairs in this work are readymades such as Duchamp's readymades, which Siopis has done little to change. Each of these wheelchairs was made for a congenitally crippled woman, who used the chairs at different times over a period of 68 years. The wheelchairs look so uncomfortable that they appear to be torture objects, yet they were used to help the patient move around; they are at once a potential source of pain and the source of mobility. In this work the traces of former use and the physical condition of the chairs themselves are important signifiers for the physical condition of the occupant of the chairs. Uncomfortable, used, stained, spent; these objects bear the trace of their use, and act as a signifier for the life of the woman who used them. Atkinson (2000/revised 2005, 75 author's emphasis) poetically describes the wheelchairs as signifying "...the disturbing *trace* of a life, the material residue of someone having been there."

Objects shape us as much as we shape them

So far I have established that we attach meaning to objects through a variety of private and public social processes which reveal and sometimes obscure the meanings that objects hold for us. Woodward (2007, 4) argues that, through these processes, objects come to be used as markers of value, identity and encapsulate social and political power. This occurs, for example, when objects form an integral part of symbolic social rituals, such as the wedding bands used in Christian churches and western civil marriages. Less obvious, perhaps, is the manner in which quotidian objects, such as many of those used by the artists in this study, are endowed with meanings and value through their use in mundane daily tasks, such as brushing one's teeth or catching the bus.

Miller's theory of "the humility of things" (2005; 2010) is useful for thinking about the manner in which even seemingly invaluable, quotidian objects, do cultural and social work. In recounting the manner in which he arrived at this theory, Miller (2010, 5) points out that while researching the significance of the different pots used in Indian rituals he was told repeatedly that 'the pots didn't mean anything'. He realised that to focus on the *pots* was to miss the point of their significance (Miller 2010). While the pots were important in carrying out the rituals in which they were used, they were not implicated in the significance of the rituals by the participants (Miller 2010). In other words, the pots were important in enabling the rituals, but were not part of the purpose or envisaged outcomes of the rituals. This realisation led Miller (2010) to develop his theory of "the humility of things", which refers to the capacity of objects to affect our behaviours and enable social practices while remaining relatively unnoticed. The theory of "the humility of things" applies to quotidian objects which are ubiquitous, and help us to *be* in the world, and also to less common objects, such as the pots discussed above, which we use during special occasions, but that we nevertheless ignore because they are not the point of the rituals. These objects provide the backdrop. In introducing his theory, Miller (2010, 5) argues that

...objects are important not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but often precisely because we do not "see" them. The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behaviour.

Thus, for Miller (2010) not only does the meaning of objects lie in the meanings we attach to them but, through their use, the objects around us shape us as much as we shape them. This process he casts in a Hegelian mould in which, in a process of 'objectification', what we produce is a reflection of ourselves, and what we produce also produces ourselves (Miller, 2005).

Miller points out that for Hegel, (1977, cited in Miller 2005, 8)

...everything that we are and do arises out of the reflection upon ourselves given by the mirror image of the process by which we create form and are created by this same process.

Miller's interpretation of Hegel's self-alienation as objectification underpins his theory of the humility of things, which can be thought of as "...a dialectical theory of objectification that challenges the Cartesian dualism of subjects and objects" (Miller 2010, 69). If what we produce is a reflection of ourselves, it follows that we construct things, which construct us, and in turn, we construct more things that reflect who we are. Part of our subjectivity rests on our relationship to objects, which is characterised by this process of mutual creation. The idea of the humility of things, that are significant to us because they help us to be in the world, may also account for why Seejarim and Alborough are drawn to using such seemingly insignificant objects in their work.

Another way of thinking about the manner in which objects could be seen to make us as much as we make them is through the phenomenological understanding that when we perceive something we are entering into a relationship with that thing, connecting us with what we are looking at. Jay (1993, 268) argues that for phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty "...consciousness was not independent of its object, nor was an object a thing standing apart to be viewed from afar; consciousness was always *of* something". Implied is that mutual creation occurs when we are conscious of ourselves perceiving something outside ourselves; in this moment we both know what is *self* and what is *not self* (other). This amplifies Miller's conception of mutual creation, since it provides a way of

understanding the possible ways in which the process of mutual creation happens. Implied in the idea of the mutually constructing relationship between subjects and objects is another; that in this process of mutual creation, and in as much as objects enable social and cultural practices, objects have agency⁶⁴.

The idea of the humble object, that is quietly in the background, but that nevertheless has agency to shape our everyday practices, is helpful for thinking about the manner in which quotidian objects come to have so much significance. It is also helpful for thinking about the significance of the use of quotidian objects in artworks: the bus tickets used by Seejarim are quintessentially humble objects, usually unnoticed, but nevertheless enabling movement through time and space by giving the bearer access to the bus.⁶⁵ The bus tickets fit into Miller's (2010) description of objects that are part of life, but which are not really noticed, yet help shape us because they are part of our daily practices; the tickets partly enable the journey, but are not the point of the journey. In using these bus tickets, in an artwork, Seejarim creates a new situation for the objects (as part of art), and in so doing also creates new meanings for the objects. This theory is not as easily transposed onto a discussion of Siopis's use of found objects because the objects used by Siopis are not 'humble', and ubiquitous such as those used by Alborough and Seejarim. Further, although the objects used by Siopis in *Reconnaissance, 1900- 1997*, for example, may have, at some point in time, been 'humble' in Miller's (2010) terms, at the time Siopis uses them in her artworks the

⁶⁴ The potential agency of objects specifically in relation to Gell's (1998) theory of the agency of artworks as a special category of object is explored in depth in chapter eight.

⁶⁵ Of course the pegs and cable ties used by Alborough are also humble objects in Miller's terms.

objects' heirloom status already marks them as 'special', even though they might otherwise be regarded as trash.

The transition from being part of the world to being part of an artwork changes the "humble objects". In the case of the particular bus tickets used by Seejarim, their incorporation into artworks, changes these bus tickets from being rubbish (once expired), to being preserved and looked at in a different way. They are also given a new economic value as part of the artwork⁶⁶. Following Miller's (2010) conception of the humility of things, it can be argued that things shape us as much as we shape them, and when things are part of art, they are no longer humble but foregrounded, and scrutinised. The notion of the humble object, that remains unnoticed because of its ubiquity, but nevertheless shapes us, stands in contrast to the idea of an artwork, an object which is exhibited, scrutinised and valued for its singularity. This binary is the foundation of the first (and subsequent) uses of found objects as materials in the collages of Picasso and Braque, and the designation of whole objects as artworks in Duchamp's unassisted readymades. The historical avant-garde use of found objects employed the contrast between the humble object and the status of the art object as unique object, to highlight the values ascribed to both the humble object and the artwork. Through this contrast we were enabled to see how the object is constructed in the context from which it comes, and it simultaneously reveals the frame of art discourse⁶⁷. The artwork helps us look at the object in new ways. It can be argued that in as much as objects

⁶⁶ The idea of a new economic value being assigned to objects as they move through different social spaces is explored by Kopytoff (1986) in his theory of "the social biography of things", which builds on Appadurai's (1986) notion of the social life of things and considers how objects have different economic value at different times of their life cycle and as they move through social spaces and in time.

⁶⁷ This will be discussed in depth in chapter four in which, following Danto (1981) I pursue the question of what separates artworks from other sorts of objects.

are a reflection of us, when found objects are used in the field of art, the resultant artworks enable us to look at how other things make us, and thereby to see ourselves in new ways.

Objects help in the performance of identity

While it can be argued that artists make things (artworks) that help us reflect on how other things can be said to make us, for most people in the era of capitalism, this process of mutual creation manifests itself not in the things they make, but in the things they buy and own, and/or aspire to own. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) notion of *habitus*, Miller (2010) extends the idea that objects help shape us as much as we shape them, to suggest that objects are not just part of material culture, they help create culture, and thereby assist in shaping our identities. Miller (2010, 53) argues that

...by learning to interact with a whole slew of different material cultures an individual grows up assuming the norms that we call culture.

According to Bourdieu (1977) class is what distinguishes us above all, because people are socialised into the practices, and values of the class in to which they are born. Objects play an important part in this socialisation. Peoples' everyday practices are central to the use of, seeing and being with, the objects. Objects help us to construct a personal sense of self and a social identity through being social markers of taste, status, wealth, and affinity to particular social groups. Through interacting with particular objects which are part of their material culture, people develop attitudes towards objects that are linked to their class and social status. This is what Bourdieu (1977) referred to as *habitus*. This leads people to value certain objects more than others. It also affects what objects people aspire to own in adult

life. Within the concept of *habitus*, the social structures which determine a person's environment while growing up influence his/her perceptions in all subsequent experience. Therefore although persons may move up or down in class, as they acquire or lose wealth throughout their lives, Bourdieu (1977) contends that they nevertheless retain the *habitus* of the class into which they were born. Bourdieu (1977, 72) states that *habitus* can be understood as

...systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*/ structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices.

Further, Bourdieu (1977, 78) argues that

...the structures characteristic of a determinate type of condition of existence.... produce the structures of the *habitus* which become in turn the basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experience.

Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* refers to dispositions that are both structured and structuring in a manner similar to that in which discourse can be argued to be constructed and constructing. It is important to note that these dispositions are learned from an early age and are so ingrained that they seem natural. Woodward (2011) notes that our *habitus* can be thought of as providing a 'framework' within which people operate; that is, it generates the principles which guide people in their encounters in the social and material world. *Habitus* is also the means through which people of a similar class or social group share values and associations. These shared values and associations are manifest as 'taste', which is visible in everything people do and own, and even in their aspirations.⁶⁸ Members of the

⁶⁸ Woodward (2007, 119) points out that Bourdieu's notion of taste, and how it is linked to class and socialisation, and also becomes a means to enact power, is in contrast to Kant's view of judgement as fundamentally 'disinterested', and 'universal' and supposedly pure appreciation of objective beauty. Bourdieu

same class and social group will have similar values and attitudes towards things, Woodward (2007, 119) points out, for Bourdieu, judgements of taste are socially inscribed and linked to class. The implication of this is that taste is exercised by all people across all classes, and as such appears to be 'a natural judgement,' therefore we do not even notice the ways in which we are socially conditioned to make these judgments.⁶⁹ Thus, judgements of taste are social distinctions masquerading as natural judgements.

In terms of discourses of power, it is problematic that value judgements based on class are perceived to be natural, because when ideological apparatuses seem natural, the power relationships that are at play are masked. Woodward (2007, 120) points out that *habitus* is "...the mechanism by which tastes are cultivated and exercised". An individual's taste signifies membership of a particular group and thereby contributes to constructing a shared social identity. It is through being markers of taste that objects are used to perpetuate social distinction.⁷⁰ These associations are projected onto objects that in turn embody those value judgements that are so engrained that they seem natural to us, and are therefore not

(1984 cited by Woodward 2007, 119) maintains that in the power relations between the classes and taste, social violence is enacted. The dominant classes have power to dictate what is considered to have value - that is what is tasteful, fashionable. Working class culture is associated with low culture, and therefore undesirable and of low status. High art is considered to be part of high-culture. One's ability to discern what is tasteful, and of high culture and by implication of the higher classes is "distinction".

⁶⁹ Woodward (2007, 120) points out that "taste judgements in Bourdieu's model come to serve as an aesthetic playing out of social relations".

⁷⁰ Bourdieu (1977) argues that it is through the exercise of taste and distinction that social violence is enacted. Members of the higher classes are given the right to be taste makers. Within this, certain objects become associated with high culture and therefore "good taste", and are desirable, and other objects are associated with low culture and therefore "poor taste", or the lack of taste. It is through *habitus* that we develop distinction, and the ability to discern the value of objects, and what constitutes good or bad taste. This is one of the reasons why the pop artists' deliberate use of low culture, and popular culture in high art was shocking and interesting. The irony of their use of popular culture in high art was that it was nevertheless an appropriation into high art that maintained the *status quo* since those versed in the discourse of art could understand what they were doing.

questioned. It is through our expressions of 'taste' that we are able to communicate aspects of our identity. Thus, as Woodward (2007, 134) points out, all our material culture, from how we choose to dress, to the objects that we collect to surround us, "help to establish, mediate and assist us in the performance of our personal and social identities." Our ability to manipulate social symbols, as expressed in our personal style, that in turn reveals our taste, enables cultural mobility, and access into certain groups (Woodward, 2007, 135). An example of this is that, in order to be considered a hipster by other hipsters, one must wear certain clothes, have particular taste in music and use a specific computer for work in a particular industry.

According to Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*, which is based on a system of shared values and structures, certain objects will have similar cultural capital for most members of a particular social group. These objects, which will most likely be understood in similar ways by members of a particular social class, can be used to support the performance of our identities. The idea that objects have an 'expressive capacity' and can be used as symbols of taste, status and identity affirms the post-processual anthropologists' notion that objects can be regarded as 'language like', in that they can be used as symbols that stand in for something else. This idea is contingent on a shared or social understanding of the meaning of objects. Woodward (2007, 135) describes the capacity of objects to communicate aspects of one's social and personal identity as the "...expressive capacity of objects." Woodward (2007, 137) puts it succinctly when he argues that:

Objects *assist the credible, effective* performance of an identity - they are integral parts of an effective social performance whereby objects (seem to) fuse with their possessors in order to offer a convincing social performance.

The kinds of objects Siopis uses speak of her *habitus* and her belonging to a particular class. Siopis's objects further identify her of being of Greek- Catholic descent, being educated, and variously interested in popular culture, kitsch and historical events. Through her use of her family heirlooms, Siopis's installations can be understood as a public performance of identity, in which Siopis constructs a social identity for herself and her family members. The performative aspects of Siopis's installations are present in their theatricality: she makes use of dramatic lighting and staging, and reinforced in the manner in which she uses narrative to give the objects used added significance. The juxtaposition of objects particular to Greek culture, and Catholic culture, as well as objects that resonate with South African history reveal complexities of identity, of guilt, of collusion with the state or insurgence are explored through the juxtaposition of objects.

The social life of things

In as much as objects are portable, they can circulate. As objects move in and out of different fields the meanings associated with the objects change. The kind of exchange also matters, because objects acquire layers of meaning as they are circulated in different ways, for example, through economic exchange or gifting. Appadurai (1986) argues that it is through the processes of circulation that things can be said to have 'a social life' because their meaning is culturally embedded, and changes as they circulate. Therefore, Appadurai (1986, 5) suggests that the meaning of things is inscribed "...in their forms, their use, their trajectories." Appadurai (1986, 5) concludes that if one is trying to find meanings other than the use-meaning of objects one must look at "the things in motion."

One such motion is when objects are removed from everyday circulation and recontextualised into the field of art.⁷¹ The changing classification, and value attached to the objects in relation to Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough's use thereof – from trash or domestic stuff, to heirlooms, to being part of an artists' collection, and then transformed into 'art' – provides a good example of the manner in which the meaning of objects changes as they circulate through social spaces. This example reinforces both Appadurai's (1986) theory of the social life of things, and Kopytoff's (1986) extension of Appadurai's theory in his "social biography of things". Contrary to Siopis's statement "...things are what they are" (Siopis in Mbembe and Siopis 2005, ?), I follow Miller's (2010) notion that things are what we make of them and what they make of us.

Implied in Appadurai's theory of "the social life of things" is that as objects are used and circulated, so they acquire richness of meaning. However, not all layers of meaning are recoverable, as some of the past layers of meaning are obscured by the newer ones layered over them, and some of the meanings inscribed in objects are personal and kept private. A question that emerges when thinking about the "social life of things" and the possible layers of meaning that objects acquire as they circulate through social fields, is how do outsiders have access to these layers of meanings?

Commenting on Harré's (2002) critique of Appadurai's theory of "the social life of things"

Pels, Hetherington, and Vandenberghe (2002, 11) argue that

⁷¹ Danto (1981) argues that in the process of becoming "art", the quotidian object is differentiated from other things in the world that look like it but are not art. The differentiation of artworks and what Danto (1981) refers to as "mere things" is explored in depth in chapter four.

...objects need symbolic framings, storylines and human spokespersons in order to acquire social lives; social relationships and practices in turn need to be materially grounded in order to gain temporal and spatial endurance.

Harré (2002, 25) states “material things have magic powers only in the contexts of the narratives in which they are embedded.” Therefore Harré (2002) suggests that we largely ignore the objects around us until we insert them into a narrative that gives them meaning and a place. These narratives can take the form of stories that people tell about the significance that objects hold for them, as was the case with Miller’s (2008) informants’ stories in *The Comfort of Things*. Suggested in Miller’s (2008) account of the manner in which the objects were displayed is that the display of the objects provided clues as to the objects’ significance for the owner.⁷² However, while the display of objects in prominent positions in the living area signified ‘importance’ of some kind, Miller’s (2008) participants’ associations with specific objects, and thus the objects’ particular significance for the people who owned the objects, were often embedded in narratives. These narratives made the objects’ significance more accessible, but only for those who were privy to the narratives.

The use of narrative to endow objects with meanings is evident in *Reconnaissance 1900-1997* (1997) through Siopis’s retelling of the manner in which she came to have the objects, and the manner in which she presented the objects. Narrative devices were also used by Siopis when she included handwritten cards (fig. 3.12) that include information about particular objects in her 2015 installation of *Charmed lives* at Wits Art Museum. These texts

⁷² This is not unlike objects are treated in museum exhibitions, in which the value ascribed to the objects is communicated by the manner in which the objects are displayed. These issues are explored further in chapter five.

demonstrate that even though objects can have multiple lives, we only have access to those narratives that are made explicit to us in whatever form we encounter the object.

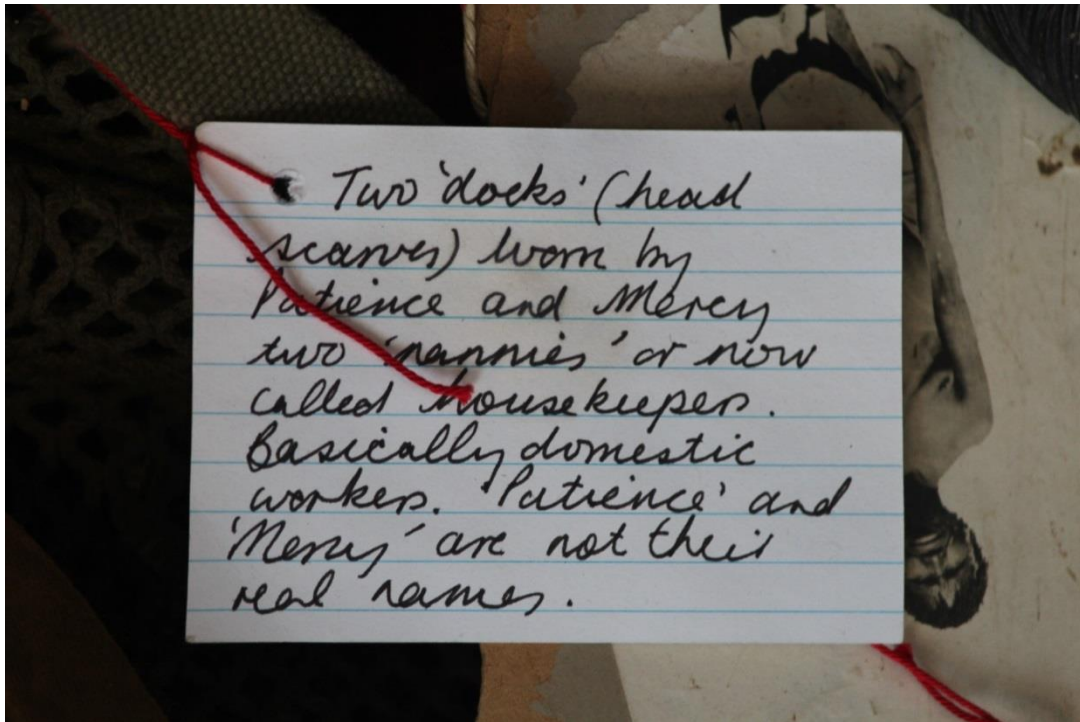


Fig. 3.12 Penny Siopis, *Charmed Lives*, 2015. Detail of a mixed media installation exhibited on *Time and Again* at Wits Art Museum. Dimensions variable. Photo: Alison Kearney. Image courtesy of the artist and Wits Art Museum.

In the absence of an explicit narrative, although we may not have access to the specific layers of meaning of a particular object, when we encounter familiar objects in artworks, we are able to draw on our own, personal associations to make sense of the objects, and the artworks.

The displacement of objects into art

The social anthropological theories of the social life of things, the humility of things, and Bourdieu's (1993) the notion of *habitus* are useful for understanding why objects are meaningful. When used together, these theories suggest that objects are meaningful because they play a part in our socialisation and identity formation. Objects also enable us to act in the world, and so shape us, as much as we shape them. Because objects play such an important part in our identity formation, we endow objects with symbolic meanings beyond their economic and use values, through a process of cathexis. As objects move through different spaces, and in time, they have a life of their own. Throughout their social lives, objects acquire layers of meaning, as the meanings attached to them change. Our attitudes towards objects are also determined to some extent by our *habitus*, which is linked to class. These attitudes towards objects are communicated to others through our expressions of taste and distinction in the objects we own and aspire to own. In this way, objects help us in the social performance of our identities.

Given that our socialisation and *habitus*, including our relationship with objects, can be seen to be part of the formation of our identities, and play such a pivotal role in shaping us, it is not surprising that artists continue to use objects from their everyday environments (their *habitus*) in their work. Quotidian objects that are included in artworks bring with them those chains of signification from their former uses in the world, for example the associations, personal meanings, social meanings, and object histories, and affect the meaning and the content of the artwork. Artists such as Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough who use found objects in their work harness these chains of signification for the content of the

artwork. However, the chains of signification from their former uses only influence viewers' understanding of artworks if we have access to those chains of signification. Thus, the meanings of objects need to be made explicit through narrative and framing, if they are not to remain hidden. This is also true of artworks as objects.

Through the inclusion of found objects that carry specific associations shared by a community, artists can harness the expressive and performative qualities of objects as signifiers in their artworks. This is one kind of 'work' that found objects do in contemporary artworks.

Chapter four

Artworks and other things

The incorporation of quotidian objects into art

In chapter three I established that the meanings objects may accrue are contingent on their place in a system of use. It follows that as objects move through different fields, their meanings change. When objects are part of everyday social practices, they are given agency to shape us as much as we have agency to shape them, because objects enable social practices and are markers of distinction and power. Entangled as they are in the formation of our identities, we project personal meaning onto objects through a process of cathexis. Thus objects often accumulate hidden personal and/or collective psychological significance as they come to stand in for other things for us. When objects become part of artworks they are removed from the social practices of which they were part and to which their significance was linked. This constitutes a displacement of and a new status for the objects, which are now part of a new set of enmeshed relations, as *art*. In this chapter I investigate the manner in which the incorporation of quotidian objects into art changes the ontological status of the objects and thus their meanings. To conduct this investigation, I explore what differentiates quotidian objects from artworks. I then consider the implications of the inclusion of found objects into artworks for the ontological status of the artwork as a special class of object.

What differentiates artworks from quotidian objects?

In the canonical narrative of Western art history there have been various shifts in the ways in which objects have been elevated to art, culminating in the lauding of the naturalistic/realistic forms of painting of the early and mid-nineteenth century. Danto (2013) points out that this changed during the 1870s in Europe, when less naturalistic expressionist works that made use of symbolic colour palettes, which were thought to express the artists' deepest emotions, became valued as the pinnacle of art.

Benjamin (1973) attributes the shift from naturalism to the invention of the photographic camera in 1836, and the subsequent development of lithography, which enabled mass production of photographic images. According to Benjamin (1973), before the invention of the camera, artworks were valued for their social function. This is partly because, before the camera, artworks played a more direct social role, in that artworks recorded social events and at times had a didactic purpose. Benjamin (1973, 224) therefore argues that before modern forms of printing, artworks were always "entangled with ritual, first of the magic kind, then of the religious kind", and thus art had "cult value".⁷³ Benjamin (1973, 224), postulates that the invention of the camera "freed art" from its ritual purpose, and thereafter, art had "an internal theology" that of art for art's sake. Significantly, within the doctrine of art for art's sake, artworks were made to be exhibited as artworks, and did not necessarily have another social or didactic purpose. For Benjamin (1973) the invention of the camera and lithography marked "the age of mechanical reproduction".

⁷³ It is the period after the invention of the camera and lithography, up to the 1930's, when he was writing, that Benjamin (1973) refers to as "the age of mechanical reproduction".

In Benjamin's (1973) view, the invention of the camera constituted the moment when artists were emancipated from the demand for naturalism that had dominated art discourse since the time of Alberti, and could invent themselves and art discourse in new ways. Thus, Benjamin (1973, 224) argues, after "the age of mechanical reproduction" the "exhibition value" of artworks made with the purpose of being exhibited, is privileged beyond their "cult value." Arguably, since the late nineteenth century, this is one of the ways in which artworks can be differentiated from quotidian objects that, for the most part, have a utilitarian purpose which dominates and subverts their aesthetic dimension. Artworks made to be exhibited stand in contradistinction to Miller's (2010) notion of the humble object that remains in the background, unnoticed and yet shaping social practices. The artwork that is made with the purpose of being exhibited is made to be looked at, scrutinised, and critiqued by an audience. When utilitarian objects become part of artworks, they are thereby subjected to the same kinds of looking that take place within the field of art⁷⁴.

The 'aura' of art

Another way in which Benjamin (1973) differentiates artworks from quotidian objects is that artworks have an 'aura' that other objects including reproductions of artworks (made possible with the advances of commercial printing methods in the age of mechanical reproduction), do not have. The 'aura' of an artwork is inextricable from its 'authenticity', upon which part of the value of the artwork rests. Benjamin (1973, 220) argues that

...this unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence.

⁷⁴ This will be explored in depth in chapter five, which focusses on the manner in which meanings are constructed and communicated for objects within the field of exhibition.

Benjamin (1973) further argues that the authenticity of an artwork is contingent on its being the 'original' artwork, with a unique existence in time and space, bearing the trace of its own history, and facture. The traces of history and facture, are part of the physical condition of the artwork, including the layers of paint that make up a painting, as well as the artwork's age, its reaction to its environment, whether it has oxidised and whether it has accumulated layers of dirt, etc. Before the possibility of mechanical reproduction, the trace of facture indicated the artists' hand, and thus implied the *presence* of the maker, distinguishing artworks from mass produced, machine made things, and mechanical reproductions of the artwork.⁷⁵ These traces are testament to the authenticity of the artwork, and are therefore part of the 'aura' of the work of art. Implied in the notion of the 'aura' is that the authenticity, and therefore the value of the artwork, is contingent on the artwork being the only one of its kind because it is subject to the inconsistencies of being made by the hand of the artist and therefore exists in a particular place and time.

It is partly this 'aura' that distinguishes artworks from other kinds of objects, and reproductions of artworks as Benjamin (1973) postulates. Like the hidden layers of meaning of the social life of things, the underlying layers of 'facture' are often hidden from view when looking at finished artworks, yet these underlying layers are essential in making up the final artwork.

⁷⁵ It is important to remember that Benjamin's discussion focuses on the difference between the artwork that is made by hand and a reproduction that is made by mechanical means (in his examples, either photography or lithography). An artwork, made with the help of apprentices in an artist's studio, such as those made in Rodin or Da Vinci's studios, fit in to Benjamin's criteria of "authenticity" because they are attributed to the master artists rather than the apprentices, and are considered to be 'original' and 'singular' artworks in the Western cannon. It is also significant that when Benjamin posed these questions notions of the authenticity and value of art were still linked to the idea of the artist as 'genius author'. Today (perhaps because of the activities of the historical and neo- avant-garde), it is an accepted part of art practice for artists to conceive of an idea that is executed by industrial means. These artworks are nonetheless attributed to the artist.

It was to these underlying, hidden layers which form the physical characteristics of an artwork, (which Benjamin (1973) links to the authenticity of the artwork), that Siopis drew the viewers' attention when she exhibited x-rays (fig. 4.1) of her painting *Melancholia* (1986) as part of the installation of objects for *Charmed lives* at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg (1998).⁷⁶



Fig. 4.1. Penny Siopis, *X-ray of Melancholia*, 1998 (Detail). No longer exists. Original painting is in the Johannesburg Art Gallery collection. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Editions.

The x-ray reveals the underlying layers of paint that make up the painted surface and which are usually hidden from view. The hidden layers, though usually invisible, are necessary for building up a surface, for optical colour mixing, and to create the illusion of depth (fig 4.2).

⁷⁶ This installation was first exhibited on *Charmed Lives*, at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg (1998), and subsequently exhibited on *Liberated Voices*, New York (1999); *Time and Again* at the South African National Gallery, Cape Town, (2014); and *Time and Again*, Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg, (2015). Images of different iterations of this installation are reproduced in chapters four and six.

Though the x-ray reveals the underlying layers of the painting, it does not reveal the appearance of the painting. In showing us what the painting is made of, the x-ray affirms the object-ness of the painting, yet simultaneously belies the illusion of the scene created by the painterly forms which confront the viewer. Thus, the x-ray reveals the painting as object, rather than the painting as representation. Through the inclusion of the x-ray of her own iconic work, Siopis represents *Melancholia* as an object, which, together with a variety of other objects, represent *themselves* in the artwork.

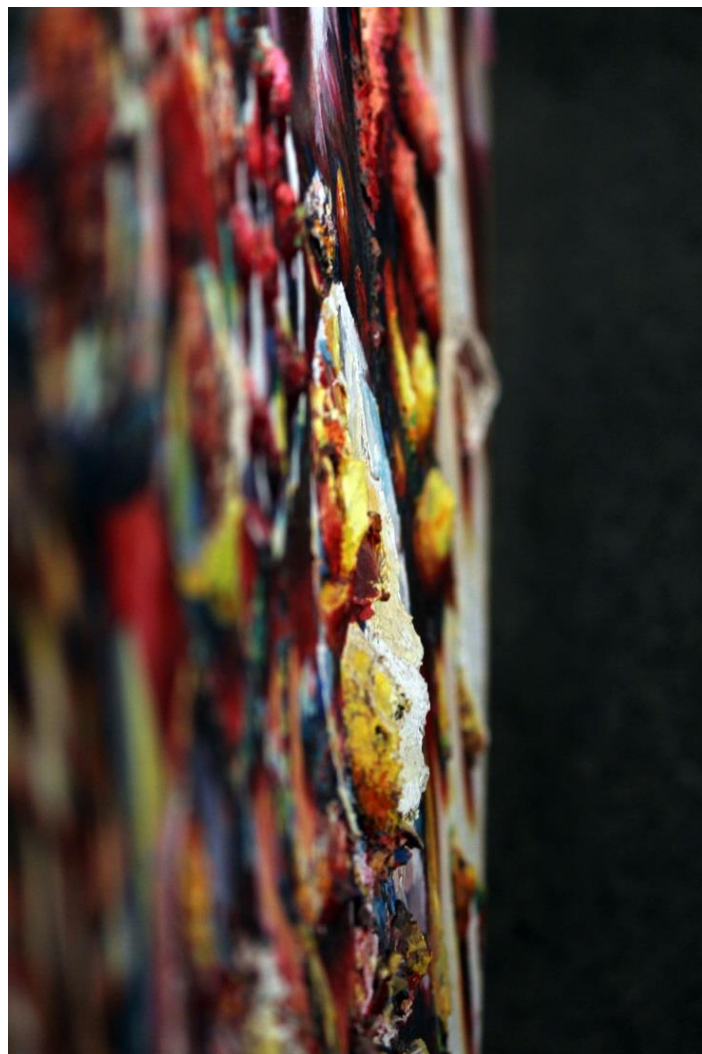


Fig. 4.2 Detail of Siopis's *Melancholia*, 1986, showing the texture of the paint and the manner in which the paint protrudes from the canvas. Photo: Alison Kearney. Image courtesy of the artist.

Arguably, since the layers of 'manufacture' are now made visible, the history of the painting and the painting as index of the artist's hand are foregrounded. Thus, the x-ray of the *Melancholia* stands in relation to the painting as the reproduction of an authentic artwork stands in relation to the artwork: the reproduction affirms the existence and authenticity of the original as the original of the reproduction. Likewise the x-ray affirms the authenticity of the original in two ways: the first because the painting is the original of the x-ray and the second because the x-ray makes the layers of manufacture visible.

I argue for a further parallel here: between the now exposed layers of the painting that reveal part of the history of the way the painting was made, and the manner in which the depicted objects, each with their own layers of meaning that (following Miller (2010) and Bourdieu (1993)) have contributed to the shaping of Siopis herself. My claim is reinforced in the themes explored in the exhibition, *Charmed Lives* (1998), on which the x-ray was exhibited. Atkinson (2005) points out that the title *Charmed Lives* (1998) comes from a phrase by Siopis's maternal grandmother, the implied narrator of Siopis's film *My lovely day* (1998) (fig. 4.3) (first exhibited as part of *Charmed Lives*, Goodman Gallery Johannesburg (1998)). To construct the film, Siopis stitched together scenes from her childhood home videos made by her parents, and found footage of political events. A narratorial voice is inserted through the use of subtitles, consisting of fragments of statements by her grandmother, which run across the bottom of the screen. The implied narrator asks "...what do you know of horror? Of catastrophe? You children lead such charmed lives, spoilt rotten, wanting for nothing". The result is a constructed narrative, of fragments, that have a memory-like timbre, and that weave personal and political events. The picture is hazy, often

out of focus, simulating the texture of memory and dreams. The video was presented as a video installation in a room with old movie house chairs, and a velvet curtain to replicate the movie house that Siopis' maternal grandfather owned in Umthatha.⁷⁷

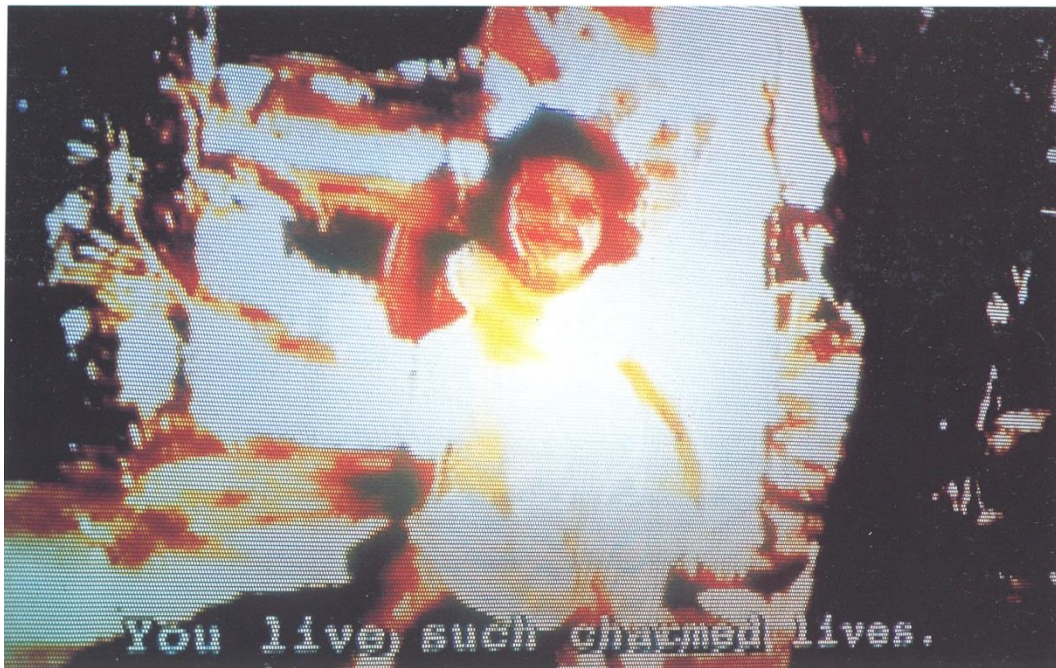


Fig. 4.3 Penny Siopis, *My Lovely Day*, 1997. Film still. 8mm film transferred to video, 21minutes. Edition 3, collections: Museum of Modern Art Stockholm, South African National Gallery, the artist. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Editions.

The exhibition *Charmed Lives* (1998) also featured an installation of Siopis's collection of objects. The installation of objects took the title, *Charmed Lives*, and after the first exhibition at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, it was later exhibited at the Museum of African Art New York (1999), the South African National Gallery, Cape Town (2014) and Wits Art Museum (2015). With each installation, the objects are reconfigured. For example, Atkinson (2005) points out that when exhibited at Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg (1998),

⁷⁷ I return to a discussion of *My lovely day*, (1997) and the manner in which it was presented in chapter seven.

the gallery was divided into three sections. The first was a room of objects, installed as if to suggest a psychic space, of strange objects in bizarre relationships. The sense of the uncanny was heightened by the red lighting. Viewers moved through this room into a second space, in which objects were presented in perspex vitrines. The juxtaposition of a full, seemingly disorganised space with a presentation of objects as if they are part of a museum collection is an exhibitionary device that Siopis also made use of in *Sympathetic Magic* (2002)⁷⁸.

The objects were presented as a 'wall' of objects in the installation at the Museum of African Art New York, that was part of *Liberated Voices* (fig. 4.4), a travelling exhibition of South African art curated by Frank Herreman (1999). Siopis (2014) points out that this arrangement became the prototype for those that followed. This is evident when comparing the installation for *Liberated voices* (fig. 4.3) with that of *Charmed lives on Time and Again*, at Wits Art Museum, 2015 (fig. 4.4). Each new configuration can be understood as a way of exploring the meaning that objects can accrue through their new contexts and juxtapositions. The objects are thereby always in a state of becoming. Atkinson (2005, 75) notes that

By replacing displaced objects in new constellations, by recreating their context and content anew, the artist spins different universes of association, weaving the public and the intimate into provocative juxtaposition.

⁷⁸ The implications of these arrangements on the possible meanings of the artwork and the objects used to create the installations are discussed in depth in chapter five.



Fig. 4.4 Penny Siopis, *Charmed Lives*, 1999. Detail of installation including found objects on the exhibition *Liberated Voices* at the Museum of African Art New York. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 4.5 Penny Siopis *Charmed Lives*, 2015. Detail of installation on *Time and again* at the Wits Art Museum. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and Wits Art Museum.

Exploring artworks as objects

While Siopis included an x-ray of *Melancholia* (1986) on *Charmed lives* (1998), she included the actual painting, *Melancholia* (1986) in her installation *Sympathetic Magic* (2002) at the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries. For *Sympathetic Magic* (2002) *Melancholia* (1986) was suspended vertically from the ceiling so that viewers could see the front and back of it. In this arrangement the painting, not made for the exhibition but on loan from the Johannesburg Art Gallery collection, was treated as an object; seeing the back that is usually hidden, reminded viewers that the image depicted is an illusion, and the painting itself is an object with a history. In *Sympathetic Magic*, as with *Charmed Lives* (1998), Siopis's self-referencing is interesting to consider in terms of the discussion of what separates artworks from other sorts of things. The effect of Siopis's inclusion of her own artworks in new installations is to turn the artworks into objects, grouped with the other objects that make up the installation. In the process of exhibiting the x-ray of the painting, or the back of the painting with other objects in her installations, Siopis reverses the process of the found object becoming part of art, because the artwork is now turned into object. The x-ray of the painting represents the painting as part of the object-world of the artist. Returning to her own work in this way, with the painting presented as object, Siopis explores her own history. The artworks are presented as if they are objects, part of the stuff of life, while the objects such as the x-ray nevertheless gain an 'aura' by way of their inclusion into the works by the artist.

Reproductions of artworks lack an 'aura'

Benjamin (1973) argues that the singularity of the original artwork contributes to the authenticity, and thereby the 'aura' of the artwork. The singularity includes the physical condition of the original artwork, and the layers that make up its manufacture, which point to the hand, and thus the presence of the maker. These elements are not reproducible, and are therefore not present in reproductions of artworks. Thus Benjamin (1973, 220) argues, reproductions of artworks lack an 'aura'. Further, because of the multiplicity of the reproductions, the reproduction does not exist in a particular place and time. Benjamin (1973, 220) states:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.

Benjamin (1973) therefore argues that when artworks are reproduced, the transportability of the reproduction to situations that the original may not be able to be transported to, "depreciates" the quality of the presence of the original because the reproduction substitutes a singular existence for a plurality of existences. This has implications for the meaning/s of the original artwork, because part of the meaning of artworks, as with other objects, is contingent on its place in a system. It is possible to think of the manner in which the reproduction re-contextualises the image of the artwork as a kind of displacement that is similar to the displacement of the quotidian object when it becomes part of an artwork. Both are removed from their place, and recontextualised, and in as much as meaning is partly contingent on place in a system of use, this displacement causes a shift in meaning. Further, for Benjamin (1973), because the viewer encounters the reproductions in a multitude of contexts, the meaning of the artwork, in as much as it is linked to its 'aura', is

diluted/changed. Viewers no longer need to make a pilgrimage to the site where the artwork exists to see it because they can see a reproduction of the work. To demonstrate: seeing a small reproduction of Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), next to fragments of isiZulu love poetry on my fridge (fig. 4.6) is very different from encountering that painting in Arnolfini's house in Antwerp, or where it now hangs in a quiet, dimly lit and air conditioned hall at the National Gallery in London.



Fig. 4.6 The author's fridge magnet collection, featuring reproductions of Jan Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), Damien Hurst's *The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living* (1991), Raphael's *St George and the Dragon* (1506), a detail of Frida Kahlo's *Thinking about death*, (1943).⁷⁹

⁷⁹ A quick review of where the original artworks are in 2015 reinforces Benjamin's (1968) argument: Jan Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), and Raphael's *St George and the Dragon* (1504-1506), are in the National Gallery, London. Damien Hurst's *The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living*, (1991) is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and Frida Kahlo's *Thinking about death* (1943), is in a private collection.

Despite the plurality of reproductions, which transport the image of the original to multiple locations and situations, it is only the original artwork that retains the trace of the maker, and its singular existence. But, because the reproductions can be viewed in multiple situations that affect the viewer's interpretation of the original artwork, Benjamin (1973, 221) argues the 'aura', and therefore the value of original work of art "withers" in the age of reproduction. The 'aura' withers because the reproductions do not have an 'aura'. Yet, as Berger (1972, 21) points out, despite multiple reproductions, in the age of mechanical reproduction, the original artwork retains its 'aura', as *the original* of the reproductions.

Challenging the authenticity of the artwork

The idea that the 'aura', and by implication, the authenticity of an artwork is linked to the manufacture of the artwork, and the artwork's singularity, is significant in discussions of found objects in art. Mass-produced objects, such as those designated by Duchamp as unassisted readymades, lack uniqueness, and have no connection (via a Benjaminian trace) to their makers, who operate machines which make the objects. As Marx (1954) is famous for arguing, a lack of connection to what one produces is part of the alienation the worker experiences in industrial capitalist modes of production, and has been contrasted by Benjamin (1973) and others to the process of an artist literally manufacturing an artwork from beginning to end. Thus mass produced quotidian objects do not have a singular existence and have no 'aura' in Benjamin's (1973) terms. Mass produced quotidian objects are therefore proposed as the extreme opposite of the handmade artwork. The ubiquity of quotidian, industrially produced objects stands in contrast to the 'singularity of the artwork' and its concomitant unavailability. Incorporating found objects that do not have the 'aura' of art into artworks, highlights issues related to the authorship, manufacture and value of

works of art that Benjamin's (1973) notion of authenticity proposes. Thus, Duchamp's unassisted readymades such as *Fountain* (1917) and *Bottle Rack* (1917) in which he designated whole found objects that he did little to change, as art, challenge conceptions of artistic authorship and artistic labour upon which Benjamin (1973) rests the authenticity of art.⁸⁰

Duchamp's deliberate challenging of long-held assumptions is evident in the manner in which he orchestrated the reception of *Fountain* (1917) and other works. Alberro (1999) points out that at the time Duchamp submitted *Fountain* (1917) to the Society of Independent Artists he was actually one of three organisers, who were tasked to handle the entries. Apparently Duchamp's colleagues were unaware that it was he who submitted the offending 'artwork,' and they jointly agreed to reject the object, despite their open policy, on the grounds that a piece of plumbing is not art. Foster (1996, 236) points out that the reaction of the reception of Duchamp said more about the conventions of art than it did about the actual object. Foster (1996) asserts that this was part of Duchamp's intention. After the work was rejected, Duchamp then organised for the rejected artwork to be photographed by Stieglitz, in the photographer's studio/ gallery, and then sent the photograph with an open letter to the magazine, *The Blind Man* in May 1917, under the pseudonym, R. Mutt. Duchamp (cited in Harrison et. al. 2006: 252 authors' emphasis) wrote

⁸⁰ It is interesting that many of Duchamp's readymades were made *before* Benjamin's essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, and are not mentioned by Benjamin. This may be because, as Alberro (1999) and Buskirk (2005) point out, the readymades were relatively unknown in the art world until after Duchamp made replicas of them for his *Boite en valise* (1934), and resurrected them again when he made 'reproductions' of them in the 1960s with the help of Harold Sneeze-man. This demonstrates that it is rarely the case that the history of art happened as it is written in survey books like Arnason's (1972) *A History of Modern Art*, where it is generally presented as a series of events that happened chronologically. Interestingly, as Buskirk (2005) and Alberro (1999) point out, it was through Duchamp and Sneeze-man's active canvassing, and the reproduction of edition of the readymades in the 1960's that the readymades were retrospectively recognised as the defining artworks of the twentieth century.

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. HE took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view- created a new thought for that object.

Later, in a talk titled *Apropos of the 'Readymades'* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, (1943) Duchamp (cited in Danto 2013, 25) declared that:

...the choice of these readymades was never delectation. This choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time an absence of good or bad taste; in fact a complete anaesthesia.

In declaring that whether he made the artwork with 'his own hands' was of 'no importance' when determining whether *Fountain* (1917) was a work of art, Duchamp challenged the idea that the artwork had to be manufactured by the artist in order to count as art. Duchamp deliberately pointed out that, while he did not make the object, the authorship of the artwork consisted in choosing the object to be art. His reference to the absence of "good or bad taste" can be understood as a challenge to the Kantian notion that pure aesthetic beauty is universally recognisable and therefore beyond the scope of good or bad taste.

It is significant that while Duchamp's readymades were not *manufactured* by him, they were designated as art by an artist who was an established member of the art world and who therefore had 'authority' to claim something as art. Instead of making the urinal by hand, the artist turned this quotidian object in to art by signing it, giving it a title, and submitting it for an art exhibition. Thus, even the unassisted readymades were not entirely free of the trace of the artist; giving the urinal the title '*Fountain*' (1917), and signing it "R. Mutt" are interventions that left the physical trace of the artist's hand. The artist similarly lettered the title on the handle of the snow shovel that became the artwork '*In advance of a broken arm*'

(1915), which he gave to his patron Walter Arensberg as a gift (Danto 2013, 25). Although the stencilled lettering on the snow shovel is more mechanical than the hand writing on the urinal, both signatures constitute a trace of the artists' hand. In showing that anything the artist designates as art is art, Duchamp's readymades demonstrate that the 'aura' of authenticity does not only lie in the trace of the hand of the maker artwork, but is also linked to the concept of the artist as genius creator. Even when the artist has not physically manufactured the artwork, the artwork still has the 'aura' of art because it is an index of the artists' conceptual labour.⁸¹ Ironically, as Buskirk (2005, 3) argues, in the case of Duchamp

...the removal of the artist's hand rather than lessening the importance of artistic authorship, makes the sure connection between work and artist that much more significant.

Duchamp's gesture represented, what Heartney (2008, 40) calls "the original sin of Modernism" since it challenged the idea that the work of art was something set apart from everyday life, a thing of transcendent beauty. It is worth reiterating, as mentioned above, that these *readymades* were only recognised as the quintessential moment in Western modernism retrospectively.⁸² Claiming a non-art object as art, is paradoxically a kind of 'anti-art', because what Duchamp appears to have been saying is that this thing, which was selected because it isn't art, is art because he, an artist deemed it so.⁸³ In the process of being transformed into art, 'readymades' like Duchamp's *In advance of a broken arm* (1915), *Fountain* (1917) and *Bottle Rack* (1917) acquire an 'aura', that urinals and bottle racks that

⁸¹ The relationship of aura and trace is useful for thinking about different usages of found objects: in his use of mass produced objects, that have no trace of former use, Alborough's artworks foreground the aura of the artist, while Seejarim and Siopis make art with used objects that bear the traces of their use. This idea is discussed in more depth below.

⁸² For more on this see Foster (1996) and Buskirk (1996).

⁸³ In the introduction to *Art Power*, Grois (2008) points out that the paradoxical nature of Duchamp's work exemplifies the modernist preoccupation with the paradoxical in art since *Fountain* (1917) is at once an art work and a non-artwork.

look just like them do not, because they have been removed from everyday social practises and entered into the field of art.

The artist's labour

Roberts (2007) explores the implications, for art, of the manner in which the readymade challenged the notion of the artist's labour. His discussion is couched in Marxist terms, focussing on the manner in which the notion of 'artistic labour' changes throughout the twentieth century, as a result of the readymade and the changing relationship of artists to technology. While Roberts' (2007) focus is different from mine, (and beyond the scope of this study), it is interesting that he also identifies the notions of "manufacture", and value of the artwork, as significant in understanding Western art since the readymade. Roberts (2007) points out that the readymade bridged the gap between the technical and the intellectual labours of art making. Roberts (2007) argues that the act of designating the readymade as art object challenged the nature of the artist's labour in two ways. In one sense, this was an act of deskilling art- because the artist no longer had to physically make something. In another sense, the readymade involved re-skilling art, suggests Roberts (2007), in that the choosing and assemblage of parts emerged as a new method of art making. Roberts (2007) suggests that this was in keeping with a questioning of the social status quo, and industrial modes of production, like the mechanised production line, that were increasing in the early twentieth century. Thus, Roberts (2007) suggests that, to see the invention of the readymade as merely anti-art, is to miss the importance of the development of new ways of working that made sense in relation to social forces at the time the readymades were first introduced. The shift, Roberts (2007) posits, results from

processes such as manipulating materials on a surface, and selecting, arranging and manipulating objects in space- suggesting that the latter is not unlike the manipulation of paint on a surface.

The idea that arranging objects in space is not unlike the manipulation of paint on a surface is tempting for the comparison of painting and installation. Siopis, whose art praxis includes making paintings, prints, videos and installations, consciously works with the shift between manipulating paint on a surface, and manipulating objects in space. Siopis (2014c) states that the way she works with objects is not unlike the way she works with paint.⁸⁴ For Siopis, creating installations is a response to each object in each new situation. She thus considers the placement of each object in a manner similar to how she responds to the surface of the painting in considering the placement of new brush marks.⁸⁵

Returning to *Charmed Lives* (1998), it can be argued that through first foregrounding the material reality of *Melancholia* (1989) as painting, and then confronting the viewer with an installation that could be understood as a physical manifestation of the pile of things in *Melancholia* (1986), Siopis plays with the relationship of representations of things and the use of real things as a means of representation. In these works, the artist's labour is a response to and manipulation of the materiality of the things and paint to evoke new meanings. Writing about the relationship between Siopis's paintings and her installations, Atkinson (2005: 129) suggests that

⁸⁴ Siopis reiterated this statement in conversation with Mbembe (2005) in discussion with Alison Kearney, (Pers. Comm. July, 2012).

⁸⁵ Siopis's methods of working with paint and working with objects are explored in relation to the materiality of objects in chapter six.

...the surfaces of the paintings seem to have mutated into the surfaces of the installation, provoking a similar experience; we see ourselves seeing ourselves in the moment of recognition, of empathy with something we at first thought to be truly bizarre.

I contend, however, that despite the visual resemblance, the use of a real object is different from the representation of an object, because of the object's physical presence in time and space, and because of the layers of meaning that accumulate around objects. This is what Picasso (1912) recognised when he used the actual piece of rope in *Still life with chair caning*. This is what Duchamp played on when he put the urinal on a plinth. Even mass produced objects have an 'aura' that comes from the meanings people attach to them, once they are part of a system of use. Further, as objects are used, and bare the traces of their use in the scuff marks, cracks, chips and dents, these objects acquire particularity and uniqueness. There is also a difference between encountering a two dimensional artwork, that may be a representation of an object, which we view on a gallery wall, and walking into an environment of objects such as an installation, where we enter the space of the artwork, or the artwork protrudes into our space. Part of this difference rests with the 'aura' of the objects involved.

Trace and facture

Questions of trace, facture, and authenticity are interesting to consider in relation to the kinds of objects Alborough chooses and his working methods. Like Duchamp, Alborough engages with notions of beauty, 'aura', trace and artistic labour. The plastic washing-line pegs, cable ties and coins Alborough used to create his *Beautiful Objects* series (fig. 4.6) have no 'aura' in Benjamin's (1973) terms. At the time Alborough purchased them from the factories where they were made, or from hardware stores: they were as yet unused.



Fig. 4.7 Alan Alborough *Beautiful Objects: Ellipses and Asterisk*, 1997. Installation view, University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries, University of the Witwatersrand. Image courtesy of the artist.

These objects are quintessential “humble objects”; part of everyday life, enabling social practices and yet largely unnoticed. The objects that make up the sculptures in the series were selected for their aesthetic and well as technical qualities. The coins used were commonly available one pence coins, mass produced and of little value. Washing-line pegs, also mass produced, plastic, and disposable, have a particular design, and can be joined together in limited ways, all of which Alborough exploits, echoing the Minimalists⁸⁶ repetition of prefabricated industrial materials. Alborough nevertheless subverts this reference through the multiplicity of objects and intricacy of construction.

⁸⁶ The Minimalists were a group of American artists, most notably Carl Andre and Donald Judd. Buskirk (2005, 23) points out that the Minimalists’ work was characterised by ...the use of industrial means of production, the creation of objects based on simple geometric forms conceived in advance of their realisation, the incorporation of the copy in the creation of work based on repetition or serial forms, and the use of prefabricated units like bricks or fluorescent fixtures.

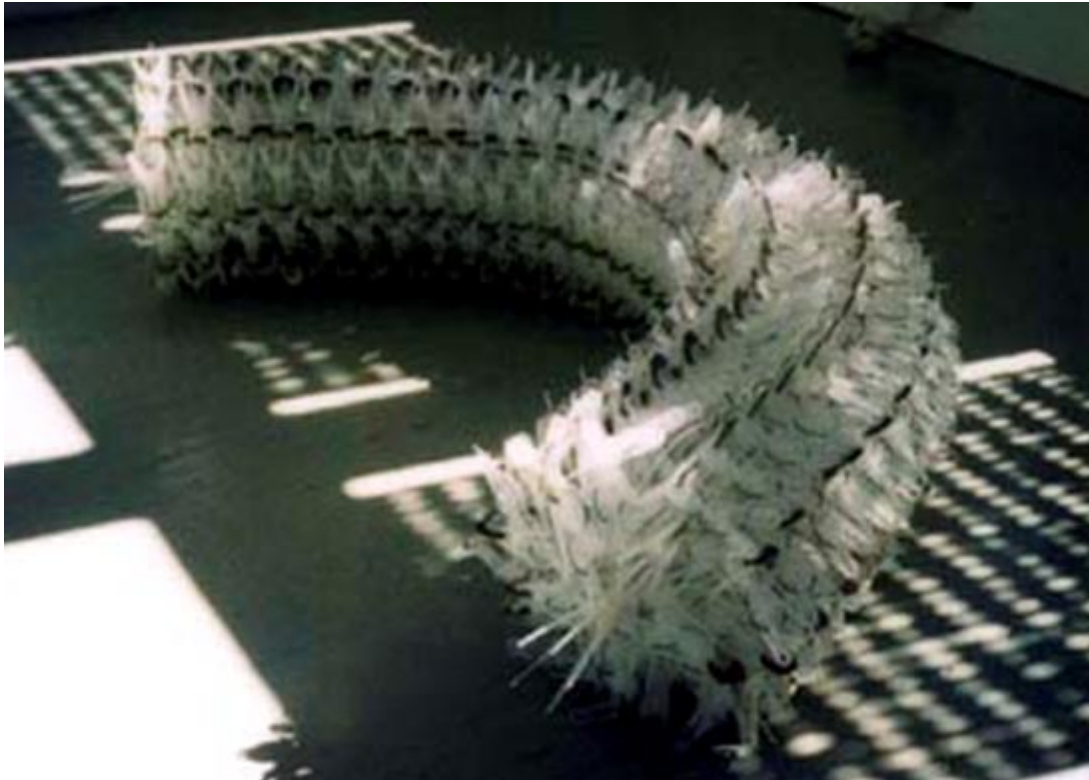


Fig. 4.8 Alan Alborough *Beautiful Objects: Hyphen*, 1997. Plastic pegs, cable ties, coins, electric cable. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

Each sculpture in the series is subtitled after a part of grammar: *Asterisk*, *Ellipses* and *Hyphen*. I argue that these titles are incidental, and possibly given as an afterthought because of the sculptures' visual resemblance to those graphic symbols. There is a cool, calculated mathematical precision to the sculptures; the spaces between objects and the relationships between the parts of the sculpture have been carefully designed, creating intricate and intriguing patterns, texture and a tactile quality (see for example fig. 4.8).

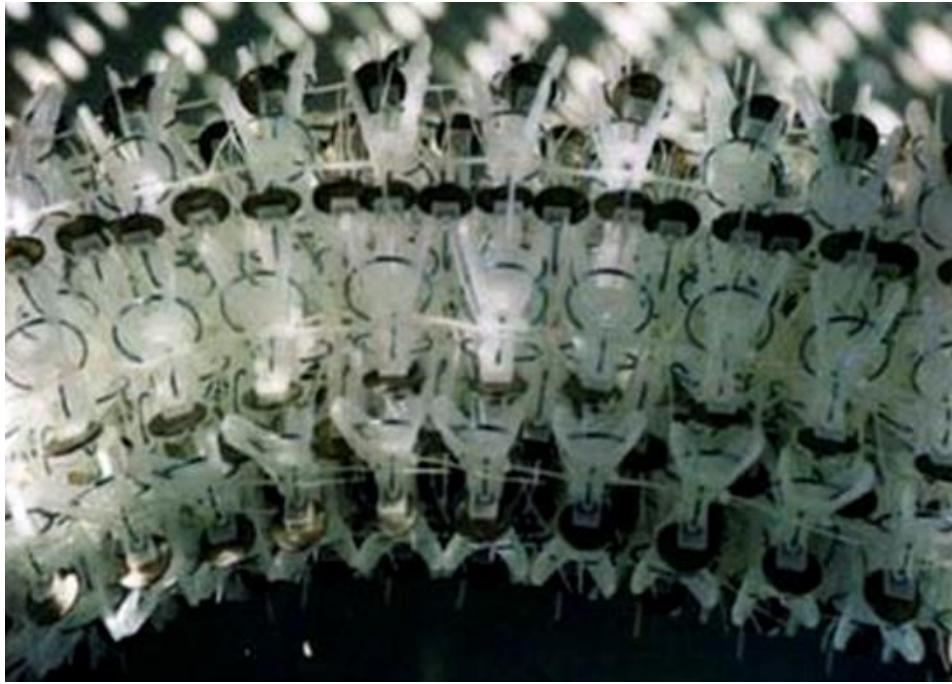


Fig. 4.9 Alan Alborough *Beautiful Objects: Hyphen*, 1997. Detail. Plastic pegs, cable ties, coins, electric cable. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

Alborough's *Beautiful Objects* (1997) point to what I perceive as his interest in the work of art as a semiotic field with its own internal logic and sign system. In works like *Beautiful Objects: Hyphen* (1997) (figs 4.8 and 4.9) and *Beautiful Objects: Ellipses* (1997) (fig. 4.10), a pattern is created, and the shape of the object seems to follow the logic of the pattern, as if the form develops out of the system of making the object. While the objects used to create the sculptures are recognisable, Alborough does not seem to necessarily make reference to the object's former life or possible banal associations in the work. Rather, through repetition and pattern Alborough creates a new environment for those things, where they are displaced from everyday practices, and are given new value. The elements like the cable ties and pegs are like parts of speech in the visual language of the work. In the process of tying, joining, sewing, becoming art, the mundane is transformed into the extraordinary. Different combinations of the same materials across a range of works in the series suggest

that, in the process of making these art works, the artist was exploring what the constraints and affordances of the materials were.

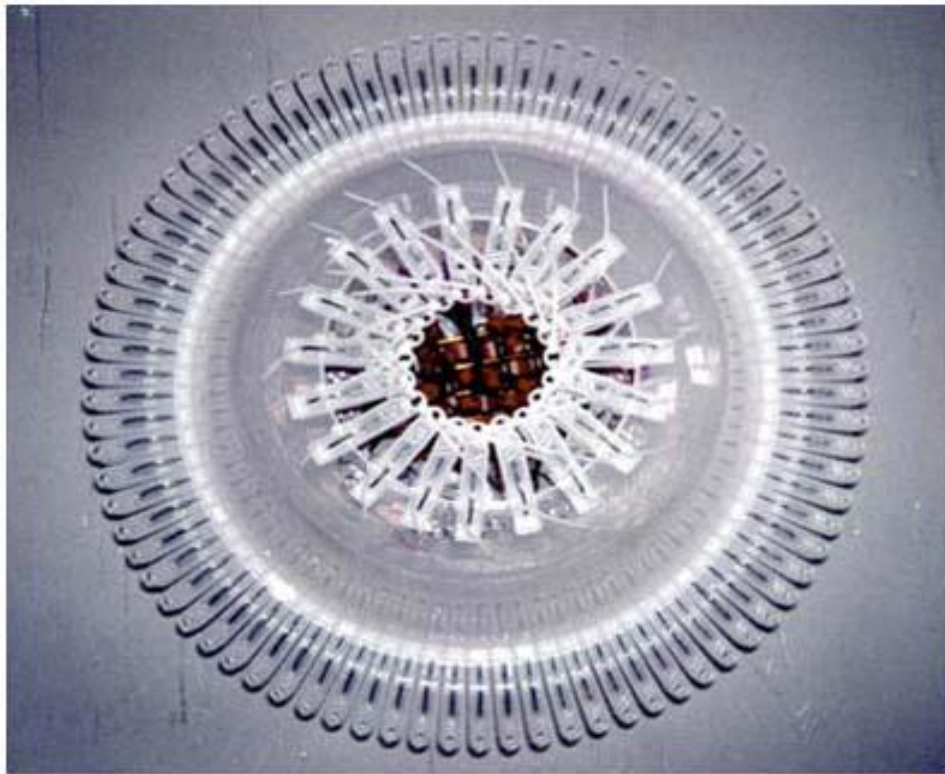


Fig. 4.10 Alan Alborough *Beautiful Objects: Ellipses*, 1997. Detail. Plastic pegs, mixing bowls, cable ties, coins, electric cable. Image courtesy of the artist.

Even though the industrial object is traditionally a sign of the removal of the artists' labour, in this series of works, the labour of the artist is evident in the meticulous pattern that is created in how the units are put together. The mass produced, industrial plastic objects Alborough used to make *Beautiful Objects* (1997) are not part of the same system of value as art works, where the latter are valued for their singularity their facture by the hand of the artist as Benjamin (1973) demonstrates. The manufactured elements thus stand in contrapuntal relationship with the painstaking labour - the making of things with one's hands- and careful precision that the artist has used to make these sculptures. Alborough

uses these mass produced objects as readily available art making materials, in a manner similar to that in which modern painters buy readily available tubes of paint to use as painting materials.⁸⁷ This is not unlike Siopis's description of the manner in which she works with objects. Alborough's use of new mass produced objects is distinguished from Siopis's use of her personal collection in that Alborough uses the objects to make free-standing sculptures, while Siopis reuses her personal collection in various installations.

The recognisability of the objects used by Alborough is important, since it is through understanding their former quotidian status that we are able to understand their new significance as part of art. Thus, in these works the banality of the mass-produced objects used to construct the artworks is juxtaposed to the idea of the completed sculptural installations as '*art*' and thus as in some way 'exalted'. Once completed, the sculptures have a value that is far greater than the value of the parts. The paradox of the value of the materials and their new value as art enables the viewer to look differently at the relationships within the artworks and the relationship of the artwork to the world.

Therefore, I argue that the contrast between the objects as materials and the manner in which Alborough works with them to create his sculptures is part of the significance of the artworks. Herein lies the "persistence of materiality", that Richards (2002) identifies as part of South African conceptualism, in Alborough's works.⁸⁸ Further, the contrast foregrounds the importance of the materiality the objects used in the discussion of the significance of found objects in contemporary art.

⁸⁷ Alborough's use of the cable ties, ties, pegs and coins as material work within the parameters of this research because he uses whole objects. The objects are thus recognisable, and differentiated from uses of fragments of found objects as material by artists like Nicolas Hlobo.

⁸⁸ Richards's (2002) notion of 'the persistence of materiality' has been introduced in chapter two, and is discussed in more depth in relation to the significance of materiality in chapter six.

Through contrasting the banality of the materials with the labour-intensive method of art making, Alborough engages with discourses of found objects in art, and challenges notions of artistic labour. Alborough's methods are different from Duchamp's. Duchamp did little to change both his unassisted and assisted readymades, while Alborough combines recognisable quotidian objects in ways such that they lose their individual identities to become part of a sculpture that does not resemble the parts. Whereas Duchamp's readymades propose that the artist's labour is conceptual, the painstaking precision in the manner in which Alborough combines found objects to create artworks suggests that through incorporating found objects in different ways, artists have agency to transform the banal into the extraordinary conceptually and materially.

The transfiguration of the commonplace

In the process of becoming artworks, found objects are removed from everyday circulation, and, in so far as they are inalienable parts of the artwork, acquire the status and 'aura' of 'art' that similar objects which remain part of everyday use and work do not. Thus, Duchamp's urinal, Siopis's domestic objects, and Seejarim's bus tickets have an 'aura' and value, that things like them that have remained in the realm of the everyday do not. The relationship of actual (as opposed to represented) things in artworks that not only look the same, but are substantially the same as things in the world, yet are nevertheless differentiated from them is explored by Danto (1981).

As mentioned in the introduction, it was upon seeing Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964), which appeared so similar to boxes of tubs of Brillo one could find in supermarkets, that the artwork prompted Danto (1981, vi) to question whether:

...once an artist has deemed one thing to be art, how can this be differentiated from other things that look like it but which are not artworks?

Danto (2009) recalls that the now iconic *Brillo Boxes* (1964) was one of the artworks exhibited at the Stable Gallery in New York in 1964, which was filled with artworks that appeared to be supermarket products. Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964) is an interesting case within this discussion of what separates artworks from other sorts of things.

Danto (1981) argues that *Brillo Boxes* was made possible partly because of historical developments in art, like the invention of the readymade. However, unlike Duchamp's designation of found objects as 'readymades', Warhol reproduced the design of a box of Brillo on specially-made wooden boxes, which were stacked on the gallery floor, in much the same manner as they would be in a supermarket. Warhol's work was not made from a found object; it was fabricated to look like a quotidian object. Danto (2013) points out Warhol wanted the edges to look sharp and thus more pristine than cardboard boxes. Even though Warhol employed assistants to help produce his artworks, which were made by mechanical means like screen printing, the production of these works is attributed to Warhol.⁸⁹ Although Warhol's boxes look very similar to the boxes of Brillo found in supermarkets, they were not the same in two ways. Warhol made his boxes out of wood, and not cardboard; and even though silk-screening technology that enables things to be

⁸⁹ It is ironic that, James Harvey, a designer from Detroit who designed the original Brillo logo, and who apparently had aspirations of being an artist, is little known as the original designer (Danto 2009, xiv).

mass produced was employed to make Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, they were not mass produced, but part of a limited edition set, much like a print edition. Thus *Brillo boxes* had the 'trace' of the artist, who is recognised as author of the artwork. It is significant that Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964) appeared to be the same but were not the same as boxes of Brillo found in supermarkets. Warhol relied on the conventions of engaging with art in the gallery- where viewers are not permitted to touch the artworks, emphasising *Brillo's* transition from the everyday into the field of exhibition.

Both Duchamp and Warhol thus brought the profane into the sacred space of the gallery, albeit in different ways. Therefore Danto (1981, vi) looked to Duchamp for the antecedents of what he refers to as "*the transfiguration of the commonplace*" in art. Danto (1981, vi) argues that Duchamp's readymades had a "profound philosophical originality" because they begged the question

...how (do) such objects get to be works of art, since all that would have been shown is that they have an unanticipated aesthetic dimension.

Thus, Danto (1981) argues, Duchamp showed us that the distinction between art and 'mere things', is not perceptual; artworks don't necessarily look different from mere things. This point brings us back to the initial question, what separates artworks from other things that look like artworks but remain part of everyday practices? Danto explored aspects of this question in a range of texts including *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (1997), *The wake of criticism* (1998), *The philosopher as Andy Warhol* (1999), and *What art is* (2013), amongst others. In *Artefact and Art*, an essay accompanying the

catalogue to Vogel's exhibition *Art/Artefact* at the New York Institute for the Creative Arts of Africa, Danto (1988) extends the question to what differentiates artworks from artefacts.⁹⁰

Danto (1988, 18) suggests that, although the boundary between art and other things is philosophically established, it is possible to "discover something to be a work of art".

Further, according to Danto (1988, 20), although "anything can become an object of detached aesthetic scrutiny" this does not make it art.⁹¹ Putting it another way, Danto (2013, 26 author's emphasis) states that "just because everything *can be* art, it doesn't follow that everything *is art*." Danto (1981, p. 31) also acknowledges, artists since Picasso have appropriated non-art objects as part of artworks, and displayed them in manners in which artworks are displayed, further complicating the distinction between artworks and other sorts of things.

⁹⁰ In trying to answer what differentiates art from artefacts, Danto (1988, P27) recalls the philosophies of Socrates and Plato, for whom the distinction between art and artefact was of utmost importance. He points out that one of the differences for the ancient Greeks was that they believe that the artist was 'inspired'. Modernist beliefs about the artist as genius creator rest on the notion of the artist as an 'inspired individual', invoking Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*. These ideas about what art is are linked to the idea of the artist, and the artwork is valued as primarily the product of the artists' labour.

⁹¹ In the article, Danto (1988, 18) equates the manner in which Western art historians have come to view Artefacts from non- Western traditions as art, with a process of 'discovery'. This process of discovery is a process of 'enfranchisement'; those objects that were not part of art when they were made, but are embedded in art as found objects by artists, become art through a process of enfranchisement. According to Danto (1988, 19) Picasso recognised the sculptural styles in African art as *art*, and after this moment those African artworks were enfranchised in the Western eyes, partly because it was impossible to acknowledge Picasso as a master without acknowledging those works he revered as masterpieces too. Further, according to Danto (1988), Picasso's 'discovery' was possible because of the turns that painting and sculpture had undergone in Picasso's own tradition, which made it possible for him to see the possibilities in African art, even though these objects may not be thought of in the same way by the makers of those objects as Western art historian have come to appreciate them. Danto (1988, 31) is critical of the manner in which Western philosophers have tended to view other cultures in terms of their own lexicon. He points out that when Western philosophers do not find terms in another culture for understanding things the way in which they are understood in the West, the assumption is that those distinctions do not exist in that culture, rather than seeing that their view is a superimposition of ideas may not fit. Despite Danto's criticism of Western philosophy, his account of Picasso's enfranchisement of African art is problematic, because those objects he discusses have not been not been enfranchised, but rather primitivised, and appropriated, with little regard to their actual significance- and have certainly not been regarded as having the same value as Western art works.

Danto (1981) questions, if artworks can look the same as mere things, and mere things can be designated as art, what are the criteria defining the boundaries of *art*? That is, what properties of art can we identify that are true for all artworks, and are therefore philosophically part of the ontology of art? In the *Transfiguration of the commonplace* Danto (1981) systematically explores a range of possibilities of what might characterise all artworks.⁹² Danto (1981) argues that artworks embody thought and express a meaning beyond their 'use value' or function. While he acknowledges that this is also true of other things, Danto (1981, 52) posits that "what the artwork is *about* is central to the question of what an artwork *is*". Developing his argument, Danto (1981) suggests that artworks, unlike other sorts of things, are specifically made by artists to express something about their content. Sensitive to the implications of his claim, Danto (1981) is cautious to include the caveat that 'artworks' are made by 'artists' - someone who is accepted as an artist by the art fraternity- to express something.⁹³ He therefore claims that two essential characteristics separate artworks from mere things. The first is that an artwork expresses something about its content (Danto, 1981, 148) and the second is that through the artwork, artists enables us to see their way of seeing the world (Danto, 1981, 207). In a later essay, Danto (1988, 31) expressed the idea in this way:

...just as a human action gives embodiment to a thought, the artwork embodies something we could not conceptualise without the material object which conveys its soul.

⁹² Bourdieu (1993a) criticised Danto's attempt at a universal definition of what art is, arguing that it is only because Danto is part of the paradigm of thinking about art and philosophy in a particular manner that Danto feels that it is natural and necessary to find a universal definition.

⁹³ While this caveat may address those problems with the implication that other objects do not express something about their content, the caveat begs a new question: that is what counts as "artists" and by extension, what counts as "art." African artworks, like Zulu headrests and Luba hairpins that were made with an aesthetic dimension, do express something about their content but also have a utilitarian purpose must be considered in this discussion. These artworks have come to be valued as artworks by art historians like myself, who may not be in the West but have been trained in the discipline of art history, which has its roots in Western ideologies. In these instances, the artwork becomes art because it is understood as such by the art historian rather than by the makers of the work, who may not even use the terms artwork and artist.

Linked to this, according to Danto (1981), is that artworks communicate something of the artist's attitude towards the content through the manner in which they are presented. That is, the manner in which we encounter the art work has bearing on the recognition of the artwork as art, and the viewers' interpretation of the artwork.

Bourdieu (1993) challenges Danto's (1981) definition of what separates artworks from mere things. According to Bourdieu (1993), the problem with Danto's theory is that it is a search for an ahistorical *essence* of art, and, according to Bourdieu, an ahistorical essence of art is impossible, because we always view art from our particular historic position, and with the disposition we have been enculturated to use when looking.⁹⁴ Bourdieu (1993, 217) therefore questions the extent to which the artwork is able to communicate the artists' supposed intended message, pointing out that we can never look without our "...spectacles that sit on our noses and are so close to our eyes that we do not see them." Gell (1998, 12) is also critical of what he refers to as Danto's "institutional account of what art is". It is interesting to note that while Gell (1998) is critical of what he refers to as Danto's reliance on the institutional account of art, Gell himself cannot get away from discerning artworks as those things that he has encountered "in an art like situation" rather than focusing on objects made to be art. Perhaps this is because many of those objects analysed by anthropologists have been made with aesthetic consideration, but have not been made as "art" in the Western canon.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ As discussed in chapter two, for Moxey (2002) an ahistorical essence of art is impossible.

⁹⁵ Bourdieu and Gell are discussed in more depth in chapter five.

Some implications of the inclusion of found objects in art

According to Danto (1981) because of the manner in which they question long held conventions of art, artworks such as Duchamp's readymades and Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964) are about the nature of what art is. Danto (1981) argues that to make a statement about the nature of art in an artwork, the artist must have internalised the history of art, and have an understanding of the context in which he or she works. Thus, artworks that are about the nature of 'art' must be in dialogue with the history of art, and incorporate a definition of art in their construction. Arguably in order to understand the meta-textual nature of such works, viewers must also understand the discourses of which these works are part. Thus, argues Danto (1981), the inclusion of found objects in artworks does not change the status of the artwork as art, but rather these so called anti-artworks expose the structures of the discourse of art, and challenge notions of what art is.

While Danto's discussion focuses on the implications of the inclusion of objects in artworks for our understanding of 'art', he acknowledges, but largely ignores that the transition of the object from the everyday into the field of art causes a change in the ontological status of the object *qua* object. When objects are part of artworks, they are displaced, and as part of artworks, are differentiated from other things like them in the world. In as much as the meaning of objects is tied to their place in a system of use, objects, and thus their meanings, change when they are part of the field of exhibition within an artwork. On one hand, the objects acquire an 'aura' as "art", which mass produced, quotidian objects do not have. Further, the objects are now part of a new system of use that is characterised by

conventions of display and looking that are different from everyday practices. Thus our physical and theoretical positions in relation to the found objects need to be reconsidered in relation to their new situation- as art.

To understand the shift in meaning/ ontological status of the object when it shifts from everyday practices to the field of art requires a consideration of the emergent artwork as object, *and* the space in which we encounter the object, because the space in which we encounter the artwork is part of the new system of use into which the object is relocated. Since the field of exhibition is characterised by conventions of display and looking that are different from everyday practices, it is necessary to consider what these conventions are and the manner in which these conventions influence our apprehension of the objects when they are transformed into art.

Chapter five

The field of exhibition

Shifting ontologies

In chapter four, I explored Benjamin's (1986) idea that one of the ways in which artworks are different from other sorts of things to explore what differentiates artworks from other sorts of things. I demonstrated that it is possible for other sorts of things to acquire an 'aura' through their particular social lives, which constitute their unique existence (history), and through being included in artworks, thus, additional distinctions are required. Drawing on Danto (1981; 1988; 1999; 2013), I argued that artworks are further differentiated from other things through the manner in which they are presented, which signals that they are 'art' and must therefore be viewed in particular ways. When found objects are embedded in artworks, they acquire the ontological status and 'aura' of art, and are subject to the kinds of viewing that takes place in the field of exhibition. In order to understand the shift in the ontological status of objects as they move from everyday practices in to the field of art it is necessary to consider the manner in which the field of exhibition influences our encounter with the objects and thus their meanings, *and* to consider the emergent artworks as objects.

In chapter five I explore the manner in which Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough make use of, or invert, the conventions of the field of exhibition in order to construct meanings for the

objects they use. I begin by considering some characteristics of the field of exhibition. I then explore the ways in which Seejarim, Siopis, and Alborough make use of, or invert, the conventions of the field of exhibition through their uses of found objects. My exploration enables an understanding of the ways in which these artists' engagement with the conventions of the field of exhibition affects the viewer's interpretation, and thus the meanings, of the found objects, and the resultant artworks.

Some characteristics of the field of exhibition

Following Baxandall (1991, 49), Duncan (1991) and O' Doherty (1986), I regard the field of exhibition as an ideological and discursive space, in which positions of power are established and legitimated through acts of display.⁹⁶ Baxandall states that "it seems axiomatic that it is not possible to exhibit objects without putting a construction upon them" and that therefore "there is no exhibition without construction and therefore –in an extended sense- appropriation" (Baxandall 1991, 34). This is because, as Baxandall (1991) points out, every act of display involves conscious choices about inclusion, exclusion and value by curators or exhibition organisers, whose ideas and concerns represent a particular cultural perspective. Therefore, Baxandall (1991) posits, acts of display, like written texts, demonstrate ideological statements about that which is on display as well as the cultural perspective adopted by the curators or exhibition organisers.⁹⁷ The curators can therefore be thought of

⁹⁶ These ideas are reiterated by Alpers (1991), Bal (1996), and Hooper- Greenhill (2007) amongst others.

⁹⁷ This resonates with Moxey (2002) and Bal's (2002) discussions on the manner in which theorists construct and are constructed by the theories they use.

as active agents, with agency to represent, and in so doing validate, their theories of culture through their curatorial decisions (Baxandall, 1991: 34).⁹⁸

Not all objects are treated in the same manner in the museum. Curators and exhibition organisers communicate their different behaviours in relation to the objects they contain, including art, through exhibitionary devices, like the use of vitrines, the use of spotlighting, and the texts that accompany the exhibitions, all of which signal the importance given to that which is on display (Baxandall 1991). Caught up with various ideologies regarding that which is displayed, in the art museum artworks are sanctified as artists' statements, and are given a different status from that afforded to other kinds of material culture, which are displayed in natural history, social history or ethnographic museums, for example. In the art museum, viewers always encounter something that is considered art, but in other museums not. In all museums, those things which are on display are assigned different ranks in the ideological hierarchy of the museum; the hierarchies are communicated through the manner in which the items are displayed. Conventionally Western paintings and sculptures are not placed in vitrines⁹⁹ so they are apparently accessible, but are nevertheless guarded, not least by learned behaviour and verbal signs warning people not to touch. Non-western material is often imprisoned, placed in vitrines, as if in quarantine, and so, while it may be interpreted, it is not sanctified in the same way as Western art.

⁹⁸ Although Baxandall (1991) conceives of all participants in the field of exhibition as active agents who participate in the construction of meaning, his discussion focusses on the roles of the curators and viewers as active agents. The agency of art, which is explored by Alfred Gell (1998), is discussed below.

⁹⁹ I am not making a claim about all Western art in all art museums: drawings and graphics are often vitrined, as are mediaeval works.

Baxandall (1991) points out that the conventions of display allow the curators to share their interpretation of the artworks and other objects on display with viewers, who bring their own culturally determined ideas into the field of exhibition.¹⁰⁰ Part of the viewers' disposition, according to Baxandall (1991, 34), is that the viewers have come to "see something displayed, and have come to expect these "cues" for "ways of looking"¹⁰¹. Although the curators have agency to orientate the viewers' interpretation through the manner in which objects and artworks are displayed, viewers are not just passive receptors of information in the field of exhibition. Viewers have agency to interpret that which they see. However, the viewers' interpretations are influenced by the manner in which objects are presented to them, and whether, to use Baxandall's (1991, p 37) term, they are part of the "museum set". Those who are part of the 'museum set', are viewers who are inducted into museum practices, and are therefore able to decipher the conventions of display used to convey hierarchical attitudes towards objects they encounter in the field of exhibition.

Baxandall's discussion of the 'museum set' resonates with Bourdieu's (1993a) discussion of forms of distinction in the field of cultural production. Bourdieu (1993, p. 236) argues that in the art museum, which he and (Duncan 1991, Adorno 1967) describe as 'civic temples',

¹⁰⁰ Baxandall's (1991, 37) discussion focuses on a particular kind of viewer, which he refers to as "the museum set." The construction of a particular kind of viewer enables Baxandall to assume that the viewers might view the objects in the manner that he does, which is important for his discussion. I elaborate on this in relation to Bourdieu's (1993) discussion of the field of cultural production below.

¹⁰¹ This idea resonates with Alpers (1991) suggestion that the field of exhibition is a discursive space that is engaged with a particular kind of ritualised looking. For further discussion on the process by which the ways of looking in the museum have come to be associated with forms of control see Duncan (1991), who argues that because of their link to the state's demonstration of power and to certain kinds of control of knowledge in the seventeenth century, in the modern world museums fulfil the ceremonial function that temples and civic buildings would have in the ancient world. Therefore, Duncan (1991, 91) posits, in modern society, the museum, and by extension the art gallery is a secular temple involving a learning experience that demands a particular kind of contemplation and a special quality of attention.

“everything combines to indicate that the world of art is as contrary to the world of everyday life as the sacred is to the profane”.¹⁰² Bourdieu (1993, 236) argues that

The prohibition against touching the objects, the religious silence which is forced upon visitors, the puritan asceticism of the facilities, always scarce and uncomfortable, the almost systematic refusal of any instruction...everything seems to be done to remind people that the transition from the profane world to the sacred world presupposes, as Durkheim says, ‘a genuine metamorphosis’, a radical spiritual change.

Bourdieu is referring to the metamorphosis of the viewer, as she moves from the profane world into the sacred space of the museum. In the context of this study however, the transformation of the found object into art in the field of exhibition can also be understood as such a metamorphosis, because once the object is understood as art it has a new status as art.

Bourdieu (1993) asserts that only those who are educated into the forms of perception and decoding that are part of the field of art have the distinction to look in the ways that are required in the art museum. Bourdieu (1993) argues that the forms of perception and decoding that constitute museum practices seem so natural to those inducted in to those practices that they are not questioned. Further, our learnt behaviours, and the social practices that shape them seem so natural that are invisible. Bourdieu (1993, 217) argues that people who are inducted in to museum practices:

...are consequently carried towards that kind of ethnocentrism which may be called class-centrism and which consists in considering as natural (in other words, both as a matter of course and based on nature) a way of perceiving which is but one among other possible ways.

¹⁰² One of the reasons *Fountain* (1917) was met with such disdain was because a urinal is a quintessential profane object. Placing it in the sacred ‘gallery space’ was an act of sacrilege. That the urinal was on its side, resembling a vagina was even more sacrilegious.

Because of the long process of enculturation of the disposition to decipher works of art, Bourdieu (1993) argues that artworks are only truly available to those who already have the disposition to decipher them. For Bourdieu (1993, 236), this reveals that “the true function of the museum is to strengthen the feeling of belonging in some and the feeling of alienation in others”. With this, suggests Bourdieu (1993), comes the conceit that everyone should be looking in the same way.¹⁰³

Making that which is invisible, visible

Reiterating much of Baxandall’s and Bourdieu’s (1993) argument’s, Bal (2002) conceives of the conventions of display within the field of exhibition as framing devices that induce the viewer to look at certain objects more closely, and in specifically directed ways. Any device that constructs an orientation for the viewers’ gaze can be thought of as a framing device, including the discursive field through which artworks are analysed. When something is framed it is isolated in some way, fenced and made apart. A frame is thus a device of inclusion and exclusion. The act of ‘framing’ constructs that which is framed, through specific lenses, in space and time. Making links between Bal’s (2002) notion of framing as concept, and Moxey’s (2001) theory of the practice of persuasion (discussed in chapter two), it is possible to argue that artists and curators, are agents who are framed by their acts of framing, in the same manner in which the theorist shapes and is shaped by theories used.

¹⁰³ This view is not unlike those of Mitchell (2002) and Moxey (2001), who argue that ways of looking at art and visual culture are learnt, not inherent, and that when scholars start to look at our ways of looking, we notice the ideologies that underpin our ‘vision’.

Bal (2002, 137) suggests that because objects can be framed and reframed, when exhibited, the object is “put under pressure, its meaning is multiplied, its material existence set up as troubled”. Therefore, Bal (2002, 137) argues, in museum environments “the object is repositioned as ‘alive’”. The suggestion that the object is repositioned as ‘alive’ within the field of exhibition, because it can accrue a multiplicity of meanings through framing and re-framing, is interesting to consider in contrast to Adorno’s (1967, 175) conception of the art museum as mausoleum, which houses objects “to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying”. Implied in Adorno’s argument is that, when objects are part of the museum collection, they are no longer part of everyday life, but enter in to a process of dying as they are now relegated to the past. Further, the idea of the objects’ being positioned as ‘alive’, rather than dead, when part of the field of exhibition is pertinent to Siopis’s continuous reconfiguration of her collection of objects in different installations. Siopis’s reusing of her collection of objects can be understood as a continuous reframing of those objects; in each new configuration the objects can be seen to have a new social life. Speaking of her refrigeration of her object collection Siopis (2014c, 115) says:

...there’s something tragic and beautiful about objects that just sit there. They’re a kind of ruin. But also not as they always have a new life in a new setting. Putting them together is like regenerating something.

In as much as found objects make visible the differences between everyday social practices and the conventions of the field of art, when artists make artworks that engage with the conventions of the field of exhibition they draw attention to the manner in which the field of exhibition frames objects. In the process, the resultant artworks render visible that which is usually *invisible* to participants in the field of exhibition. This process is like “showing

seeing”, to borrow Mitchell’s (2002) phrase.¹⁰⁴ The invention of collage and the readymade are historical examples of such practices. Foster (1996) points out that the historical avant-garde’s experimentation brought into relief the conventions of art, thereby opening the possibilities for subsequent paradigm shifts. According to Foster (1996), the historic avant-garde’s challenge to conventional art making practices, allowed for the institutional critique achieved by the American and European neo-avant-garde in the 1960’s. Foster (1996) therefore posits that, in the twentieth century, as subsequent artists engaged with the discourses of art, these artists brought new inflections to their institutional critique.¹⁰⁵ Questions that emerge from this for my thesis are twofold. First, in what ways do Siopis, Seejarim, and Alborough’s uses of found objects engage with the framing that occurs in the field of exhibition. Second, what new inflections, if any, do these artists bring to the praxis, given that that they are operating at a time when the use of found objects is an accepted method of art making?

Alborough’s engagement with display and spectatorship

Through his installation titled *ROOM 6 or RULES of LEXICON or (RED HERRING)*¹⁰⁶ (1996) (fig.

5.1) Alborough engaged with the conventions of display and spectatorship in a range of

ways. Like of Schwitters’s *Merzbau* (1933),¹⁰⁷ the installation was made in a section of

Alborough’s house, and conceived of as an experimental art-space in to which viewers

¹⁰⁴ Mitchell (2002) focuses on the distinction between visual culture studies and art history. The idea that when we start to interrogate the discourses we use, we see not only that which we are looking at but also the manner in which we look is useful in this discussion of framing since discourse also ‘frames’ the object of study.

¹⁰⁵ I do not wish to suggest a linear development between the twentieth century Western artists who engaged with the discourses of art, such as Picasso, Duchamp, Schwitters and Rauschenberg. Rather, following Foster (1996: 44) and Danto (1981: 208) I suggest that the experiments with collage, assemblage and installation of the historical and neo-avant-garde opened up new possibilities for later artists, like Siopis, who are self-reflexively engaging with the discourse of art.

¹⁰⁶ The capital letters are used by the artist as part of the title of the work.

¹⁰⁷ No longer exists. The work is reproduced in Schmalenbach (1967).

walked. Charlton (1996), described the installation as “a continually evolving environment that function(ed) as a kind of repository of ideas, works, explorations and processes”.



Fig. 5.1 Alan Alborough, *ROOM 6 or RULES of LEXICON or (RED HERRING)* (1996). Installation views. Images courtesy of the artist.

In creating this installation, Alborough made use of an eclectic array of objects, which were arranged and grouped in different configurations in different parts of the installation. Some of the objects were quotidian - pegs, empty egg cartons, parts of a telephone directory - while others were unusual, like taxidermied elephants ears, and a cow's tail. There were also the by-products of the everyday for example, the artist's shaved off whiskers, kept in little bottles, dated, numbered, juxtaposed with the debris from art making experiments, for example 'rejected' rust drawings. The collection of objects here was a mixture of the debris

of art making and life, proposing a merging of the two. In this environment, even ordinary objects were made strange through the manner in which they were presented: house dust was collected weekly, was placed in bottles, dated and numbered.¹⁰⁸ Careful attention was paid to details like the choice of objects, as well as the relationships between the objects on display. This created the impression that there was some kind of internal, though arcane, logic to the seemingly chaotic arrangement.

Walking into the room, viewers were immersed in the space, thereby becoming part of the artwork. The embodied experience of being ‘part of’ the installation was enhanced through Alborough’s use of smell, sound and his controlling of the viewing conditions. Charlton (1996) points out that upon entering the room, a motion detector that turned on the lights, temperature control and a tape recorder of a tune-playing an ice-cream van melody¹⁰⁹ was activated. The lights were on a timer. When the lights were on, viewers caught glimpses of fragments of objects; when off, viewers were immersed in darkness. Something of the experience of viewing under these controlled conditions is captured in Charlton’s (1996) written response to the exhibition, which is laid out like a visual poem. Each paragraph is disjointed; connected with the coordinating conjunction “or”, to capture a sense of the

¹⁰⁸ The work can be paralleled to Ilya Kabakov’s installation, *The man who never threw anything away* (1985-1988), reproduced in Groys (1998, 49). *The man who never threw anything away* was a fictional character, invented by Kabakov to represent a person living in a Soviet commune. To create that installation, Kabakov collected the empty cartons and packets of things he had consumed for a year prior to the creation of the installation; thus, in one reading the work can be understood as a kind of archaeology of life in Soviet Russia. In this installation the detritus of life was grouped, labelled, ordered and presented as if to make the order of all the collected clear, but the taxonomy was arcane. For more on this work, and Kabakov’s interest in garbage, life and art see Groys (1998).

¹⁰⁹ A familiar sight and sound during summer in some South African suburbs is that of pastel coloured minibuses that have been kitted out with ice cream machines. They are driven around with their carnivalesque tune playing, as signal to neighbourhood children to come and buy ice-cream in cones.

disjointed looking that the controlled lighting forced on viewers.¹¹⁰ The excerpt that follows illustrates my point:

...

Objects are arranged, substances bottled, experiments labelled and time measured according to procedures that appear ordered and meticulous even as they are mystifying.

OR

A Polaroid documents a tuber of the *Dioscorea elephantipes*, or 'elephant's foot' or 'Hottentot bread' plant. Also indigenous to South Africa, this was the original source of cortisone.

OR

Tied with a strip of black rubber and attached to the door, the boxed set of *RULES OF LEXICON* spells out my recurring sense of being in a game and not knowing how to play.

OR

A profound sense of shock and loss accompanies the recognition of the half-moons as elephants' ears, and the cloth takes on connotations of a funerary shroud.

OR

... (excerpt from Julia Charlton (1996) *A cow's tail*).

In controlling the conditions under which viewers were able to look at the objects in the installation, the artist drew attention to the manner in which viewers' gaze is directed in the field of exhibition as well as the manner in which our encounters with objects shape the meanings we attach to those objects. This foregrounded the artist and curator's agency in the field of exhibition, and at the same time drew attention to the limits of the artist's agency since the artist can control the possibilities of what we see, but artists cannot control the manner in which these objects are interpreted by viewers. The viewer's agency is

¹¹⁰ A similar strategy was used by Siopis for *Sacrifices* (1998), made for the exhibition *Holdings: Refiguring the archive* (1998) curated by Jane Taylor. Siopis asked a colleague to stand in front of each panel that made up the work, and list what she saw (see Atkinson, 2005). I discuss this work in depth in chapter seven.

foregrounded through Julia Charlton's (1996) poem, which captures the viewing experience. It is evident that in *ROOM 6 or RULES of LEXICON or (RED HERRING)* (1996) Alborough made use of recognisable objects, with particular associations, which he used as materials to construct an environment that enabled the exploration of the agency of the artist and viewer in the field of exhibition.

Exploring the agency of art

In his exploration of the agency of art, Alfred Gell (1998, 17) states that his concern with agency is with the "agency that objects acquire as they become enmeshed in the texture of life". Gell (1998, 16) defines an agent as:

...a person or thing who initiates a cause or sequence of events of the mind- or will in their vicinity –rather than a physical cause and effect.

Further, Gell (1998, 17) argues that "social agency can be exercised relative to 'things' and social agency can be exercised by things". Within Gell's (1998) definition, artworks can be thought of as agents in two ways. First, artworks are necessarily social objects - they become art in the context of social practice. Gell (1998) argues that once artworks are accepted as art, they are agents of social change, because they affect social interactions, and create relationships between artists, curators and viewers in the field of exhibition. Artworks are agentive in that they help us see the world differently. Second, artworks can be thought of as secondary agents, because they require artists (primary agents) to make them and other agents to consider them as art (Gell 1998, 21). Thus, the artwork points to the agency of the artist in creating the artwork: the artist makes the artwork, which in turn makes the artist. Gell (1998) posits that even though a found object was not manufactured

by the artist per se, it is an agent in the same manner as any artwork, in that it points to the artist as creator. He argues that a found object:

...is the index which inherently possesses the characteristics which motivate its selection by the artist as an art object, to which none the less his name is attributed as originator (Gell 1998, 30).

In indexing the world outside the field of art, found objects make visible the differences between everyday social practices and the conventions of the field of art. The idea that all the participants in the field of exhibition, including the artworks (which index the artists), the curators, and the viewers, are active agents has implications for the manner in which art historians and other viewers interpret the artworks. It points to the need to look at all the parts of the exhibition, and the roles that different agents play, to find meaning. It also reinforces the idea that the field of exhibition is a discursive space, in which meaning is situated and contingent.

Alborough extended his exploration of agency to an exploration of the agency of the artworks in later works, for example in his Standard Bank Young Artist works (2000),¹¹¹ and his untitled installation at the Stellenbosch University Art gallery (formerly a church) (2000). Alborough's installation consisted of a series of structures, made from cable ties, batteries and nails, that mimicked the shape of the galleries' stained glass windows (see fig. 5.2 and 5.3).

¹¹¹ The Stellenbosch University Art Gallery works were made at the same time as the Standard Bank Young Artist Award works. A similar strategy is used to create the both bodies of works. I chose to discuss the Stellenbosch University Art Gallery works here because the site of the Stellenbosch University Art Gallery, that was formerly a church, resonates with the discussion of the idea of the museum as civic temple. I discuss the Standard Bank Young Artist Award works in depth in chapter six.



Fig. 5.2 Outside view of the stain glass window on the east side of the Stellenbosch University Art Gallery. Photo: Alan Alborough. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 5.3 Alan Alborough, Untitled installation at Stellenbosch University Gallery, 2000. Installation view showing the relationship between the sculptures and the architectural features of the gallery. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

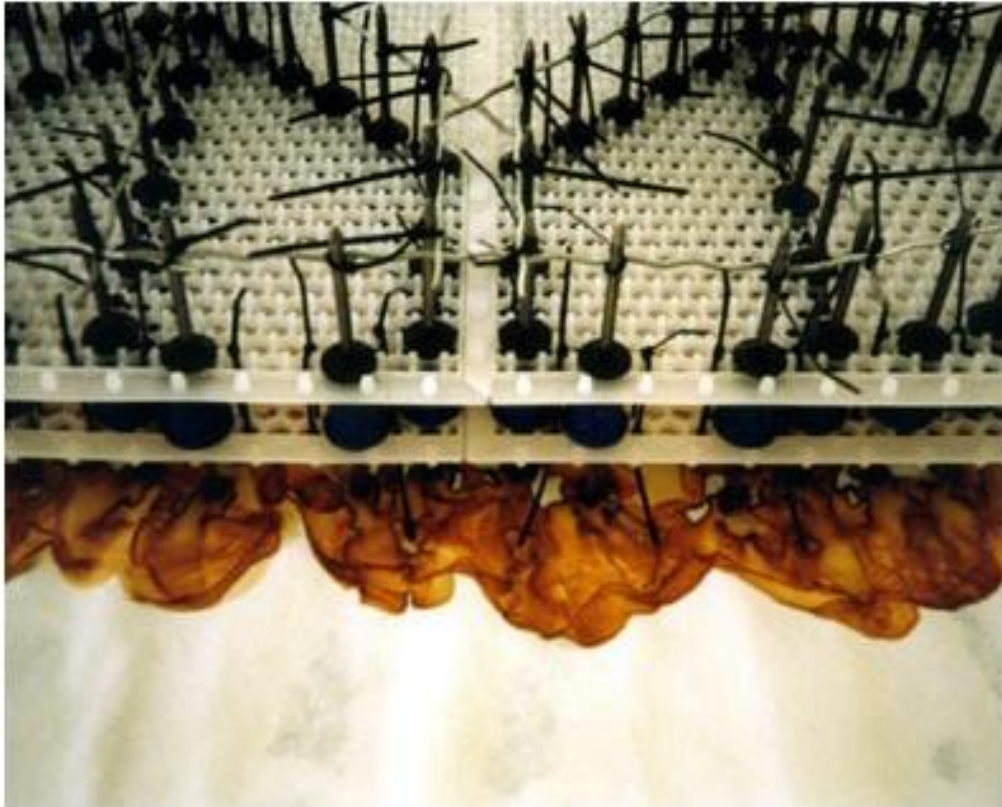


Fig. 5.4 Alan Alborough, *Untitled* installation at Stellenbosch University Gallery, 2000. Detail showing the corrosion process. Image courtesy of the artist.

Alborough installed his sculptures on sheets of paper on the floor of the gallery (fig. 5.3), so that the structures appeared to be the patterned shadows that are created when light streams through the stained glass windows. These sculptures were resting on large sheets of paper, soaked in saline solution. Wires connected the nails to battery packs, which sent an electrical current through them. This caused the nails to corrode. Drawings were produced as the rusty residue from the corrosion bled onto the paper on which the structures rested (fig. 5.4). Thus, the sculptures can be thought of as 'drawing machines' that created drawings on the paper through a process of corrosion. Alborough's drawing machines are

reminiscent of Jean Tinguely's drawing machines¹¹² which questioned artistic authorship and the creative process, through the use of a machine to create a drawing, and through their reliance on chance within the drawing process.



Fig. 5.5 Alan Alborough, Untitled installation at Stellenbosch University Art Gallery, 2000. Detail. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

Once the paper was saturated, Alborough exhibited the resultant drawings on the walls of the gallery. The result was a dynamic installation in which the pattern of the stained glass windows was repeated in the sculptures and the drawings on the walls (see fig 5.3 and fig 5.5). The objects used to create the artworks were banal, unconventional as art-making materials. Though their status as cheap, mass produced objects is significant, the specificity

¹¹² Jean Tinguely (b1925- d1991) was a Swiss Surrealist who constructed elaborate drawing machines as a means of incorporating the elements of chance into the drawing process. For more on Tinguely see Unknown Tinguely. <http://www.tinguely.ch/de>.

of the objects fades in light of their material status as artmaking materials. The use of found objects as materials is distinguished from Alborough's use of objects in *ROOM 6 or RULES of LEXICON or (RED HERRING)* (1996), *Room six*, and is also different to Siopis and Seejairm's use of objects.

Through this installation, and the manner in which it was presented, Alborough disrupted the usual relationships that exist between the different agents in the field of exhibition.

There were no titles, no labels, and no catalogue, to orientate viewers's engagement with the works; the principal 'framing device' was the actual gallery space, that here literally resembled a church- pointing to the construction of the museum, and by extension the gallery, as modern day 'temples'.¹¹³ This conspicuous lack of the usual texts that accompany artworks, to orientate the viewers/ frame the viewers' interpretation, apparently gave viewers more scope to interpret the work in their own way. Due to the lack of texts that accompany his work, and because the work is not representational, Alborough's work has been described as "opaque", "inscrutable" (Roper 2000) and "challenging" (Klopper 2002).¹¹⁴ These descriptions of Alborough's works are partly inspired by the surprising and intricate ways that the artist uses mundane found materials, and also inspired by

Alborough's refusal, since 1997, to make any statements about the possible meanings of his

¹¹³ Alborough's lack of titles, artist's statements and other explanatory texts is evident in his 2000 untitled Standard Bank Young Artist Award works, as well as his 2002 First National Bank Vita Award works. The lack of titles results in these works being identified by the names of the awards exhibitions which they were on, which could be construed as the artist making a statement about the "creativity on demand" that is part of making art for awards exhibitions.

¹¹⁴ In reviewing Alborough's untitled exhibition made for The Standard Bank Young Artist Award, Roper (2000) refers to Alborough as "a bit of a bastard" because Alborough left no clues for viewers as to what the work was 'about'. The works and the exhibition were not titled; there was no catalogue or artist's statement to refer to. Instead, Alborough created a website where he uploaded any press articles related to the exhibition as well as the viewers' responses from the gallery visitor's book. The Standard Bank Young Artist Award is a prestigious art award sponsored by the Standard Bank of South Africa in which a visual artist, under 38, who has shown outstanding achievement in their field, but who may not yet have achieved national or international acclaim is given a sum of money to produce a solo-exhibition as part of the main programme of the Standard Bank National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. The exhibition is customarily accompanied by a catalogue, and travels to different venues across the country for the year of the award (Maurice 2009b).

work or his artistic intentions.¹¹⁵ In a rare interview, ironically titled '*April Fools Interview*', (suggesting that it is not to be trusted), which appeared in the April edition of *NKA Journal of African Arts* and which took the form of a discussion between Alborough and Richards (1997), Alborough argues for an art practice that challenges the viewers to make their own meanings when engaging in looking. Alborough argues that he should not be asked to comment on or reinforce viewer's interpretations of his work since he has chosen to communicate in a visual manner through the artwork. Alborough is also weary of how, in time, artists' statements about their artworks often linger longer than the work itself, superseding the experience of looking at the works (Alborough in Richards 1997, 47). Faced with the daunting task of interpretation, it seems that some critics like (see for example Kloppe 2002, Roper 2000, Maurice 2009a) focus on Alborough's reluctance to make any claims to meaning, making the artist's lack of comment a focus of the review.¹¹⁶ In a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, Alborough's refusal to make any statements linger longer than the works themselves. Taking their cues from the few statements Alborough made before deciding not to speak about his work any longer, reviewers have interpreted Alborough's reluctance to talk about his work as a strategy for decentring the artist, and inviting the audience to participate in meaning making when engaging with the works. For instance, Kloppe (2002) argues that Alborough's

¹¹⁵ For this reason I have not interviewed the artist in carrying out this research. I did email Alborough to ask a question regarding where he bought the objects he used for his Standard Bank Young Artist works (see pers. comm. Alborough, email 12th August 2013).

¹¹⁶ Two critics' comments stand out from those I have already mentioned as attempting to deal with the material content of the works. Paul Edmunds (November, 1999), himself an artist who makes use of found materials and has similarly painstaking intricate processes, notes that unlike most conceptual artists, Alborough always pays attention to the material and the aesthetic. Colin Richards's writing about Alborough's work is distinctive in its attempt to capture the experience of the works. Richards's writing (1997) on Alborough's artworks shows a direct response to Alborough's invitation for the audience to engage with and interpret the works. His texts complement the works in that they explore some concepts that come up in the works through form and content. Richards's texts are like extensions of the artworks.

...installations have repeatedly confused, intrigued and frustrated audiences, challenging them at once to confront the limits of their own willingness to engage and understand the seemingly incomprehensible and to bridge the creative gap between the production and consumption of art.

Another way in which Alborough challenges the usual relationship between the agents in the field of exhibition in this work is in that the artworks were drawing machines. The drawing machines were (literally) agentive in that they produced corrosion drawings that were exhibited as part of the exhibition. There is an element of chance as the artworks make themselves, and the artist is not in control over what the end result may be. This element of chance is contrasted with the mathematically precise way in which the 'drawing machines' are made, further drawing attention to, and subverting the roles of the agents in the field of exhibition. Through creating artworks that are machines that make drawings, in this work and others, Alborough challenges conventional conceptions of the authorship of art, and by extension, the agency of the artist and the artwork. Thus, not only did the artworks make themselves, the artwork was only complete at the end of the exhibition. Alborough's (2000) installation at the Stellenbosch University Art Gallery thus made the process of making and exhibiting artworks visible.

The framing of objects in Siopis' *Sympathetic magic*¹¹⁷

Siopis's (2002) exhibition *Sympathetic Magic* at the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries consisted of a series of installations characterised by a conscious play with aspects of exhibitionism. For this series of installations, Siopis made use of some of the existing

¹¹⁷ Preliminary work on this discussion was published in an article by Alison Kearney titled "*The framing of objects in Siopis's Sympathetic Magic*" (see Kearney 2013). The material has been reworked for inclusion in this thesis, since my argument has become more sophisticated as the research has progressed.

conventions of display, and deliberately contrasted them with an inversion of the same conventions through unexpected arrangements of objects, including her own previous artworks. In each installation, objects were presented in different arrangements that affected the viewers' encounters with those objects. It is worth considering the series of installations in this exhibition in depth, because they can be used to demonstrate the effect that the framing in the field of exhibition has on our understanding of objects, as well as the agency that curators and artists have to direct the viewer's gaze, and thereby influence interpretation.

The entrance of the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries opened onto a large 'white cube' exhibition space on the upper floor (referred to as the Gertrude Posel Gallery), customarily used for temporary exhibitions of contemporary art. A spiral staircase in the middle of the gallery led to a smaller, more intimate, exhibition space downstairs. The walls of this smaller space were lined with glass cabinets, specifically constructed for rotating exhibitions of artworks from the Standard Bank Collection of African Art housed at the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries. For *Sympathetic Magic*, Siopis made use of both floors of the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries, purposely utilising the gallery's architecture, glass cabinets and permanent collection, in a series of interconnected installations made of a range of her own artworks, domestic objects, personal memorabilia and African artworks on loan from the Standard Bank Collection of African Art.

On entering the exhibition, the viewer was confronted with the artists' painting *Melancholia* (1989) suspended from the ceiling, so that viewers could see both sides of it. As discussed in chapter four, in this arrangement the painting was treated as an object, exposing the painted image as the illusion it is (fig 5.6).



Fig. 5.6 Penny Siopis, *Melancholia*, 1986. Oil on canvas, 197.5 x 175.5 cm
Collection: Johannesburg Art Gallery. Image courtesy of the artist.

Viewers were then confronted with what, from a distance, appeared to be a pile of used domestic furniture and other objects (fig. 5.7). Broken chairs, sets of drawers, carpets, souvenirs, and even a moth-eaten, taxidermied crocodile, were precariously perched on top of each other. The placement of heavy objects above the viewers' heads was reminiscent of Duchamp's (1938) *1200 coal sacks*, in which apparently heavy objects were unexpectedly

hung over viewers' heads. In Duchamp's installation the coal sacks were out of place, partly because they were in a gallery space, and partly because they were suspended. Similarly, Siopis's displacement of the furniture turned the familiar in to something strange and unexpected, and created an uneasy feeling, as if everything might fall at any moment. These objects were not, however, merely piled on top of each other as they appeared to be, but were attached to a dome like structure that covered the stairwell. This structure turned the stairwell into a cave-like environment, through which viewers had to walk to get to the lower level of the gallery, and into which Siopis could insert different objects. Inside the cave viewers were immersed in textures, shapes, smells. The arrangement of objects was characterised by unusual juxtapositions: deep red velvet curtains next to army camouflage.¹¹⁸ Many of the objects attached to the walls of the cave had been used, bearing the traces of their use, and connoted the detritus of many lives. In this installation broken toys, old clothes, used school books and souvenirs, were now elevated as part of art, but nevertheless presented in as if part of a pile of rubbish.

¹¹⁸ This was not unlike the unusual juxtapositions in Siopis's previous installations like *Reconnaissance 1900-1997*, 1997 and *Charmed Lives* discussed in chapters three and four.

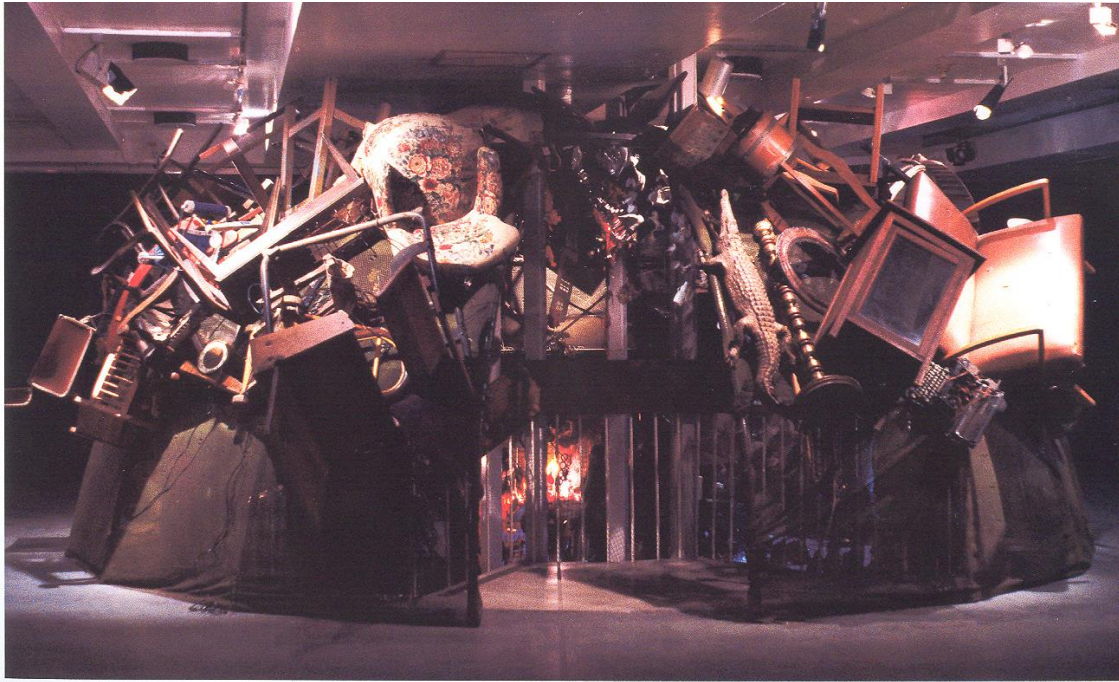


Fig. 5.7 Penny Siopis, *Sympathetic Magic*, 2002. Installation view covering stairwell. Dimensions variable. Found objects including furniture, ornaments and lights amongst other things. University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Editions.

The image of the pile suggests surplus, excess, and thereby loss of value. In the pile, the uniqueness of things was masked, because objects obscured each other. In this presentation, the objects were not singled out as *Melancholia* and other objects in the vitrines downstairs were. The objects were heaped, as if discarded or forgotten. There was no clear hierarchy of objects; everything that was subsumed in the pile was treated in the same manner. In masking the specificity of objects, the pile is the opposite of a museum display, in which objects are singled out, and their specificity is foregrounded. When objects and artworks are part of a museum collection, and exhibited in the museum, they are placed in vitrines, under spotlights, and held up for a particular scrutiny, but in this arrangement as a pile, we can no longer see individual things.

Imaging piles of things is a trope in Siopis work. *Melancholia* (1986), which Siopis (2014a, 59) describes as “an allegory of excess” depicts a banquet table, piled high with food, ornaments that reference Greek antiquity, the history of art and vanitas symbolism; cowrie shells, porcupine quills and other exotic African objects. The perspective is such that the objects towards the back of the table seem to merge into the pattern on the carpet, enhancing the illusion of excess. There are piles in other of Siopis’s paintings, for example *Patience on a monument: a history painting*, (1988) (fig. 5.8), which was made through the use of photocopies of ethnographic representations of Africans, slaves in a chain gang, drawings depicting the colonial wars between the British and the amaZulu, which were collaged on to the canvas to form a background surface. It is against this backdrop that an African woman, swathed in fabric that drapes around her body, such as the carved folds of simulated fabric that was draped around marble statues of Greek goddesses, sits on a pedestal. The pedestal is made of a pile of things, similar to those depicted in *Melancholia* (1986), including a skull, books, African masks, paint brushes, flowers and canvases. Suggested in this is that this pedestal is the woman’s history, piling up beneath her.



Fig. 5.8 Penny Siopis, *Patience on a Monument: A History Painting*, 1988. (Detail). 180 x 200 cm, Oil and collage on board. Collection: William Humphreys Art Gallery, Kimberley. Photo: Alison Kearney. Image courtesy of the artist.

In this painting, *Patience* is peeling a lemon, as she sits, waiting for a revolution or some kind of social justice from the disasters of war and pillage around her. In these history paintings, Siopis inverted the cannon through foregrounding those who were formerly left out of the grand narrative of history. Discussing her own use of the pile, Siopis (2014c, 116) compares the painted piles with the pile of objects in her installations:

...when the pile started in *Patience*, it was very concrete- a picture of a pile- but as the pile became the objects in the installations, it became less and less fixed. The pile disintegrates into bits and pieces, and transforms as it is distributed across the world. Singularity becomes multiplicity.

Immersion

As viewers entered the cave created in the stairwell in *Sympathetic magic* (2002), they moved from being onlookers to experiencing the artwork from the inside; as if being part of the artwork. There was something profoundly affecting about being so completely engulfed.

Describing this installation, Siopis (2014c, 115) comments:

...you literally walk into the work in a way that makes it difficult to see where the installation begins and ends and where you stand as spectator. Sometimes you're right in the things. Sometimes they just spill out at you. They're in the space of spectating.

Ironically, because of the way objects were layered on top of each other and crammed together, despite close proximity, viewers could not see the individual constituents clearly (fig. 5.9). Objects obscured each other, leaving only fragments visible such as a bit of fur, part of a tatty teddy bear, a Boy Scout's uniform, immaculately ironed, unexpectedly kept pristine amidst this collection of cast-offs. At first, it was as if the immersion challenged the usual distance between artefact and onlooker to which one is accustomed in exhibitions. Despite this immersion, the distance between the viewer and what is displayed, mentioned by Baxandall (1991) and Bourdieu (1993), is nevertheless maintained because even though viewers are immersed they are not permitted to touch the objects that make up the installation.



Fig. 5.9 Penny Siopis, *Sympathetic Magic*, 2002. Installation view, (lower level), University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Editions.

In *Sympathetic magic*, as with her other installations, such as *Reconnaissance 1900-1997*, (1997), familiar objects were made strange, evoking a Surrealist sense of the uncanny through the new relationships between objects in this arrangement. Viewers encountered seemingly familiar objects, in strange juxtapositions, and unusual positions. Many objects were on their sides, or partially obscured, heavy things were suspended above viewers' heads. In Siopis' installations, the uncanny is evoked in order to make us look again at those things that usually go unnoticed, thereby challenging what Miller (2005, 5) refers to as "the humility of things."

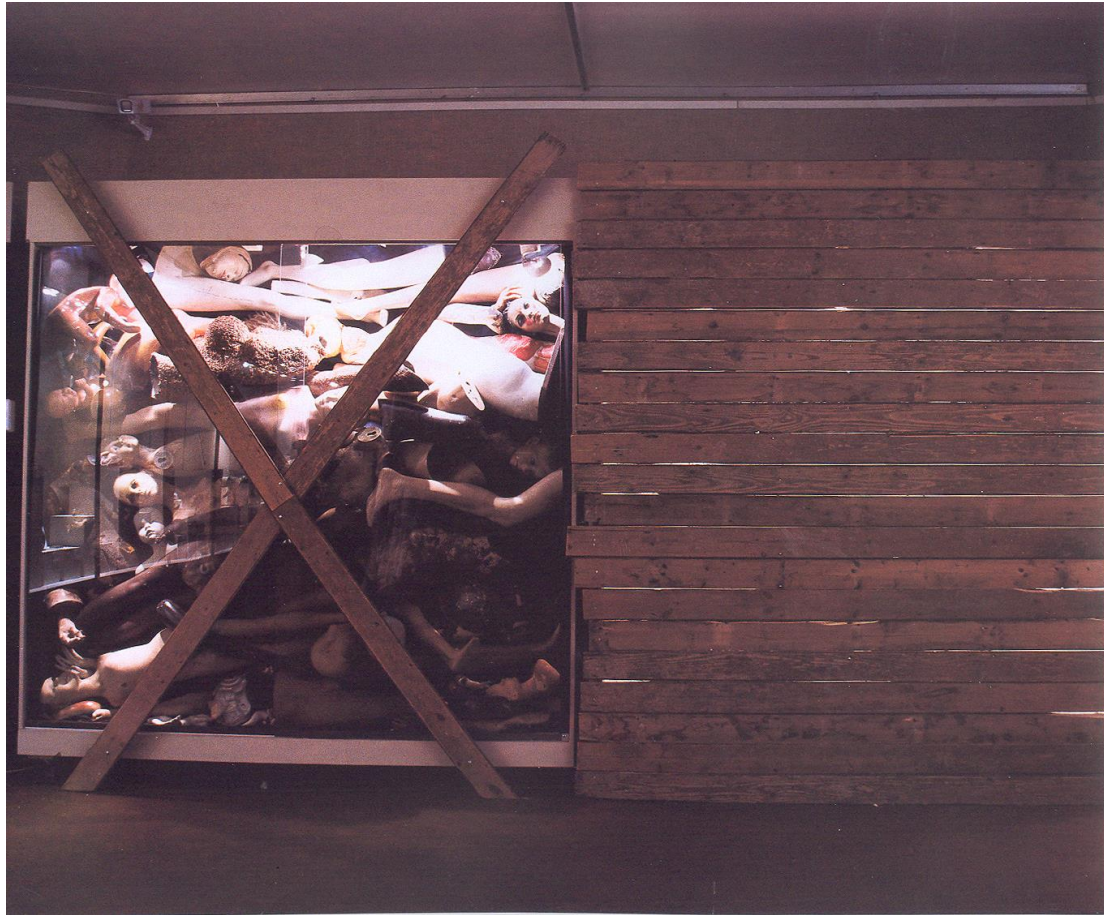


Fig 5.10 Penny Siopis, *Sympathetic Magic*, 2002 installation view, (lower level), University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Editions.

By contrast to the immersion viewers experienced in the pile and cave, glass separated the viewers from the objects installed in the gallery's permanent vitrines. In a vitrine along one of the walls was an installation of mannequins' body parts stacked on top of each other, evoking a pile of corpses (fig 5.10). Next to this was a boarded up vitrine with light coming through the cracks in the panels. There was not enough of a gap between the boards to see what, if anything was inside the vitrine. This was reminiscent of the artist's previous site-specific installation titled *Permanent collection*, (fig 5.11) for which the artist borrowed a

number of African artworks from the Standard Bank Collection of African art housed at the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries.¹¹⁹



Fig. 5.11 Penny Siopis, *Permanent Collection*, 1995. Mixed media installation including African art, artefacts, in downstairs exhibition space of the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries, as part of the First Johannesburg Biennale, 1995. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Editions.

Distinguishing objects

Adjacent to the installations of mannequins (fig. 5.10) Siopis created an installation using artworks from the Standard Bank Collection of African Art housed at the University of the

¹¹⁹ Law, (2002) points out that *Permanent collection* (1995) was an installation of African art, and Siopis' personal artefacts, exhibited in the downstairs exhibition space of the Wits art gallery, as part of the First Johannesburg Biennale, 1995. Siopis used objects from the Standard Bank Collection of African art, which she exhibited alongside mannequins that she covered in sugar, coffee and spices. Her first film, *Per kind permission*, (1994) which consisted of a drawing of an African mask followed by a drawing of a portrait of the artist, was drawn onto a rectangle of whitewash on Siopis's back by a pair of gloved, disembodied hands, was played on a television monitor that was also placed in the vitrine. The African artworks were used in a similar manner in *Sympathetic Magic* (2002) discussed chapter.

Witwatersrand Art Galleries (fig. 5.12). These included southern African milk pails, which she placed lying on their sides; southern African beadwork, headrests, west African masks, a mancala board, drums, baskets and mat racks. The artworks were wrapped with layers of batting- that approximated a form of geographical sedimentation around the objects, which symbolically made them into obscure archaeological artefacts buried within the museum. As in the presentation of the objects in the pile and cave', this seemingly random collection of artworks from the Standard Bank Collection of African Art was displayed without any reference to their original functions, where they were from, and what they are.



Fig. 5.12 Penny Siopis, *Sympathetic Magic*, 2002. Installation view, (lower level), University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Editions.

In Siopis's disregard of the ontological history of these artworks' first being removed from their contexts of use, second being disoriented in their physical orientation through lying on their sides, thereby denying their function, these artworks are multiply displaced. This arrangement evokes death, as do the mannequins' limbs and torsos that appear as if they are a pile of corpses in the adjacent vitrine. The African artworks are presented as if buried in layers of sediment; unknown and unknowable. Siopis here stripped their uniqueness and symbolically relegated them to obscurity. In their non-specificity, and the ways they were displayed and wrapped, they were reduced to piles of things signifying and obscuring 'African culture'.

Through obfuscating the African artworks' specificity, their agency is also denied; they are turned into pile of 'things', not unlike the manner in which the objects in the cave are presented as a 'pile' of things. There are similarities in the effect of the presentation, but there are also differences: one is that, unlike the objects in the pile, the African artworks were behind glass, increasing the distance between them and the viewer. They were not part of the space of the viewer, and by implication, they were not part of the life worlds of the viewer. This reinforces the fact that the artworks from the Standard Bank Collection of African Art are ontologically distinguished from those things in the pile; the African artworks are not part of the same kind of detritus of everyday life that made up Siopis' pile. Even though all of the African artworks Siopis buried in batting had been made and used within domestic and/or public settings, they had already been retrieved from their potential end on a pile of detritus when they were selected, taken out of everyday circulation and included in the Standard Bank Collection of African Art. This retrieval had happened in a

politically-inflected context of debates on/around the status of African art as artworks, under Apartheid. In collecting these objects, as part of an art collection, the curators at the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries challenged constructions of African art as artefact, such as those discussed by Danto (1988), as somehow less valuable as art from the West. Not only did Siopis make use of pre-selected objects, her display was insensitive to the politically inflected debates around these objects. Whether Siopis managed to highlight and transcend the problematic ways in which different objects are sanctified in museum displays or whether she reproduces those practices is questionable.¹²⁰

Favouritism

It is evident that not all objects were treated in the same manner by Siopis in this series of installations. The pile and the cave of objects (broken old things) were distinguished from the display of the painting as a single object, and also from the African artworks (lying on

¹²⁰ One might question the extent to which Siopis was empathetic to these artworks and their meanings, and the contested nature of the history of the display of objects like this, or as a contemporary artist, working within the established discourses of appropriation, and installation, is she exempt from such ethical issues? In the introduction to *Appropriation*, Evans (2009) points out that, within post-modernist art, appropriation is an accepted mode of art making that is sometimes a strategy for challenging the originality of the artwork, and thereby the aura of art. Within this art-making praxis, argues Evans (2009), it is considered acceptable to make use of found objects, found images, and materials, which are included in artworks to which the artist is given authorship. This mode of art making encourages a position of aloofness in the artist who, it appears, may take whatever image she wants to use. Lippard (2010) challenges the aloofness of the modernist construction of the artist as 'participant-observer', not subject to the same moral code as mere mortals that continues to pervade post-modern constructions of the artist. Lippard (2010) argues for a more ethically aware art. Lippard (2010) is particularly critical of acts of appropriation in which artists make use of objects or images of other cultures, when there are unbalanced power relationships, and the artist gains through the exploitation of others. Further, Lippard argues that projects that are called 'interventions' are often invasive, and superficial. Lippard (2010) argues that truly social art is often not recognised as such by the art world because it has sacrificed aesthetics for social action and radical politics. She states:

Artists have a social mandate to take risks. Yet unequal power makes unequal risks, and aesthetic daring must be balanced with responsibility (accountability) to the communities with whom the creators are creating (Lippard 2010, 25-26).

For more on the ethics of appropriation in contemporary art see Evans (2009) and Young and Brunk (2012).

their sides and buried under batting) and the other objects displayed in the vitrines. The only space in this series of installations where the specificity of objects was foregrounded was in the installation of the on-going artwork *Will*, 1997- (fig 5.12).



Fig. 5.13 Penny Siopis, *Will*, 1997-. Installation details from *Sympathetic Magic*, 2002. Installation view (lower level), University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries. Image courtesy of the artist.

Sympathetic magic (2002) seems to be the one exhibition in which Siopis focuses on the ontological status of the objects she uses; the manner in which objects are presented communicates the different values that are attached to objects. In other constellations of her archive of objects, such as *Charmed Lives* (1998), Siopis has not distinguished the objects so carefully. For example, there is a contrast between the seeming chaos of the objects in the pile and cave and the singling out, and order of the objects presented in *Will* 1997- (fig. 5. 13). Significantly, the isolation of the objects, on plinths, with labels and lights,

within the glass cabinets marked these objects as different from those which were part of the pile or obfuscated in layers of batting. The plinth and spotlight signalled that these objects, removed from everyday circulation, were significant, special, and worthy of looking at. The labels provided viewers with personal information, including details about what the object was, where it was from, and who it is bestowed on and why. The objects in *Will 1997-* include Siopis's son's first lost tooth, a small bottle containing the artist's blood (fig 5.14), the taxidermied monkey that was the model for the monkey in *Melancholia* (1986), figurines collected by the artist which have appeared in other paintings and installations as well as African National Congress (ANC) paraphernalia, amongst other things.



Fig. 5.14 Penny Siopis *Will, 1997- , 2015*. Detail of the work as exhibited on *Time and Again* at Wits Art Museum. Photo: Alison Kearney. Image courtesy the artist and Wits Art Museum.

Most of the objects are of little monetary value, yet have great sentimental value as they point to the artist's personal history, to which viewers are given access through the labels. The labels construct narratives for the objects, whose significance would otherwise have been obscure. Through these texts viewers were privy not only to the objects' pasts as seen by Siopis, but also to their Siopis- imagined futures. Thus, in *Will*, 1997- these objects' agency as nodes in a social network of relations was foregrounded and their value emphasised by their isolation. Not only are the objects that are part of *Will* 1997- singled out in the manner in which they are displayed, the title *Will* 1997- turns them into heirlooms. Because of their claimed heirloom status, conveyed to the viewer in the title of the work, these objects are given an added layer of significance and value.

In the introductory essay accompanying the catalogue, curator Jennifer Law (2002, p. 7) points out that sympathetic magic is "the art of influencing events through the dual enchanted principles of contact and imitation". This is the 'sympathetic magic' to which the title of the exhibition refers. Within this, the heirloom that is bestowed through a will is understood as

...a special kind of gift- one which aims to extend a life beyond death through a process of projected possession, *habitation* and renaissance (Law, 2002, 8).

Law (2002) further discusses the idea of an heirloom in terms of Mauss's notions of gift giving and exchange. For Mauss (1954) objects that have been exchanged, bind the givers and the recipients through a magical sympathy of sorts. The relationships created through processes of gift giving and exchange and the way that the heirloom both signifies death, and yet symbolically prolongs life are of primary interest to Law.

Law (2002, 10) states

This exhibition takes *Will 1997*- the projected end of a life still in progress- as its point of departure to reflect upon the historical biography made corporeal through the heirloom and thereby chart a system of inheritance via a material network of social relations past, present and future.

Further, in Law's essay, objects are framed to signify 'the body of the artist', through the synecdoche of the heirloom.¹²¹ After the death of the artist those heirlooms will stand in for the body of the artist, symbolically prolonging her life. A conceptual link can be made between Mauss' (2009) conception of the gift, and the concept of the 'distributed object'. Gell (1998, 223-228) points out that a 'distributed object' has a synecdochal relationship with the owner, and in certain cultural the object stands in for, and *is* the absent person. Thus, in the context of use, the object has all the agency and power of the absent person. It is important to note that within Gell's (1998) theory this is one instance of the agency of objects. Siopis's work *Will*, can be interpreted as an embodiment of this idea, since each part of *Will 1997*- is envisaged as a substitute for the artist's body after her death, as Law (2002) points out, the gift embodies/ signifies the giver. Thus, through the construction of these objects as 'heirlooms', the objects are imbued with meaning (acted upon), but also are given agency to influence relationships (between the giver and the recipient) and to extend the artist's life by proxy.

Ironically, in this exhibition, the process is alluded to but suspended in the process of the 'will' becoming artwork. The 'will' is constructed as an imagined future for objects frozen in

¹²¹ Law's discussion omits questions of how objects were displayed in the rest of the exhibition, and how these mechanisms of display obscured the specificity of the objects used. She, like Siopis does not question the artist's right to appropriation of others' objects, assumed in this series of installations.

the moment of exhibition (Law, 2002, 16). So the Maussian notion of the significance of the object in exchange is nullified because the object is no longer in that kind of exchange. There is a symbolic change rather than the symbolic exchange suggested by the title; the objects are no longer in circulation, and have undergone transformation through their inclusion in this series of installations.

In this series of installations Siopis deliberately uses the framing devices that are part of the conventions of display to create specific encounters with objects. Through treating objects differently in this series of installations, Siopis directed the viewers' attention to the manner in which the value of objects and their place in the order of things is communicated through the way objects are displayed in the field of exhibition. Further, Siopis's orchestration of the viewers' encounters with objects in each installation foregrounded the relationships that exist between the agents in the field of exhibition.

Seejarim's engagement with the field of exhibition

The use of the conventions of display within the field of is evident in Seejarim's early works, such as *Fifty stories* (1997) (fig 5.15), which was exhibited as part of the *Urban Futures* exhibition, on the fiftieth floor of the Carlton Centre in central Johannesburg.¹²² To create *Fifty stories* (1997), Seejarim collected fifty objects that could fit in her pocket, while waiting

¹²² A fifty floor high sky scraper in the centre of Johannesburg completed in the 1970's. At the time it was the tallest building in the Southern Hemisphere and regarded as testament to South African Afrikaner ingenuity. It has a visitor's centre called the "Top of Africa" on the fiftieth floor, which tourists can visit to see a panorama of the city. The exhibition was held in the visitor's centre.

at bus stops, and walking around central Johannesburg.¹²³ Some of the objects Seejarim collected were used bus tickets, discarded key rings, and fragments of unidentifiable things. Objects that had lost their value and which were discarded were found by the artist, to be literally elevated fifty stories above the ground, and figuratively elevated as part of art. When at the 'Top of Africa' (fig. 5.16) one has a bird's eye view of the city. From this vantage point, we see its busyness, the tall buildings and bustling streets, but the details are lost. Exhibited in their little perspex boxes, those seemingly worthless objects formed a microcosm of the metropolis below, bringing into view minute details of the everyday against the backdrop of the panorama.

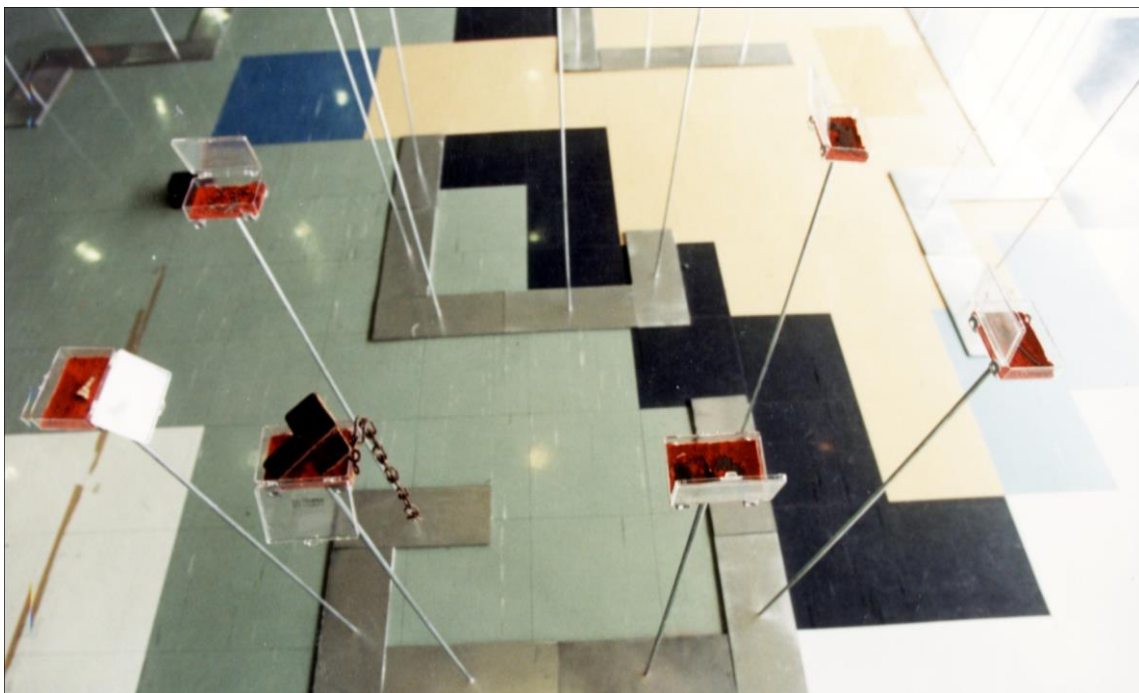


Fig. 5.15 Usha Seejarim, *50 Stories*, 1997. (Detail) Dimensions variable. Found objects, pigment perspex, steel. Image courtesy of the artist.

¹²³ This method of collecting recalls Karsten Bott's (1991) *Trouser pocket collection*, in which Bott collected things that could fit in his pocket while walking the streets of Cologne. Though possibly derivative, Seejarim's work is nevertheless differentiated from Bott's through the manner in which she displays her work and because the objects are connected to the place they were from.

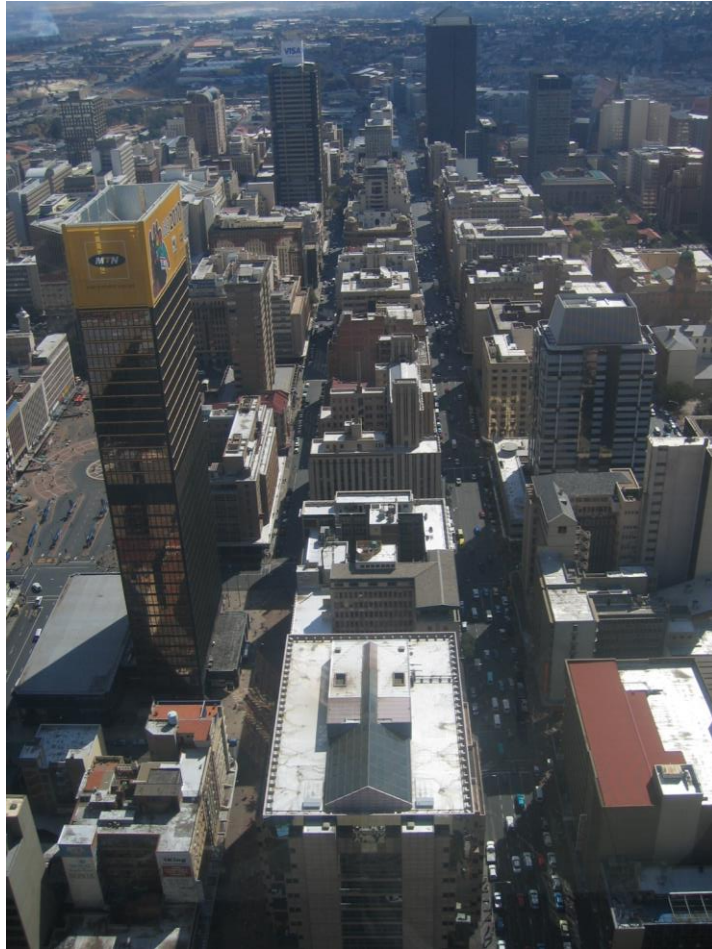


Fig. 5.16 View from the 'Top of Africa': the 50th floor of the Carlton centre, looking west onto Johannesburg. Photo: Alison Kearney.

The plastic containers on special plinths that Seejarim made for the objects she collected while walking the streets of Johannesburg were reminiscent of the small vitrines in which insect specimens used to be kept in entomological collections. In this context these makeshift vitrines signalled 'preciousness' and 'fragility'. By singling these objects out from others that look like them, and presenting those objects in this manner, Seejarim made use of the conventions of display to suggest that even those objects which appear to be trash, are special, worthy of keeping, and worthy of display. Thus, even though this work was made to be exhibited outside the gallery, the conventions of display signal to those viewers

who have been inducted into the forms of looking that are required in the field of exhibition, to look in particular ways.

Challenging discourses of art

For the most part Seejarim's engagement with the discourses of art occurs through her choice of materials and the manner in which she presents them. One work, *Cow's Head* (2012) (fig. 5.17), first exhibited on Seejarim's travelling solo exhibition *Venus at Home*, (2012) stands out in its direct challenging of the male dominance and whiteness of the white cube. *Cow's head* (2012) can be understood as a reinterpretation of Picasso's *Bull's head* (1942), which was originally confined to the artist's studio then released into the white cube.¹²⁴ In place of the handle bars and bicycle seat Picasso used to construct *Bull's head* (1942), Seejarim has used an iron and a hanger to construct *Cow's Head* (2012).



Fig. 5.17 Usha Seejarim, *Cow's Head*, 2012. Assemblage with found objects including hanger and iron. Photo: Alison Kearney. Image courtesy of the artist.

¹²⁴ Pablo Picasso, *Tête taureau (Bull's head)*, (1942). Bicycle seat and handle bars. 33.5 x 43.5 x 19cm. Musée Picasso, Paris.

In both works, the animal evoked is gendered. Picasso used the handle bars and bicycle seat to create an animal head that evokes the machismo of 'riding the bull', showing male prowess, and not something associated with women. The bicycle is also a means of transport, to get around town - historically (at the time of Baudelaire) associated with the *flâneur*: which comes from the French *flânerie*, which translates as 'stroller' or 'saunterer', and was associated with the male artist, who was thought of as part of social life but also aloof. By contrast, the hanger and iron used to construct *Cow's head* (2012) have been taken from the domestic sphere, historically the domain of women, and associated with women's work in many cultures. In making *Cow's Head* (2012), Seejarim makes use of the conventions of the field of exhibition, reinterpreting the artistic precedent that came before her work, thereby posing a challenge to the conception of the artist as a male and the history of art as the history of white men.

The artworks discussed in this chapter have engaged with the conventions of the field of exhibition, and challenged the idea that only certain kinds of things can be seen in the art-space through bringing quotidian objects into the field of exhibition that were not formally thought of as art. When artists engage with the conventions and the discourses that attend the field of exhibition, they construct meanings for the artworks and objects on display, thereby making that which is usually *invisible* visible. Through their utilisation or inversion of the conventions of the field of exhibition, artists are engaging with the power relationships within the field. While acknowledging the influence that the conventions of the field of exhibition exert, it is important to recognise that the artworks are active agents which also influence the construction of meaning within this field.

Chapter six

Materiality

The materiality of found objects

Having explored the ontological status of quotidian objects in chapter three, I then considered the difference between artworks and commonplace objects in chapter four. This led me to an investigation of the manner in which meanings are constructed for objects and artworks in the field of exhibition in chapter five. I argued that it is through utilising or inverting the conventions of the field of exhibition, that curators and artists are able to frame the viewer's orientation towards artworks and other objects on display. When artists such as Siopis, Seejarim and Alborough make use of, or invert, the conventions of the field of exhibition, they comment on the activities of the different agents within the field of exhibition, and expose the power relationships within the field. The artworks are also active agents which influence the construction of meaning within this field. When recognisable found objects are used in artworks, these objects are agentive in that they bring with them chains of associations which influence the possible interpretations of the artworks. Part of the significance of objects lies in their materiality, and the meanings that the objects accrue as they move through social practices, which are subsumed into the materiality of the artworks. Therefore in this chapter, I explore some ways in which the materiality of found objects contributes to the meaning of the artworks in which they are enmeshed. I begin with a discussion of the concept of materiality, and its implications for art history. I refer to

some of the limits of the concept of materiality for art history identified by Elkins (2008). I argue for a broadening of the concept of materiality through adopting a social-anthropological approach towards understanding the materiality of objects. I make links between the social-anthropological approach to materiality and Danto's (2013) conception of the artwork as 'meaning embodied'.

Art and materiality

For Elkins (2008) theories of materiality are important when considering contemporary theories of looking at art. Elkins (2008, 25) argues that contemporary theories of looking at art have abandoned the notion of the "disembodied eye" that was part of high modernist and formalist theories of visuality, and have moved towards understanding seeing as an "embodied experience". He posits that this shift is a response to postmodern and poststructuralist art-making practices that involve immersion and audience participation, resulting in artworks that are often olfactory and auditory as much as they are visual. Consideration of the materiality of such artworks is seen as a way to interpret these artworks.

Despite these shifts in theories of art, Elkins (2008) argues that the concept of materiality is problematic for art historians. He posits three, connected, reasons for this. One has to do with what Elkins (2008, 26) refers to as "the limits of phenomenological detail", which the art historian encounters when drawing on phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty (2008). The limits are, Elkins (2008) suggests, a consequence of differences in critical vocabulary

because describing the materiality of artworks requires more specificity than phenomenological accounts enable. Fundamental to this problem are the different purposes of the art historian and phenomenologist. Elkins (2008) suggests that the art historians are interested in particular details to enable particular readings of specific artworks, whereas the phenomenologists refer to particular instances only in order to make generalisations that enable understanding and interpretation of experience.¹²⁵ Therefore, according to Elkins (2008, 26), art historians seldom use Merleau-Ponty directly.

Another reason why the concept of materiality is problematic for art historians according to Elkins (2008) is that it is easier to discuss “theories of materiality” than to discuss the actual materiality of specific artworks. This he refers to as “the fear of materiality” (Elkins 2008, 27). In *What painting is* Elkins (1999) attempted an analysis of artworks that focused on the materiality of paintings. In his analysis Elkins (2008) described small areas of particular paintings in such detail that he took note of each brush stroke and mark. Reflecting on this earlier work, Elkins (2008, 28) points out that his book was criticised “for giving up the *history* of oil painting in order to talk in such myopic detail”. Elkins (2008, 28) confesses that he found it nearly impossible to reconcile his close looking, with an art historical account of the painting. Subsequently, he warns that such a narrow focus could make it impossible to see the artwork as a whole. Implicit in this is the view that, if we look too closely at each part separately, we are no longer able to see or discern that which we are looking at. A further problem Elkins (2008, 28) identifies through his attempt at such close scrutiny, is that “it becomes excruciatingly difficult to keep talking or writing when you are looking very

¹²⁵ I explore the possibilities of phenomenological approaches to understanding the representation of lived experience in chapter seven.

closely.” Nevertheless Elkins (2008) argues that there is no real reason not to continue focussing on the detail of the materiality of a painting, but that art historians do not, because of the difficulties in persisting. Elkins (2008, 27) states:

In art history, it is a *topos*, a commonplace, to assert that we are interested in materiality and physicality. But it is a *fact*, [sic] an unpleasant one, that the overwhelming majority of art historians and critics do not want to explore beyond the point where writing becomes difficult.

Further, Elkins (2008, 27) argues that, because they are so personal, such close readings become increasingly difficult to “attach to other people’s meanings”. This, I imagine, makes it difficult for such writing to be *persuasive*, to use Moxey’s (2001) term.

For Elkins (2008, 29) the third limitation of the concept of materiality is linked to the disjuncture between, “the slowness of the studio” which is part of the process of making art, and the (relative) speed with which ideas can come when writing about art. Elkins (2008) posits that the art-historian grappling with the materiality of artworks, should slow down, and take time for ideas to emerge, not unlike, Elkins imagines, the artist taking time to think through making, and allowing the artwork to emerge. Thus, Elkins (2008, 30) argues, real materiality is “the sense of matter substance experienced by artists.” Elkins’s discussion of the ‘slowness of the studio’ resonates with the manner in which Siopis (2014b) describes her working methods with paint and with objects. For example, at times when creating her *Shame* (2002-) series (fig. 6.1) Siopis quickly smears paint onto the canvas, at other times she pours ink and glue onto the surface, and waits for the slow pooling of the glue; often images emerge as the glue and ink dry (fig 6.2).



Fig. 6.1. Penny Siopis, *Shame Series* (2002-.) Ink, glue, oil paint on board. Installation view, Wits Art Museum, 2015. Photo: Alison Kearney. Image courtesy of the artist and Wits Art Museum.



Fig. 6.2 Penny Siopis *Shame Series*, 2002- (Detail). Mixed media on paper, 18.5 x 24.5cm. Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist.

Pollock (2014) argues that the visceral ink, sometimes smeared, sometimes splattered, at other times pooling, or bleeding into glue, evokes a sense of violence, vulnerability, and pain. In this series (as with Siopis's earliest paintings in which she applied the paint with cake icing nozzles) the materiality of the media, and the manner in which she applies them, are part of the content and subject of the artwork.

It is possible to extend the concept of 'the slowness of the studio' to the methods Siopis uses when working with objects. Referring to the ways in which she constructs her installations, Siopis (2014c) states that there are similarities between her painting process and the manner in which she works with objects. As she selects and places objects in her installations, she considers each in relation to the other as she would consider each new mark in relation to others when drawing or painting. Siopis, in conversation with Olivier, (2014), states that, because of her method of working in response to objects and contexts, it is important that she creates the installations herself. Her working methods enable her to reuse the objects, and respond to them in different situations. Siopis (2014c, 111) states:

The method for constructing the installations is similar to making a painting. It's contingent, but there's logic to the way the objects are arranged- something that emerges through the making. The installations are created in the moment, in situ, and each one is different. ...The objects are like an archive, which I use similarly to how I use film.... It's an ephemeral art really. The objects get taken down and become like paint tubes again.

Using the objects as a medium, Siopis works with the objects' materiality, including their physical properties and the associations they have accrued to create surprising juxtapositions within her artworks. The surprising juxtapositions that are created when different sorts of things are placed next to each other, as can be seen in this detail of *Charmed lives* (2015)(fig. 6.3) in which ballet shoes are hung next to army camouflage and

bullet shells, elicit an emotive response for viewers. While these relationships are contrived to purposely to do so, they nevertheless point to the fact that in life, feelings do not always have clear boundaries: pain, pleasure, torture and beauty often coincide.



Fig. 6.3 Penny Siopis, *Charmed Lives*, 2015. Detail of installation, exhibited on *Time and again* at Wits Art Museum, 2015. Photo: Alison Kearney. Image courtesy of the artist and Wits Art Museum.

The specificity of these objects, as well as the associations they elicit, are essential to Siopis's art-making praxis and the audience's interpretation of the artworks. This is affirmed by Siopis (2014c, 116) who states:

...it's the particular tactility of each object that is as important to me as what it means symbolically.

Through her constant reuse of her collection of objects, Siopis harnesses the materiality of the objects, adding layers to their already rich social lives. As they are reused the objects themselves change: literally when they break, and symbolically because they acquire history and additional layers of meaning with each exhibition.

A social-anthropological theory of materiality

The limits of materiality that Elkins (2008) identifies arise because of a conception of materiality that relies on 1) the physical qualities of an artwork, coupled with 2) an interpretation of the experience of the artist when making the artwork. This conception of materiality surely leads to an analysis which disassociates the art work from the contexts in which it was produced and is exhibited, and speculates about the artists' experiences which are situated in a field from which the viewer is excluded. Such a decontextualisation is problematic for the critical art history that underpins this study. I argue that it is possible to get around the limitations of the concept of materiality that Elkins (2008) identifies through adopting a social-anthropological conception of materiality.

The concept of materiality, as it is used by anthropologists such as Miller (2005) and Woodward (2007), resonates with critical art history (and the iconology that came before it). For Miller (2005, 4), materiality does not only refer to the physicality of objects, but also their expressive capacity, which is the capacity of objects to hold the different meanings that we place upon them as they move through different social spaces. Miller (2005, 4)

argues that materiality refers to “the ephemeral, the imaginary, the biological and the theoretical; all that which would have been external to the simple definition of an artefact”.

Likewise for Woodward (2007, 55) materiality denotes:

...the relations between people and objects, especially the way in which social life is inherently structured by everyday dealings with objects, such as technology or objects of memory.

These definitions encompass more than the mere physicality of an object. They include the relationship of the object to the system in which it operates, and make reference to the social life of the object. Such conceptions of materiality allow for the consideration of the changed status of the found object as artwork, and the impact of the context in which we encounter the artwork on the meanings that we infer through looking at/interacting with the artwork. Further, Woodward’s definition of materiality brings people and objects together. This resonates with Miller’s (2010) concept of the humility of things, in which objects are understood to have agency to shape us as much as we shape them.

Embodied meaning

Broader possibilities of interpretation emerge for the discussion of found objects in art when art historians adopt social-anthropological views of materiality, such as those shared by Miller (2005) and Woodward (2007). Through these conceptions of materiality, the physicality of the artworks, as well as the associations and meanings accrued by the found objects, which are brought into the artwork, are recognised as contributors to the meaning of the artworks. A social-anthropological focus on the materiality of the artwork can be

understood as a return to the object, such as that Boivin (2008) advocates. This approach to materiality also resonates with Danto's (2013, 37) suggestion that artworks are "embodied meanings". Danto (2013) sums up the development of his philosophy on the ontology of art that began when he first encountered Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1961). Danto (2013, 37) states:

I thought that works of art are about something and I decided that works of art accordingly have meaning. We infer meanings but meanings are not material. I then thought that, in artworks, unlike sentences with subjects and predicates, the meanings are *embodied* in the object. Thus, I declared that works of art are *embodied meanings*.

The social-anthropological understanding of materiality that is used in this study leads to retaining the social and political aspects of the meanings that accrue to objects as part of the signifying structures in the artworks, thereby helping to keep my discussion from falling into a formalist reductivism. Further, the social-anthropological idea of materiality resonates with critical art history in which we consider the object and the context in which we encounter the object as part of the meaning-producing structure of the artwork. This is particularly useful for a discussion of artworks which incorporate found objects that have or had particular significance when they are/were previously part of the world outside the gallery. Such a focus on materiality moves beyond the idea of the found object as anti-art, and opens the discussion to a consideration of the implications of the particular found objects on the meaning of the artwork.

Alborough's *Heathen Wet Lip* (1997) (fig 6.4) lends itself to analysis that considers the influence the materiality of found objects has on the possible meanings of the artworks.

Heathen Wet Lip was exhibited at the South African National Gallery as part of the exhibition '*Graft*', curated by Colin Richards.¹²⁶



Fig.6.4 Alan Alborough *Heathen Wet Lip*, 1997. Dried and salted elephant's ears and feet, rope, chain, pulleys, clamps, canteen tables. Dimensions variable. Installation view, South African National Gallery 1997. Image courtesy of the artist.

For this site-specific installation Alborough utilised the architecture of the South African National Gallery, not unlike the method in which Siopis later utilised the Wits Art Gallery space for *Sympathetic magic* (2002) (discussed in chapter five). Richards (2002), (who curated the exhibition), points out that when constructing this work Alborough characteristically paid attention to the site and conditions of viewing. Alborough selected a particular room in the South African National gallery, in which its neoclassical architecture

¹²⁶ *Graft* was part of the second Johannesburg Biennale, in 1997. The central theme of the biennale was trade routes, history and geography. Although the biennale was held in Johannesburg, a number of exhibitions, including *Graft*, were held in Cape Town, because the Cape of Good Hope was the former port of the Dutch East India Company, during colonial expansion.

was foregrounded. There he created an installation using a mixture of industrial and organic elements, arranged with meticulous attention to the relationships between the parts of the installation, the space, and the lighting. Alborough used dried elephant's ears and taxidermied elephant's feet to construct what appeared to be the sails and hull of a ship, reminiscent of those sailed by the Dutch East India Company. Even though Alborough did not use the whole elephant to make this work, the parts of the elephant that have been used are intact and recognisable as particular hunter trophies (see figs. 6.5 and 6.6 for detail views). Elephant ears were/are dried to be hung on walls, and taxidermied elephants' feet were/are routinely used as pedestals for tables in living rooms, or made into canteen tables¹²⁷. While challenging the boundaries of the definition of found objects used in this study, these found objects are nevertheless recognisable, and retain their associations from the social field.

Despite the fact that Alborough obtained the elephant's ears and feet from the Kruger National park, who routinely cull elephants to preserve the environment (Williamson 2009, 215), the use of actual elephant body parts in this installation is somewhat shocking in view of their endangered species status. The fragmented, objectified parts of once living elephants, which links to the histories indexed above, elicits an emotive response in viewers that would not be so potent had some kind of substitute been used.

¹²⁷ These practices continue today. It is possible to buy contemporary elephant foot stools, made to order, online. See for example Unknown. Elephant foot table mounts: <http://northeasttaxidermy.com/african-big-game/6111/elephant-foot-table-mounts>



Fig. 6.5 Alan Alborough, *Heathen Wet Lip* 1997. (Detail) Dimensions variable. Dried and salted elephant's ears and feet, rope, chain, pulleys, clamps, canteen tables.



Fig. 6.6 Alan Alborough, *Heathen Wet Lip*, 1997. (Detail). Dimensions variable. Dried and salted elephant's ears and feet, rope, chain, pulleys, clamps, canteen tables. Image courtesy of the artist.

Richards (2002, 39) asks:

What could be more emphatically material than the sheared, salted ears of elephants, strung up like flags rigged on a structure of chains, pulley's clamps? One glimpses some kind of outlandish ship or even an elaborate animistic gallows constructed on the very material pseudo-classicism of the national gallery interior. How absolutely material are the chafed, cracked feet displayed on bluntly utilitarian "canteen tables".

Alborough's use of elephants' ears and elephant foot tables, however acquired, indexes their past usage as hunters' trophies, and indexes their appearance on jumble sales etc. across the European colonial empires, after such trophies had gone out of fashion. This fits in with their 'white elephant' status as suggested by the title of the work, which is an anagram for 'white elephant';¹²⁸ an unwanted thing that has lost its value/usefulness for the owner, but that is difficult to get rid of. The phrase "white elephant" can also refer to something that is expensive to maintain, whose upkeep is more expensive than its value.

In this work, (and all artworks according to Danto, 2013), the meaning is embodied in the object and the manner in which it is presented. The mutilated elephant, understood as synecdoche for the African continent and its people, here made into an image suggestive of colonial ships, could be interpreted as a comment that the plundering of Africa has led to the wealth of the west. In the wake of colonial exploitation, Africa is now the white elephant: it has lost its value and is rendered somewhat useless. *Heathen Wet Lip* is an example of an artist harnessing the power of association through using provocative materials, and manipulating the mechanisms of display in the field of exhibition, to create

¹²⁸ A white elephant is defined as something "burdensome, unwanted possession (from the cost of maintenance)" (Oxford English Dictionary).

an artwork that enables viewers to think in different and nuanced ways about the subject of the artwork. This is the agency of art to which Gell (1998) refers.

Venus at home

Unpacking the materiality of the objects used by Seejarim in her *Venus at Home* (2012)¹²⁹ (fig. 6.5) series brings new inflections to the understanding of these artworks. In this body of works the materiality of the found objects used, contributes to the possibilities of meaning of each artwork as a whole.



Fig. 6.7 Usha Seejarim, *Venus at Home*, 2012. Installation view, Johannesburg Art Gallery, 2012. Photo: Alison Kearney. Image courtesy of Johannesburg Art Gallery and the artist.

¹²⁹ This exhibition was first mounted in Grahamstown 2012, and subsequently travelled to various exhibition spaces around South Africa between 2012- 2014. My discussion focusses on the exhibition as it was installed at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2012.

Seejarim used second-hand mops, buckets, irons, ironing boards, brooms, and hand brushes and scoops that she collected from family and friends to create her series of works. As such, these objects can be understood as indexes of her social network, connecting those who gave the artist the objects.¹³⁰ Seejarim deliberately made use of the objects in the state that they were given to her: they smelled rancid; they were dusty, balding and burnt out. This dirt, so out of place in the pristine exhibition space, was integral to the artworks.

The title of the exhibition invokes Venus, the Roman goddess of passionate love, beauty and pleasure. Throughout Western art, representations of Venus constitute a (changing) ideal of beauty and femininity. Venus is often depicted reclining languidly, as in Titian's *The Venus of Urbino*, 1538¹³¹, or in scenes from her mythology, as in Peter Paul Ruben's *Venus and Adonis*, c1630.¹³² Such representations construct images of what a woman as lover should (according to Western standards of the time) look like, as well as point to a wife's fidelity, and her role as mother. In Seejarim's series of works *Venus at home*, the dirty, used mops, brooms, buckets and scoops in are the very opposite of the associations of leisure and aristocracy that representations such as Titian's evoke. Thus, in this body of works, the passion, sexuality and beauty of traditional images of Venus (alluded to in the title of the exhibition) is at odds with the materiality of the objects themselves. The mops smell, they are tattered, yet in these works they have a new life as art. The traces of their former use

¹³⁰ While not exactly the same, a similarity can be drawn between Seejarim's use of the mops and brooms from her family and friends, and Siopis's use of objects that were given to her by her mother and grandmother. In both instances the objects are nodes in broader social networks. Siopis makes her social networks visible in her work *Will 1997*-, through including records of the manner in which she obtained the objects, and to whom they are bestowed as part of the display.

¹³¹ Titian, *The Venus of Urbino*, (1538) 1.19 m x 1.65m. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

¹³² Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus and Adonis*, c1630. Oil on canvas, 77 3/4" by 95 5/8". Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. For more on the symbolism of Venus and her attendants see Carr- Gomm (1995).

invoke the body of the former user and their arrangement offers evidence of the artist's hand in making the artworks. The materiality of the brooms is visible through the evidence of their use. It is this former use and its material remains that lead to an understanding of their gendered nature and the accompanying associations. The connotations of gender and domesticity are reinforced by the title of the exhibition and the titles and imagery of individual works.



Fig. 6.8 Usha Seejarim, *Triangle*, 2012. Mixed media assemblage with brooms. Photo: Alison Kearney Image courtesy of the artist.

Into this mixture of signifiers are added the titles of works, such as *Triangle* (2012) (fig. 6.8), that deliberately allude to the pubis and the treatment of pubic hair. *Triangle* (2012) is made of a collection of used brooms, complete with dust, lint, and frayed bristles which challenge the romantic representations of the goddess of love through their imagery and their materiality. Further allusions to the pubis are evident in the "*Hair styles series*", (fig.

6.9 and 6.10) in which used, dirty, mops have been grouped together to resemble popular styles of pubic hair waxing. The subtitles of each work in the series are taken from these waxing styles, for example '*Brazilian*' and '*Landing strip*'. Pubic hair is tamed through cutting, shaving and waxing. Control of hair is often a means/ indication of other forms of control- about conforming to social rules and about how to present one's self, in this instance presumably for one's lover. If we were to read the objects as standing in for the woman's body, because of their allusion to the feminine body via their reminiscence of pubic shapes and allusion to pubic hair waxing styles, then in Seejarim's works Venus is not a beautiful lover, but, tired, dirty, and used. These dystopic images counter discourses of "the ideal woman" suggested by the title of the exhibition and also call up images of domestic drudgery that is the everyday lot of many women.



Fig. 6.9 Usha Seejarim, *Hairstyles: Triangle*, 2012 Fig. 6.10 Usha Seejarim, *Hairstyles: landing strip*, 2012. Both mixed media assemblages with found objects including mops. Photos: Alison Kearney. Images courtesy of the artist.

Throughout this series of artworks, Seejarim challenges conventions around notions of what is taboo- it is taboo to exhibit the dirty mops that smell in the pristine space of the gallery, and pubic hair is also 'taboo', usually hidden or removed. There is potential for embarrassment in making pubic hair styles the subject of artworks, but the exposure of the taboo works against embarrassment. Further, Seejarim's allusion to notions of the ideal women that representations of Venus connote can be understood as part of her challenging of the discourse of art.

Exploring relationships

The artworks in *Venus at home* explore relationships of different kinds. There is the relationship between the materiality of the used brooms, mops etc. contrasted with the pristine gallery space. Through the manner in which Seejarim has assembled these artworks, the material relationships of the actual brooms and mops that make up each of the works is explored. In *Triangle* (fig. 6.6) the formal relationship of the colour and texture of the bristles has been considered in the arrangement of the brooms next to each other. It is clear that the artist has considered the relationships of the tones and textures created by the strands of the mops when assembling these sculptures. This indicates sensitivity to the aesthetic dimension of the artworks as well as the conceptual.

Another set of relationships that are explored in these works are the relationships among genders, classes and races in South Africa, because of the connotations of these domestic objects in contemporary South Africa. Domestic work is persistently thought of as women's

work in many communities. Further, many South African middle and upper class households employ domestic helpers who commonly use brooms in homes, not necessarily the home owners or the occupants of the home.¹³³ Cock (1980) points out that domestic work is almost always carried out by poor women, women of colour and immigrants. Drawing on Marxist-feminist discourses of women's labour, Ally (2010, 5) points out that paid domestic work reproduces the structures of inequality of a society. In freeing her bourgeois employers from the drudgery of childcare and house cleaning, the domestic worker enables her employers to pursue the accumulation of capital. Ally (2010) points out that in post-apartheid South Africa, in which there is a growing non-white middle and upper class, it is still mostly working class black women who are employed as domestic workers.¹³⁴ Thus, in a South African domestic context, cleaning items such as brooms and mops invoke the relationships between employers and their domestic helpers, since it is the domestic workers who are most likely to be the ones who use the brooms.¹³⁵

Familial relationships are also explored in this series of works, for example, the work titled *Family* (2010) (fig. 6.11) consists of a group of five similar brooms, in different states of

¹³³ For more on the history of domestic workers in South Africa during Apartheid, see Cock (1980), who points out that despite the separation of racial groups, the creation of a black servant class resulted in black women in particular being part of white family life during Apartheid. Shireen Ally's (2010) recent study focusses on the effects of the recognition of private domestic works as a legitimate workforce, protected by labour law in the democratic South African government after 1994, on the subjective experience of intimate labour.

¹³⁴ There are of course many men employed as cleaners in the domestic and industrial spaces of South Africa. These workers are often migrant labourers who leave their homes in rural areas and come to urban areas in search of work. The complexities of the migrant labour system and labour relations in South Africa are beyond the scope of this thesis. For more on this history, and the art that has been produced about and by migrant labourers, see Delius, Phillips, and Rankin-Smith (2014).

¹³⁵ Moving outside of South Africa, brooms may have additional significance. In India, for example, the broom may also be associated with domestic work, and with a different class system- based on birth. In an article in which she compares the human rights injustices of the Indian caste system to those of Apartheid, Roy (2014), points out that historically and in some parts of India today, members of the Maher caste were/ are expected to tie broom's to their waist's to sweep away their polluted footprints as they walk. The association of Seejarim's use of brooms with the caste system in India was suggested by Prof. Dilip Menon at a Wits Centre for Indian Studies in Africa (CISA) seminar where Seejarim presented her work in 2013. However, this is not my reading.

repair. In each, the broom bristles lean in different directions, forced to do so from long use. The title implies that the differences in the appearance of these brooms could be understood as a metaphor for the family, which is thought of as a unit, and yet made up of individuals who are idiosyncratic and different. *Three sisters in law* (2012) (Fig. 6.12) explores the relationship between women who are united by marriage into a family. The bangles that Seejarim used are customarily worn by, and therefore signify, married Indian women. I read the brooms as bodies of the married women, and the bangles as the bangles that these women would wear to show their married status. In this artwork, the bangles bind the brooms in uncomfortable relationships, which prevent the brooms from being able to be used.



Fig. 6.11 Usha Seejarim, *Family*, 2012. Installation with found objects including brooms and plastic rack. Photo: Alison Kearney. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 6.12 Usha Seejarim, *Three sisters in law* (2012). Mixed media assemblage including brooms and bangles. Photo: Alison Kearney. Image courtesy of the artist.

The work is presented standing on the gallery floor, leaning against the gallery wall- similarly to how one might encounter a broom in a home. The presentation reinforces the humility of the objects: they are just there. The placement of this work could be understood as a statement about that which binds women together, and a comment on the place of women in the domestic sphere. In contrast to the placement of *Three sisters in law* (2012) on the gallery floor, for *Dysfunctional relationship* (2012) (fig. 6.13) Seejarim makes use of the Marley tile flooring which is commonly used for kitchen floors in Lenasia (Seejarim 2013). In this work, made from a bucket and mop, the strings of the mop seep through the walls of the bucket that has been perforated (fig. 6.14). The autonomy of each object is thus interrupted. Just as the brooms can no longer be used for sweeping because they are constrained by the bangles, neither the bucket nor the mop can perform properly in this situation. If the mop and bucket are understood as partners in a relationship, what is

implied is this work is that for a relationship to work, each partner needs to retain its autonomy while working with the other partners to create a functional relationship.



Fig. 6.13 Usha Seejarim *Dysfunctional Relationship* (2012). Installation view. Mixed media assemblage including bucket, mops and floor tiling. Photo: Alison Kearney. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 6.14 Usha Seejarim *Dysfunctional Relationship* (2012) Close up. Mixed media assemblage including bucket, mops and floor tiling. Photo: Alison Kearney. Image courtesy of the artist.

The artworks in Seejarim's *Venus at home* series allude to the objectification of woman as cleaning utensil and sex object: this itself is not a new theme in feminist discourse. However, Seejarim's interpretation and use of objects to make these statements is innovative. The act of making the artworks can thus be understood as protest against stereotypical constructions of femininity as domestic. In her artist's statement Seejarim (2015) states:

Related to the search for meaning in the ordinary is a search for identity. It is the relationship of oneself to all this "stuff" that seems to define our existence. It is an analysis of identity further than culture, nationality, gender and heritage. It is a personal investigation of the self and the relationship of the self to its environment; an understanding of oneself beyond the labels of being female and African, beyond being a mother, and an artist.

The work *Lotus* (2012) (Fig.6. 15), also exhibited on *Venus at home*, reveals the tension between Seejarim's fascination with the everyday, and her attempts to transcend the ordinary, through artmaking. *Lotus* (2012) is made from an assemblage of irons, arranged so that the top of the irons resemble the open petals of a lotus flower. Swami Mukundananda (2014) points out that for Hindus the lotus is a sacred flower which symbolises detachment and spiritual development:

Those who dedicate their actions to God, abandoning all attachment, remain untouched by sin, just as a lotus leaf is untouched by water (Bhagavad Gita, 5: 10)¹³⁶.

The lotus flower is rooted in mud at the bottom of a pool of water, yet the petals rise above the water's surface and open towards the sun. Therefore, Swami Mukundananda (2014) points out:

...the lotus flower is often used in Sanskrit literature as an example of something that is born amidst the dirt, and rises above it while retaining its beautiful purity.

¹³⁶ The Bhagavad Gita is available online at <http://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org>.

These characteristics are attributed to the devotee, who works in divine consciousness and self-awareness, and is therefore untainted by the temptations of the world. Lotus leaves are included in the metaphor, because despite relying on the water on which they rest for sustenance, lotus leaves are waterproof. This is understood as a metaphor for the life of devotees, who remain untouched by sin, when they perform their work with divine consciousness, reached through meditation.



Fig. 6.15 Usha Seejarim, *Lotus*, 2012. Assemblage with irons. Photo: Alison Kearney. Image courtesy of the artist.

I am intrigued by the irons arranged in this manner. The irons are transformed into something beautiful, and yet they are inert- they are, unplugged, not hot; by contrast, when plugged-in, irons are potentially dangerous. The process of ironing is repetitive, and could be meditative in its monotony. Ironing is also a process of flattening and ironing out trouble/ creases/ disturbances to a surface. Suggested here is that just as the aesthetic may be found

in the most ordinary of objects, (as Duchamp showed us), so divine consciousness may be found in repetitive daily tasks, and perhaps focussing on the spiritual is a means to escape the drudgery of the ordinary. This reading resonates with Seejarim's personal beliefs as a practising Hindu (Seejarim 2013).

In using these found domestic objects in the condition in which they were given to her, Seejarim relies on the objects' unmediated materiality to evoke associations of their former lives. Although many of the objects such as mops, brooms and irons were mass produced, their former lives, indexed in the traces of use, make these objects unique. The objects that Seejarim used to make the works in *Venus at Home* (2012) bring these associations of their former lives with them into the artworks in which they are enmeshed, thereby influencing the viewers' interpretation of the artworks. Seejarim's reliance on the unmediated materiality of her objects can be contrasted against the uses to which Alborough puts his quotidian objects when using such objects as material to create artworks such as his untitled installation at Stellenbosch University Gallery (2000) and his untitled *Standard Bank Young Artist Award* (2000).

The materiality of things and things as material

Seejarim's used objects are different from new, as yet unused, mass-produced objects, such as those bought by Alborough to create his untitled *Standard Bank Young Artist Award* (2000) works. Alborough exploits the contrast between the ontological statuses of the cheap, mass-produced and readily available objects used to make the artworks, and the

ontological status of the resultant artworks as 'art'. The plastic tables, fluorescent lights, plastic tubes, cable ties, fabric, nails and plastic cotton reels Alborough used to create his installation were possibly selected because of their banality, and their physical qualities, that enabled them to be joined in particular ways to other objects in creating the artworks. The installation, which changed as the exhibition travelled to from one gallery to another, around South Africa for a year, was comprised of numerous rectangular sculptures.



Fig. 6.16 Alan Alborough, untitled *Standard Bank Young Artist Award*, 2000. Installation View, South African National Gallery.

These rectangular sculptures followed two designs. The first types (fig. 6.16) were labelled 'corrosion devices' by Edmunds (2000). The 'corrosion devices' were made from children's plastic water tables that were stacked on top of each other. A white fluorescent light shone from between the stacked tables, producing one of the few light sources in the exhibition, since the lighting in the galleries in which these artworks were exhibited was deliberately kept low. The result was that the sculptures appeared to glow; as if taken directly from a

science fiction film set. The tables were kept together with clamps that were placed at regular intervals along the edges of the tables; cable ties, reminiscent of the hairs on hairy caterpillars, protruded from these clamps. All the elements worked together to produce an industrial aesthetic, maintained through the mathematical precision with which the sculptures were made. There was minimal use of colour: black, white and silver. Everything appeared controlled, deliberate, measured, and orderly. The time it took to these machine-like sculptures was at odds with the disposable nature of the materials used to create the sculptures. On the table top, coils of white fabric soaked in saline solution, with nails imbedded in them at regular intervals, were placed on large sheets of thick white paper. Wires connected the nails to battery packs, sending an electrical current through them (fig. 6.17). This caused the nails to corrode, thereby speeding up the natural processes of rusting and oxidation. The corrosion resulted in a rusty residue that bled on to the paper upon which these coils were placed, producing drawings.¹³⁷ The 'corrosion devices' can therefore be thought of as drawing machines. In these works the artist's labour is to create the conditions for the drawing to be created rather than to draw. The drawings were displayed with the 'corrosion devices', accumulating over the duration of the exhibition (fig. 6.18).

¹³⁷ The corrosion process used to make drawings is the same as that used for the later exhibition at the Stellenbosch University Gallery (2000), which I discussed in chapter five.



Fig. 6.17 Alan Alborough, untitled *Standard Bank Young Artist Award*, 2000. Dimensions variable. Close up of 'corrosion device'. Mixed media installation including plastic tables, cable ties, cotton reels, batteries and paper. Installation detail, Monument Gallery, Grahamstown.



Fig. 6.18 Alan Alborough, untitled *Standard Bank Young Artist Award*, 2000. Dimensions variable. Mixed media installation including plastic tables, cable ties, cotton reels, batteries and paper. Installation detail, Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg.

A second type of rectangular sculpture, which I refer to as 'display devices' was created to hold the used coils after they became saturated with rusty residue; the 'display devices' were exhibited with the 'corrosion devices' and the drawings. The 'display devices' appeared different from the 'corrosion devices' in that they consisted of plastic tubing, joined at regular intervals, in a grid-like formation, to create a dome-like structure over the plastic tables at their base. Like the corrosion devices, each dome structure was lit from below with fluorescent lighting. Spokes, made from cotton reels were placed at each of the nodes of the dome (fig. 6.19). It was to these spokes that the used coils from the corrosion devices were attached.



Fig. 6. 19 Alan Alborough, untitled *Standard Bank Young Artist Award*, 2000. Detail, of the display devices, installed at the South African National Gallery. Image courtesy of the artist.

Within these sculptures, the individual found objects in the conglomerates lose their individuality almost completely within the whole. This emphasises that despite being

selected for their physical qualities and their social associations with the quotidian, and the banal, the objects were used as materials much like painters might use tubes of paint to create a painting. The two types of structures worked together with the other materials used to create the drawings, as parts of a whole installation that was reconfigured as the installation moved to different galleries around South Africa. As the installation moved to from gallery to gallery, at the start of each new exhibition, new batteries, paper, and coils were attached to the corrosion devices; beginning the process again. All the materials, including the used coils of fabric, spent batteries and drawings from previous exhibitions were exhibited as part of the next installation (fig 6.20). Everything that was used to create the drawings was exhibited; nothing was wasted.



Fig. 6.20 Alan Alborough, untitled *Standard Bank Young Artist Award*, 2000. Installation detail, showing display of used batteries. Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg.

This strategy meant that no two installations were alike. The series of exhibitions can be thought of as a “living artwork” that was only completed at the end of the exhibition run. This is an inversion of convention, in which ‘finished artworks’ are exhibited. For the duration of the exhibitions, everything used to create the artworks, and the debris from the corrosion machines, as well as the resultant drawings was exhibited in the field of exhibition. Through this, all the objects occupied the same ontological space as ‘art’. The drawings, although made through unconventional means, did not include found objects in them, so they are different in *kind*, but nevertheless maintain ontological status as artworks, for the duration of the exhibition, because they were exhibited as such. That the sculptures were dismantled after the exhibition caused yet another shift in the ontological status of these objects; these particular objects were formerly art, and then relegated back to the everyday¹³⁸.

Further, in creating ‘drawing machines’, and subsequently exhibiting the drawings made by the machines, alongside the machines as part of the travelling exhibition, Alborough makes the art making process the subject of this body of works. This could be construed as a critique of art competitions like the Standard Bank Young Artists Award, in which the artist is given a sum of money to make a body of works to be exhibited, thereby compelling the winning artist to make artworks on demand, so to speak. This is an example of an artist

¹³⁸ Alborough states: “The works from those shows came back to me and in time I dismantled most of them. I reuse bits if and when possible. I still have the corroded elements (still corroding) boxed away in my studio - none of them were re-articulated as other artworks, sold or went anywhere” (Pers. comm. Email to A. Kearney, 26 September 2015).

exposing the conventions of the field of exhibition through making art-making the subject of their artworks, discussed in chapter five.

Exploring contrasts

A number of contrasts were explored in this body of works. The installations were temporary, lasting only as long as the year-long exhibition. Thus, there was an ironic contrast between the permanence of the plastic materials, and the impermanence of the installation, and the corrosion drawings produced throughout the exhibition. A further irony is that the corrosive process, which is a process of decay, is used to create artworks in this series of works. Finally, the precision with which the 'drawing machines' were created stands in contrast with the organic, and somewhat uncontrollable, process of corrosion, and the resultant drawings. This introduced an element of chance, suggesting that despite our attempts to control the creative process, we cannot escape an element of chance. In order to surrender to the chance process of corrosion, Alborough had to some degree relinquished authorial control. However, as Klopper (2002), points out, while Alborough may be seen to have done this in setting up a process that completes itself, his authorial presence was nevertheless re-inserted at key moments as the exhibition travelled from venue to venue. Alborough maintained control over the manner in which the exhibition was reconfigured at each venue. For each installation, he chose to display the resultant corrosive drawings and other materials in particular ways. The artist meticulously documented each installation as the exhibition travelled. Instead of creating a catalogue, he created a website

where he uploaded the documentations of each installation. The website included any articles written about the works as well as a record of the comments from the audience.¹³⁹

Material conceptualism¹⁴⁰

Alborough's engagement with process, installation, time, and issues of authorship locate his works firmly in the realm of contemporary art practices that Buskirk (2005) argues are indebted to Conceptual art¹⁴¹. The conceptualism in Alborough's works has been recognised by a number of art theorists, such as Edmunds (2000), Klopper (2002), and Richards (2004) who regard Alborough as a leading contemporary South African conceptual artist. Edmunds (2000) points out that unlike the historical conceptual artists, Alborough always pays attention to the material and the aesthetic. Despite Alborough's deliberate use of specific materials when creating installations, much of the writing on Alborough (including Richards's) merely mentions the materials the artist uses without exploring the possible links between the materiality and conceptualism in the work. My exploration of Alborough's works takes the idea of a conceptual impulse grounded in materialism suggested by Richards (2002) further. I argue that it is in his engagement with the materiality of the objects he uses to create his artworks that Alborough's particular conceptualism can be

¹³⁹ This website is still active, and available at www.alanalborough.co.za

¹⁴⁰ The term was introduced in chapter two. It originates from an article on conceptual South African art by Richards (2002) in which Richards suggests that there are three types of conceptualism in South African art. Alberro (1999, xvii) argues that

in its broadest possible, definition, then, the conceptual in art means an expanded critique of the cohesiveness and materiality of the art object, a growing wariness toward definitions of artistic practice as purely visual, a fusion of the work with its site and context of display, and an emphasis on the possibilities of public-ness and distribution.

found. The plastic pegs, plastic cable ties, plastic cotton reels and plastic tables are associated with the banal, the everyday - they are the quintessential 'humble objects' - appreciated mostly for their ability to 'do work' around the house, to hang clothes, to close sugar packets. Cable ties are used to join things together; they are incredibly strong and almost indestructible. In choosing these items to make his intricate, time consuming sculptures, Alborough's works play on the binaries of the banal mass-produced object and the singularity of the artwork. This exploration is not presented as a simple dichotomy. The use of installation and mechanical and chemical drawing processes further challenge the singularity of the artwork, and the role of the artist, complicating the relationships that are set up in his field of exhibition. Meaning in Alborough's work thus rests not only in the idea, but also in the physical construction and display of the work and in the associations which found objects used to bring with them. Materiality itself implicates the conceptual in Alborough's works, and his work can be thought of as "material conceptualism"¹⁴².

Comparing Seejarim, Alborough and Siopis's use of found objects

Seejarim and Alborough have used particular found objects for their physical properties as well as the associations those objects bring with them from their former contexts. In the examples discussed above, both artists use the found objects as materials, assembling them in different ways to create new objects. In *Venus at Home* (2012) Seejarim's uses are allegorical. She relies on the associations the objects evoke, in order to make comment on particular social constructions of the role of women in the home. In *Heathen Wet Lip*, (1997)

¹⁴² Alborough's conceptualism is akin to what Alberro (1999, X) refers to as "synthetic conceptualism." Alberro (1999, X) points out that synthetic conceptualism is an approach to conceptual art in which the act of making involves conceptualising a plan and then following the plan and then seeing what happens. This kind of art making, practiced by Sol LeWitt, and foregrounds the process of making as the subject of art.

Alborough's use of elephant body parts enabled him to comment on the effects of colonial exploitation. For his untitled *Standard Bank Young Artist Award* (2000) works, Alborough purposely chose mass-produced, disposable, objects as materials that were contrasted with the materiality of artworks in the Western canon, in order to comment on aspects of the field of exhibition and the art making process. Seejarim and Alborough's uses are different from Siopis's re-use of her personal collection of objects in different installations. The materiality of her used objects is significant in that, in their familiarity, they have evocative associations for many viewers and thus enable an emotional / personal engagement with the artworks. New relationships are created between objects in each installation, which can be understood as a literal repositioning of the objects "as alive" to use Bal's (2002) term.¹⁴³ As such, each installation can be thought of as adding a new social life to the objects which have become iconic as Siopis's collection of objects for art making. The objects' recognisability, as part of her materials for art-making has become part of their materiality.

The materiality of objects is caught up in their social lives. Thus, as I have demonstrated the found objects as part of Alborough's, Seejarim's and Siopis's artworks, not only bring with them associations that affect the possible meanings of the artworks, but the materiality of the objects also changes in its relationship to the viewer and other things of its genre. It is through the materiality of these used and re-used objects, their physical properties and the associations that these bring, that they point to the everyday, outside of the field of art. The extent to which the use of quotidian objects is a means of exploring the everyday through art is explored in chapter seven.

¹⁴³ This was discussed in chapter five in relation to the manner in which the field of exhibition orientates the viewer's gaze.

Chapter seven

Engaging with the everyday

Some distinctions between representations and the real

In chapter six I explored some possibilities of meaning that a focus on the materiality of found objects yields when analysing artworks. The social-anthropological approach towards understanding materiality that I adopted recognises that the materiality of objects encompasses their physical properties and the everyday social meanings that accrue to objects as they move through social spaces. It is therefore through their materiality that found objects bring the everyday into the field of art. This is different from the manner in which representations of them, as can be found for example in the so called 'still life genre' paintings from the late Renaissance, bring the everyday into art¹⁴⁴. The presence of found objects in artworks highlights the distinctions between representations and real objects. This is partly what Picasso's *Still life with chair canning* (1912) demonstrated: while the rope pointed to itself as a rope, the oil cloth was a cloth, but the latter also pointed to chair canning, represented by what was imprinted on it. In this artwork the representation of chair canning transcends the everyday, yet the real brings the everyday back into the representation.

¹⁴⁴ For more on the still life tradition see Schneider (2003), who traces the history of the still life genre from Ancient Greece to the early nineteenth century.

The use of everyday found objects establishes a distinction between the everyday and the conventions of the field of exhibition, thereby exposing the conventions of both social fields. Binaries of the everyday and the field of exhibition are present throughout discourses of the found object in art from the early twentieth century to contemporary art-making practices concerned with exploring ontologies of art. These binaries are also reflected in the structure of my argument: chapter three engaged with the meanings that objects accrue in everyday practices, while chapter four focussed on the difference between artworks and quotidian objects. Building on the idea that the ontological status of the object shifts as it enters into and becomes part of the field of exhibition, chapter five explored the meanings that are constructed for objects as they are framed in different ways within the field of exhibition. Acknowledging that the objects are also active agents that bring chains of signification into the field of exhibition, in chapter six I considered the manner in which the materiality of the found objects embedded in the artworks contributes to the possible meanings of both the artworks and the objects.

In this concluding chapter, I consider what a contemporary return to the everyday brings to the discourse of the found object in art. In so doing, I situate Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough's use of found objects within the genealogy of the avant-garde. Themes that have emerged throughout this study are brought together in order to conclude with a reflection on the manner in which these contemporary South African artists' artworks contribute to the discourse of the found object in art.

Iterations of the avant-garde

Foster (1996) argues that through bringing the everyday in to the field of art, the historical avant-garde drew attention to the distinctions that were present in the field of exhibition.¹⁴⁵

Foster (1996, 20) notes that artworks such as *Fountain* (1917) did not disrupt the conventions, but rather, can be understood as a performance of the conventions, which left the conventions “intact”. Therefore Foster (1996, 16) argues:

For the most acute avant-garde artists such as Duchamp, the aim is neither an abstract negation of art nor a romantic reconciliation with life but a perpetual testing of the conventions of both. Thus rather than false, circular, and otherwise affirmative, avant-garde practice at its best is contradictory, mobile and otherwise diabolical.

The historical avant-garde’s exposure of the conventions of the field of exhibition opened the discourse for new/ varied art practices. One of the problems Foster (1996) finds with accounts of the avant garde is the historicism that goes with them. Within this historicism, he argues, lies an assumption that those art practices, which are considered to be avant-garde, occurred in chronological order, and that these practices were understood and accepted as avant-garde by the broader art community, including theorists, curators and scholars, when they happened. Foster (1996), de Duve (1996) and Buskirk (1996) argue that it is a mistake to think of this process as linear because the historical- avant- garde’s

¹⁴⁵ Foster (1996, 20) warns against thinking of the avant-garde as a homogenous group. Foster (1996) acknowledges that within the neo avant garde there were differences in approach and intention. He makes it explicit that although his use of terms could be problematic, because his use of terms suggests that the avant-garde is homogenous, he is aware that the avant garde is not homogenous, and that his terms categorise groups of artists working at a similar time and place, and with similar concerns, but not necessarily similar methods.

exposure of the conventions of the field of exhibition was only understood retroactively, in hindsight, by the broader art community.¹⁴⁶ Foster (1996, 8) points out:

the status of Duchamp as well as *Les Demoiselles* is a retroactive effect of countless artistic responses and critical readings, and so it goes across the dialogical space-time of avant-garde practice and institutional reception.

Foster (1996) argues that it was the iterative practices of the first wave of neo-avant-garde artists in 1950s America and Europe, such as Rauschenberg, who returned to the methods of the historical avant-garde, that enabled the art of the historical avant-garde to become part of the art-historical canon. Foster (1996) argues that the second wave of neo-avant-garde artists in 1960s America and Europe, such as Buren and Broodthaers, were able to critique the institutions of art, through their analysis of the successes and failures of the historical and first neo avant-gardes. Thus, Foster (1996, 14) argues that in extending the historical avant-garde's critique of the institutions of art, the "neo-avant-garde has produced new aesthetic experiences, cognitive connections, and political interventions". Foster (1996) and Buskirk (2005) point out that the neo-avant-garde practices of 1950's and 1960's America have influenced western art making practices since then, extending into conceptual art, minimalism, appropriation, site specific art, post-modern art, and contemporary post-postmodern art practices.

¹⁴⁶ Foster (1996) and Buskirk (2005) are referring to the reception of artworks such as *Fountain* (1917) by agents other than the artists themselves who were presumably aware of the challenge to convention that their artworks posed. My discussion of Duchamp and Picasso demonstrates that these artists were self-reflexively challenging the discourses of art that were prevalent at the time in which they were working. Evidence that the effect of such artists' challenging of convention can be found, for example in Danto's (1988) discussion of Picasso's *Les demoiselles d' Avignon* (1907), which was painted in 1907, but kept in Picasso's studio until 1925, when it was first exhibited. Likewise, as I pointed out in chapter four (cf. page 94), Duchamp's readymades were relatively unknown in the art world before until after Duchamp made replicas of them for his *Boite en valise* (1934), and when he made 'reproductions' of them in the 1960s with the help of Harold Sneeze-man.

Through his discussion of the relationship of the historical and neo-avant-gardes, Foster (1996) demonstrates that the discourse of the avant-garde is characterized by repetition, and reiteration. For Foster (1996) repetition is the means through which the neo-avant-garde was able to address the issues that emerged in the historical avant-garde. The reiterative challenging of the institutions of art is a necessary strategy of the avant-garde's rhetoric of rupture, argues Foster (1996). Foster (1996) casts these ruptures in a Freudian light, where a trauma is understood as necessarily occurring twice. In the first instance we do not recognise the trauma because we do not have the means to understand it, so it is only after the recurrence of the trauma that we register the trauma, where it is more potent because it comes to us as a memory of trauma. Far from mere mimicry, each reiteration can be thought of as a new inflection that cannot be understood in the same way as its predecessor, not least because later iterations are performed with knowledge of, and often in dialogue with the former practices.

Contemporary artists' use of found objects is situated within the genealogy of the avant-garde. Foster (1996) points out that contemporary iterations of the avant-garde have relinquished the grand, macho claims to disrupt the conventions and institutions of art made by the historic and neo-avant-garde, in favor of subtle local gestures that displace the center, and take into account local personal histories. Foster (1996, 25) argues:

Our present is bereft of this sense of imminent revolution; it is also chastened by feminist critiques of revolutionary language and cautioned by postcolonial concerns about the exclusivity not only of art institutions but of critical discourses as well. As a result contemporary artists concerned to develop the institutional analysis of the second neo-avant-garde have moved away from grand *oppositions* to subtle *displacements*.

It is within the contemporary iterations of the avant-garde that the use of found objects by Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough is situated, since their usages demonstrate an engagement with the conventions of the field of exhibition, and draw on the everyday of which they are part. Further, just as the neo-avant-garde's reiteration of historical avant-garde practices brings new inflections to discourses of found objects in art, so do Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough's uses of found objects bring new inflections to discourses of found objects in contemporary art. Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough's particular inflections are evident in the personal ways in which they use found objects, and through the particular meanings that accrue to the objects they use with the contexts in which they are operating.

Focusing on the unheroic

Just as the reiterative practices of the neo avant-garde cannot be understood as mere mimicry, so the explorations of the everyday in contemporary art should be considered as bringing new inflections to the discourse of the avant-garde. Johnstone (2008) argues that the turn to the everyday in contemporary art could be understood as a means of looking more critically at that which is unnoticed and regarded as trivial or irrelevant. Therefore Johnstone (2008, 13) suggests that to engage with the everyday is an engagement with the "unheroic." This is a means to de-centre the discourse, and can be thought of as a form of subversion.

Siopis's use of her personal collection of family heirlooms is a turn to the local, specific and 'unheroic'. The objects that Siopis repeatedly uses in her installations are not all quotidian

objects. She has however inherited many of them, from her mother and maternal grandmother; they are imbued with Siopis family history and memories, and as such form a significant part of Siopis's *habitus*. The objects point to Siopis's every-day life, are part of her biography, growing up as a white woman of Greek descent in Apartheid South Africa. Siopis's installations, demonstrate a conflation of the personal and the political.¹⁴⁷ In choosing to draw on her personal history, Siopis reveals the ways in which her personal history was, and continues to be entangled in broader social and political histories. This entanglement of personal and social histories is present in all of Siopis's installations made with her personal objects, because it is present in the materiality of the objects themselves. Despite Siopis's engagement with social inequalities of gender and race, in a South African context Siopis's objects signify wealth and access; having had the means to accumulate so many things, and having space to keep them. Further, the entanglement of the personal and social is heightened through the manner in which Siopis uses the objects, and the juxtapositions that she purposely makes. Siopis's continual re-configuration of her collection of objects can be understood as an exploration of the meanings that accrue to objects. This can be seen in installations such as *Sacrifices* (1998) (fig. 7.1) a site specific installation at the Wits Centre for Graduate Studies.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Siopis's *History paintings* of the 1980s, for example *Patience on a monument*, in which the subject of the painting is an unknown African woman, can also be understood as a turn to the unheroic. In their potential to foreground the experiences of those who are silenced by dominant discourses, artworks that critically engage with the everyday are potential agents of social transformation in Gell's (1998) terms. This is the agency of art that art has the capacity to help us look differently.

¹⁴⁸ *Sacrifices* (1998) was Siopis' contribution to the exhibition *Holdings* (1998), curated by Jane Taylor to mark the opening of the Wits Centre for Graduate Studies. The exhibition explored the notion of the historical archive and the process of refiguring the archive in the context of post-apartheid South Africa (for more on this exhibition see Atkinson, 2005).

The title *Sacrifices*, could be an allusion to Verwoerd's¹⁴⁹ speech made at the first quinquennial celebration of the Republic of South Africa, at Monument Hill, Pretoria May 31, 1966. In this speech Verwoerd (1966) stated that

...our slowly developing state is built on self-sacrifice. The blood of brave men and women has drenched our earth. Those sacrifices burn in the life of a nation like a fire, a fire which is never quenched.

In the speech, Verwoerd is alluding to the blood of the Afrikaners, who fought various groups of people in Southern Africa on their road to the Republic, amongst them the Zulus, the Xhosas and the British.¹⁵⁰ However all those whom the Afrikaners fought also shed blood, and made sacrifices to overthrow the Apartheid government. Siopis's title could also be an allusion to Siopis's maternal grandmother's discussion of the sacrifices she made in getting to South Africa, quoted in Siopis's video work, *My lovely day* (1998). Siopis (cited in Atkinson, 2005) states that for her maternal grandmother material possessions were burdensome, because they reminded one of the dead, the absent. Thus, the ambiguity of the title is itself an instance of the mixing of the personal and political in Siopis's work.

¹⁴⁹ Hendrik Verwoerd became Prime Minister of South Africa in 1958 after the death of Prime Minister J.G. Strijdom. Verwoerd was a staunch advocate of Apartheid. He was instrumental in the formation of the Republic of South Africa in 1961, after white South Africans held a referendum to secede from the British Common Wealth (South African History Online. *Verwoerd*).

¹⁵⁰ In this speech Verwoerd also sprouted his racist politics of "good neighbourliness", which was an attempt to mask the exploitation and racism of Apartheid. Verwoerd (1966) stated: "this is a white republic, ruled by the white man, part of the white domain of the world, but with full understanding for the ambitions and objectives of the black man of Africa within our own midst, our closest neighbours and those farther afield. But this republic is also a republic of goodwill and friendship. We desire the wellbeing and friendship of all. We have no ambitions, in spite of what some say, to exploit others".



Fig. 7.1. Penny Siopis, *Sacrifices*, 1998. Mixed media installation. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Editions.

To create this installation, Siopis barricaded three large window recesses with panels, on to which she attached objects, so that they created a field of objects. The objects in each panel were grouped according to colour: white, dark green, and red. In the green panel there were a lot of military objects, such as gas masks, camouflage, army uniforms and army surplus. These Siopis associates with formal expressions of state power (Siopis, 2012). They are also a reminder of state control of people, for example, during Apartheid the military was used to suppress uprisings. Amidst these military items were animal skins, which could

be read as hunting trophies; another kind of display of power. Amidst these menacing military objects, and dead animals, were children's toys, such as naked broken brown dolls, and old clocks. The suggestion is that the supposedly innocent is juxtaposed with the powerful, and violent. Clocks are also archetypal *memento mori*, which remind the viewer of the transience of life, and, by extension in this work, the transience of power and innocence. Similar juxtapositions were made in the white panel, in which silver tea pots, trophies, dolls, and cowry shell belts were placed alongside plaster casts of hands and faces, reminiscent of those ethnographic plaster casts of Saartjie Baartman¹⁵¹ made upon her death in Paris. These objects acted as a visual stream of consciousness: they conjured images of things and events outside the artwork. That these things are all part of the same field and categorised through colour (which seems arbitrary given what the objects are) is significant. The seeming arbitrariness of the categorisation according to colour may make as much sense as any other taxonomy. In not distinguishing between kinds of things, Siopis is alluding to or echoing the conditions of encounter with objects in everyday life, in which the banal and significant co-exist, just as the personal, the political and the social are entangled.

Sacrifices (1998) included a performative aspect. One of Siopis's colleagues was asked to stand in front of the panels and name the objects that made up the panel, making a list of objects in the process; if she did not know what something was she had to describe it. The

¹⁵¹ Sara Saartjie Baartman was a Khoikhoi woman, born around 1789 at the Gamtoos River, in what is now known as the Eastern Cape. After working as a servant on a colonial farm, Saartjie Baartman was sold into slavery to a trader named Pieter Willem Cezar. She was taken to England, and later to France to be exhibited as a human specimen. She was studied by French anatomists and zoologists, and declared a link between humans and animals. After her death in 1816, a plaster cast was made of her body. Her body was also dissected parts of her remains were exhibited at the Musée de l'Homme until 1974 (see South African History Online. *Sara Saartjie Baartman*). Siopis photographed the plaster casts for *Saartjie Baartman Cast, Born Cape of Good Hope, Died Paris*, (1988/1994), artist's collection (this work is reproduced in Olivier, 2014).

list and descriptions were exhibited alongside the work. Atkinson (2005) suggests that through the performative aspect of the work, Siopis made the point that an engagement with history is always subjective and involves interpretation. In other words, an engagement with history is always personal.

Subversive acts

De Certeau (1984) compares the manner in which people enact their everyday activities to speech acts (in Saussure's terms), suggesting that the activity, for example to walk, is the *parole*, and manner in which we do things, that is how we walk, and the routes we take, could be understood as are the *langue*. He states that walking is an enunciate act, that "is at the same time a use of language and an operation performed on it" (de Certeau, 1984, 32). De Certeau (1984, 99) therefore argues that "walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it 'speaks'".¹⁵²

According to de Certeau (1984, 30), the choices that people make when engaging in everyday practices are an example of 'making do', which he defines as "the art of creatively combining ways of doing with the rules of the space you find yourself in to make a comfortable space for yourself". de Certeau (1984) argues that the manner in which people carry out their everyday actives can be thought of as creative acts that are subtle forms of resistance to the super-structure, since individuals have the power to choose the ways in which they carryout everyday activities. Thus de Certeau (1984, xv) argues, these

¹⁵² I have focussed on De Certeau's discussion of walking, however it should be noted that de Certeau (1984) extends his study to walking, cooking and consumer consumption.

ways of operating' constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users appropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production.

For de Certeau (1984) there is potential for resistance, and creativity in choosing the ways in which we act. Rather than ignoring the mundane, and the ordinary, de Certeau (1984) sees daily routine activities such as walking, cooking and consumption as potential sites of resistance for those who have been stripped of economic or political power.

This idea is corroborated by Scott (1985) who, in his investigation of everyday forms of peasant resistance, argues that far from being helpless, unaware victims of the political and social forces against them, the peasant classes make use of everyday forms of subversion, such as stalling, foot-dragging, pilfering and slander against the ruling classes. Scott (1985, xvii) argues that:

...the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on...have certain features in common. They require little or no coordination or planning; they make use of implicit understandings and informal networks; they often represent a form of individual self-help; they typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority.

These everyday forms of resistance are small, local gestures, rather than mass action. They are opportunistic and a continuous part of life. A further feature of everyday forms of resistance is that their efficacy is contingent on a shared world view amongst the classes in conflict. Scott (1985, xvii) argues that the constant grinding, foot dragging, everyday forms of resistance may in the end "make an utter shambles of the policies dreamed up by their would- be superiors".

The subtle, small gestures of the contemporary avant-garde's engagement with the discourses of art, and their turn to the everyday can be understood as everyday forms of resistance in two ways. Art about the everyday is a means to foreground the everyday, and the heroic, which de-centres grand narratives. It is also a new form of acting within the everyday, a kind of 'making do', within the discourse of art that can be thought of as an everyday form of resistance. Similar to other everyday forms of resistance, the efficacy of these discreet, localised gestures relies on a shared understanding and valuing of art discourse and an almost opportunistic response and utilisation with what is close at hand. These strategies are present in Siopis's use of her personal collection, Alborough's use of quotidian bought objects, and Seejarim's use of objects that are part of her everyday life, which point to her social networks. Seejarim (2015) states that her fascination with the "everyday" comes from her "search for the value of what lies behind and beyond that which is ordinary." This could be understood in terms of Seejarim's religious convictions as a practicing Hindu, in which mindfulness in all activities is a means to be closer to god.¹⁵³ Such a reading resonates with Seejarim's discussion of the manner in which she "loses herself" when making art and when doing chores for example washing the dishes (pers. comm. Seejarim, 2013). Seejarim's use of the objects that she collected while walking in Johannesburg, could also be understood as a form of 'making do' in de Certeau's (1984) terms. Seejarim's engagement with the everyday could also be understood as a turn to the unheroic, and therefore a form of subversion, or resistance.

¹⁵³ Seejarim (2013) acknowledges a latent spirituality in her work, saying that her life as a practising Hindu permeates everything she does. She refers to the Hindu practices of "being present in the moment" as an important dimension of her approach to art making (Seejarim, 2013).

The banality of the experiences Seejarim chooses to focus on can further be understood as a turn to the local, which resists the grand discourses of art. This is evident in the way in which Seejarim focuses on the repetition inherent in the everyday, by making use of repetition, for example, as an aesthetic element in works such as *Cash ticket ash ticket* (1999), in which the bus ticket is repeated. Seejarim also makes repeated daily actions the subject of her works, for example, the repetitive daily activity of commuting, or of brushing teeth, are the subjects of a number of works.¹⁵⁴ Felski (2000, 21) argues that “by focussing on the spheres of repetition, home and habit, repetition can signal resistance.” Felski (2000)’s argument resonates with de Certeau’s (1984) investigation of the potential for subversion in the practice of everyday life¹⁵⁵.

Identity (1999) (fig. 7.2), is a work in which Seejarim’s interest in travel and the repetition of the everyday coalesce. *Identity* (1999) is made of 11 teeth cleaning sticks, which Seejarim used to clean her teeth when visiting India.¹⁵⁶ The teeth cleaning sticks are presented in a row as if on parade. The brushes’ singularities are apparent in way they bend, their colouring and their chewed tips. The chewed tips point to the person who used them. Since Seejarim has not changed these found objects physically, other than to present them

¹⁵⁴ Seejarim has explored the theme of commuting in works such as *Cash ticket, ash ticket* (1999), *The opposite of illustration*, (1999) and *Eight to four* (2001). She explored the quotidian activity of brushing ones teeth in an early performance (untitled, unrecorded), done as part of her undergraduate degree, in which she compressed the activity of brushing ones teeth into a two hour long performance, brushing her teeth until her gums bled (Seejarim 2013). Toothpaste features in works such as *Smile* (2006), and tooth brushes are used in *Identity* (1999). For more on these works see the artist’s website: www.ushaseejarim.com.

¹⁵⁵ An interest in her own and others’ journeys are strong recurring themes in Seejarim’s work. McIlleron (2002) and Smith (2003) suggest that in Seejarim works, physical journeys can be understood as metaphors for spiritual journey’s.

¹⁵⁶ This work is reminiscent of Karsten Bott’s *Toothbrushes*, (1991) made from a collection of toothbrushes he purchased from a dentist who exchanged old tooth brushes for new ones. Even though this seems quite derivative, the differences in context and presentation inflect each work with particular meanings, providing further evidence for the claim that things have meaning in relation to other things in a system of use.

in a new context, on a plinth of sorts, with a title, they can be understood as unassisted ready-mades.

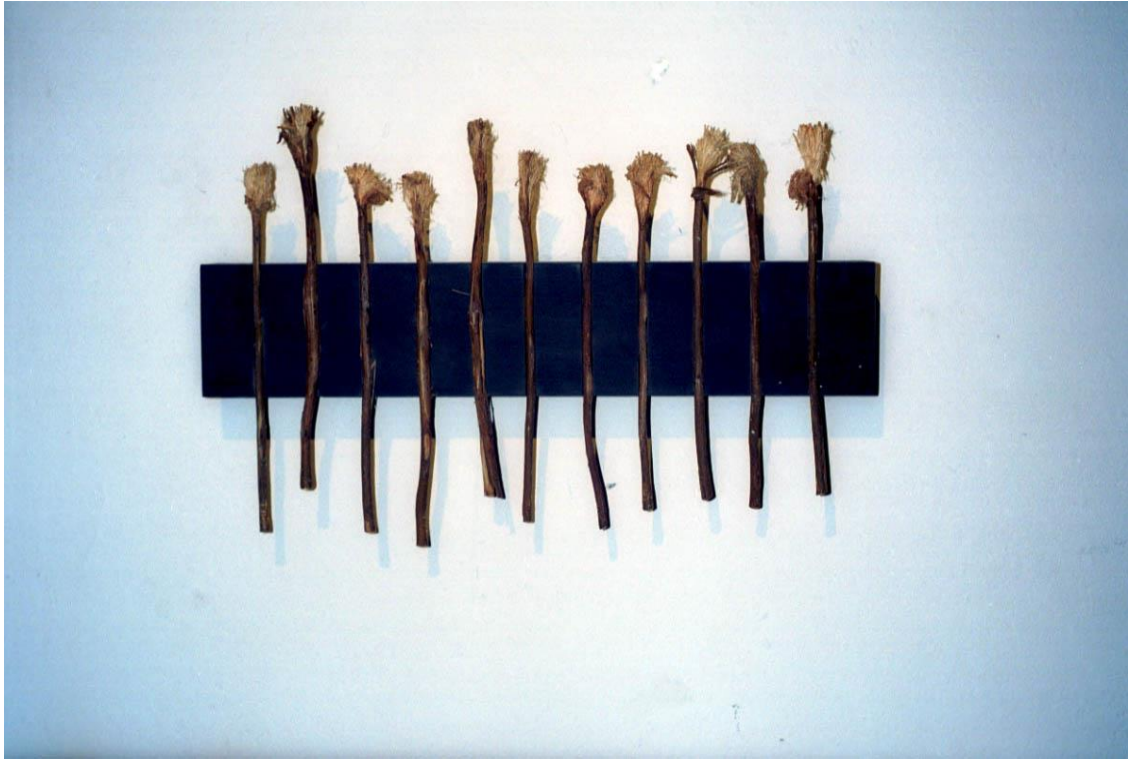


Fig. 7.2 Usha Seejarim, *Identity*, 1999. Dimensions variable. Found objects, wood. Image courtesy of the artist.

There is an interesting tension between the minimalist aesthetic of the line created by the block of perspex, and the dirty, used tooth brushes. There are also contrasts between the unifying idea (entertained mostly by westerners), that all people brush their teeth, and the acknowledgement that this does not happen for all people in the same way. Thus, in this work issues of identity are explored through acknowledging the different ways in which people brush their teeth. Despite the trite title, which belabours the point, the work is an interesting exploration of idea that we are *what* we *do* and we are *how* we do.

Representing experience

Objects that bear the traces of their prior use point to the activity, and by extension, the experience of the user. Although the found objects that Seejarim makes use of in works such as *Identity* (1999) and the works in *Venus at home* (2012) point to everyday experience, these objects do not portray the experience of brushing ones teeth, travelling on the bus or sweeping. Objects such as the teeth sticks used to make *Identity* (1999), or the bus tickets used to make *Cash ticket ash ticket* (1999) do invoke the everyday, and in the case of the teeth sticks, they make a point about difference and sameness. The manner in which artworks can represent everyday experience has been explored by the phenomenologists Heidegger (1935 reproduced in 1998) and Merleau-Ponty (2008). Macey (2000, 248) points out that phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty focus on the “essence of being of physical phenomena as they are experienced in the world, by living bodies”. For phenomenologists the starting point for knowledge is the lived experience of the human consciousness. Merleau-Ponty (2008) therefore rejects the Cartesian separation of mind and body, and instead argues that the body is the location of the embodied consciousness. He states (2008, 43) rather than a mind and a body, man is a mind with a body, a being who can only get to the truth of things because its body is, as it were, embedded in those things”. Thus the sensory information that the body receives is as much part of cognition as the information from the mind.

In his discussion of Van Gogh’s *Old shoes with laces* (1886),¹⁵⁷ Heidegger (1935 reproduced in 1998) argued that the painting expressed something of the experience of wearing those boots. It was through looking at the painting, that Heidegger (1935 reproduced in 1998)

¹⁵⁷ Vincent Van Gogh, *Old shoes with laces*, 1886. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

inferred what it must have been like to wear shoes like that. He proceeds to construct a narrative about the supposed wearer, whom he infers was a peasant woman who had to travel long distances on foot (Heidegger, 1998). Heidegger (1935 reproduced in 1998) argues that the painting communicates the experience of what it must have been like to be a peasant woman in ways that other forms of representation cannot. Thus Heidegger (1998) foregrounds painting as a means of representing the reality of the *experience* of the thing depicted rather than the *appearance* of that which is depicted. In these works naturalism is less important than capturing and communicating the experience of the thing.

Merleau-Ponty (2008) also explores the problem of trying to capture or describe lived experience. Merleau-Ponty (2008), argues that pictorial art (painting) is the most effective means to represent experience, because when we encounter a painting, we experience art physically as well as intellectually. For him, the meaning of a painting thus lies in the experience of it, and therefore Merleau- Ponty (2008, 71) argues that “the work of art resembles the object of perception” and therefore “painting does not resemble the world but is a world of its own.” For Merleau-Ponty (2008) it is the work of art, and not the description / analysis of the work of art that is ‘a world of its own’. This, he argues, is because language is not the same as lived experience. Merleau- Ponty (2008) claims that the moment you try to describe a situation, or event, the description changes it. Part of the means with which the painting communicates is through the formal arrangement of

elements and paint on the surface. Thus for Merleau- Ponty (2008, 70) “form and content exist separately from one another.”¹⁵⁸

The arguments that Heidegger (1935 reproduced in 1998) and Merleau-Ponty (2005) make regarding the manner in which pictorial art represents lived experience, make sense only in relation to certain kinds of realism (found in Caravaggio, and Cezanne and Van Gogh), where the artists explore aspects of daily life through the kinds of subjects they choose to paint; and have captured objects in particular ways through the manner in which they apply paint to the surface. The extent to which representation or even an actual object can capture experience is questionable - as Schapiro’s (1998) critique of Heidegger’s analysis of Van Gogh’s *Old shoes with laces* (1886) shows. In his essay “*Notes on the origin of the work of art*” Schapiro (1968 reproduced in 1998)critiques Heidegger (1935 reproduced in 1998) for projecting his imagined interpretation of the peasant woman’s experience onto the painting. Schapiro (1968 reproduced in 1998) is particularly critical of the way that Heidegger (1935 reproduced in 1998) claims that the painting captures an essence of being a peasant woman, because the shoes were known to belong to van Gogh himself. The extent to which Heidegger has a sense of what a peasant woman’s experience might be is also questionable.

Schapiro’s critique highlights the difference between actual experiences and imagined experiences based on the associations that representations elicit in viewers. The questions

¹⁵⁸ This is why Elkins (2008) links the concerns of the phenomenologists to issues of materiality, that were discussed in chapter six.

that these debates raise around whether it is possible to represent experience can be extended to whether found objects can represent everyday experience. The used found objects that bear the traces of their use, which Seejarim and Siopis incorporate into their artworks, do not represent lived experience. They do, however, act as mnemonic devices that rely on the associations that these or other similar objects may have for viewers to elicit meanings for the understanding of the artworks. It is through Seejarim and Siopis's video works, that these artists are able to represent lived experience. Although these works do not really fit in with a discussion of the use of found objects, they are complimentary to both artists' works in installation mode, and are interesting to consider in relation to the manner in which the works capture and represent experience, through the manner in which these artists' work with the materiality of film.

The materiality of film

Seejarim works with video in a manner that enables her to convey a sense of everyday experience without using everyday objects themselves. Through her video works, Seejarim documents repetitive daily activities such as mowing the lawn, as can be seen in *Peace Job*, (2002) (fig. 7.3), or commuting from home to work and back, as can be seen in *The opposite of illustration* (1999) (fig. 7.4). A sense of the monotony of lived experience is heightened through Seejarim's use of a static camera, and the single shot that captures these activities. This is reminiscent of the stationary surveillance camera, frequently focused on one space, as well as the static camera of Warhol's *Empire*, 1964,¹⁵⁹ which Johnstone (2008) refers to as exemplary in capturing the boredom of the everyday. The sense of repetition of daily life is

¹⁵⁹ Andy Warhol, *Empire*, 1964. 16mm film (black and white, silent) Duration: 8h 05m. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

enhanced through Seejarim's use of looping and a slow frame rate. Seejarim's use of a static camera creates a meditative effect, adding a further spiritual dimension to the works.



Fig. 7.3 Usha Seejarim, *Peace Job*, 2002. Video still. Image courtesy of the artist.

After focussing for a time on the single activity recorded -Seejarim's husband Rajesh is mowing the lawn - my eyes start to wander across the screen; I notice people passing, street, and Seejarim wandering in and out of the frame. What seemed to be monotonous becomes nuanced and more interesting. The more one looks the more one notices, which is not unlike how life is: often boring, yet the more you look the more you begin to see.

The opposite of illustration (1999) (fig.7.4) documents Seejarim's journey from Doornfontien to Lenasia, by car, at night. This is the same journey that Seejarim took by bus when she was

a student, that was alluded to in *Cash Ticket Ash Ticket* (1999), made from collected bus tickets. The difference in the manner in which *Cash Ticket Ash Ticket* (1999) and *The Opposite of Illustration* (1999) capture the experience of making this journey illustrates my point. To make *The Opposite of Illustration* (1999), Seejarim attached a camera to the rear view mirror of a car, and recorded the journey. In the video the lights of other cars along the road, bouncing up and down, as the car moves; the lights leave streaks, and flares so as to create an abstract pattern. The lights move in and out of focus as the cars move. This heightens the sense of movement, capturing the experience of looking at the lights from the oncoming traffic when travelling by car at night. Upbeat electronic music by Zakir Hussain has been edited in over the moving image to enhance the feeling of movement. The title '*The opposite of illustration*' is a fitting analogy for the difference between representations of things in the world, and the capacity of these video works to capture lived experience.



Fig. 7.4 Usha Seejarim *The Opposite of Illustration*, 1999. Video stills. Image courtesy of the artist.

Through the manner in which Seejarim uses the medium of digital video, and mediates the image by slowing the frame rate and other editing devices, works such as *Peace Job* (2001) and *The Opposite of Illustration* (1999) explore ways of representing an experience rather than merely documenting an event. The feeling of the repetition and familiarity of everyday experience is enhanced through Seejarim's use of a steady camera that focusses on a detail, and her use of looping. Material objects, such as bus-tickets and toothbrushes rely on other things, such as associations, and memory to evoke the experience of everyday life.

Siopis's video works, such as, *My Lovely Day* (1998) (fig 7. 5) are also interesting to consider in relation to the manner in which they evoke the experience of everyday life, through the imagery and the manner in which the artist has used the medium. This video exploits an element of the 'found' in that Siopis used found footage of scenes from her childhood home videos made by her parents, which she edited with found footage of public events, such as military parades. The picture is hazy, often out of focus, like the texture of memory and dreams. A sense of nostalgia, not necessarily present in the use of real objects, is heightened by the flicker and grain, and the washed-out colours of old home videos. Siopis's use of subtitles, consisting of statements made by Siopis's grandmother, that Siopis recalled from memory, provide a narrative voice that runs through the video. The result is a narrative made up of fragments, that have a memory-like timbre, and that weave personal and political events together. When exhibited as a video installation, as part of *Charmed lives* (1998) at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, second hand movie theatre chairs and velvet curtains were used to simulate a movie theatre space reminiscent of Siopis's

maternal grandfather's movie house in Umthatha (fig 7.6). The installation was repeated in *Time and Again*, at the Wits Art Museum, 2015.

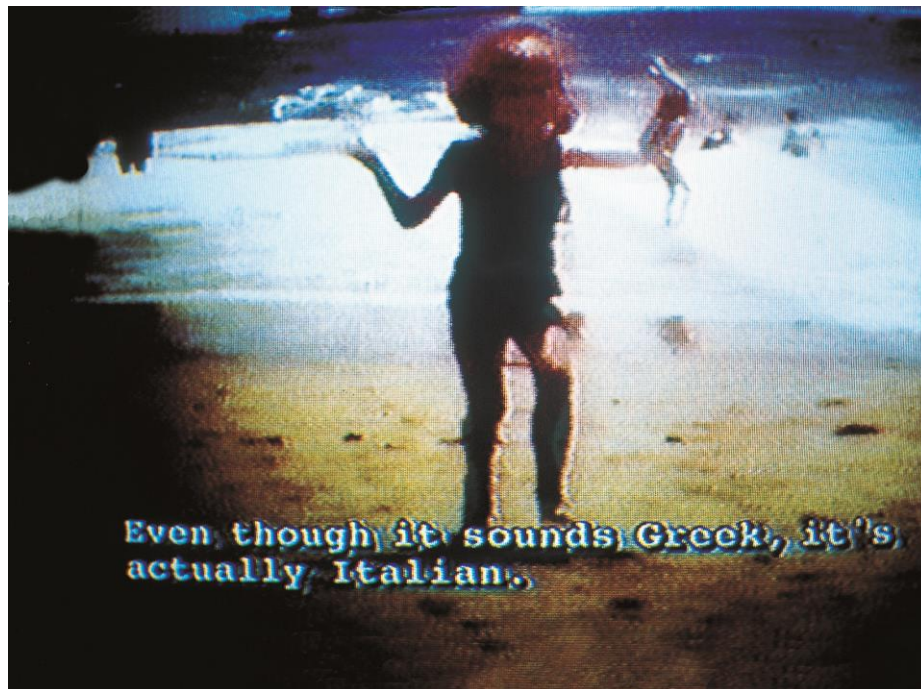


Fig. 7.5 Penny Siopis, *My Lovely Day*, (1997). Film still. 8mm film transferred to video, 21minutes. Edition 3, collections: Museum of Modern Art Stockholm, South African National Gallery, the artist. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Editions.



Fig. 7.6 Penny Siopis, *My Lovely Day*, 1998. Installation view, with chairs and velvet curtains that simulate a movie theatre such as the one in Umthatha owned by Siopis's maternal grandfather. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Editions.

Artists as ethnographers

Through focusing on the everyday, Siopis and Seejarim are acting in a manner similar to ethnographers, who, according to de Certeau (1984), draw attention to, and analyse the taken-for-granted aspects of daily life. Although Alborough also uses quotidian objects, his works do not engage with everyday experiences. Alborough uses the objects as materials and makes them into something entirely new, as is evident in works such as his untitled installation at the Stellenbosch University Art Gallery (2000), discussed in chapter five (fig. 7.7).

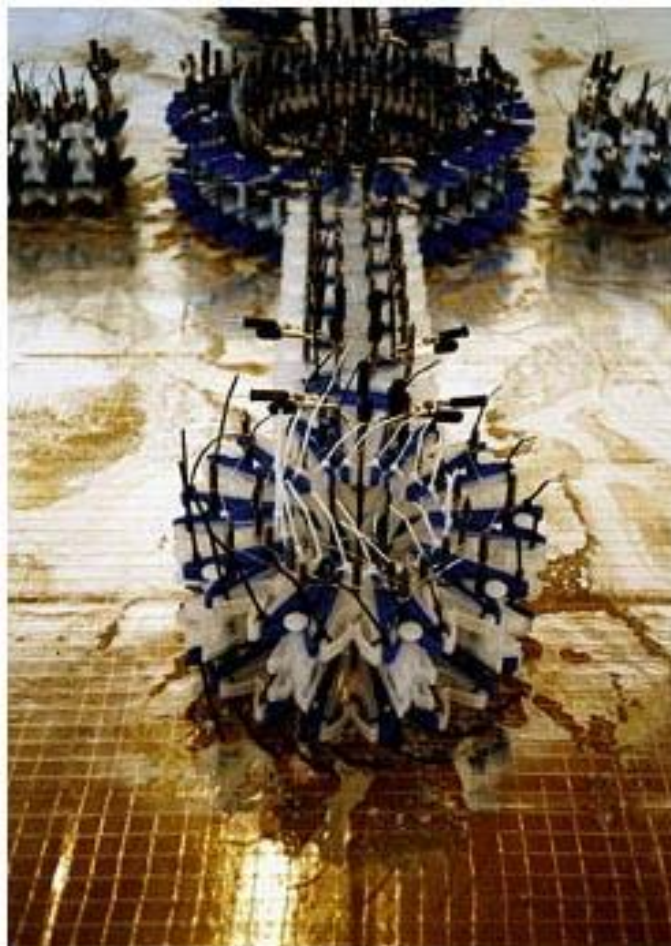


Fig. 7.7 Alan Alborough, Installation detail (annexe), corrosion device. Stellenbosch University Art Gallery, Stellenbosch, 2000. Image courtesy of the artist.

When we encounter these banal objects in Alborough's artworks, where the individuality of the objects is subsumed by the drawing machines, we see them in a different way, and thereby become aware of the conventions of the field of exhibition, which are usually invisible to us. Foster, (1996) argues that artists who work to expose the discourses of field of exhibition can be thought of as auto- ethnographers, who are turning their gaze from looking outward to looking inward. Foster (1996) cautions that when looking inward, for example to expose the workings of the field of exhibition, as the historical and neo- avant-gardes did, there is a danger that one ends up navel gazing to the point of solipsism. This is because art about the field of art, such as that of the avant-gardes, is exclusionary- it is for others who understand the discourse, and therefore reproduces those conventions it seeks to expose, and possibly overturn. Thus, to bring the everyday into art in order to make the conventions of art the subject of art does not make the art more accessible to those who are not part of the discourse of art.¹⁶⁰ Foster (1996, 5) argues that despite the solipsistic, exclusionary practices of the avant-garde, and their failure to disrupt the conventions of art, avant-garde practices remain "a crucial co-articulation of artistic and political forms". Foster (1996, 5) therefore argues that there is a need for "new genealogies of the avant-garde that complicate its past and support its future."

Rupture/ continuum

Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough's art-making practices are part of the avant-garde exploration of the discourses of art. In exploring the historical use of found objects, and situating the uses of found objects by Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough within the discourse of

¹⁶⁰ That many viewers and critics find Alborough's work inaccessible, as is evident in adjectives like "inscrutable" (Roper 2000), demonstrates this point.

the avant-garde, this study addresses the need for new genealogies of the avant-garde that complicate its past and suggest possible futures. My discussion of artworks by Seejarim and Siopis has demonstrated that their use of the found object goes beyond the exposure of the field of exhibition – and that Alborough’s usage subverts the conventions of art making at a fundamental level. Further, my analysis of the contemporary practices rooted in historical practices has led to a re-examination of historical practices. It is clear that contemporary uses of found objects continue to engage with the discourse of art, but in a manner different from Picasso’s and Braque’s first use of found objects in their collages. Thus, after 100 years of the use of found objects, the practice continues to pose new questions regarding the ontologies of art because the objects bring with them new inflections, and particular associations that are bound up with their materiality.

Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough’s artistic praxis’s are marked by their use of found objects, which have played an important role in establishing their position in the contemporary South African art world. Though the artists’ engagement with the everyday, and the social and political inflections of the objects used, their artworks are politicised. Seejarim, Siopis and Alborough have moved from the challenging of the conventions of art making, to working with the discourse of the avant-garde in order to engage with the discourses of art, and to make comment on everyday practices in their own particular contexts. I have shown that the specificity of the objects that are variously part of the artists’ life worlds, bring local, particular meanings to the artworks. These artworks I argue offer a counterpoint to those artworks made by the historical avant-garde that claimed to challenge the conventions of art.

To use found objects in art is not only an engagement with the discourse of art, it is also a means through which artists engage with the meanings that accrue to objects, and to construct new meanings for objects – giving them a new social life of sorts. Social anthropological theories of the manner in which objects acquire meanings as they move through social fields have been useful for analysing these artworks made with found objects, because incorporating the found object in artworks has been exploited by the three artists I have considered as a means to construct new meanings for those objects. I have established that to pay attention to the kinds of objects that artists use and the ways in which they work with the objects is also a means to shift the rhetoric from a focus on anti-art to a focus on the possible meanings of artworks. These contemporary artworks can be read as they enter into a discourse with artworks that came before them. In challenging the humility of things, the artworks show us the objects and the discourses of art. In enabling us to think differently about all of this, the artworks show us ourselves.

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