

**Response to *Objects of Engagement* Conference.
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Objects of Engagement was a one-day conference held at Royal Holloway, University of London in June 2008. The emphasis of the event was placed on providing a space for exchange between emerging scholars and practitioners from various disciplines in theatre and performance. This piece is a reflection on the conference by its organising committee that offers a response to some of the primary issues raised by the event, the postgraduate contributions and the keynote speakers; Professors Richard Gough (University of Wales, Aberystwyth) and Pete Brooks (Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design).

Objects and Engagements



Fig 1. Professor Richard Gough. Photo by Roberto Sánchez-Camus

Richard Gough opened the conference, reading from a leather-bound book crowned with a stag's skull with twisted horns. As the opening address developed, items were revealed from under the table; an assemblage of objects and storytelling, part fact, part fiction, engaging our senses and

awareness. The growing still life on the conference table resembled a cross between a Joel Peter Witkin photograph and a charity shop. Performative and reflexive, these words began the journey of the day. Perhaps testing the audience's objectivity, Gough broke some eggs on

the table, and then threw one towards the onlookers. The empty shell landed softly in the aisle, having been emptied of its contents for the effect. Was this object what we thought it was? What did the trick reveal? Does calculated artifice and context change an object? With these questions in mind, the conference began.

Presentations ranged topically from puppetry to the gaze, contraction in dance, and material bodies to performances on cancer, and the Noh fan, as well as a participatory piece developing assumed histories and identity. The wide variety of participating scholars and practitioners, who conduct research and produce work in a range of media, revealed the myriad ways in which human consciousness engages with materiality. Perhaps objects provide us with a platform in which to recognise our philosophies, our self-image and ourselves. The varied uses and interpretations of ‘objects’ at the conference seemed to demonstrate how these become imbued with the perspective of the subject, and are subsequently re-presented with the symbolic enhancement of the subject’s lens. The lens itself is an external object, constituting a method of framing the object. The object then becomes the centre of the paradigm which Phillip Auslander describes as the mediated image representing the live and the live representing the mediated image (38-39). The object is no longer itself but an image of itself, a re-presentation of itself, an endless version.

The conference was concluded by Pete Brooks, who expanded on this significant thread that ran throughout the day’s discussions of representation and mediation. Brooks termed the object a potential ‘bridge to fiction’ using the example of Margaret Laton’s 17th century embroidered jacket that is on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The jacket is presented alongside a portrait painting of Margaret Laton (c. 1610) wearing the exact garment.¹ The object becomes a source of information and duplicity. The jacket is preserved as an artefact, and in the painting is presented in context, but what does the object become if

¹ For an image of the display see <http://www.vam.ac.uk/images/image/12661-popup.html>

we strip its context? Brooks postulated that this allows for a rebirth of the object, a new understanding of the potentialities of materiality. Just as computer avatars or puppets bridge the real and mediated, the object is animated by the subject yet retains an individual identity.

Objects

Objects of Engagement took the physical object in the widest sense as its starting point, placing it at the centre of academic dialogue. Rather than being perceived as passive products of consumption, silent, inert materials – often ignored or marginalised in subject-oriented critical discourse – were given voice and considered as embodiments of processes that reveal ontological aspects of the world, self and other. The positing of the object as entity, liberated from the tyranny of the subject, is



Fig 2. Objects from Lotos Collective practice workshop.

vividly articulated in Peter Schumann’s manifesto ‘What, At the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets and Performing Objects?’ In his illustrated essay, Schumann questions the word ‘object’ when describing a thing’s status, seeing it as a form of linguistic subjugation. He problematises the word itself as a reductive definition that perceives the object relationally within a hierarchical system of seeing that has no ideological justification, as he maintains, ‘[o]bject exists only because we are deceived into being subject’ (48).

In the theatre, the marginalization of ‘objects’ is evident in how they are often perceived as static symbols rather than as mobile entities. In their opening of a special issue of *Performance Research*, ‘On Objects,’ Laurie Beth Clarke, Richard Gough and Daniel Watt argue that the theatre has annihilated the object by transforming its ‘Thingness’ into just another means by which the spectacle may be advanced. However, by carefully examining the

nature of the stage object, it may be revealed that ‘through such a “thing” thinking may safeguard a certain condition of being’ (1). Thus when objects are brought into view, and their material life recovered on stage, they can serve as dynamic vehicles embodied with the cultural, political and psychological projects that created them, uncovering ways by which we register ourselves as social beings. These arguments suggest that the object – in performance or non-performance contexts – needs to be considered for itself as an open, integral and revealing ‘thing’ that defies its own objectification under the subject’s controlling gaze. Opening up such provocation was fundamental to the dialogue initiated by the conference.

Objects of Engagement aimed to continue the critique of the position of physical things in relation to ours, acknowledging a consciousness for the object that functions outside of and in tandem with that of the subject. In formulating a theme and a context for the conference, the focus was shifted from defining what we mean by ‘objects,’ towards a wider exploration and a deconstruction of the process of interchange between subject and object in its various manifestations in theatre, performance, live art and beyond. We hoped to supersede definitive boundaries, in order to inform and offer new methodologies for looking at theatre and performance through the subject-object dialectic whilst questioning the fixity of such division.

Engagement

The term engagement in the conference title requires an interrogation of its meaning as a term of action, as a term of promise, and as a term of growing global reflexivity. *Objects of Engagement* attempted to address and decipher these particular issues, which are increasingly on the minds of performance practitioners, scholars, and perhaps most provocatively, in the discourses of popular culture.

In the 2006 best seller *A Whole New Mind*, Daniel Pink argues that we are entering a new era, which he calls ‘the conceptual age.’ As opposed to the industrial age and the information age, which valued physical strength and then sequential analytics, Pink proposes that 21st century western society is producing strategies of ‘high concept and high touch.’ In other words, things that combine seemingly unrelated ideas to create new inventions and designs, or which aim to empathize and interact on a more visceral level, are achieving an unprecedented dominance in contemporary culture.



Fig 3. Objects from Lotos Collective practice workshop

Although Pink’s model is presented in a simplified and accessible manner, it could be seen as evidence of the increasing influence which performance and design strategies are having on cultural economies. Why is it now nearly compulsory for museums to have an interactive component to their exhibitions? What does it mean when top medical schools now require students to be trained in ‘narrative medicine,’ role playing and engaging with patients? Why is ‘play’ therapy as a part of job training becoming the standard rather than the exception?

Engagement tells us something about the doer and the receiver. The Oxford English Dictionary lists one of the early meanings of the word as ‘the pledging of property.’ In its most modern form, the term has lost much of its historical baggage of patriarchal traditions and dowry acquisition. Nonetheless, it is significant that a word that was first used for

economic transactions developed into a term for personal and romantic fulfillment, only to be most recently adopted as a term for fulfillment through public interaction.

Despite its long etymological journey, each rendition of the term *engagement* tends to maintain one common semantic thread: a promise. An engagement is, at the very least, a commitment of a relationship of one sort or the other, whether it is economic, personal, public or artistic. Interrogating this promise, and the promise that theatre and performance seem to make, was at the core of the dialogue at *Objects of Engagement*.

Objects of Engagement

Objects of Engagement culminated in a series of inter-disciplinary threads woven into a single context. Each presentation negotiated the dialectics of objects and objectification as systems for assessing the self and social life, which is a process foundational to all forms of artistic practice. Fetishized, retrospective, absent, bodied, haunted, subverted, the various



Fig 4. Objects from Lotos Collective practice workshop

manifestations of objects that emerged throughout the day demonstrated material things' capacity to document how we register our presence, and position ourselves as practitioners and scholars of theatre and performance. It is not just that the object acts as agent, but acts as part of an unstable temporal process of creation and destruction occurring alongside the subject. This dialogue highlighted the need to engage with the issue of objects as more than a footnote or a visual apparatus. To return to Schumann's manifesto of 'things': 'they too defy their subservience and the ungodly meaninglessness to which they are delegated by the habits of the republic; they too are infested by the sourdough of cultural insurrection' (51). The aim

of this revolution, and indeed, the conference, and the discourse it prompted, was to promote an equality and a dialectic of mutual dependency between persons and things, where the pertinence of their existence and meaning is equally acknowledged.²

References

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Victoria and Albert Museum, London. 10 Sep. 2008

<<http://www.vam.ac.uk/images/image/12661-popup.html>>.

² Readers are invited to participate in the current debate and presentations through the online forum <http://objectsofengagement.blogspot.com> created as an open source network to post ideas, performances, papers, provocations and queries.