



2016 Issue No. 27 — Thing Theory, Material Culture, and Object-Oriented Ontology

Possibilization and Desuetude: the Politics of the Reversed Canvas as Thing-Object

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I define the reversed painting as a painting of a painting reversed against the spectator. The most famous example is probably the huge stretcher back on which Diego Velázquez shows himself at work in *Las Meninas* (1656). Although in the West the motif derives in complex ways from the dialogue between the visible and the unseen in medieval ecclesiastical art, long before easel painting came into its own, it is no coincidence that it culminated in the seventeenth-century in works by artists who have retained their fame up to the present day: Nicholas Poussin, Rembrandt van Rijn, Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts and Velázquez himself. This was the century in which the Protestant Reformation discredited the traditional religious image, prompting the modern tableau or easel painting to acquire an autonomous aesthetic value of its own in its triumph over other artistic media (Belting 39). Thereafter, especially in the form of oil paint on canvas, paintings dominated Western public and domestic decoration for three centuries. [2]

The motif of the reversed painting, likewise, persists to the present day as a sophisticated reflexive symbol of art that comments on its own representational capability, an idea that Michel Foucault made famous in his influential analysis of *Las Meninas* as “the representation, as it were, of Classical representation” in the opening chapter of *Les Mots et Les Choses* (1966), translated as *The Order of Things* in 1996 (Foucault 16). As painting in its turn ceded to new media in the 1960s, the reversed painting not only made a courageous last stand in the reversal of real paintings detached from the walls of galleries in works by many artists who shall be mentioned later, but also the theme of reversal gained prominence in the symbolism of non-aesthetic media – particularly televisions and computers – as a sign of combined sophistication and mass appeal.

In his essay of 1964 on “The Plates of the *Encyclopaedia*,” Roland Barthes found an origin for the phenomena of extra-aesthetic, technologically inspired reversal as far back as Diderot’s eighteenth-century Encyclopedia: “In a general way, the Encyclopedia is fascinated, at reason’s instance, by the *wrong side* of things: it cross-sections, it amputates, it turns inside out, it tries to get *behind* Nature. Now any ‘wrong side’ is disturbing: science and parascience are mixed, above all on the level of the image” (Barthes 234). As well as writing history, it is possible that he is responding to developments in contemporary imaging and reading it back into an earlier epoch where it stands out more intelligibly than in the present.

As we shall see in the contemporary works of Cathy Wilkes and Stephen Gill at the end of this essay, artists who worked in new media reappropriated this development because they saw continuities with as well as differences from traditional painting in new technologies. As Leo Steinberg wrote of Robert Rauschenberg’s “flatbed” assemblages of the 1950s, for example, “any flat documentary surface that tabulates information is a relevant analogue of his picture plane” (Steinberg 88). The consequence was that his work “stood for the mind itself ... injesting [sic]

incoming unprocessed data to be mapped in an overcharged field" (88). The crucial turning point of my argument will be to offer an account of the way in which the backs of paintings and their analogues in new technologies open the possibilities of new political congregation and imagining by questioning the status of painting in particular and art in general. I would like to begin, however, with a discussion of a photograph of the 1940s that captures a painting that, while not exactly reversed, is effectively cancelled in a forceful manner that raises the fundamental issues of this essay.

During her time as a US army war-correspondent in Germany shortly after the end of the Second World War, Lee Miller composed a truly gruesome photograph pairing two things: the corpse of a Nazi officer and the portrait of Hitler he smashed before he killed himself (Fig. 1). Two dead and purposeless things, of which only one was ever organically alive, and which, covered with powder, now seems less alive than the other, the damaged portrait, which takes life by the Baroque device of energetically transgressing the intra-compositional frame of the skirting board (Allmer 401). The portrait is dead twice over, and in its second death we sense the whole unseen apparatus that kept the ideology of the icon alive while it was still intact (Gamboni 167). The juxtaposition of these "things" prompts a welter of speculation. In the broader sense, had the officer "killed" Hitler or had Hitler killed the officer? What message was intended for the Americans who would find the scene? "Look, I too see through Hitler now and will help you kill us both" or, more likely in view of the two thousand or so other German suicides after Hitler's death: "I'm not giving you the satisfaction of killing me or him. I'll kill us both before you can"? And what is Lee Miller saying to her American viewers? "Boy did they lose! Welcome to their sicko world"? The winning side has gained access to the backroom of their enemies, so that the portrait, formerly intended for German adulation, now provides the victors insight into the fanaticism that drove and destroyed its worshippers. The two things reduce each other to desuetude and are repurposed, for when Lee Miller, well used to objectification herself (as Man Ray's muse, as an elegant Vogue model and as a pin-up war correspondent), climbed naked into Hitler's bathtub to warm its curved iron hollow with her willowy starlet's body (Fig. 2), she repurposed it with a heretical sexual frisson of possibilization that is doubly poignant now that she too is dead. Possibilization (creating pure potentiality by withholding possibilities) and desuetude (falling into disuse) are the poles on which this essay turns.

We find in such images a stark equivalent to Arjun Appadurai's Thing Theory in which power relations take the form of qualities exchanged between the living and the dead:

any and all things can make the journey from commodity to singularity and back. Slaves, once sold as chattel, can become gradually humanized, personified, and reenchanting by the investiture of humanity but they can also be recommoditized, turned once again into mere bodies or tools, put back in the marketplaces, available for a price, dumped into the world of mere things. (Appadurai, "The Thing Itself" 15)

For Bill Brown, Jonathan Lamb and Tim Morton amongst others the crucial definition of Thing Theory involves the distinction between objects and things:

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (Brown 4)

Objects are distinguished from things in terms of usefulness and desuetude. If an object has lost its purpose or fallen out of economic circulation it comes alive as a thing that registers the obsolete desires of its former owners and users. Lurking behind the useful/useless distinction might be so

traditional an authority as Kant's concept of aesthetic purposelessness. As he defined it in *The Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790), this entails the act of contemplation that isolates an object in aesthetic judgment to be considered for its own sake, abstracted from the personal interest of the observer, who regards the object with disinterest, as an end in itself rather than as a means of serving his own ends. In doing so, however, s/he finds the object imparts to the observer a fleeting intuition of harmony between the self, the world and the numinous universe beyond our senses (Kant 106–20). I shall return to this theme.

The limitation of Kant for Thing Theory is that although all beautiful objects are, in Kant's opinion, useless, not all useless things are beautiful. Thing Theory encompasses the ugly and inane too, such as the detritus accumulated by the hoarder – at least from other people's point of view (J. Bennett). The broader limitation of Thing Theory, it seems to me, is that although it poignantly illuminates the history of an object culture – the way in which Lee Miller's photograph explores post-war mentalities, for example – it neglects the possibility that an object that has become a thing by losing its function can become what I will call an "object-thing" by being repurposed and gaining another function, if only as an object of contemplation, which hardly, as Pierre Bourdieu attests of "symbolic capital," frees it of economic value (Bourdieu 75). To be worth a lot of money, a work of art must avoid obvious commercial value, which is why successful commercial artists find it difficult to gain aesthetic acclaim for their work.

For anthropologists particularly, Thing Theory opens itself far beyond the privileged realm of Western art objects. Here we must call on "it-narratives," defined for the purpose of my argument as popular literary narratives, originally in print form, which "make legible the series of exchanges that all marketable goods have as it were written on their backs" (Lamb, xvii). They are stories that establish a fictional world in which "there is little to choose between the human and the material character, for they all move, speak and are valued in the same sociable way" (Lamb xvii). Studies of eighteenth-century British "it-narratives" by James Lamb and others focus on the proliferation of "autobiographies of inanimate things ... of coins, ornaments, utensils, land, clothing, vehicles, and furniture – and of animate ones too, such as dogs, horses, insects, and body parts" (Lamb xvi). The essays in Appadurai's anthology *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1988) focus on commodities such as qat, a kind of chewable tobacco in Northeast Africa, and the cloth industry in India and elsewhere. *Eighteenth-Century Thing Theory in a Global Context* (2014) edited by Ileana Baird and Christina Ionescu concentrates on the itineraries and the spaces connected by mainly non-Western, non-aesthetic commodities, such as porcelain, museum objects, garments, books, food accessories and scientific and ethnographic objects. It makes the point that concentrating on nineteenth-century things neglects the great eighteenth-century surge in commodification that prepared so many objects for desuetude. In this paper I return to the core of Western aesthetics to study easel paintings as things, and not just paintings but paintings of paintings shown in the special mode of being reversed against the spectator, as in this seventeenth-century example of *trompe l'oeil* by Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts (Fig. 3).

To do so I must push back before the industrial revolution to the Italian Renaissance when, "with the rise of devotional piety and the diffusion of inexpensive panel paintings through the marketplace, Italians could take pictures home with them and into their private lives" for the first time (Goldthwaite 142). Krystztof Pomian defines the common criteria of all collections as "a set of natural or artificial objects, kept temporarily or permanently out of the economic circuit, afforded special protection in enclosed places adapted specifically for the purpose and put on display" (9). It is only in such places that all of these objects, "without exception, act as intermediaries between those who can see them and an invisible world" (Pomian 25). The initiate will not just see but read through the religious iconography or allegory to the coded meaning of an artefact. It is a world that constitutes "first and foremost the cleavage between the universe of discourse and the world of visual perception" (Pomian 26). In the case of paintings on canvas, however, which began to be produced in significant numbers in the last quarter of the fifteenth-century, a secondary division of worlds complicates the first. For backs of easel paintings provide

access to a different kind of world from the acolyte's invisible world of discourse, one of economic understanding that is accessible only before paintings leave or after they re-enter economic circulation. For paintings of backs of paintings show what the provenance of a painting is, where it has been, and the settings where it is made, sold, judged or transported.

Physically, the backs of paintings could only become available as a pictorial subject when paintings acquired backs, that is, when frescos, mosaics or double-sided paintings gave way between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries to the predominant arrangement of canvases hung on walls as exchangeable commodities that could be taken down to reveal the backs of their supports. As such the motif always conveyed the potential of something whose religious or aesthetic value could be "switched off" during periods of manufacture, storage or transit, when paintings do not perform their customary role of frontal display. But if so then they may be "switched on" in a different respect as commodities with an adventurous commercial life as they journey out beyond studios into and out of gallery exhibitions, art collections, store rooms, bank vaults, transport facilities and so on.

Where paintings are concerned, the visibility of their fronts and backs are vivid markers of their transition between phases of commodification, display and desuetude. This is why, as representations, backs of paintings lend themselves to it-narratives that existed far earlier than those eighteenth-century literary biographies of things of which James Lamb and others wrote. One of the earliest such it-narratives is not about a painting on canvas but Leonardo da Vinci's buckler, a small round wooden shield, now lost, bearing the painted image of a monster. Its destiny of transformation is told in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* as it is first sawn away as raw material from the branches of an Edenic fig tree on his father's farm, then taken to a turner's lathe, then on to the artist's workshop where he paints the monster on it to astonish his father. His father then deviously sells his son's gift on to merchants so that it finally ends up in the court of Milan, having increased in value at each stage of the journey. Paul Barolsky shows how this parable of sequential value-adding reenacts in its broad sweep the ancient parable of Paradise Regained: the fallen artefact from Eden eventually rising to the royal court of heaven on earth, since da Vinci's own *nobilita* had first been minted at the court of Milan (Barolsky 290).

Examples abound from later centuries. Jonathan Swift's satire "*The Battle of the Books* notoriously stages the conflict over cultural supremacy that opposes the Ancients to the Moderns by bringing to life the books in the King's Library" (Baird 12). Hogarth's celebrated *The Battle of the Pictures* of 1744 (Fig. 4) was a subscription card for an auction of his own paintings that re-stages Swift's battle as an abstract clash of market forces between his own English paintings and the serried ranks of forged Old Masters, each marked "ditto," that had flooded in from the Continent to dominate taste for contemporary English art. Both sides rise up in aerial battle to stab each other in the back.

When a reversed painting is depicted in transit, under a courier's arm say, it testifies to the fact that when we contemplate a thing we only see a frozen moment of a changing process which is otherwise hidden from view. And yet "[t]hings-in-motion illuminate their human and social context" (Brown 6). Honoré Daumier's *Marche Triomphale!.....* and *Marche funèbre!!..* (1855) are newspaper illustrations published on different days but intended as companion pieces (Figs. 5 and 6). They belong to a genre of backs of paintings in transit whose street locations dramatise the economic drawing power of the institutions of display they leave or approach. In this case they are sequential views of a gentleman artist full of hope as his paintings are transported to the World Exhibition and then as he returns in dejection after the jury has rejected them. It stands in here for the ritual journeys to and from the annual Salon, that Calvary where "once an artist was rejected ... by a conservative jury, he had most likely no chance to succeed commercially" (Noak no. 2296). In both images the jury session is conspicuous by its absence. In *La Marche Triomphale!.....* the artist is a General leading his troops to war using paintings as wings while henchmen carry other pictorial ammunition. In the second we see a private funeral in which the paintings are corpses marked "*refusé*" on a stretcher carried by pall-bearers (the henchmen) who

are as dejected as the artist because their income is dependent on their master's.

Mary Emily Osborne's mid-nineteenth-century *Nameless and Friendless* (Fig. 7; 1857) shows a bifurcation in the fate of the actual painting and the small reversed painting it depicts. The young female artist-vendor has carried it to the commercial gallery through sodden streets from her studio where we "imagine a far more active, very determined female body" setting out for this ordeal (Meskimmon 77). By contrast Mary Osborne's actual painting is destined for the Royal Academy where the difficulties facing women artists in male-dominated dealerships are a legitimate talking point, whereas the smaller reversed canvas within the painting is on an it-narrative that most likely leads to the pawn shop, a story that was dramatised in the three frames of an anonymous Punch cartoon of 1853, "The Story of a Portrait." In sequence from left to right, "The First Sitting" shows the painting being made in the artist's studio; "Finished" shows the artist visiting a pawn shop with the painting under his arm; and "Exhibited" shows the painting displayed in the pawn shop with the sum of 2/6 (the trifling sum of two shillings and sixpence) chalked on it in front of laughing urchins (Fig. 8).

Linley Sambourne's reworking of Hogarth's battle of the pictures in *The Art Lists for Punch* of 1878 (Sambourne) presents the institutional clash of academic and commercial prestige as a jousting tournament between the then president of the royal academy, Sir Francis Grant, and the immensely wealthy owner of the Grosvenor Gallery, Sir Lindsay Coutts of Balcarres. Backs of paintings by individual artists are reduced to mere flanchards protecting the flanks of each institution's horses, another excellent way of showing that individual paintings are subject to larger groupings formed by economic and political forces.

As it happens it-narratives are rife in late twentieth-century installation works by Daniel Buren, Lucas Samaras, Richard Artschwager and Imants Tillers. They respond to the rapid cycles of display on the international art circuit by revealing the normally hidden commercial life of their products in an epoch when the economy of the art world was to art what the nude, landscape or myth were in former times (Siegel and Mattick 13). Thus in Imants Tiller's *Bridge of Reversible Destiny* of 1990 an exhibition is half-displayed and half stacked for transport (Fig. 9). We don't know whether it is being installed or taken down, so that the "back room" existence of the painting becomes "front of house." The work perpetuates an old parallel between the course of human life and the itinerary of paintings formed as an "accumulated pile of spent images" prepared for a "journey into the unknown" like a heap of coal waiting for self-ignition" (Curnow 82). In all these cases objects gain ambiguity as thing-objects by repurposing old functions aestheticised by desuetude. The result is an ambivalence between desuetude and possibilization that does not stem from Kantian freedom from purposefulness.

For Tillers the backs of paintings represent the lure of the unknown but possibilization, as I must now explain, also depends on an austere form of negation. What could be duller than the back of a painting compared to any image on the front, yet by means of it we become aware of the full gamut of reality from which we contemplate the possible image on the other side. Martin Heidegger argued that, as the essential characteristic of profound boredom, being held in suspense is nothing but the experience of disconcealing the "originary possibilization" or "pure potentiality" entailed in the "suspension and withholding of all concrete and specific possibilities" (Agamben, *The Open* 66-7).

Where have we heard such ideas before? It is the art-political context of Friedrich von Schiller's post-Kantian dithyramb on the classical sculpture of the Goddess Juno Ludovisi in the 1794 *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. It was written at a time when the author had taken refuge in Germany from the French revolutionary Terror and was desperately seeking an aesthetic solution to the catastrophic divisions of aristocratic and proletarian labour that had caused it. For Schiller the face of the *Juno Ludovisi* is a godlike woman that both kindles love and makes us shrink back in awe (Fig. 10). As Schiller writes, "Irresistibly carried away and attracted by her womanly charm, kept off at a distance by her godly dignity, we also find ourselves at length in the state of

the greatest repose" (Schiller letter 15). Juno is an apparatus for the speculative rehearsal of utopian aspiration. We begin to understand the analogy with the reversed painting's capacity for possibilization in Terry Eagleton's gloss on Schiller's passage. In apprehending the Juno, "two strenuously antagonistic forces cancel each other out into a kind of stalemate or nullity, and this sheer suggestive nothingness is our pre-capacity for all value. There is, however, nullity and nullity – mere blank negation, and that richly potential vacuity which, as the suspension of every specific constraint, lays the fertile ground for . . . a dream of absolute freedom" (Eagleton 107). Here is a hinge on which the antinomy between possibilization and desuetude of the reversed painting also turns, but a carved Goddess elicits a different response from the image of a back of a painting. We need a concept that limits the range and degree of possibilization to distinguish between them.

If Heidegger and Schiller expand possibilization to infinity then the indeterminateness that Edmund Husserl attributes to the other sides of all physical objects strongly limits it and brings us down to earth. In *Things and Space* (1907) Husserl asks us to consider an ordinary box, whose back and interior are indeterminate, but makes the important qualification that "Indeterminateness is never absolute or complete ... is always delimited in this or that way" (Husserl 50). We do not know what kind of back the box has, or what colour it is, but we know that it will have a back and a colour of one kind or another. This is as true of backs of paintings as of all other objects, but if we belong to a culture familiar with paintings, their other sides promise some predictable characteristics. We expect paintings, whatever they depict, to have a less interesting, more fungible, fully materialist back that divides the spectral image on the front from the physical object that supports it. As Jean Luc Nancy observes, "the image is a thing that is not the thing: it distinguishes itself from it, essentially" (2). It is distinguished both from the thing it represents – its subject matter – and the thing it is painted on, which, however, it conveys an intrinsic awareness of: "it is therefore inseparable from a hidden surface, from which it cannot, as it were, be peeled away: the dark side of the picture, its underside or back, or even its weave or its subjectile" (2). The support alone, by contrast, conveys brute thingness. Considered as an object, we know that the hidden front, like the exposed back, is likely to be rectangular and will show moving combinations of light and shade falling upon its fixed colours. Beyond that, we expect only the unexpectedness of the hidden image, of which the only limit is what is picturable by contrast with other media, just as 'a fog or a snowstorm' is inaccessible to sculpture (Panofsky 98).

Here we encounter the riddle of the reversed canvas as a thing-object exposing conflicting ontological realms by straddling the divide between what is art and not art. In his essay "Defining Art" (1969) the American philosopher George Dickie defined a work of art descriptively as "(1) *an artifact* (2) *upon which some society of some sub-group of a society has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation*" (254). He goes on to qualify the definition by pointing out that "not every aspect of a work is included in the candidacy for appreciation, for example, the colour of the back of a painting is not ordinarily an object of appreciation" (Dickie 254). But is the *representation* of the back of a painting art or not? Here is the crucial turning point of my argument, mooted at the beginning. I want to argue that by straddling the division between art and not art the best paintings of reversed paintings foreground unresolved tensions between ontological realms that were in meaningful conflict at the time they were made. The *Juno Ludovisi* is an unambiguous work of art, regardless of its human or divine subject matter. Paintings of reversed paintings ask us to question their status as art.

The death of easel painting has been pronounced so many times since Hegel proclaimed the death of art in his *Aesthetic* that it is as difficult to date as the origins of art, but with the publication of Umberto Eco's *Opera Aperta* in 1962 the art of painting and other traditional arts really did seem finally to have ceded their purpose to new media and interactive art and so to have lapsed into a state of metaphysical desuetude. The pictorial effects of distantiation in perspective and the representation of subject matter remote from the observer were deemed unacceptable and gave way to art predicated on social interaction in the present tense of consumption. The advent of performance art, installation and other new film media coincided with a remarkable upsurge of

our motif, often in the form of a real painting taken down and reversed against the wall to grant equality to spectators moving around the gallery space or indeed in non-artistic spaces outside the gallery. There are so many instances of paintings in the 1960s negated by reversal in this way that space allows only the names of some of the artists who made them: Robert Rauschenberg, Antoni Tapis, Giulio Paolini, Jasper Johns, Daniel Dezeuze, Robert Motherwell, Patrick Caulfield, Alighiero Boetti, Peter Tyndall, Dale Hickey, Roy Lichtenstein to which one must add the important sequence at the beginning of Michelangelo Antonioni's film *L'Eclisse* (1962) in which the reversed frame of a painting draws attention to ideology as a framing device as a human tragedy unfolds in an apartment festooned with many kinds of paintings and sculptures. Perhaps this unprecedented rash of reversed paintings in contemporary art was an outcry of grief for the death of painting, for what use are the backs of paintings after painting has lost its function as a legitimate form of art? Backs of paintings, actual or depicted, became a declaration of the uselessness of the previously venerable uselessness of painting. Since the 1960s this surge of backs of paintings has dwindled to a trickle, but I concentrate on a recent work to develop my unlikely conclusion that this odd motif has gained politico-aesthetic force under a new and more popular guise .

When I first saw Cathy Wilkes' *Non-Verbal Installation* (2005–2011, Fig. 11) it reminded me of an uncanny childhood hallucination. As an infant not long past the toddling stage, I ventured beyond the street in which I lived – the permitted boundary of my wandering – to walk along the pavement of the adjacent main road. There I suddenly hallucinated all the pedestrians walking towards me on the pavement of the busy road as robots or somnambulists programmed to pass me at exactly the right moment. It was a *Truman Show* world stripped of accident in which nothing was left to chance and in which I was the only traveller moving under my own volition. I now seem to remember imagining that there were officials around corners with clipboards and stopwatches tapping walkers on shoulders when it was time for them to go.

I could believe the artist had read something like Tony Bennett's "The Exhibitionary Complex" in which our identity in a gallery is formed as much by other people looking at us as by the exhibits we look at, but here the other people seem dead too. Close-ups show that the mannequins wear make-up. According to an old analogy between *maquillage* – the art of female cosmetics – and paintings (Baudelaire 43–7), the faces are painted, like pictures, and so the fronts of the petite Expressionist canvases seem to impute subjective life to the mannequins more readily than the mask-like faces behind them do. One reading would go: "instead of wearing my heart on my sleeve I am wearing my feelings on this painting." They seem to superannuate the human condition itself, which is why they drift around like revenants, not bothering to dress – sex is passé too – having forgotten their proper stations in shop windows or the streets, absent-mindedly wheeling their empty baby buggies. The presence of these buggies subscribes to the forgotten analogy between pictorial representation and human reproduction were it not that, being black, the babies, who are anyway ignored, are their own plastic toys and show no attachment to the mothers. Was not everyone interested in the make of Kate Middleton's Bugaboo pram when her first baby was born? This one is a Maclaren.

I originally mistook the prams for supermarket trollies and thought of Pierre Bourdieu's famous adage that the supermarket is the art gallery of the masses, but the scenario is more ambiguous than that. I referred at the beginning to the most famous back of all, Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, (1656; Fig. 12). There the provisional quality of the huge, raw canvas that dominates the left side of the painting ambiguates the room of the palace in which the artist shows himself painting. We do not know whether it is predominantly a royal chamber, a studio or (due to the paintings on the walls) an art gallery, nor consequently what system of values the painting is promoting. Here, too, we cannot tell whether we are inside or outside, sharing the non-place of a home, a street, a supermarket, a gallery or a factory assembly floor. Commodities lie around in a random order, as toys or hooovers do in homes before they are put away or paintings in galleries before or after they are hung. The heterogeneous mixture of commodities include prams, Sony televisions, salad bowls, a trough of petrol and of course the shop mannequins with paintings

suspended from their faces. Certainly the scattered, careless order of Wilkes' objects contrasts with the symmetry of well-hung wall exhibits.

Unlike most of the object-things I have cited, Wilkes' installation has certain qualities that suppress the subject-object relationship between humans and things so as to manifest more strongly the relationships between things themselves, including really big things called hyper-objects (Morton). The modern equivalent of the transcendental realm conjured up under the old order of paintings is the depthless regions of the internet implied by the backs of laptops that dominate our TV screens and poster hoardings. Every time we see a cop or a business executive or a child mastering the universe behind a computer screen we entertain the fantasy of the human mind turned inside out, mapping its interior logics, perceptual constraints and innermost desires onto the external environment, which delivers itself up with the transcendental oneness of the Kantian sublime. Our heroes, villains and loved ones peer into the recesses of the internet to find their place in the scheme of things. We forget that they are engaging with inert storage and retrieval systems whose overriding ambition is to annihilate the gap between our desires and their on-screen fulfilment (Halpern). Such imagery is ill-equipped for representing and understanding the dispersed causal matrices of hyper-objects.

Hyper-objects are phenomena that are too big to be apprehended by the senses yet do not belong to any transcendental sphere. Kant is their enemy in that respect since the matter of which they are composed "doesn't come from something deeper" (Morton 44). Obvious examples of hyper-objects are global warming and capitalism, the way in which a galaxy forms, the scattered reasons for the sudden onset of a GFC, events that work over vast periods of time and geographical distances and, while impinging on us only episodically, live with us intimately like the asbestos in all our lungs or the sun that falls through the hole in the ozone layer. Backs of paintings can motivate us to think about hyper-objects by inspiring us to imagine the ineffable. They dramatise dispersed and tangential causalities rather than homogeneous transcendental ones. Students of hyper-objects endeavour to return Kant's transcendental realm to the biosphere, which is not infinity but trillions of finitudes, numerous as things themselves. This requires adjustment to our centralised sense of humanity: "the phenomenon we call *intersubjectivity* is just a local, anthropocentric instance of a much more widespread phenomenon, namely *inter-objectivity*" (Morton 83), where *inter-objectivity* means nothing so implausible as consciousness passing between inanimate objects but rather "the understandings that are shared within and between cultures about social reality" (Moghadden 221).

As well as illuminating the subject-relations between things and their human users – the way things interpellate us – backs of painting are good at evoking *inter-objectivity*. They induce a feeling of vertigo as if the world could be seen without a subject to perceive it: a world minus human consciousness, the look of the world before our entry into it or after our departure from it (Bryson 143). They mark a rupture between the objects we are accustomed to and materialist processes that occupy wider dimensions than we can be aware of (Morton 70).

This gives us another way of reading the faces behind paintings in Wilkes' *Non-Verbal* installation. They hang on invisible walls that slice and intersect each other like Hogarth's battling pictures. The sharp metal edges of the tray on the floor twist our awareness of the vertically hanging backs of paintings into a dimension that points upwards to the ceiling, which could be leaking into it, except that the fluid is petrol whose aroma pervades the air, invading lungs. A critic observes: "The jangling tone of the objects resonates; the scene has no clearly defined threshold, and, as such, it is experienced as an event" (Staple), or rather we may say it is experienced as a series of processes that leave their residue in overlapping ontological realms penetrated by causal chains that work from far beyond the gallery walls (such as the factories where all these things were made and the sources of their raw materials and the habits of mind that created needs for them and were in turn created by them).

Other contemporary works accentuate the anti-aesthetic aspect of the object-thing by reversing

surfaces that have nothing to do with art. My final examples are by the British experimental, conceptual and documentary photographer Stephen Gill. His *Field Studies* (2004) features a series of photographs of the reversed sides of billboards whose titles are taken from the legends on the sides of the posters we cannot see. This generates a sharply ironical sense of contradiction between the consumerist fantasies remembered from the fugue state of driving and the stark reality of the hoarding backs and the detritus behind them. Hence the appalling pseudo-political pun on turning an ignition key in the title of an advertising slogan for new cars: *Turn the key. Start a revolution – Mazda* (Fig. 13) when all we can see is a heap of promiscuously intermingled makes of disused cars lying rusted and immobilised behind the hoarding on which it is inscribed. Gill uses counter-memory to reveal the potency of outmoded objects behind slick surfaces, and of derelict spaces cut off from main routes of circulation. He invests these billboards with the aura of specific back regions where the junk discarded by consumerism inexorably accumulates. He engineers an exchange between photoerotic advertising and the normally invisible waste it generates. In his essay "Negation" Freud wrote of the oldest oral imperatives – "I should like to eat this" or "I should like to spit it out" – as the basis of introjecting within ourselves everything that is good and ejecting from ourselves everything that is bad (Freud 439). Gill challenges the way we divide things in this way and invites us to occupy the caravan behind *Gordons Gin cut with lime – New Gordon's Edge* (Fig. 14) or the kennel behind *Inland Revenue* amongst the trash that adverts screen us from (Fig. 15), though distinction between rubbish and food becomes prim in countries such as India and Africa where the poor must live directly off the dumping grounds.

The political force of contemporary surrogates of the reversed painting is the reverie they induce about hyperobjects and new forms of political constituency. In *The Coming Community* Giorgio Agamben discards Schiller's project of employing art to heal the divisions of labour because "there are no longer social classes, but just a single planetary petty bourgeoisie" bent on its own destruction (63). Those dumping grounds countries where the poor feed on rubbish put the lie to this overstatement, but there is merit in Agamben's notion that instead of "continuing to search for a proper identity in the ... senseless form of individuality" (*Coming Community* 65), we should entertain the conception of a "singularity without identity, a common and absolutely exposed singularity", for then for the first time we would enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects (65). Perhaps the strength of the Tiananmen Square protest and the Occupy Movement was the "relative absence of determinate contents in their demands" (Agamben, *Coming Community* 67). What the State cannot tolerate is "forming a community without an identity. Wherever such communities peacefully demonstrate their being in common ... sooner or later the tanks will appear" (Agamben, *Coming Community* 67). By subordinating human identity to awareness of hyper-objects, the tactics of occlusion and reversal promise to unite us in resistance to collective blind spots. I do not know how much confidence to place in this hope but I find it interesting and suspect it is already being practised in many spheres of politics.

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Endnotes

1. This essay is an invited article based on the authors' keynote address for "The Life of Things" Work in Progress conference, UQ September 2014.

2. This essay contributes to a book project provisionally titled *The Reversed Painting in Western Art*.

Figures

Fig. 1 Lee Miller, *Dead Volksturm General (suicide)*, April 1945, photograph
<<http://i.imgur.com/M8LttwD.png>>



Fig. 2 Lee Miller and David E. Sherman, *Lee Miller in Hitler's Bathtub*, 30 April 1945, photograph, published in Roland Penrose, *Scrap Book* (Barcelona: La Poligrafa, 1981)
<<http://www.leemiller.co.uk/media/Lee-Miller-in-Hitler-s-apartment-at-16-Prinzregentenplatz-Note-the-combat-boots-on-the-bath-mat-now-stained-with-the-du/bsw88oH7msYbO0C148L69g..a>>



Fig. 3 Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts, *Trompe l'oeil. The Reverse of a Framed Painting*, 1670, oil on canvas, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen
<<http://www.smk.dk/en/explore-the-art/highlights/cornelius-norbertus-gijsbrechts-trompe-loeil-the-reverse-of-a-framed-painting/>>



Fig. 4 William Hogarth, *The Battle of the Pictures*, 1743, engraving and etching
<<http://www.wikiart.org/en/william-hogarth/the-battle-of-the-pictures-1745>>



Fig. 5 Henri Daumier, *Marche Triomphale!.....*, lithograph, *Le Charivari*, 14 April 1855
<http://www.daumier-register.org/werkview.php?key=2664>



Fig. 6 Henri Daumier, *Marche funèbre!!..* 11 April 1855, lithograph, *Le Charivari*, 11 April 1855
http://www.daumier-register.org/detail_popup.php?img=DR2665_3&dr=2665&lingua=en

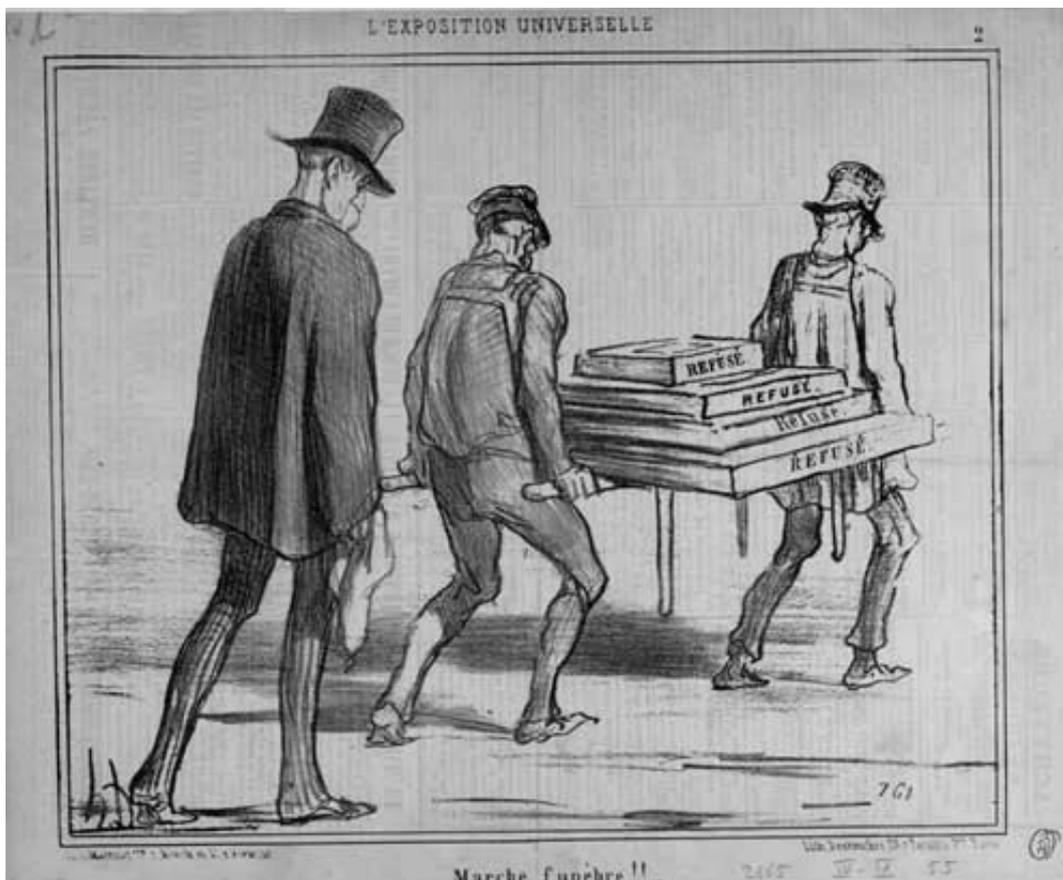


Fig. 7 Mary Emily Osborne, *Nameless and Friendless*. "The rich man's wealth is his strong city, etc.'" *Proverbs x. 15* (1875), Tate Britain
<<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/osborn-nameless-and-friendless-the-rich-mans-wealth-is-his-strong-city-etc-proverbs-x-15-t12936>>



Fig. 8 "W." "The Story of a Portrait." *Punch* 25, 26 November 1853: 234
<<https://archive.org/stream/punch24a25lemouoft#page/496/mode/1up>>



Fig. 9 Imants Tillers, *The Bridge of Reversible Destiny*, 1990, mixed media
http://www.shermangalleries.com.au/artists_exhib/artists/tillers/popup3.html



Fig. 10 *Juno Ludovisi*, portrait of Antonia Minor, 1st century CE, Parian marble, Palazzo Altemps, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome
 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juno_Ludovisi#/media/File:Hera_Ludovisi_Altemps_Inv8631.jpg>



Fig. 11 Cathy Wilkes, *Non-Verbal Installation* (2005-2011), Mixed media, dimensions variable.
 <<http://experience.geistweidt.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Non-Verbal-2011-Installation-view-at-Art-Unlimited-Art-42-Basel-2011-2-copie-915x686.jpg>>



Fig. 12 Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, 1656, oil on canvas. Prado Museum.
<<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/zoom/1/obra/the-family-of-felipe-iv-or-las-meninas/oimg/0/>>



Fig. 13 Stephen Gill, *Turn the Key. Start a Revolution* – Mazda 2002–2004, 20 Crystal C-type prints.
Stephen Gill, *A Book of Field Studies* (London: Chris Boot, 2004), p. 189
<<http://newsfeed.kosmograd.com/city-of-signs-3/>>



Fig. 14 Stephen Gill, *Gordons Gin Cut with Lime – New Gordon's Edge* (2002–2004), 20 Crystal C-type prints, in Stephen Gill, *A Book of Field Studies* (London: Chris Boot, 2004), p. 184
<<http://hollysavagea2.tumblr.com/post/74298581800/analytical-frame-3>>



Fig. 15 Stephen Gill, *Inland Revenue*, 2002–2004, 20 Crystal C-type prints, 508 x 406 mm). Stephen Gill, *A Book of Field Studies* (London: Chris Boot, 2004), p. 193.

<https://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/vickytheay/entry/stephen_gills_billboards/>



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