Animate objects, articulate things: what next?

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Animate objects, articulate things. *What next?*

Every poet of furniture...knows that the inner space of the wardrobe is deep. A wardrobe’s inner space is also *intimate* space, space that is not open just to anybody.

Gaston Bachelard¹

The mattress and the intimacy of furniture

Indestructible, ubiquitous, intimate. There is something disturbing about encountering a mattress on a pavement or in the street. It should be wrapped in clean cotton sheets, swaddled in eiderdowns and tucked up in bed. Left to the vagrancies of the weather, the cheery quilted ticking fades and, in time, it becomes rain-sodden detritus, the dirty stuff understood by Mary Douglas as merely ‘matter out of place’.² In his 1989 photographic series, *Rubbish and Recollections*, the British artist Keith Arnatt focused on ‘matter out of place’, seeking out objects that had been dumped down idyllic country lanes.³ Many of his images featured bloated mattresses, their burst innards oozing slimy feathers like rotting corpses. The eye settles on the soiled satin fabric, punctured by steel strips of uncoiled rusty springs. Those coiled springs are strangely indestructible and ubiquitous. In every garden and allotment that I have ever attempted to cultivate, mattress springs have emerged from the debris of countless bonfires. Decades later, the twisted metal re-appears, glinting amongst the cabbages, like a filthy secret.

In fact, every patch of urban wasteland the world over - Manchester, Melbourne or Mexico City - seems to acquire discarded mattresses. A few years ago, I interviewed the artist Lucy Puls who was producing installations with mattresses which she had found stacked up on the sidewalks in the San Francisco Bay Area. The abandoned mattresses were peculiarly lonesome and evocative.⁴ The humble mattress has a physical intimacy about it. It is the site of birth, death, illness and sex. It harbours semen, urine, blood and vomit. But the mattress is also a place for the imagination, a resting place to ponder, to sleep and to dream. All the traces of human life are there.

We are not always comfortable with the traces of human life though, particularly the residue of others. Many years ago, when my partner and I acquired our first ‘home’ - a dilapidated ‘condemned’ Victorian urban ‘two-up-two-down’ terrace - we negotiated the steep, narrow staircase into the main front bedroom. The air was suffocating. Engulfing the whole room was an

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enormous iron bedstead with a soiled damp mattress. The previous owner had died in the house. The mattress had to go, so we threw it out of the window onto the street below. Incongruously, as ‘matter out of place’, it sprawled itself across the pavement at a jaunty angle, its human intimacy disturbing the everyday comings and goings of the world outside. As Bachelard noted, in his ‘topoanalysis’ of the intimacies and poetics of domestic space, ‘outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains.’5 Things that are inside, shouldn’t be outside; breaching the threshold disturbs the order of things.

Articulate things

Waiting for you
How does it feel?
What next?6

This exhibition of work by Julie Shiels features lots of mattresses which have been abandoned outside in busy streets, in parking lots, on wasteground. Along with chairs and sofas, for the past decade or so, they have formed part of her repertoire of urban ‘canvases’. Sometimes, the statements are the artist’s own, evoked by the uncanny juxtaposition of objects and environment; at other times, the objects reiterate the words or favourite aphorisms of destitute people living on the streets. For the viewer, they evoke other living rooms, other bedrooms, other lives where people once ate, worked, slept and dreamt. This domestic furniture once held onto bodies, protecting them from the harsh world of exterior space. Now, they are conduits of human residue and physical intimacy; they have become objects ‘out of place’.

At the same time, Shiels has resurrected these abandoned objects and transformed them into rhetorical sites of banality, melancholy and, often, wit. Detached from their owners (their subjects), the chairs, sofas and mattresses have become subjectless objects. Yet in becoming articulate objects - objects that speak - they have acquired subjectivity. From object to subject and back again, there is a continuing process of oscillation at work on the viewer. Moreover, in this photographic series of ‘object statements’, the interplay of voices demands us to return to some of those familiar discourses and canonical positions concerning authorship. Whose voice do we hear? Is it the artist’s or the object’s? Who or what is speaking? Does it matter?7

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6 Statements extracted from some of Shiels' photographic images.
Animate objects

There is the power of boundary objects and the general principle that objects are active life presences. 8

Besides becoming articulate, these evocative objects go beyond evocation and might be said to have ‘active life presences’. There is a sense in which these inanimate objects have become animate. The boundary between the two states is precarious. Another threshold is breached.

Objects can do things. For Bruno Latour, an actant is a source of action that can be human or nonhuman. In her book, Vibrant Matter, Jane Bennett develops Latour’s ideas further. In order to discern the active powers of specific material stuff, she addresses the agency of nonhuman objects. Bennett’s project highlights the positive, productive power of things – ‘thing-power’ - aiming to give voice to a vitality intrinsic to materiality, in the process absolving matter from its long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism.9

Other recent writings associated with ‘new materialist’ thinking, counter the idea of matter as inert. Instead of conceptualizing objects as discrete or closed, new materialists seek to understand matter and objects as contingent and unstable, as ‘open, complex systems with porous boundaries’.10 Elsewhere, in The Democracy of Objects, Levi Bryant writes compellingly about the radical autonomy of objects. Rather than elucidating the gap between humans and nonhumans, he draws on the notion of a ‘flat ontology’, stressing the entanglement of human/object relations.11

Clearly, within current philosophical discourse there is a new ontological approach, an emergent reorientation of our understanding of objects, their effects and their affects. With objects that communicate and statements that activate, Shiels’ project enables us to engage with some of those debates. With poignancy, and a dose of humour, it also evokes the intimacies and banalities of everyday life.

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8 Sherry Turkle, Evocative Objects, Things We Think With, MIT, 2007, p. 9
10 See Diana Coole and Samantha Frost ‘Introducing the New Materialism’ in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds), New Materialisms, Ontology, Agency and Politics, Duke: London, 2010, p. 15