

Art

MONTHLY

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Object Lesson

Andrew Wilson questions Material Culture

Immaterial Culture

Mark Harris objects

Whaddayakiddingme?

Jeffrey Kastner takes in the Whitney Biennial

Phoney War

Julian Stallabrass takes on the philistines



Immaterial Culture

Mark Harris questions the basic premise of Material Culture



Installation view
Anish Kapoor
In the Beginning 1997
Jacqui Poncelet
Tartan 1993
Susan Hiller
From the Freud Museum 1991-96
Rebecca Warren
Every Aspect of Bitch Magic 1996

How can such a good-looking show grow from such a weak premise? Is it necessary to quarrel with the poorly formulated arguments underlying an installation of the many extraordinary works that transform the Hayward into the great space for contemporary art it was always meant to be?

In this case, yes, since shaky curatorial premises use contemporary art to warm up the old chestnuts of formalism and 80s British sculpture while neatly eliding the last ten years of critical practice with that handy universal, the object.

By giving such a casual definition of material and by endlessly qualifying what they mean by object the curators, Michael Archer and Greg Hilty, turn this show into a catch-all that should more honestly be called 'These are a few of my favourite things'. Under their loose definitions there is no way of understanding how work has come to be included, leaving us to conclude that only taste and prior investment have determined their choices.

The curators start the catalogue essay by defining their terms. Material culture is taken in the archaeological sense to mean a society's residual evidence, though it is not made clear in text or exhibition whether the artists are understood as using or bequeathing such a residue, or perhaps doing both. Nor is there any attempt to define whether it is being done intentionally or inadvertently, and what these very different actions might mean. Fortunately we have Susan Hiller's Freud Museum installation to compensate for these shortcomings by highlighting such issues with deft humour. The curators do not consider other implications of material culture, although moving from work to work brings several to



Installation view
Grenville Davey
 (gold) Table 1991
Douglas Gordon & Graham Gussin
 Jukebox 1995
Bill Woodrow
 Five Objects 1979
 Twin Tub with Guitar 1981
Angela Bulloch
 Wall of House Rules ... 1997

mind. Neither materiality nor materialism are elucidated in the show despite their importance for those younger artists who are working to transgress any notions of authenticity carried by either term. The disregard for materials and ambivalence towards commodification that distinguish the critical approach of some of the best new art is not emphasised by the curators' terminology and selections. Nevertheless, the altered jukebox of Douglas Gordon and Graham Gussin does a nice job of tying these attitudes together, as it gives us the chance to hear Madonna, the material girl herself, blasting out across the galleries.

Although so much work here derives form from concept there is no indication that the curators grant ideas any materiality. Yet this is a defining characteristic of the aesthetic changes occurring in the two decades covered by the exhibition. Where the earlier sculptors, Anish Kapoor, Richard Deacon, Antony Gormley, Tony Cragg and Alison Wilding worked material to achieve presence (Gormley is quoted as saying his 'subject is being', Kapoor as saying his work must be 'self-manifest, as if there by its own volition') the younger artists like Simon Patterson, Gavin Turk and Sarah Lucas give conceptual material tacit form, without presuming that those forms can have any independence from concept. There is no way such discontinuities can be easily bridged, as this show attempts to demonstrate.

The obscurity continues with the second term, object, given initial definition as something taking up space, eliciting a spectator's physical response and yet remaining autonomous. With no explanation as to how these objects sustain their autonomy while dependent on an audience's response, we cannot understand such a paradoxical claim. All through

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the account phrases like 'independent objects', 'autonomous physical objects', 'a material presence of its own', 'an independent presence' indicate lurking ontological assumptions like Heidegger rewriting *Toy Story*, as if sculptures come to life without us or the artists having much to do with it. There might be a case for this belief, but it cannot just be assumed.

Most importantly no productive distinction is drawn between found and made objects, nor between made and manufactured, other than to list a range of processes determining artmaking as if all methods were equivalent. These approaches, however, have different histories, and if the distinctions are going to be levelled it would be interesting to know on what basis. Even within one idiom we have the sense that all things are equal. Angela Bulloch's found texts are an entirely different discourse from Ian Hamilton Finlay's and Roderick Buchanan's, just as Stephen Pippin's media sculpture is from Richard Hamilton's, yet in both cases the examples are closely juxtaposed. Instead of grounds for understanding changing cultural and social motivations for making art the exhibition and catalogue offer us trans-historical presence with qualities. Even putting aside the heterogeneity of included media there is nothing in these definitions that painting and photography do not satisfy. Why are we supposed to accept their exclusion?

The exhibition does not clarify the implications of using organic as against manufactured objects



.....
Ian Hamilton Finlay
Matisse Chez Duplay
 1993

(Damien Hirst or Christine Borland compared to Patterson or Turk), and implies that the term object links things whose form is altered (Cornelia Parker and Bill Woodrow) with things whose matter has been entirely converted (Parker again and Ceal Floyer). These blurred distinctions confound the sense of object even within one artist's corpus. Where the idea of the object flickers with lucidity here is, however, in an area that is no longer of great originality; the *objet trouvé* has been around so long, is so unreflexively embedded now in contemporary practice that here it is a case of kicking an old dog to get it to bark. This cannot be the best way to locate the contribution of young British artists to the radicalising of visual culture, since recent art production has been messier, more energetic, more down at heel and more improvised, than this resolved show would suggest.

If the definition of the object is allowed endless fluidity in the catalogue, 'the object's counterpart – the independent mind, or subject –' is no more than

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a springboard to another inventory of qualified things. On what grounds is the curators' assumption that subject and object are in distinct realms based? In the most rudimentary way there needs to be some definition of how they think objects are recognised or produced out of whatever is not an object, of the extent that the existence of objects is dependent on subjective categories. We need to know what object and subject respectively bring to their meeting, and from what subject positions the various artists themselves are working. From what disembodied subject position are the curators speaking, for example? In this text and exhibition we have jumped back over ten years of work by artists and theoreticians who claim distinction for the subject according to identity of gender and race. The challenge to this recent hegemony of identity politics by younger artists in Britain is important, but does not by itself legitimate the immediate erasure of such premises, as this show attempts to do. Artworks can serve as texts, even as they state that they are not, and the same with curators' actions, in spite of their claims for immanence, or self-evident connoisseurship.

Putting these generations of artists uncritically alongside each other, like forerunner and progeny, allows each to misrepresent the other by assuming that new art is anticipated by the old whose occluded meanings it reveals. This may happen, but here it only flattens the achievements of some younger artists who, though effectively reinventing the forms art can take, instead get compressed into a footnote, into part of a genealogy of a preordained canon. There they can prematurely and inaccurately be assigned their place in a British tradition in which the Arts Council and Hayward have heavily invested. ■

Material Culture: The Object in British Art of the 1980s and 90s is at the Hayward Gallery, London until May 18.

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