Raised Eyebrows

Louisa Minkin

I'm standing in front of a 'painting' by Niki de Saint Phalle called 'Green Sky'. It happens that I'm standing in front of it in Tokyo where the intense nihon-spectral activity on my eu-retina might indeed make the sky green.

This painting is a couple of years older than me. The depostion, or the stuff stuck in the paint, is a collection, or bundling, of 'throwaway' (depositable) cultural components from the early 1960s. A toy gun, fake hair, a comb, suspenders, a miniature wreath. It looks culturally irrelevant, faded pink, nostalgic in a general sense. The tiny gun and baby shoe together were always going to add a bit of a frisson, constituting, as they do, a *Komplex*. Where there might be anything interesting remaining here must be in the capacities of the objects and their bringing together in the cultural container of a painting. Art historian David Joselit has described paintings as reservoirs of temporal experience—'time batteries'—'exorbitant stockpiles' of experience and information (Roberts 2013). 'Green Sky' works on the decontextualization of family objects from the living-room floor re-assembled into a culturally and economically valuable unit, passing through the internationally undifferentiated art circuit. It travels partly as niki-reliquary, an object of piety or ostensorium. Most recent point of exposition, The National Art Centre, Tokyo. Benediction here is an electronic version of 'Auld Lang Syne' at closing time. On leaving the museum a traffic policeman waves me across the road with a light-sabre. Wandering in Tokyo presents compelling evidence for the uneven distribution of the future; a future that was imagined in our past and since got dusty.

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I am reading Andy Jones' text over *matcha* tea and sugar 'subtleties'. It has been folded into a book, Benjamin (2003) on Brecht:

> On the wall was chalked;
> They want war.
> The man who wrote it
> Has already fallen.
>
> These inscriptions are not, like those of the Romans, intended for stone but, like those of underground fighters, for fences.

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Humans and objects are mutually constituted through their interactions. Archaeology produces objects. It also produces insights for contemporary art practice. If it is a trick of philosophers to use etymology as divination, then spending time with archaeologists as they weigh and scrutinize things in an archive might give a glimpse, of horse, man and stirrup operating together. The process of transdisciplinary exchange itself—applying method from one discipline to another—could be considered skeuomorphic. What emerges from such an exchange may be proleptic[1] (or prolapse). You could call it a level violation. The skeuomorph is a figure of anachronism, a temporal or material inconsistency of method and material; it messes up all those neat distinctions between form and function, truth to materials. A change of materiality is a familiar trope in art, one of the key transformations, a material displacement rather than a contextual one: Meret Oppenheim's fur tea-cup or Jeff Koons' mirrored-steel balloon dogs, for instance.

Art objects tend to escape the conditions of their making to create meaning in different times and places. I would argue with Andy Jones that 'Neolithic motifs and decorated artefacts are not simply static designs to be compiled and analysed in the academic corpus' (A. Jones, this issue) and say that they are, even now, active devices for visibly connecting communities. They belong to more than one historical moment simultaneously. Jane Bennett (2009) cites Bernard Stiegler's reflections on tool-use producing an interiority, engendering a being with an inside. This might apply to advanced recording technology as well as to hand fabrication.

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Deep in the west country the 'ancestors' extend themselves into the world and into time, burying a pig,

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a sandstone ball, a lump of chalk. These are not lost objects,[2] not casually discarded, but deposited, got rid of, with labour and intensity: expelled, separated. They have been dug up again with considerable effort and no little danger: a seven-metre pit, manual labour and repurposed farm machinery hauling out millennia of sedimentation onto the spoil heap. Hannah Arendt, in her 1968 essay on Walter Benjamin, uses the image of the theorist as a pearl diver. The transmissibility of the past, she says, has been replaced by its citability. I think of the famous *ukiyo-e shunga* by Hokusai, 'Tako to Ama': the female pearl diver wrapped in erotic congress with octopi. Desire, Hamilakis (this issue) reminds us, is the real name for assemblage.

The block of chalk, brought up from the depths, is given a number and placed in a box in the museum, a hut not far from the pit. It has moved only a very short distance in very many years: an exemplary delay, slow time itinerary, belated. Here is Spinoza on the movement of stones:

> Further conceive, I beg, that a stone, while continuing in motion, should be capable of thinking and knowing, that it is endeavouring, as far as it can, to continue to move. Such a stone, being conscious merely of its own endeavor and not at all indifferent, would believe itself to be completely free, and would think that it continued in motion solely because of its own wish. (Spinoza 1955, 390)

It is a hot day in June. The air is heavy with thyme. Ravens have built a rough nest in a tree over the pit and the local RAF are hazing the site for fun. Inside the hut two women lift the chalk lump gingerly into the light. One of them has freshly painted red fingernails, vibrant against the white chalk, violence safely displaced into the symbolic.

The lump is not resilient or stable. It leaves parts of itself on the fingers, deposits white traces on the foam support, keen to disperse itself into the world, to circulate, disintegrate. The boundaries separating it from the world are excitable. The immediate reality of this experience produces anxiety in those around it. I want to call what is produced at this moment, its speeds and affects, an haecceity.

Whoever carved the block must have been white with dust. Perhaps it was carved for the dust. Chalk is sensitive enough to register the signs and clues of a situation. Things in chalk are never finished, easily erased, improvisatory, aleatory. 'Material' is then no longer a stable substance, but a process, coding and de-coding, receiving and losing an imprint, dematerializing, deterritorializing. Whatever information is cut into this object is keen to lose its body.

In the 'Treatise on nomadology', Deleuze and Guattari (1988) reflect at some length on stone-cutting. They distinguish an hylomorphic model, they call it 'Royal or State science', from the vague, fluent, etymologically 'vagabond' essence of 'nomad science'. They call morphological essences 'essentially and not accidentally inexact'. It occurs to me that this nomad science might be useful in describing the surfaces and shape of the Monkton-Up-Wimborne chalk lump.

The reason we are looking at the chalk is to record it. Data collection is here a very material interaction. The apparatus of capture is reflectance transformation imaging. Its precise capture of the friable time-surface of the chalk lump produces stable code. Aggregated images are visualized as beautiful still lives, heightened gradients, silver solarized surfaces. Pragmatically, the overlapping of multiple light sources allows us to see more, working and reworking processes become evident. What Andy Jones seems to be saying is that cutting cultural information into the substrate produces an interface. Pattern and multiplicity operate to bring about an attachment between people and objects. The decorated surface forges a relation between us and objects, it ensnares us. Philosopher Julia Kristeva (1977) might hear echolalia. Decoding is not at issue, the media and filetype are irretrievably redundant. What we might recognize here beyond the lability of the mnemnonic trace is the production and modification of form, or plasticity. The chalk has been given form and it produces thought-form.

Catherine Malabou (2008) describes neuroscientific research into epigenetic sculpting—the plasticity of the brain, the modelling of synapses, a living sculpture where information must cross gaps. Rather than mechanism, think entanglement; a brain modelled by our own nervous activity.

Notes

1. Prolepsis: the representation of a thing as existing before it actually does or did so, as in *he was a dead man when he entered*.
2. Freud believed that the only use that the child made of his toys was to 'make them gone' (Derrida 1987, 311).

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