Concretizing God - Fetishism and the Social Construction of Objects

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the agency of objects within the context of contemporary art discourse by viewing them through the lens of fetishism. The fetish has been widely used to describe a material object that possesses some concentrated force or power beyond its materiality - a power that is somehow inordinate, misplaced or inflated (Graeber, 2005: 434). This power is mediated and maintained socially, dependent upon particular beliefs and activated the moment it is interacted with. In this sense, by viewing objects as agential, fetishism constitutes a social theory of objects, and furthermore a condition wherein objects are capable of becoming autonomous social entities in their own right. The research is positioned within the contextual field of socially engaged art practice, with particular emphasis to Relational Aesthetics by Nicolas Bourriaud (Bourriaud, 2002: 112), which was written in relation to the growing prevalence of socially engaged practice as he saw it emerging in the 1990s (Ibid). However, an optical contemplation of objects as an inherently social activity is negated from Bourriaud's writing (Bishop, 2005: 62). The research has found that fetishism provides a useful means with which to understand both the social and participatory implications of objects within the context of contemporary art. I have investigated these capacities using a practice-led methodology, wherein my art practice has developed alongside my engagement with the literature, which I have used in tandem in order to further my understanding of fetishism and its relationship to contemporary art discourse. I have subsequently produced three sculptures and one public intervention which have been photographically documented, as well as autoethnographic responses of my own mental process of creating them. The research has subsequently identified and explored three crucial topics on the fetishistic capacities of objects within this context; their death, their life and the illusion they create.

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INTRODUCTION

As an artist I work to investigate the power and agency that material things possess. I do so that I might utilise this agency within my artistic practice, as well as address materiality and its contention within art discourse. The publication of Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's essay 'The Dematerialization of Art' sought to identify a condition whereby the conceptual content of a work was being seen to replace its material autonomy, rendering the art object 'obsolete' (Lillemose, 2006). This established a curious position for material things and their immaterial antipodes – the mental and social forms that artworks produce, prompt or instigate. It is in these ways that I have become interested in exploring the imaginative and social implications of this immaterial form, and furthermore the means by which objects are capable of producing it. However, it is by viewing the agency of this immaterial form as a sacred power – and by exploring the potentials of this affinity - that my research interests have taken root. This has led me to compare the art object with the sacred object as I consider their shared function as material embodiments of immaterial forms - be that sacred, social or otherwise. These investigations are made with the intention of understanding not just the power of objects, but more so the means by which their power is born of an encounter with people – the sacred object presenting an agency which is maintained by both belief, and a certain set of theological doctrine. It is for these reasons that I am endeavouring to not only understand the agency of objects, but moreover the means by which this agency is informed by our relationship with them.

For the purpose of understanding this relationship I have been led to study the phenomenon of Fetishism. Fetishism has been widely used across a variety of fields to describe the entanglement between people and objects, notably by Karl Marx in his theories surrounding commodity fetishism or by Sigmund Freud as a means of describing sexual fetishism (Apter, 1991) – the latter of which will probably be the most immediate definition of the term that comes to mind within the contemporary lexicon. The word derives from the Portuguese feitiço meaning 'something made' or 'artificial' (Graeber, 2005: 434), and entered the English language due to its prevalence of use in the 17th Century by Portuguese merchants in African colonies, as a means of describing the charms, amulets or other items

associated with ritual and sorcery that they came into contact with (Ibid). The objects in question, to the colonists' eyes, were irreconcilable with the Eurocentric value system to which they were accustomed, seeming to be somehow crude or lacking in monetary worth. Much less were the colonists able to understand the belief systems that attributed these ordinary objects with value, the word soon became synonymous with these specific items in order to describe a material object that possesses some concentrated force or power, a power that is somehow inordinate, misplaced or inflated.

Subsequently, fetishism describes a process by which we submit to our own creations as if they were alien powers imposed upon us, or as David Graeber describes, falling down and worshipping that which we ourselves have made (Graeber, 2005. P.412). Beyond being perceived as mere curios or objects of desire, a fetish describes an object that is implicated with some sacred force or supernatural capacities. This power is one that is socially both mediated and maintained, dependent upon a particular set of beliefs and activated the moment it is interacted with. Fetishism then demonstrates the means by which this transaction is capable of giving life to objects. In this sense, by viewing objects as being anything other than static, fetishism constitutes a social theory of objects, and furthermore a condition wherein an object is capable of becoming an autonomous entity in its own right.

As fetishism describes a relationship between people and objects that imbues objects with some form of power, it is useful to make these considerations in relation to art discourse – arguably a field that could be defined very much in terms of its study of objects and their encounter with people. The social function of art is one that has a rich field of critical enquiry, notably more recently with the publication of Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics, which he describes as "Aesthetic theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt" (Bourriaud, 2002: 112). The text addresses a model of art production where art's social dimension was the central focus for critical enquiry - written in relation to the growing prevalence of socially engaged practice as he saw it emerging in the 1990s (Ibid). However, Claire Bishop criticises the absence of a perspective in which an optical contemplation of objects as an inherently social and participatory activity is

negated from Bourriaud's writing, citing a preference for artworks that demand a more literal participation (Bishop, 2005: 62). It is for these purposes that fetishism will be useful as a means with which to understand both the social and participatory implications of objects within the context of contemporary art.

It is for these purposes that this study will use fetishism and its associated discourse to create a lens through which the role of the object within contemporary art discourse – and furthermore its power - might be viewed. In so doing I will endeavour to analyse the social function of the fetish object, as I engage with source material that provides examples of its uses in the creation of sacred spaces and objects, as well as by studying examples of its uses within more 'profane' settings. These observations will support me in locating the agency that these objects possess, how that agency is generated and how it might be harnessed within my own artistic practice.

Methodology

The Artistic Turn, a Manifesto describes artistic research as being 'Knowledge of the process of creativity, not its outcomes.' (Coessens, Crispin and Douglas, 2009: 14) Implicit in this statement is a shift in the purpose of artistic research, when compared with other disciplines, away from the outcome and towards the process that precedes it. This analogy is used to describe not only what one might consider academic research, but rather artistic practice as a whole, the authors considering the artistic process a research process in its own right, wherein consistent judgements and inferences are made as a means to better understand one's artistic process. Within this inference, it is not so much the artwork but the process of creating it that constitutes a research activity. Furthermore, in relation to my subject matter, Graeber describes fetishism as being a "dimension of action" (Graeber, 2005: 425), which indicates that rather than simply indicating a means of categorising objects, fetishism should be thought of as an activity that one participates in. This action is one that is enacted not only by the creator of the fetish, but furthermore by those who interact with it as they are compelled to participate and subsequently implicate it with an inflated value.

It is with these considerations in mind, and with an emphasis on the processes of both art production and fetishism, that I have adopted a practice led research methodology, deeming it as an appropriate means by which the implications of fetishism and its uses might be better understood. In this way my artistic practice has developed alongside my engagement with the literature, which I have used in tandem in order to better understand the implications of fetishism on artistic practice. In so doing, the process of creating the artworks that I have produced has constituted a form of knowledge creation, insofar as they have bolstered my insight into fetishism and its implications, and in so doing provided further avenues for academic exploration. My process could thusly be described as an auto-ethnographic process - a research practice well suited to arts-based research though by no means limited to it - as allowing the researcher to consider themselves as a research subject in their own right (Adams and Holman Jones, 2018: 141). Adopting this perspective has allowed me to distil and document my own shifting relationship with my practice – and furthermore with the subject matter of fetishism – as it develops. The artworks that I have created – and furthermore my own personal account of the intellectual process of producing them – then serves to both illustrate and demonstrate my findings, whilst also acting as research outcomes against which the literature might be better understood, and my concepts further developed.

Chapter 1

THE DEATH OF OBJECTS

"The animated object is a disquieting presence that captures our gaze, spellbinding us and plunging us deep in the enigma of things. It forces us into confronting the ultimate, inscrutable and utterly tangible event of us becoming, with death, objects ourselves." (Marenko, 2009: 252)

A materialistic worldview is dependent upon the diametric opposition between human subjects and material objects (Dant, 1996) - the material world presenting a point at which 'I' ends and 'something else' begins. It is precisely these distinctions which demands the need for fetishism as a field of categorisation in the first place, which somehow describes a perversion of these precisely set distinctions – the condition wherein pseudo-human relationships are established between humans and non-human objects (Ibid). But where does this boundary between human and object precisely sit, and could it potentially be a far more messy and non-distinct affair? As the quote above from Betti Marenko suggests, the point of death for the human subject does, to some extent, collapse these differences by constituting the moment at which the body is transformed into an object (2009). This observation is important, as in order to understand the processes by which fetishism is capable of animating seemingly lifeless objects, one must initially understand the antithesis of such a state of being - the inanimate state of being dead.

This perspective of the 'dead-ness' of objects is nothing new. Traditionally, the interest in fetishism and its study stems not only from a desire to understand the power of objects, but moreover with a caveat of viewing that power as somehow being incorrectly attributed or misplaced (Graeber, D. 2005). From Marx's commodity fetishism wherein commodity objects are seen to be concealing the truth of human labour and a resultant misunderstanding of value and its origins (Dant, 1996), to Freud's study of sexual fetishism wherein the object performs the role of a sexual surrogate or a stand-in for reciprocating human sexual organs (Apter, E. 1991), there is a sense across the history of this term in which to identify a fetish is, as Tim Dant describes, "[…]to expose the inadequate beliefs of those who revere it for what they believe it is capable of" (1996, p.496). Fetishism then

does not describe a rational truth of objects, but rather a disordered way of thinking - one that disrupts the natural hierarchy of humans' dominion over the material world. Fetishism in this sense, Dant goes onto say, describes "[…]a misunderstanding of the world in which properties are attributed to objects that can only correctly be attributed to humans." (Ibid: 496). The fetish is then an object whose agential qualities are somehow inaccurately attributed or fictitious, with these distinctions being made under a rational understanding of the material or concrete qualities of the object. This perspective is one that privileges the agency of humans over the agency of things whilst seeing the object as something that is dead – or at the very least as something that is in-capable of life.

It was by considering this perceived deadness of objects that I endeavoured to produce a sculpture explicitly exploring death as a thematic reference point, so as to cultivate a greater understanding as well as illustrate the themes that I will come to address. The sculpture's title *We Scorn What We Eat* (Fig.1) is taken from a quote by Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard and Gane, 1993: 138), which I will later discuss in greater detail (pp. 10). The piece takes as its thematic reference point images of death - with specific emphasis to carved tomb effigies, and is composed of a free-standing cardboard cut-out that depicts a computer-generated 3D rendered image of a lying, shrouded figure – inviting an assumption that the figure is dead. The iconography to which the piece's imagery is borrowed is that of transi tombs, a Christian tradition originating in the middle-ages wherein carved images of dead and decaying corpses were presented either as an adornment to a tomb or as stand-alone effigies, the figures often shrouded and having been subject to the ravages of decomposition (Cohen, 1973). The purpose of appropriating iconography of this nature was so as to generate an image that was unequivocally 'death-like', drawing upon the potency and symbolic value that such images possess, with particular emphasis on the insight this might my provide to the relationships between the in-animacy of objects as mirroring the in-animacy of the human cadaver.

It will be by exploring the relevant literature in relation to this piece that this chapter will subsequently beg the question; to what extent does death – or rather an understanding of the deadness of things and the relationship this has with conceptions of our own mortality – influence our relationship with material
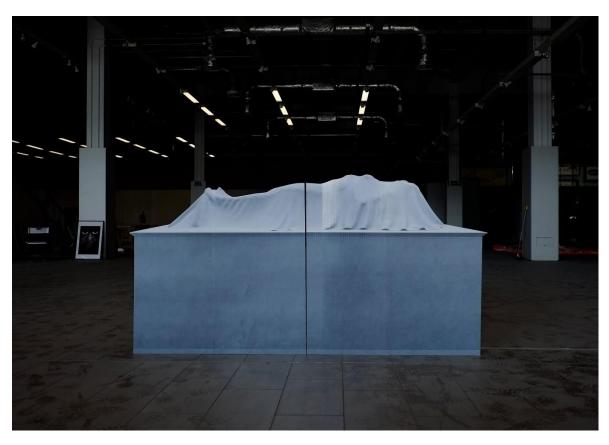
Fig. 1 – We Scorn What We Eat (2019)

objects? Furthermore, it will also seek to scrutinise the boundary between 'dead things' and 'living things' – and furthermore between objects and people - so as to better understand the point at which each is transformed into the other. It is for these reasons that death and its associated objects, customs and behaviours present a crucial opportunity to witness the tumultuous relationship between people and things in action, not only in part due to the perspective it provides to the perception of the 'dead-ness' of things, but also due to the capacity of death to shift and change the value of objects.

1.1 - Inanimate Bodies

"Anthropologist Franco La Cecla, an acute observer of the fluid narratives embodied in everyday objects, writes that the more objects proliferate, the more our culture pretends that they are dead, professing "a strange metaphysics of neutrality and of non efficacy of things that it calls 'materialism" (Marenko, 2009: 244)

As the above quote from anthropologist Franco La Cecla as quoted by Betti Marenko is testament to, it seems also that a culture in which objects proliferate runs in tandem with a perspective of their 'deadness'. This observation is of particular interest when one considers the proliferation of objects within the material economy of capitalism – a system that is governed by the pursuance of material goods – and also within the material economy of the art market. The text goes onto describe materialism as a fearful precaution in front of the dangers of a world in which objects may be "singular", and thus animated (Ibid: 244), which infers that a materialistic worldview negates the autonomy of objects out of an anxiety of a world in which objects might exist independently of humans, and are thus 'singular' autonomous entities. This arguably illustrates that it is the materially concrete qualities of objects – and furthermore their in-animacy - that lubricates their exchange by providing fixed determinations of value which allude to their concrete qualities. This condition is one which places the object in a position of subjugation beneath the human. The 'dead-ness' of things, then, presents itself as a useful dividing line by which objects and people might be seen as distinctly separate or ontologically opposed – a perspective I will go onto

explain maintains an avoidance of our own eventual assimilation, in death, into the world of objects ourselves.

The various human practices surrounding death conjure an array of contradictory insight into our relationships with the material world. Death is bound up with processes by which the value attributed to the material human body – and furthermore human possessions - can be seen to shift. The cadaver for example possesses a distinctly different value to that of a person and is somehow thought of as something that is distinctly separate to the person. For these reasons the dead body is often placed into a different symbolic order, to varying degrees and by various means. For example, historically the cadaver is seen as being something that is unclean or hazardous to the world of the living, with other residues of the deceased's body such as bones, ashes, hair or possessions on the other hand entering into a different and often venerable status (Gibson, 2010). Margaret Gibson discusses these differing definitions by describing the cadaver as being categorised under the 'abject' order of things, and subsequently as being something that is somehow distant or separate from the individual. The abject, for Gibson, is categorised as something that is distinctly 'not me', alongside other products that are expelled from the body such as urine, menstrual blood and faeces (Gibson, 2010: 56). These substances are expelled, - and thus are seen as separate from 'the person' – so as to ensure the person's continued survival. The corpse then, in this instance, becomes the final remainder to be extracted from the activity of living - the final and most abominable of wastes to be disposed. The cadaver then embodies the essential yet most uncomfortable truths of our eventual assimilation into the order of the abject at the point at which death prevails, as well as an illustration our body's movement across the border from 'self' towards 'non-self'. As Gibson quotes Julia Kristeva in the same text, 'It is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled.' (Ibid: 57) These observations of the dead and their separation from the order of the living – but also from the order of the self – starts to establish a perspective with which one can understand the discontent with which the inanimate object is perceived; as an uncomfortable reminder of our own eventual assimilation into the world of objects. The person and the body are evidently then seen as distinctly separate things, the former of which is precious and the latter of which as waste to be disposed.

Jean Baudrillard expands upon these considerations in his text Symbolic Exchange & Death, in which he investigates death and its symbolic value. Baudrillard discusses what he terms 'the extradition of the dead' from the centre of public life, by revising Michel Foucault's conception of 'the extradition of mad men', which provides useful insight into the societal implications of death and its various practices (Baudrillard and Gane, 1993: 147). Baudrillard posits that the dead are separated from the world of the living – and furthermore from the centre of our social worlds – in order to determine life's value. For Baudrillard, value is determined by its relationship to its opposite, so through death's exclusion life becomes a survival determined by death (Ibid: 148). For all intents and purposes, Baudrillard regards the conceptualisation of death as a man-made fabrication - a means of determining the symbolic value for a thing which does not exist, death merely constituting the absence of life. Death then serves as nothing more than a dividing line by which the symbolic value of one's life might be extracted. Baudrillard makes these claims in relation to burial practices, wherein he states that graveyards - which at one time had existed at the centre of towns – were increasingly expelled to the peripheries, something he describes as being akin to a 'ghetto beyond the grave' (Ibid: 127-128)Through these observations one can infer that death, rather than simply signifying the end of a determined lifespan, instead as providing meaning to the very notion of what it means to live.

"We scorn what we eat, we can only eat what we despise, that is, death, the inanimate, the animal or the vegetable condemned to biological assimilation." (Baudrillard, 1993: 138)

As the above extract illustrates, which was written in relation to Baudrillard's perspective on the transgressive act of cannibalism, our 'scorning' of that which we eat – that is death or the inanimate – infers not just scorn for the 'dead' world of objects, vegetables or animals, but also infers the collective position that somehow humans are ontologically opposed to inanimate things; a perspective that is explained through our desire to consume only that which exists in opposition to us. These concepts are further iterated by Gibson, who demonstrates the mechanisms by which theological doctrine – with specific emphasis to that of the Christian church – reconciles this opposition by entering death into the sacred order of redemption:

"Religions, in both belief and ritual, practice a moral economy of redemption or return of the negative (including the abject) into the positive, sacred order. Thus waste, the abject body, returns as sacred and redeemed in the Christian economy of resurrection and salvation." (Gibson, 2010: 56)

Transi tombs present an illustration of this return of the abject corpse into the sacred order of redemption and salvation that the Christian tradition connotes (Gibson, M. 2010. p.56), with their carved depictions of emaciated or decaying corpses serving the function of reminding the onlooker of death's material realities and inevitability (Cohen, 1973). Arguably, then, it could be perceived that conceptions of redemption and the afterlife provide useful resolution to our scorn for death and in-animacy, as to does the transmutation of value that the cadaver becomes subject to under these conditions.

Baudrillard takes these considerations further, determining that we live in a 'culture of death' (Ibid: 148) such is the extent to which human culture is permeated by our opposition to death. Baudrillard states that it is by the conceptualisation of death that it enters into the realms of symbolic exchange, rather than becoming 'absolute surplus value' (Ibid: 152) – death constituting a determination of value for a thing that is absent and should consequently, then, be incapable of exchange. It is then through the exchange of death – facilitated by the dead's extradition - that concepts of immortality and the afterlife start to emerge – such as in the Christian tradition as noted above - working in tandem as tools of power and control emboldening the power of the church, the state or capital who act as protectorates for the stake of the living. In essence, it is in these ways that death – through its conceptualisation – enters the symbolic order of value, and is thus capable of being exchanged, be that under the value of theological doctrine or otherwise.

In the production of *We Scorn What We Eat* (Fig. 1), I possessed similar desires to those of the production of transi tombs, in that the piece was designed to remind the onlooker of death. However, it was with these considerations in mind that I endeavoured to present death as a man-made fabrication so I might subvert the notion of death's potency. I did so in order to illustrate the falsehood of death as described by Baudrillard by quite literally presenting death as an illusion – one in which an artifice of three-dimensionality was somehow being forced upon the

onlooker. It was for these purposes that I also identified the cardboard cut-out as a method of production that is typically attributed to the creation of some form of artifice - such as shop window dressing or stage set design – an artifice that is further iterated in my decision to create the image as a computer generated 3D rendering. If one views the object as a piece of stage scenery, then one could also declare that its fourth wall seems to have been broken with its artifice being plainly declared. The two-dimensionality of the façade then denies the viewer an opportunity to come into closer contact with the object from alternative angles – a typical attribute of three-dimensional sculpture – which places the viewer at a purposeful distance. The viewer is then denied the opportunity to look behind the image, alluding to a sense that some truth of the object is somehow being withheld from the onlooker. In addition to the falsity of this illusion, there is a second falsity that is being presented to the viewer through the multiple levels of concealment that it demonstrates, a concealment on one hand through the object's two-dimensionality, and on the second in that the figure is shrouded - denying the viewer the opportunity to see what lies underneath the cloth but nevertheless inviting an assumption that they are dead. The question posed here is whether or not the potency of such an object – and furthermore the potency of death - remains in-spite of such an illusion. There is too, in addition to this, a 'dead-ness' here embodied due to the finality presented by such an illusion – a façade that is static, closed and seemingly un-agential.

These considerations are important for the purpose of understanding the sacred means by which, not just corpses, but all inanimate things are capable of being ascribed with some sacred potency or value in much the same way – what Mircea Eliade describes as a hierophany or a material manifestation of the sacred (1959) – which will take us some way to understanding the agency that fetishes possess as a value which is socially mediated and prescribed. This is somewhat contradictorily reflected in *We Scorn What we Eat* (Fig. 1), wherein although I have created an image that is unequivocally dead, through its multiple levels of concealment and artifice the viewer is invited to project meaning onto it, whilst also being compelled to collectively imagine that which they are unable to see. Although dead, in this instance, it is also animated, alluding to the means by which through the impetus to fetishize, even dead things do not stay dead for long. In terms of the inanimate and material qualities of objects, I would infer that it is our

inability to bear witness to the 'dead-ness' of things – and the mirror of our own inevitable death that inanimate objects face towards us – that leads us to perceive them as both living and animated, and subsequently fetishize them.

Chapter 2

"IT'S ALIVE!"

The title of this chapter is taken from James Whale's classic 1932 adaptation of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (Frankenstein, 1932), and the quote continues "It's moving, it's alive! It's alive! It's alive! In the name of God, now I know what it feels like to be God!", spoken by Dr Frankenstein having achieved success in his experiment to harness the natural forces of lightening, and re-animate the corpse of an exhumed convict. Frankenstein's claims to have harnessed the life-creating power of God are easily understood when one considers the biblical creation of man as described in the book of Genesis of the Old Testament, in which it is stated that "[…] the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." (Genesis 2:7) Of course, these examples provide insight into the potent agency, as well as the God-like human desire, to hold such dominion over the material world that one is capable of reanimating the inanimate, be that the animation of Frankenstein's monster or God's transmuting of dust into living flesh.

These allegorical examples are useful, as having previously considered the 'dead-ness' of objects and their position of mirroring our own eventual assimilation into the order of things, I will next go on to consider what is arguably a result whilst also the antithesis of such a state of being – the capacity of fetishism to cause objects to appear as lifelike, 'animated' and seemingly autonomous entities in their own right. Of course, these animated or lifelike qualities do not arise from the rationally material qualities of objects – as has previously discussed in relation to their 'dead-ness' – but rather it arises in the eye of the beholder, so to speak. This is to infer that fetishism describes a point of confrontation between person and object, wherein the human subject is somehow compelled to project life onto otherwise inert and static things. Understanding this compulsion, as well as this point of confrontation, will form the basis of this chapter, which I will explore in relation to two additional artworks that I have produced as a part of these enquiries.

The first work, titled *Symbolic Retribution* (Figs. 2, 3), takes as its thematic reference point the social phenomena of leaving flower memorials within public

Fig. 2 – Symbolic Retribution (2019)

Fig. 3 – Symbolic Retribution (2019)

spaces, as typically left following some tragic loss of life such as a murder, a road traffic collision, a terrorist incident or the premature death of a public figure. *Symbolic Retribution* (Figs. 2, 3) is an ongoing public action or performance wherein I myself have created and left flower memorials in public locations in and around the geographic locale of my home in Urmston, Greater Manchester – an area that I regard as being typically suburban and unremarkable – and is being documented photographically on 120mm film. The benefit an activity such as this has on my research is in order to better understand the means by which both meaning and agency – in this instance as ascribed to a material location – are socially prescribed and maintained. It is for these reasons also that public flower memorials more generally have presented themselves as a useful tool with which to describe the agency implicit in fetishism, through their capacity to utilise objects – be that flowers, candles or items associated with the deceased – to inflate the value of a space or even open it up as a sacred one. I subsequently wished to use the project as a means to better understand the mental or social implications of such monuments – as well as the compulsion to create - by placing them within my own lived environment.

The second work, titled *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian* (Figs. 4, 6), is a sculpture depicting the commonly rendered Christian scene of the martyrdom of the 5th Century Christian Saint Sebastian. The sculpture is composed of a reclaimed car bonnet penetrated by arrows made of brass and steel, designed to be leant against a plinth or pillar. St Sebastian's martyrdom is a recurring trope across Renaissance Christian art – commonly depicting a similar composition of the semi-clothed saint bound to a tree with a number of arrows protruding from his body (Liepa, 2009), however the composition was also notably re-purposed for the iconic 1967 photograph of Mohammed Ali taken by Carl Fisher (Gotthardt, 2018)(Fig. 5). The narrative of the scene is that Sebastian, himself a Roman nobleman, was discovered by Emperor Diocletian to be a Christian and sentenced to be tied to a stake and shot at by archers until he was dead - the 15th Century historian Jacobus de Voragine describing the gruesome scene as "[Sebastian] was as full of arrows as an urchin is full of pricks." (Fordham University, 2000). However, the 'martyrdom' of this commonly depicted scene is a misnomer, as the story continues that Sebastian somehow survived the attack – an apparent miracle indicating the strength of his faith – only to later be re-discovered by
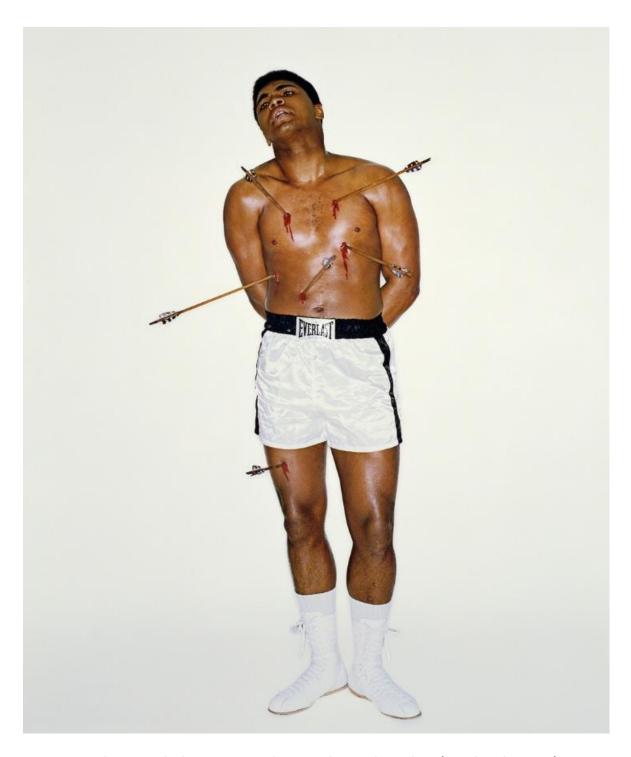
Fig. 4 – The Martyrdom of St Sebastian (2019)

Fig. 5 – Muhammad Ali as Saint Sebastian by Carl Fischer (Gotthardt, 2018)

Emperor Diocletian and beaten to death (Fordham University, 2000). Saint Sebastian has subsequently become an emblematic figure of persecution, but he is also a symbol of the miraculous ability to overcome death. The recognisability of this composition provided me with an opportunity to visually infer humanity in an otherwise inert and static object –the car bonnet – by inserting it into a context where it could be seen as recognisably human, afflicted and dying. The benefit this has to my research is in order to better understand and investigate the means by which objects become attributed with human agency, and thus are fetishized, merely by the act of representation.

The observations that I will present within the literature, and also by analysing the literature in relation to my art practice, will illustrate the fragile boundaries at which distinctions between humans and objects can be seen to collapse into one another, at the moment at which the object crosses the border to become an animated entity. This chapter will subsequently discuss the uses and implications within the field of contemporary art that arise therefrom, as will be further demonstrated by my art practice.

2.1 - Fetish Market

In order to discuss the animation of objects and its relationship with fetishism, I will first explore a prevalent use of fetishism within the contemporary lexicon, being the fetishization of objects under capitalism as a means of explaining their commoditisation. Karl Marx's discourse surrounding commodity fetishism describes the ontological status of commodities as objects from which their use-value has been extracted and replaced by a different value, as he employed what to him were the primitive notions of the fetish object to describe the seemingly magical or enigmatic capacities such objects possess. Use-value pertains to the value of objects to fulfil human needs or utilitarian functions, however the value ascribed to commodities is described by Marx as abounding in "metaphysical subtleties and theological whimsies" (Marx and Cole, 1957: 44). This fetishistic value is one which is described as having absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom (Ibid: 45), but rather arises from a form of magical thinking (Baudrillard and Levin, 1981: 88) – a

Fig. 6 – The Martyrdom of St Sebastian (2019)

perspective which elevates the object beyond use-value and towards a symbolic value which is socially prescribed and maintained. The fetishized commodity, then, could be seen to represent the schism between use-value and exchange value (Marenko, 2009), a condition that results in it appearing to the subject not as a product of human labour, but rather as an autonomous alien facticity over which the subject has no control (Silva, S. 2013). Walter Benjamin considered, under this condition, that the commodity "becomes a magical object, insofar as the labour stored up in it comes to seem supernatural and sacred at the very moment when it can no longer be recognized as labour."(Benjamin and Tiedermann, 1999: 699). By way of an example, these distinctions are tackled by Baudrillard who provides insight from within his own contemporary commodity landscape of the television set, wherein the value ascribed to the product is not dictated by its capacity to fulfil its utilitarian functions (Baudrillard and Levin, 1981:). The value it is ascribed with, Baudrillard states, acts as a social relation and social signification indicating status or affluence (Ibid).

The result of a condition wherein commodities exist independently of the work of human hands and minds - and thus are returned to us as autonomous entities – was considered by Marx to result in the alienation of the individual. For Marx, this condition causes the individual to forget their authorship or agency within the world, with the fetishized commodity no longer being seen to be a work of human hands at all (Silva, S. 2013). What is here described is the moment at which commodities become animated, and are thus seeming to the individual as autonomous entities beyond the scope of human control. It is in this sense that the commoditised object – through its animation – almost becomes deified in nature, as it is elevated to a status that places it above humans at a distance that is somehow unattainable.

 "Thus, the fetishization of the commodity is the fetishization of a product emptied of its labour and subjected to another type of labour, a labour of signification, that is, of coded abstraction" (Baudrillard and Levin, 1981: 93).

Baudrillard elaborates upon Marx's conceptions of the fetishized commodity in his essay Fetishism and Ideology: a Semiological Reduction, as quoted above. This assertion is one that places the commodity within a socially prescribed value system of signification, whilst also insinuating that the labour of producing

commodities lies not within its material production, but rather within its perception and reception as informed by the social field of the market. Perception and reception, then, become the labour of production, with Baudrillard going onto say that the fetishization of commodities does not indicate a sanctification of the object, but rather a sanctification of the system – that is the generalised system of exchange and value (Ibid: 97). The agency of the fetish is not located inside the object so to speak, but rather its power exists elsewhere within the social field that supports it, the object itself reduced to a social signifier. It is with these considerations in mind that one can then infer that, through perception, it is the point at which persons or people look upon commodities and interpret their symbolic value as informed by the wider social field, that they come into being and are thus 'animated'.

Such is the extent to which the animation of commodities hinges upon perception, that Taussig considers it is through the very act of looking upon commodities, and producing a copy of their appearance on the retina, that their 'spectral' quality is generated – what he refers to as tantamount to the generation of an 'Optical Unconscious' (Taussig, 1993: 20). This spectral quality of commodities, Taussig suggests, is channelled by the mimetic machinery of the advertising image and such images' proliferation, imbuing the commodity with what he describes as an aura generating a quite secular sense of the marvellous (Ibid: 23). What is here being concealed within the commodity – it's 'aura' – and channelled by the work of the advertising image are the socially constructed ascriptions of value, price and meaning. It is here demonstrated the extent to which the fetishism and animation of objects is so totally linked with their commoditisation.

It was through these considerations of the sanctification and subsequent fetishization of commodities that I was led to utilise a car bonnet - a discarded fragment of a mass-produced consumer product – in my creation of the scene of St Sebastian's Martyrdom. Of course, an identical logic could be applied to the car as to Baudrillard's television set in their status as 'social hieroglyphs', and popular culture is saturated with references to the car's position as the ultimately desirable commodity. Take for example, the dystopian novel Brave New World written by Aldous Huxley published in 1932, in which an industrialised and seemingly perfect society of the distant future revere Henry Ford as a deity due to his creation of the

modern industrialised production line producing his Model T Ford automobile (Huxley, 2007). A further example would also be Crash written by J G Ballard, in which the commodity fetishism one might expect for cars has seemingly been replaced by an un-adulterated sexual fetishism, not for the car but for the experience of a violent car crash as some sexually potent and gratifying force (Ballard, 1995).

"Every object is susceptible to investments (and divestments) of meaning, of acquiring (and losing) a specific aura, of becoming encrusted with (or stripped off) affects, of enriching (or reducing) our emotional world. This has to do not simply with their variable biographies but, even more so, with the ways in which they become our own extensions, in a process that turns stuff into a prosthetic arrangement without which we would not even begin to be who we are."(Marenko, 2009: 240-241)

Marenko's description of a 'prosthetic arrangement' goes some way to quantifying the extent of our entanglement with objects as quite literal material extensions of the self, such is the extent to which they are elevated by their fetishization. Margaret Gibson reiterates this entanglement, by observing that such is the extent to which concepts of property, ownership and the pursuance of material goods is fettered to the sense of individual that even after death objects can still be thought of or seen to be in possession of the original owner, even once they are owned by other people (2010: 55). I would even speculate that this demonstrates a process by which something of the soul of the deceased is perceived, in death, to have migrated to reside within the object, such is the extent to which our possessions are integral to our formulation of our sense of self.

"The subject is no longer eliminated in the exchange, it speculates. The subject, not the savage, is enmeshed in fetishism; through the investment [faire-valoir] of its body, it is the subject that is fetishized by the law of value." (Baudrillard & Gane, 1993: 107)

Baudrillard provides some insight into this relationship, as he describes the means by which individuals themselves become fetishized through a process he describes as adornment (Ibid). In the context of this text he refers to the use of make-up, jewellery and clothing and their ability to produce a particularly

'unnatural' form of desire that is wholly invested in symbolic value. In this sense, it is through adornment that we as individuals become further enmeshed with our material things, as we use them to decorate and thus commoditise our very bodies. By this distinction, the dividing line between our bodies and our things begins to blur, as both become exchangeable commodities to some degree. These considerations illustrate the means by which our possessions become not only fetishes embodying the system of exchange, but also fetishized embodiments of their owners. These concepts then iterate not just the fetishization of commodities as ascriptions of value determining their price, but moreover their capacity to act as fetishized embodiments encompassing the very being of their owners. Of course, it is not merely with fashion items that we decorate our bodies and thusly fetishize them, as the same logic could also be applied to a number of goods. These considerations demonstrate a further intention of mine to employ a car in my scene depicting St Sebastian's Martyrdom, due in part to their position as embodying a particularly unnatural form of desire that is wholly invested in symbolic value, but also due to their efficacy as material extensions of the body within the contemporary landscape. The scene evokes an image of violence and affliction, but one in which it is the commodity product and not the human subject that is being presented as the afflicted party. What this connotes is our compulsion, through fetishism, to perceive these objects as somehow independent, autonomous, pseudo-human entities capable of the same calibre of recognition as that of their human counterparts, due to their status as being in one instance beyond ourselves, whilst on the other as extensions of ourselves. By visually humanising the car bonnet then in such a way, and ultimately by presenting it as experiencing the very human experiences of pain, injury and death, I wished to solidify the notion that this static object was somehow capable of these uniquely human experiences.

2.2 - Animation

"What if all the objects that surround us were to possess intelligence, a memory, maybe even a conscious will? What if they were able to affect us, to interact with us? What if they had agency?" (Marenko, 2009: 243)

Speaking then of the 'life' of objects - or the illusion thereof - Marenko considers the animation of objects in her essay Object-relics and their effects : For a neo-animist paradigm, in which she advocates for a re-evaluation of the relationship between people and things through the lens of Animism, describing its potential to provide insight into the complex, relational and negotiated engagement between us and the material world (2009: 249). Marenko's observations on the viewing of our engagement of objects through the lens of animism will also provide useful insight into objects' fetishistic quality. Marenko describes animism as constituting one of the oldest and most widespread explanations for how the world works, hinging upon a belief that objects – as well as plants, animals or other 'non-human' entities – possess an anima – an anima describing a life or a soul (Ibid. p. 243). Marenko takes these considerations further, using animation as a means of describing a universal human impetus to perceive life within inanimate objects – due in part to the symbolic and affective investments that objects are charged with (Ibid: 239). It is these symbolic and affective investments that defines our relationship with objects, with Marenko describing this relationship as "[...] a messy and unpredictable one, electrified by emotional investments, often anxietyridden, never innocent or neutral, and always implicated in powerful identity-forming practices." (Ibid: 239)

To these ends, it is in studying the ontology of relics that Marenko endeavours to understand our relationship with objects through a 'neo-animist' lens, citing the relic as a useful tool with which this animist agency might be demonstrated. Marenko does so by not only investigating relics within the Christian tradition – describing the veneration of the bodily remains or personal effects of saints - but also provides further examples in: celebrity memorabilia, pieces of the Berlin Wall, a donor's eggs or the wreckage of the World Trade Centre. Objects such as these, Marenko explains, present a messy ontological status due to their distinctly 'animated' nature, be that through a perception of the contents of their history or some other perception that they should somehow be set apart from other 'non-living' objects. Marenko considers this to demonstrate that these objects possess an excess of meaning or a surplus of significance, which is to infer that the value attributed to them has somehow been inflated, at the very least beyond their concrete or material qualities. One could then connote that this excess of signification – driven often by these objects' historic or symbolic value – is stored

up within the object and provides it with its 'anima'. Marenko describes this as tantamount to a dissolution of the symbolic function, as the animated object straddles the boundary between presence and absence – the presence of the material object and the absence of the historical event or sacred power that it alludes to. I would then suggest that the animated object demonstrates a convergence of the material and the immaterial, the former referring to the concrete qualities of the object and the latter referring to its meaning as mediated within the social field.

Marenko's observations demonstrate that there are different sorts of objects and spaces that elicit different sorts of responses, I would state dependent upon the varying symbolic investments that they are charged with. For example, Marenko discusses the use of scrap metal from the remains of the World Trade Centre as being melted down and implemented in the creation of a naval ship, and the various implications of value and emotion that this act elicited. From my own immediate geographic and social context also, I would provide an example in the large flower memorial that took root in St Anne's Square in Manchester following the 2017 terrorist attack at the MEN Arena. The spontaneous memorial became emblematic of the city's collective mourning, and such care and due diligence was employed once the time came for the site to be dismantled that it would seem that these objects had become too precious to simply be landfilled. Football shirts were given to charities to be re-used and any salvageable flowers were preserved, pressed and presented in a book to the families of the victims (BBC News, 2017). In addition to this, much of the remaining ephemera – presumably including cards, balloons, letters and soft toys to name a few – have now been archived by the Manchester Art Gallery, in collaboration with the University of Mancheste in a project titled the Manchester Together Archive (Perraudin, 2018) (Fig. 7). The curious thing that this demonstrates is the means by which these objects have, in the wake of tragedy, somehow been separated off from 'ordinary' objects and now possess a value which is somehow inflated due to the weight of their history, and the tragedy they have seemingly witnessed or embody. There is a sense then in this act of sanctifying such objects in – and through a refusal to simply cast them aside as landfill waste - that they are perceived as possessing an inflated value.

Fig. 7 – Memorial at St Anne's Square (the Manchester Together Archive, 2017)

These considerations played heavily in my own intention to act out similar public rituals in my ongoing action *Symbolic Retribution* (Figs. 2, 3), and this enabled me to garner a greater understanding of the investments of value, meaning and sacredness such public memorials both create and display. There was, in the first instance, a sense that I was somehow doing something wrong by bastardising such memorials from the source of their intended purpose, the memorials I was creating baring no affinity to some historic personal tragedy. To consider this in tandem with Marenko's understanding of object relics straddling the boundary between presence and absence, the absence to which the memorials I have created allude is a totally absent absence so to speak – a memorial with no history to speak of. The question I considered here was whether the potency of such a symbol – an easily understood symbol within my own social context of the discarded bunch of flowers tied around a lamp-post – would remain in spite of this absence of history. A benefit of placing these memorials within my own geographic locale was that I was able, in part, to witness the shifting nature of these sites I had created, and furthermore infer their symbolic presence within the public spaces they occupied. More often than not I found upon returning to the sites, or walking by them on my daily commute, that the flowers were left un-disrupted until they fully decomposed. What I could infer this demonstrates is that at the very least these sites were treated with a similar level of respect and

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sacredness to that of their 'real' counterparts, and that their symbolic value was no less potent. There was one instance in which the site was disrupted with the flowers being removed no more than a week following the action – one can speculate by street cleaners although this is only an assumption - which in itself then leads one to consider the social implications of removing such sites, the longevity they deserve and the moment they are stripped of their sacrality and transmuted into landfill waste, an act which is arguably tantamount to the disruption of a graveside.

Gibson's aforementioned text Death and the Transformation of Objects (Gibson, 2010) is useful for understanding our relationship with such objects or sites, the text taking the form of an ethnographic study investigating the transformation of value attributed to objects in the event of a death. Her research, which was conducted using interviews, found a list of objects falling into this category to include, though not limited to; hair, baby teeth, handwritten notes, clothing, ashes, a pipe, a hand-made clock, post-mortem photographs, partially destroyed objects from a motor-bike crash, medals and badges (Ibid: 103). What is here being demonstrated is the identity-forming nature of our relationship with objects - as described by Marenko – to such an extent that in the event of death there still seems to be the appearance of the deceased within them – a condition Gibson describes as making it difficult for the research participants to discard these objects, inferring the value and attachment ascribed to them. It could be viewed that the soul, or 'anima', that animates these particular objects is the contents of their histories.

Michael Taussig rigorously addresses the agency of objects in his text Mimesis and Alterity, which provides some further insight into the means by which objects become animated by the contents of their histories as well as imbued with the agency of the individuals they have come into contact with. Taussig discusses the logic of sympathetic magic and its practices as theorized by James George Frazer at the end of the 19th century, in relation to the belief systems of indigenous groups of South America (Taussig, 1993). To simply explain, sympathetic magic pertains to a belief in an ideal connection - along a chain of 'sympathies' – as being understood as a real one (Ibid p. 49). These belief systems purport an assumption that in order to produce magical effects upon a human subject, one

only needs to act anywhere along this chain of sympathies that connects them. For Frazer, this magic and its efficacy functions on 2 levels of both copy and contact, the former of which I will later discuss (pp. 39-41). Contact, in these circumstances, refers to a belief that material objects associated with an individual are perceived to maintain a connection with them after that physical connection has been severed. Taussig goes onto explain how such items - including clothing, hair, nails, semen and even footprints - could be utilised and magically acted upon in order to effect the individual they are associated with (Taussig, 1993: 53).

These practices demonstrate a belief that objects take on a residual character of the individual they have come into contact with, and can subsequently be magically acted upon in order to bring the magician into enough contact with the subject so as to cause them affect, be that for malevolent or medicinal aims. Of course, these practices are not limited to the beliefs held within the sociological context that Taussig describes, with the agency of contact also evident in more contemporary mourning rituals wherein there is a persistent belief that by coming into contact with the belongings or sites associated with the deceased that we are brought into direct communion with them – for example by maintaining an empty bedroom or in memorializing the site of a fatal car crash. These examples demonstrate the prevalent belief that, through contact, physical objects are capable of adopting or embodying something of the character of the individual, and furthermore the contents of the individual's histories. It is with these considerations that one can infer that the memorialised sites of tragic death provide an opportunity for those in mourning to establish contact with the dead, which they seek by perceiving the site of death as somehow still maintaining a connection with the deceased. It is in these ways that, counterintuitively, the sites become animated and thus fetishized as a lasting material embodiment of the deceased.

It is also then important to understand that the objects associated with this ritual – flowers, stuffed animals and other ephemera – are not solely fetishized per say, but are rather indexical in the sense that they re-contextualise the surrounding space and shift its meaning. The symbolic value of the flowers possess a specific value within the specific social context in which they are situated, which

furthermore reiterates the premise that meaning and value are socially prescribed. The activity of creating these memorials then acts as a form of public communication designed to designate the space as a sacred one, whilst imploring the public to recognise the history that the site has witnessed and thus shift its meaning. Thomas explores these points, as she considers that there is a distinct difference between the intention of these public memorials to that of the private space of a graveside, as she considers that these memorials demonstrate intentions that are inherently socially or even politically motivated. This, she states, is due often to the tragic events that have led to the death of the loved one, so the spontaneous shrine could subsequently be seen as an attempt to effect social change – citing violent crime or dangerous driving as some notable examples. It could subsequently then also be understood that the spontaneous shrine does not so much exist solely for the benefit of victims and their loved ones, but is rather designed to affect the public. What is here described is a process whereby, through perception and mediated by social interaction, the space becomes animated. Not only does the public project meaning onto the space by interacting with it, but in so doing they are also allowing themselves to be affected by what they have themselves collectively generated as they are compelled to consider death and the tragic circumstances that have led to it.

Marenko discusses this dynamic in relation to Christian relics, wherein she describes that any potency in the literal healing capacities of the bones of saints is not negated by the objects literal 'dead-ness', as its potency exists as a social relation informed by systems of belief, tradition, and theological doctrine (2009: 241). The efficacy of their healing properties lies not within the object, but outside of it – be that through the social interactions it engenders as informed by tradition and ritual or in the perception that the divine is somehow channelled through them. What is here described is the means by which the animation of objects, and their subsequent fetishization, is generated as an inherently social relation. In this context Baudrillard's description is useful, as he describes fetishism not as a sanctification of the object but rather as a sanctification of the system (1981: 92), be that the systems of religion, capitalism or wider social contracts. The meaning of objects then, and subsequently their capacity for agency and animation, exists as a social relation depending upon the specific social context in which it sits.

2.3 - Ritual Functions

Bringing these considerations back into the realms of contemporary art discourse, I will next consider art objects in relation to their position within the specific social context of art institutions. As was addressed in the previous section, fetishism describes a process that is based in the interaction between people and objects, and furthermore the means by which, through some sort of ritualization, objects are imbued with agency. It is for these purposes that I will analyse the ritual function of art objects within the art institutions' physical environments (the gallery, the museum etc.), and furthermore the specific set of social rituals that the art institution engenders, so as to locate the fetishistic character implicit in the relationship this establishes between people and objects.

Dorothea Von Hantelmann provides a useful perspective on the role of art objects and arts institutions within society in her text What is the new ritual space for the 21st century? (Von Hantelmann: 2018), which was published in conjunction with a Prelude to the Shed –The Shed being a multi-purpose and multi-disciplinary creative arts venue located in Manhattan, New York (The Shed). This text is of profound benefit for this study due to the means by which it describes the art institution as a ritual environment.

Von Hantelmann considers that the historic purpose of ritual is a gathering in which members of a society communicate, enact, and maintain their view of themselves and the world in which they live (Von Hantelmann: 2018). It is in this sense that the ritual function serves to affirm the core values of a society, and through the de-individuation that collective gatherings produce, solidify these values within the ritual participants. It is for these reasons that historically speaking, ritual was the domain for the creation of new laws or the formation of new social contracts (Ibid).

However it is the central position of the art object as a mediator of the ritual of the art institution that is particularly insightful, as Von Hantelmann asserts that art institutions are the essential ritual place for contemporary societies in which values ascribed to a wholly materialistic worldview are affirmed – defining our contemporary western worldview as being determined by the proliferation of

objects as both identity forming, but also as the basis for our material economy (Ibid). It comes as no surprise then that the art institution - a collective activity focussed around an engagement with objects – would be identifiable as a space in which our societies' core values are demonstrated, with objects described by Von Hantelmann as the pivotal entity of this new ritual (Ibid).

 "Every era builds its temples. Art institutions are the gathering temples of modern Western industrialized liberalism, which explains their peculiar character as a ritual: if every ritual is an immersive experience, this ritual immerses its participants in modalities of distance and detachment." (Ibid, 2018)

This point is further iterated, as Von Hantelmann characterises the ritual of the art institution as being directly linked to liberal concerns of the individual, the market, progress and pluralism (Ibid). Defying a historical use of rituals to conjure a sense of being a de-individualised member of a wider group, this contemporary ritual is defined in terms of the alienated position in which it places the participant. The liberal concern for individual autonomy is here demonstrated in a condition whereby rather than encouraging a collectivised togetherness, what instead the art institution generates is collectivised individuation – a dynamic wherein the participant is alienated from others and placed into direct communion with objects.

"Durkheim's model of ritual emphasizes the misattribution of this subjective state to whatever salient and tangible source is available to a participant's senses. Thus, a totem becomes imbued with mana, the abstract power of society becomes objectified, and God is created." (Marshal, 2002: 366)

There is a sense, then, that the performance of rituals acts as a means of cementing belief, be that a belief in the abstract power of gods, supernatural forces or society. Douglas Marshal expands upon the points made by Von Hantelmann whilst revising the work of Emile Durkheim in suggesting that it is through the enactment of ritual – and through the collective de-individuation that it generates – that the effects of ritual become attached to the participants knowledge structures of the focal entity, thus cementing their power. This provides useful insight into the position of the art object at the centre of the ritual here described – and furthermore the primacy of the object at the centre of this ritual –

as a means by which the object is imbued mana[1] at the moment it is worked upon by human minds, as has previously been described as an essential characteristic of fetishism. It is in so doing that the object becomes powerful, agential and animated through the collective generation of meaning that the art ritual demands. Of course, an additional consideration here made by Marshal is the basis of ritual behaviour in historical custom and a continuation of the same sets of beliefs and behaviours. It is consequently through the power these rituals connote due to their historical trajectory also that embolden and cement the belief that is desired.

These considerations are evident in each of the artworks that I have created as a part of this research that are designed to sit within a gallery space, wherein the collective generation of meaning has been employed in order to give an apparent 'life' to the object. I achieved this by making particular considerations to the spatial environments of gallery spaces, and furthermore by utilising the specific behaviours accustomed to these settings. Take for example my aforementioned piece *We Scorn What We Eat* (Fig.1) as previously discussed (pp. 6-13), wherein levels of concealment are utilised in order to invite the onlooker to imagine that which they are unable to see. To these ends I made considerations to the specific ways in which people encounter sculptural objects in the gallery setting, such as the position at which one would stands in order to view the work and the differing ways in which three-dimensional and two-dimensional objects are interacted with. The purpose then of presenting a two-dimensional object as masquerading as a three-dimensional one was in order to somehow frustrate these behaviours, whilst also alluding to the creation of an imagined three-dimensionality that is collectively rendered in the minds of the public.

These considerations can also be made in relation to the scene depicting *the Martyrdom of St Sebastian* (Figs. 4, 6), wherein it is hoped that by presenting an otherwise inert and static consumer product as an afflicted and dying man that it will subsequently be perceived as such, and thusly imbued with the agency of not only humanity but also the symbolic values attributed to affliction and death. What this demonstrates is the importance of ritual – and moreover the specific set of rituals at the centre of art institutions – in providing life to the object. A life that

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[1] The concept of *mana* was theorized notably by Marcel Mauss - in his studies of the uses of the term as it originates in Polynesian culture - to describe some magical power or quality as ascribed to an object or person (1972: 108).

arguably imbues these objects with an inflated status that on the one hand both facilitates their exchange as capital, whilst on the other causing them to appear as animated entities.

The social rituals that art engenders were notably addressed by Bourriaud in his canonical text Relational Aesthetics, which advocates for an aesthetic theory which judges artworks based upon the social relations that they produce (2002). These considerations are made by Bourriaud in relation to the work of artists within the context of an emergence of socially engaged art practices as he observed in the 1990s. Examples include Rirkrit Tiravanija, who opened up the gallery space as an area of sociability and leisure in his series of Untitled(1992) performances, wherein the gallery was transformed into a cafeteria of sorts serving the Southeast Asian dish pad thai (Artnet), achieving its form from the resultant inter-human relations established in this transaction. Bourriaud observes the benefit of a work such as this – the sharing of time and the sharing of food in a seemingly utopian models of sociability – is so as to enter the gallery-goer into a dialogue wherein they possess the individual agency to themselves effect the form of the work.

Bishop describes Relational Aesthetics as an attempt to invert the goals of Greenbergian Modernism by dictating that meaning is collectively produced, whilst standing in opposition to the 'discrete' and 'private' space of a supposedly closed artwork (2005: 54). Relational Aesthetics, Bishop supposes, does not prescribe to the models of optical contemplation that a traditional relationship between viewer and artwork dictates, but rather pertains to a relationship in which a public is provided with a stake in the production of the work. This, Bishop connotes, is due to the form of the work of art as being a 'social form' and thus capable of producing positive human relationships, an assertion she underpins in Bourriaud's belief that art not merely reflect culture but produce it.

However, Bishop denies the utopian usefulness of these forms as described by Bourriaud, as she questions the truly emancipatory nature of the art institutions in which these works typically sit, or as I would describe as the ritual environment that the gallery space encompasses. Bishop places this in one instance with the literal interaction that is demanded by 'relational' works, which she contests by considering that all artworks are potentially 'open' in their having an infinite

number of readings, it is simply the achievement of Relational Aesthetics to contextualise work which foregrounds this fact (Bishop, 2005: 62). In addition to this, Bishop also considers the problematisation of both the physical context of many of these works, and also the audience for which they are typically designed. Speaking of Tiravanija, Bishop states that the work relies upon its position within a gallery and its participation from gallery-goers to differentiate it from entertainment, as well as claiming that the structure of the work circumscribes the outcome in advance (2005: 68-69). The result is one in which the microtopia there created is one that is designed only for the few who identify as gallery-goers. I would argue this demonstrates, building upon Von Hantelmann's speculation, that the specific set of social rituals inherent within art institutions are seemingly hard to escape, and so too here can the liberal concerns for autonomy and individualism be seen to be demonstrated – even in an apparently socially democratised art form.

It is not the goal, nor is it within the scope, of this study to present a case one way or the other as to the efficacy or longevity of Relational Aesthetics. Nor is it the intention of this study to stake claims for any individual benefits to be found in the art institution's different environments, wherein individualistic and arguably elitist concerns are realised and enacted. However, considering this study's focus upon the social form that objects take – fetishism - a consideration within my own immediate art historical context as to the discourse surrounding the social form of art is necessary. What I would consider, as Bishop did, is the position of the optical contemplation of objects as also being capable of producing social forms that Relational Aesthetics somewhat negates, and moreover the social activity of encounter that objects themselves are invested in. A social encounter with objects and the symbolic relations arising therefrom sits at the centre of the ritual of the art institution, and furthermore in our wider social worlds as has been outlined in my considerations of commodity fetishism and animism. What this study aims to demonstrate is the agency implicit in the material practices of fetishism as a means of describing its capacities to itself produce social relations.

Chapter 3

SEEING IS BELIEVING

As has so far been described, fetishism identifies an ascription of value to objects arising not from their concrete material qualities, but rather from a set of collectively imagined social relations as informed by their symbolic value. So too does fetishism describe a means by which meaning is collectively negotiated through social rituals and thusly projected onto objects, seemingly animating them in the process. There is a perception then that the agency of the fetish, as was described from the outset, describes an ascription of value or power that is somehow misplaced, with those who believe in their efficacy having left themselves invested in the illusions they create. My final chapter will subsequently consider the agency implicit in the creation of such illusions, and moreover how the irreality of the fetish only cements its power. Baudrillard considers that fetishism – which was historically used as a term to imply some supernatural power or entity embodied within an object and a viewpoint that is bound up with notions of a primitive form of 'magical thinking' - fetishism should actually be defined in terms of the opposite; that is a fabrication, an artefact or a labour of appearances and signs (Baudrillard, 1995: 91). Where then lies the power in fabrication, in artifice or in the investment of belief in these seemingly non-real things?

Each of the artworks I have produced throughout this study have utilised similar notions of artifice and the investment of belief that artifice demands. Be that in the illusion of death as a cardboard cut-out that I employed in my production of *We Scorn What We Eat* (Fig. 1), the invitation to perceive a commodity object as human in my scene depicting *the Martyrdom of St Sebastian* (Fig. 4, 6), or in the false narratives of tragedy that I created as a means of sacralising public spaces in *Symbolic Retribution* (Figs. 2, 3). Each of these decisions were made with the intent of illustrating the scant regard for the real that fetishism supposes.

It is at this juncture I will introduce an additional and final artwork titled *Sky Fetish – The Demiurgic Instinct* (Figs. 8, 9). The work stands at three metres tall, and is composed of a steel frame and ladder which leads up towards a computer generated 3d rendering of the sky, digitally printed onto aluminium. There are

Fig. 8 – Sky Fetish – The Demiurgic Instinct (2019)

notable references to which this piece owes its composition, the most immediate of which will be that of Jacob's Ladder – a biblical story of the old testament in which Jacob was presented by God an image of heaven with a stairway leading towards it (Genesis 28:12). There are though more wider inferences of symbolism of the sky as representing a place that is forever unattainable, and subsequently as a place where the gods live. Eliade discuses the potency of such imagery in his text The Sacred and the Profane, wherein he states that "simple contemplation of the celestial vault already provokes a religious experience. The sky shows itself to be infinite, transcendent." (Eliade, 1959: 118) Eliade expands upon these considerations as he expresses the prevalence of such imagery across diverse historical, geographical and religious contexts in what he terms as sacred pillars, a totemic symbol that connects the heavens and the earth, brings them into communion with one another as well as provide a fixed point of absolute reality around which the cosmos is brought into order (Ibid: 34). Jacob's ladder could indeed be thought of in these same terms, and one can begin to understand the potency with which the sky – or rather a desire to come into contact with it – is perceived. It was this universal potency that led me to employ this symbolism as a means of understanding its encompassing of a desire to reach the unattainable. The sky furthermore demonstrates the means by which belief and subsequently meaning – in this instance of the sky and its heavenly inhabitants – is socially ascribed. It was these considerations that led me to produce a copy of the sky, as a means to understand the benefit of producing illusions that are ascribed with potent value or sacred power.

3.1 - The Copy

Taussig rigorously addresses the artifice created by objects and their mimetic function, and there is particular importance in the perspective he provides to representational images and their use in such rites, which provides useful insight into the agency of copying (1993). These observations are made in relation to the logic of sympathetic magic and its practices as theorized by James George Frazer, this magic understood to exist on the two levels of copy and contact, the latter of which I have previously discussed (pp. 29-30). Taussig describes the copy,

Fig. 9 – Sky Fetish – The Demiurgic Instinct (2019)

within these magical practices, as affecting the real original to such a degree that the representation shares in or acquires the properties of the represented (Taussig, 1993: 47-48), which is to infer that the representation and the represented become one and the same thing. The conclusion to this logic is the principle that to harm the copy is to harm the subject, or as Frazer explains "[…]just as the image suffers, so does the man, and that when it perishes he must die."(Ibid: 48) Taussig explains how such is the extent of the agency of representations, that ritual acts of violence are committed against such objects in order to afflict the subject – such as driving arrows or nails into small wooden figurines depicting an enemy. These ideas not only provide insight into the ritual logic of effigy making, but also into the agency implicit in the fetishized character of such objects - the very act of representation causing them to be attributed with human traits and abilities to such a degree that they are capable of transmitting affliction to the person they represent.

A worrying precedent is here set for the power of the copy to affect the original, particularly when one considers not only the proliferation of objects but also the proliferation of images – that is of copies - that informs the contemporary visual landscape as well as the capitalist models of exchange and value. Taussig considers that the era of industrialised reproduction produced a resurgence of mimicry, a conclusion he achieves by considering the work of Walter Benjamin (Ibid: 19-20), which is easy to understand when one considers the advent of the production line and the resultant proliferation of objects made valuable not only by their difference, but also by their equivalence. Taussig also considers this in relation to the mimetic function of the photographic image, which also provides useful insight into our contemporary relationship with images, and moreover their efficacy as tools of duplication and reproduction. At what point, then, does the copy acquire an agency that is independent of the original? Furthermore, by what processes then might the copy be capable of affecting the original?

Taussig offers further insight into these questions by providing an example of Antisemitism and the role of mimesis in its formulation, whilst considering the writings of Theodor Adorno (Ibid: 66). Taussig equates that it is the goal of the anti-Semite to produce a replica of their own mental image of a Jew, and then duplicate these images in order to proliferate them. What these processes of

replication and mimesis demonstrate is the capacity for the copy to affect the value of the original, and certainly also their ability to afflict harm on them. Imagery and its uses in such a way is familiar within our own contemporary visual culture, in which relentlessly duplicated imagery of individuals is evident in our culture of celebrity, and even in our own individual desire to duplicate our own image on social media. But here too, much like Taussig's equation of the reproduced image in the mind of the anti-Semite, it is the degree to which these images are manipulated and steeped with a socially ascribed symbolic value, that the representational image becomes entangled with the individual represented, and is thus capable of affecting them. It is also evident the means by which these images, through their manipulation, reside in the imaginary. It could then be understood that the act of representation - be that in producing images of gods, individuals or supernatural forces – mimesis acts as a tool of control.

These considerations were also reiterated by Sonia Silva in her article Reification & Fetishism – Processes of Transformation, in which she describes similarly afflicting uses of Fetishism and Reification (Silva, S. 2013). Silva discusses the portrayal of Tutsis as 'cockroaches' by the Hutus prior to the Rwandan genocide, the depiction of 'Fallen Women' in 20th Century Ireland who were sent to Magdalene Asylums, or even the colloquial use of the term 'Nerd' as used in High Schools across the world. Arguably one could consider that these examples, too, provide evidence of the affliction capable in the mimetic reproduction of an image of a group or individual, and also how these duplicated images come to affect the original.

3.2 - Concretizing God

"In some way or another one can protect oneself from evil spirits by portraying them." (Taussig, 1993: 1)

It is with these considerations in mind then that the fetishistic principle of mimesis can be understood in terms of its capacity to exert control over the individual that it represents, and furthermore a means by which unstable forces are capable of being brought under control. Taussig draws wider comparisons over the uses of mimesis as a tool of manipulation, not limited merely to the power of representing

ones earthly enemies, but also in the agency of mimicking spirits, supernatural forces, colonial settlers and animals, to name a few (1993). These considerations also provide useful insight into the production and use of religious deities, in the prevalent belief that by crafting an image of a god, one is capable of coming into contact with them and subsequently bringing them under control.

The power of mimesis in this regard played heavily in my intention to employ a fabricated image of the sky in such a way, in my piece *Sky fetish – The Demiurgic Instinct* (Figs. 8, 9). Building upon my previous considerations of the potency of the sky's universally symbolic value, and its position as representing the unattainable abode of the gods, it was intended that by producing such a representation that it would mimic or acquire the same power of the religious icon, as I identified the sky as connoting some universal notion of sacrality. Of course, what is here being mimicked is not merely visual, but moreover symbolic. To these ends, I am not intending to produce a copy of what the sky is, but rather what the sky means as a social ascription of symbolic value that transforms it into a divine being.

"But what becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme authority, simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or is it volatilized into simulacra which alone deploy their pomp and power of fascination – the visible machinery of icons being substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God?" (Baudrillard, 1983: 8)

Of course, if the mere act of copying gods and rendering them as objects or images is sufficient to acquire their power or bring them under control, what does that say about the authority of divine powers? Moreover, what insight does this provide for the power implied in producing copies, and images? Similar questions are above quoted by Baudrillard in his canonical text Simulations. These considerations are made through his conception of what he termed the precession of simulacra – simulacra describing something which simulates the real. Baudrillard makes a distinct separation between something that is simulated and something that is simply fake, stating that a simulation somehow possesses the same capacities of the thing it represents (Ibid: 5). These properties are of course evident in religious icons, in which there is a distinctly blurred boundary between the representation and the represented, to such an extent that these images become capable of much the same veneration as well as the same sacred

abilities. There are notable similarities with Baudrillard's conceptions of simulacra and the mimetic object as described by Taussig, and furthermore with my own considerations of fetishism and animation describing a capacity of things to possess a value which is inflated. The precession of simulacra then, for Baudrillard, describes a condition in which simulacra could be seen to be preceding the real, whilst being privileged above the real and created in the absence of any original reference. Simulacra's precession connotes a condition in which the real has somehow been abandoned in favour of the non-real, the precedent here set being one in which the replication of the non-real proliferates as it becomes wholly self-referential. In this instance, the real and the non-real become indistinguishable from one-another - a condition described by Baudrillard as hyperreality (Ibid). Such is the extent of the agency of the seemingly illusory capacities of simulation, that Baudrillard states that it threatens the very difference between "true" and "false" and between "real" and "imaginary" (Ibid: 3).

These considerations informed my decision to produce an image of the sky as a computer generated 3d rendering in my piece *Sky Fetish – The Demiurgic Instinct* (Figs. 8, 9). The intention of this was to produce an image that presented a convincing illusion of the natural world, and one that could at first glance maintain its Illusion or conceal its artificiality. Of course, the caveat to this illusion is that once the artifice of the image has been revealed, it is in essence no different to the photograph it is at first assumed to have been, as a photograph too depends upon its mimetic capacities to produce both copy and illusion of the real. Taking these considerations even further, Benjamin posits as previously mentioned that even the act of looking only merely produces a copy on the retina (Taussig, 1993: 20). Where then do these concepts leave the very notion of the real itself, with its concrete and material qualities? The assertion here being made with this piece is that the real sky, the photograph of the sky and the computer generated image of the sky each produce the same effects and possess the same symbolic capacities, when considered in relation to either fetishism or simulacra, thus demonstrating the negation of the real that such a perspective suppose. The purpose of this is to demonstrate the means by which both copy and original can become interchangeable, and the agency this supposes for producing representational objects.

These considerations are furthermore reflected in the title of the piece, the 'Demiurgic' instinct here referring to the figure of the Demiurge as described in the school of thought commonly categorised as Gnosticism[2]. The character of the Demiurge is synonymous with the 'God the Creator' as described in the biblical book of Genesis, and is translatable from the Latin as describing an artisan or craftsman, which conjures an image of God creating the world as if rendering an image in clay (Hoeller, 2002). However, the figure of the Demiurge is characterised as an imperfect God who thusly produced the material world in an imperfect manner. I wished to employ this as a metaphor with which to describe the artistic impetus to produce images of the material world in much the same way, and furthermore the 'god-like' agency implicit in this. In so doing I am demonstrating a privileging of the copy over the so-called original, whilst asserting that through an employment of both mimesis and fetishism, a digitally produced sky is interchangeable with the real one. This also serves to illustrate a collapsing of the differences between what is real and what is imaginary, as described by Baudrillard (1983: 3).

3.3 - Escape Strategies

"The symbolic is neither a concept, an agency, a category, nor a 'structure', but an act of exchange and a social relation which puts an end to the real, which resolves the real, and, at the same time, puts an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary." (Baudrillard and Gane, 1993: 133)

Baudrillard considers the opposition that exists between the real and the imaginary in much the same way as he considered the opposition that exists between the living and the dead, as discussed in my first chapter (pp. 5-13). This is to say that they are co-dependent so as to provide legitimacy to one another; the real establishing its value only in terms of its difference from its opposite, the imaginary. I would consider that the imaginary then presents a threshold which exists beyond the boundaries of material existence, and one that as described above by Baudrillard, is circulated within the social ascription of symbolic

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[2] Gnosticism is a somewhat disputed term, due to its encompassing of a vast swathe of early Christian philosophies deemed to be 'heretical', with little overarching orthodoxy (Gardner, 2010). However, it is a useful term in this context so as to locate the historical context of the figure of *the Demiurge* to which this study is alluding.

exchange. A desire then to engage with the symbolic and enter into the imaginary could be viewed as a desire to escape one's material reality. The imaginary in the context of this study describes the illusion that fetishized objects produce, and also the symbolic ascriptions of value that powers their illusion, as has been rigorously addressed throughout the entirety of this study. The fetishized object then finds itself existing in a schism between opposites; in one instance material, and in the other immaterial, in one instance real, whilst in the other imaginary and in one instance present, whilst in the other absent. The fetish could then be seen to act as a mediator or a signpost, directing the viewer to engage with something that exists outside of the object, or even beyond materiality itself – be that either sacred or social forces.

The promise of escape that fetishes suppose, and furthermore their position as mediatory tools, played heavily in my creation of *Sky Fetish – The Demiurgic Instinct* (Figs. 8, 9), wherein quite a literal albeit futile escape route is being presented to the viewer by way of a ladder. The image of a stairway to heaven presents quite a literal visualisation of a boundary being crossed between one world and another, with the promise of escape being presented also as a promise of salvation. The ladder as an object with both symbolic and utilitarian values presents an invitation for the viewer to climb it, however this invitation is one that they are unable or at least unlikely to heed, not least because the ladder was not designed to be climbed but also due to the specific social behaviours required by the art institution in which it sits. The ladder then is not a ladder but an image of a ladder, much like the sky is not a sky but an image of the sky, so any invitation for the viewer to climb is one that can only be accepted in an imaginary scenario with symbolic terms. What is here being iterated is not just the unattainability of heaven, but moreover the intangibility of the imaginary. By inviting the viewer to climb the ladder only as a conscious effort – a conscious effort which they perform collectively both with other gallery-goers, and also within the social ascriptions of symbolic exchange – I am privileging the power the imaginary holds over the real.

Taussig considers that our engagement with objects encapsulates our desire to merge with our surroundings, or to somehow experience existence beyond ourselves (1993). This, Taussig equates, demonstrates the human desire to seek

out and engage with alterity, or otherness – that which exists in opposition to us. The otherness to which Taussig alludes could easily be compared also with the imaginary, and furthermore our desire to engage with that which exists beyond what is considered to be concrete and real. The fetishized object then presents an opportunity for us to travel beyond ourselves, beyond materiality and beyond the real, as it stands at the threshold between us and other.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study has demonstrated the means by which fetishism can be used to define our understanding of objects as anything but static, but rather as animated, agential and powerful things. The power of the fetishized object has been shown to exist at the moment of encounter, serving not to define only the nature of the objects themselves but moreover our relationship with them. It is within this relationship, and furthermore the means by which we work upon objects with our minds, implicate them with value, and the social agency that informs this transaction, that they cease being dead and are animated. This power of animation is one which elevates the fetish beyond its objecthood, beyond its material confines and beyond its passivity and towards a condition in which it is an autonomous entity capable of agency.

The agency of the fetish has also revealed the effect such objects have on individuals, and furthermore the wider implications of our relationship with the material world. This relationship is one which has been shown to be mutually entangled and invested, wherein our relationships with objects come to define our sense of self, our sense of others and our sense of the wider world. It is in so doing that the fetish has been demonstrated as an inherently social object, its power maintained and existing as a social relation as informed by both belief and its symbolic value.

Each of these considerations demonstrate the benefit an understanding of the fetish quality of objects can have on artistic practice, through the means by which I have explored, through the production of artworks, an encounter between people and objects, the form that this encounter takes and how a utilization of this encounter causes artworks to be imbued with agency. This study has also demonstrated an academic understanding of the position fetishized objects hold within our wider cultural, social and personal imaginations, as well as the emotional investments such objects are charged with, which has been reflected in both the subject matter and form that these artworks have adopted. These considerations demonstrate how an understanding of the fetishistic quality of objects can be employed in art practice, as a means of understanding and producing the agency they are capable of.

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Fig. 3 – *Symbolic Retribution* by John Carney (2019). An ongoing public action wherein the artist is creating and leaving flower memorials in ordinary public locations in and around the area surrounding his home in Urmston, Greater Manchester. The action is being documented photographically on 120mm film

Fig. 4 – *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian* by John Carney (2019). Reclaimed car bonnet penetrated by arrows made of brass and steel. Dimensions variable.

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Fig. 7 – The Manchester Together Archive (2017) *Memorial at St Anne's Square* [online] Available at: https://mcrtogetherarchive.org/

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