

Object a:

The Fantasy Behind the Category

Jeffrey Fereday, catalogue essay for "Object a," exhibitions by Susan Fereday at the Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, 1993

They Have Belonged

They inhabit forlorn corners of charity shops, unloved stacks beyond display, there beside the old shoes and the yellowed magazines. Handbags. Purses become orphans. Castaways, once held so close. Handbags, the secondhandbags of fallen desire. What can one say for them? They have belonged - but to one only, one absent. To this legacy of desire and attachment they remain, forsaken, estranged, left over, supplementary.

Fallen Objects [ill-fitting shoes]

It is not unlike the passage of belonging which forms a fit to discarded shoes and constantly shapes reminder to any subsequent wearer that she follows in the footsteps of another. If the phrase "secondhand shoes" faces a literal absurdity, an ill-fitting metaphor, perhaps it is because the phrase also stands awkwardly through lack of use; perhaps the category "hand-me down shoes" falls beyond the correct speech of commodity - whose ideal dictates individual ownership. To fit the shape that someone else's feet have worn in sweated hours standing in queue, walking sore across years of silent disappointments or shabby scuffles to stand ground. Even if there is no physical discomfort involved with acquisition of a secondhand purse, there is some anxiety attendant upon its object.

Fallen Objects [not the same]

Discarded purses do not immediately offer up the odour or broad historicity apparent when one looks back at old New Ideas and Women's Weeklys, which read explicitly with a voice upon a culture, ideologically particular, imperative as a call by the doctor's receptionist, a prescription for a gender. The dislocation of the discarded purse is more personal, more sombre; the resonance it offers to a contemporary reader of historical meaning - so far from the moment and the object of its design - falls into the silent way of all fallen commodity: a silence so

particular, as engendered as that which defined and enstructured its use value in life. It is from this silence, beyond the speech of its commodity and its function therein, that its social product - its deposition - might begin to speak.

No Ordinary Purse

No ordinary purse can buy entry to the discourse of art - to do so it must first be made to trade ordinariness for exception. It must be emptied, and then refilled. It must be separated from invisibility within its category, and be held out to scrutiny as an example. But to place an ordinary purse within the category "art" also positions it amidst a specialised field of view and enquiry which spills back upon the cultural.

ArtSpeak

Art is nothing and it should be everything. A vehicle for endless chatter, its effective silence, loud noise, and gestural convolutions of worldview are spectacular. Because of the hijack of both ontology and cosmology by the forces of capital in its social organisation, the category "art" has been granted this privilege of openness in which all matters cultural may be discussed, contested, yet nothing changed.

Art is everything and it should be nothing in particular. Endless chatter affects its silence. Art's privilege is open for all to see. Its spectacular worldview of convolution is a gesture. Nothing should be discussed, nor any matters contested, since everything will already have changed. Social forces have capitalised on Art's precarious vulnerability and impressionable nature.

Art should think Art, and be beautiful

Nice Art Doesn't Spit.

Always Beside Her

The purse is accessory to the culturalised commodification of the female identity, a symbolic yet functional vehicle, identifying the process to which she is subject and holding as an accessory to her precarious subjectivity.

A matching set.

The Form of The Loss

The allusion of form - purse/vagina - is a double-coding which recalls that sexual difference is constructed at a price, that it involves subjection to a law exceeding biological division. The concept of the phallus stands for that subjection, and for the way in which women are very precisely implicated in the social ordering. In an ironic cross-reference to the generative symbolism of the power of money, the wallet is concealed within the male clothing, a potential whose power is implied through the gesture of restraint in non-disclosure, whereas the purse must remain visible as an accessory, subject to appearance, exposed and vulnerable. The handbag is a fetish object to women, and is also a fetish object of the category "woman". Its position as external, as accessory, itself carries implications of design which assert the unconscious contingency which is the place of the female according to the opposition (having or not having the phallus) in the ordering of sexuality, here revealed as fetish upon the cost of that order. Thus the purse, which is physically beyond herself, is held as that which remains, the deposition, the proof of castration, that which has been castrated. Or so the story goes.

One Man's Ceiling

No-one wants a second-hand purse. Well, some do, some don't. A second-hand purse is never the same. It is the purse without the vista. It promises no spectacle, no implied luxury, no fabric of glimmer or intrigue. It is what it is. A second-hand purse is always firstly someone else's, but some women don't mind. Some men don't mind women who carry a second-hand handbag - it wouldn't bother them. Some wouldn't hear of it. What's it matter? You can't be too choosy. To save a bit these days is good. The economy affects everyone. First you see it somewhere, in a shop somewhere. There are good secondhand shops, and not so good. You have to know where to look. You see it, perhaps ask to see it, then inspect it, try it out for size, then put it back and think about it. You can't be too choosy because if you wait too long it'll be gone.

The Spectacle is the Other side of Money

But there is always the other side of the coin, for the spectacle is the other side of money. The anxiety of the object is such that many people cannot simply throw away old purses no longer in use. Some deal with their fixation in that suburban carnival of ritualistic consumerist purge, the garage sale. There, amidst

the roleplay and the rest of the junk, its precise symbolism may not be noticed. The anxiety will not disappear if a purse is simply given away. Anxiety tends to accumulate, just as a life accumulates clutter until such a point that one has to move, remove, or cannot move.

Writing lesson

Each forsaken purse contains a wealth of fictive potential. Who are these women whose names remain etched in sticky biro inside the purses one finds in the corner of shops? What is their story? One feels that their time has been spent. Lost, as one day all things will be lost.

The snap that purses make

The snap that purses make can be heard as a full stop at the end of a sentence. I recall hearing it as a kind of command. I snap to. I remember I have not been paying attention. I snap out of it. Its sound is always significant: it announces, yes or no, the precise intention of mother to leave, or to leave behind, and that is that, an open and shut case, sale or no sale. Context is Everything. This is a memory corresponding to a worldview only three foot tall [an age when I spent a lot of time standing beside women, roaming elliptically in patterns around their skirts]. The memory is set most vividly in a butcher shop and narrates from a geometry where I always had to look up to enter the world of things. I draw your attention to the smells of the meat and the sawdust. It is a hot Adelaide day. A short story unfolds.

Daydreams

Later a red purse was mine for marbles. The sound it made just opening and closing again, over and over with that clasp, the sound was different in my hands - to my ear a distracted music or sometimes just deafly clicking fingers for sometimes minutes at a stretch. The idea of clicking oneself into a trance is quite meditative and familiar, possibly attractive; years go by and you wonder if you're dreaming.

Out of the blue day, somewhere along the line between Paris Nord and Amsterdam Centrum, I discovered my journey had turned around - instead of taking a seat which looked forward to wherever I was going, the seat I'd chosen faced the opposite way, and I realised I'd begun looking back upon where I'd

been, territory I'd just passed, even in the framing of each present moment, even as I was moving forward. It came as quite a shock, for it felt completely natural, this looking back, facing south, turning inward. Had I turned my back on what possibilities lay ahead of me? [on borrowed time and borrowed money, any possibilities had to be weighed in advance, any pleasures held to an accountable minimum]. Or had I simply tired of my own company and wanted to get home? In a turn, the excitement of attentive journey was reduced to mere commute. How long had I been approaching middle age while facing the opposite direction?

Suddenly, whichever way I turned, a slow, accepting contempt of the situation surrounding my passage, an introspection which produced a prolific effort of writing once I reached Amsterdam, pulled me back to St.Kilda.

Foot-notes

The purse always has strings attached; these are figures of speech operated by varying tensions.

The role of the woman creates degrees of expertise in purse control and home economics because I am still thinking of Australia and a childhood configured in the 1950s.

To appear is a conditional action, a passive verb, which takes for granted a state of absence. It suggests that something is, or is not, acknowledged as not being there in the first place.

If, in composition, music appears, does it come from another place?

Forsaken, forsaken, like a stone in the street

The slightly forlorn presence of the discarded purse is recognised by the absence of the woman. The appearance of the purse confirms her absence and describes that form of her desire which once engaged the object with meaning and currency. In the purse we find nothing. Its sombre uselessness echoes the silence of the unrepresentable woman, a passage by which the woman progressed within the world of commodity, until that which held fast in the desire of her attachment fell away and out of circulation.

Beside such trace of conditionality, or the residual values which attend upon the purse as remaindered expression of an historical signification [fashion, style], there is nothing to be understood of the person herself from examination of the object which has fallen from her sphere of lived relations to a time and place beyond her desire. The discarded purse offers nothing but itself, no name for itself, no content, no promise of entry, nothing but itself, a shed shell of discarded desire left waiting when someone's world was left wanting.

Beneath the stones, the beach

To seek something immaterial in the world of the material, to achieve something of substance, to crystallise some immutable essence from the death drive of language - such desires are the motor of the used purse market.

Fashion statement

The purse as identity/style accessory - having played its part in undetermined processes of stylistic display and social recognition, it passes beyond critical use value. Whether, at this point of its fall, it is recognised as having had its moment pass without tangible accomplishment save a style dispossessed by a non-specific familiarity which recalls in the personal the failures of anxious consumption, as having exhausted its usefulness to the progress of desire, is immaterial. To look at it now is to see only that which it is, beyond the facility to appear that which it is not. Goodbye [not looking back, not even goodbye].

The way one looks at old clothes which have fallen out of style, unwanted and about to be despatched to the goodwill bins. The way one looks at unflattering photographs of times you'd rather forget.

Social graces

The sexual economy, in an affinity between the enigmas of sexuality and the play of the signifier, informs the ease and manner of use of the female purse and the male wallet.

The purse must always be guarded, for hers is an elegant vulnerability. The balance between pleasure and certain disaster depends on the woman's measure and restraint. Such is her condition within the world of money - adjacent to it, included as accessory in the spectacle of money. Her social

manner in relation to the world of money is always on display; hence the self-consciousness which has been culturalised as the feminine condition - the field of passive activity implied in the verb to appear - effects her subjection within the field of economic power and orders an acute consciousness of how it is she appears in its relation, how she adorns and gestures [with]in the signs of money.

As she learns to live beside the power of money the purse becomes a fetish-object which represents both her possession, her subjection, and her separation, and above all carries her relation to economic power as a finite entity held and conducted at arm's length. Her use of the purse can be cautious, respectfully conservative, expansive or expressive, even hysteric, depending on the occasion. For the man, the wallet should be presented with unequivocal and natural authority - for his is the mastery of the generous understatement, at ease within the world of potential which is the man's relation to the world of money. His capital is the seed from which his intelligence of desire might prosper and settle in the world of material. In an air of cool confidence, perhaps with trace of metered swagger, the wallet can be produced and the gesture of exchange performed with a studied nonchalance - more than just a monetary exchange, he enacts a transaction in language. Cool, at ease, like it's no big deal, completely natural - that's the ticket, good technique. His regard for the definition and satisfaction of his/her pleasure should appear paramount, but his/her actions are necessarily formed by an overriding vision - the longterm view by which s/he demonstrates his eye for the future. Women respect a man who can flash a bit about, 'cos baby there's more where that came from, but the promise of his language must indicate a level of management. The wallet is safely returned to the secure pocket, setting the scene for a tactful change in the topic of conversation.

In closing, the historical dispossession of the category "woman" in the ideologies of wealth informs the resonant space of meaning in the snap that purses make.

The worlds of money

My mother is a stranger to the wider worlds of money; her limit is the purse and a passbook. She has practised a day by day economics, hand to mouth, week by week, year after year. When I gazed up sometimes at the Robinson's Trade Routes Map of the World which hung in the classroom I saw countries in terms of two-dimensional spatial relationships and nominal political boundaries, not a

world of financial processes. I found both the colours used to represent certain countries, and the names given to certain places, of specific interest. The green of Angola, for example, or the yellow of France. The name Vladivostok. Don't ask me why. The world presented itself as a chaotic order of facts from which one was naturally excluded, save for one's effort in quests of attaining knowledge. As a result my formative worldview afforded neither perception or understanding of, nor interest in, the world of economic relations. Only later did the world appear to comprise a complex order of chaotic processes, as represented in the world of political economy. Possession is theft etcetera. There is no there there, and there is no going back.

Rude

But mother was very good on manners. If she taught me one thing about good manners it was one: Never stare inside a lady's purse, and two: If you can't say something nice, say nothing at all.

Then again, as a child I used to think of my mother as an old bag whenever I didn't prevail.

Art like this [the object of photography]

Like the boxes of old purses and handbags in the opportunity shop, there is a slightly forlorn quality in the ambience which surrounds the readymade object repositioned temporarily in works of art. Something shifts in its objectness, in the structures of value it engages as object. These purses, sealed in metallic green hammer-finish toolbox paint, become purses no more, but each comes singularly to represent the category all purses, while in their proliferation each suggests its place in the orders of individuality and difference. They are no longer the objects they are, but objects apart. Yet they are objects now more than ever, nothing more, and evoke a space for contemplation and meaning through reference to everything that they were and are not, and to all that they are and were never. The surface coating of paint completes the passage of their fall - sealing their disengagement from a continuity of relation as object/commodity, and effecting their entry to another realm, whereby their discontinuity could enable a viewer to head off in directions probably never imagined.

Like museum specimens, the factual chronology of their demise has been arrested. Like works of art, they create an auratic field which attends upon their presence, a silent separation from the viewing conditions of the everyday, a separation which draws attention in and away from their object selves. The surface of paint upon these handbags recalls the surface of a photograph - which appears at once transparent and opaque, representing the object by replacing it with an image of an object. One can read only that which appears at the surface - unless one is prepared to read further, deeper, around, or beside that which appears at the surface. That which appears in all the depths of history is often lost at the surface.

Readymade history

The readymade reflects historically upon the structural basis of art and commodity, this transformation being achieved through a shift in institutional value and the functionality of the object. The object becomes the thing itself, in all its social material, except in the function it had when such things were less in focus. A meta-object, metaphoric object, objective metaphor. A form and a content. An object which has, in effect, become image.

Big Glossy Photos

The pervasiveness of the post-photographic surface, for a culture of saturation exposure in a continuum of fragmented imagery, brings a fall of the photographic to an ascendent spectacle of image. What is described as the aura of the photograph - evident when photographic prints surface as objects [art] or documents [not art] of scrutiny and contemplation in directed viewing contexts like gallery exhibitions - has arguably disappeared from our habitual relations with the reproduced image. We no longer see the photographic unless it is specifically brought to attention - the prevalence of the post-photographic, the reproduction of photographic imagery, promotes direct identification and entry into the cultural ambience surrounding that which is signified in image. The work and materiality of the photographic production, the fact of its constructedness, becomes remote if visible on the surface at all. Yet the spectacle's deposition, the photographic image, is held to confirm that image, in train with the desires it drives, the values it identifies, and the promise it appears to represent, can surface as a tangible, material unity - even as image continually refers elsewhere. Image is always deferred, for its form is not of material, but of a representational

economy involved in the circulation and transaction processes of the apparent/ immaterial - ideas, associations, all relations in flux.

What becomes visible at the photographic surface is not the veracity of the image possessed as a unity in separation from desire, its supplement in satisfaction of desire brought in looking, but a transient glimpse of one's specific alienation before the generalisation of image.

All Photos

There are some who speak of the spectacular economy of the image as commodity, and others who consider the currency of image as the categoric performance of a language system. On the one hand the photograph cannot express the condition of the image, but describe only the conditions associated with its loss - as the loss of something unable to be possessed in the first place. Every photographic frame which will ever be made is both anticipated as a potential outcome attendant upon the inexhaustible finite resources of photographic subject matter and the impossibility of achieving a definitive view through photographic technologies. On the other hand, the photograph exists as the deposition of representational languages, with opportunity for the viewer to access entry to a complexity of discourses and subject positionings.

It's like she made them herself at home

Art like this, wall plaques of received values, resonant words, and domestic materials, constructed of homemade means, is at socio-aesthetic odds with the pristine seamlessness of the corporate. Its ironic celebration is not of commodity or materiality but of use value, of re-use value. It describes the impossibility of a view sublime, a vista of allusion to the unrepresentable, through the displayed failures of representation. Together with the lightbox images, which counterpoint the wall plaques through convergence with the slick disengagement of the post-object aesthetic found in contemporary commodity advertising, the series as a whole challenges the seamlessness of category - Art, Woman, Image, Work, Memory, Commodity, Conceptualism, Abstraction, Identity, Accessory, Surface, Beauty, Value, and so on - in ways that are complex in their critical actions and loadings of reference.

No place of roses

Thirty three, and still no future. I loathe the stilted smell of institutions. Schools. Museums. Offices. Banks. Newspaper offices. Shopping malls. Relationships. A government of imbeciles. In my memory the stench of business is insidious, a thick air like stale breath, papers and inks, plastics, aromatic tobacco, the odour of the inflexible, the unaccommodating chairs all uncomfortable and tables, once too large, now too small. The industrial chemicals used to clean and sanitise such places only heightens awareness of what it is they seek to conceal. As a child I would visit my grandfather's office, which smelled like London would smell when I arrived there 27 years later. Mostly I would get in the way.

The fantasy behind the category <essence>

The fantasy behind the category "woman", as the dominant fetish of our culture, inhabits even the stillness of objects. To consider the silent particularity of an object is to deny and involve its associations and affiliations, its relations within a personalised world of its social engagement, its functions and manner of performance, its materiality of form and construction, and also that thing it is - the materialisation of its intrinsic nature, its essence; that which is beautiful/quiet and characterises all its moments and manifestations; its spirit, that which drives its appearance and finds form in its natural material. The essential carries the gesture of the imperative. Essence as emanation evokes some presumed constant of origin, yet appears at the surface only as a presence of fantasy, apparitional, an absence after all. In this, the category "essence" would seem at odds with our culturalised belief in the category "surface" if it didn't function as its alibi. The point at which "category" and "essence" collude to appear unequivocal is the ascendant moment of representation.

Chairs

Absent. Present.

Memorial [Canberra]

Huge honour rolls, vast lists of names represent those who died in military conflict. To stand beneath walls of names is to experience contradictions of identity in a human scale torn between the meditations of silent humility and senseless politics, between respect for human life and contempt for its

organisation. As I stand so small before the classical architecture of state, I spit against the wind and taste my own revulsion, yet I'm strangely moved to the point of confusion. I don't know. The formal categories of mixed emotion seem so inadequate. I experience a mix of emotion described in the category "I decided to walk and climbed to the top of the hill." If the memorial had a bar, it'd move a lot of beer.

Art & Text & Analysis

Rene Magritte's works, with their windows onto the disjunctions of language and image, opening upon what has been named the unconscious, are frequent companions to the published works of psychoanalysis and philosophy. Perhaps any product-name-and-image advertisement would do as well. The project of billboard graffiti against advertisements exploiting representation of the female could be a thoughtful starting point. There's a billboard ad near my workplace which carries an ad for lingerie displaying a bosomy lingerie-clad woman in close proximity to a phallic lily and the text - No Pinching. No Rubbing. No Squeezing. It was quickly covered with a graffiti message on the politics of representation, which was replaced a day later with a new poster that was promptly splattered with a paint bomb. I suggest these four frames for the cover of the next paperback edition of *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

Chairs [not the same]

Auditoriums [facing the same way]. First Class. Reserved. Formal. Casual. Executive [the head of the table, facing away from the window]. Nostalgic. Silent. Conventional. Conditional. Functional. Comfortable. Convertible. Musical. Unfashionable. Instructive [seat of learning]. Present. Electric. Ordered. Sorted. Missing. Out of place. Strategic. Compliant. Versatile. Adaptable. Conversational. Modern. Pump-up adjustable. Historic. Evocative. Established. The penance of hard pews. Ergonomic. Collapsible investment. Interchangeable. Specific. All chairs. The high stool. Ex-government recliner easychairs. Leather. Art chairs. Waiting room chairs. Recognisable. Permanent home office. Synthetic diningroom. Work. Leisure. Uninviting. Public domain. Hard wearing. Welcoming outdoor. Practical armchairs. Economy Class. Facing the wrong way. Exclusive. Symbolic. Absurd. Appropriate. Well-earned. Director. High-status. Popular. Melbourne's best mix of '50s/'60s/'70s Classics. Designer. Brand-name quality. Broken. Original. Definitive model replica. Secretarial. Opulent. Hierarchical. The

Aussie throne. The long drop. Seats of power. Seat of neglect. Miniatures. Antique. Period. Art Deco. Wooden. Man-made. Named. These. Others.

No chairs.

The Woman in the Ad

The uncertainty of the female subjectivity. Feminine Desire = the hole in the theory of psychoanalysis = the strategic unconsciousness = to speak her name gives no answers = mystery = difference = difficult = namelessness = structure = enforcement = silence = denial = death. I am never sure of my place = You know who you are.

The difference between purses and chairs

Purses, personal, personalised - uniquely the domain of one.

Chairs are conditional. Even personal chairs can be taken by another. This is particularly so of corporate chairs. A corporate chair can either outlive its occupant, or is replaced by a different chair in office refurbishment accompanying a change of style in corporate image or management regime. In some boardrooms, the Chair has been part of the furniture for generations, while chairmen come and go. In others, the opposite occurs.

Seat of Power

The person for the chair is the man for the job. The incumbent is the suit in the chair, impermanent, political, dispensable. The chair absorbs the impression of every asshole that has held its tenure, yet retains its shape. It's hard to leave a mark.

Glimmers of abstraction

The worlds of post-object commodity advertising assemble around the points of banality which are routinely identified in the organisation of everyday life. Their object is the perpetuation and direction of desire in a specific mass audience, located by design and transacted by means of seemingly individual responses which must appear as complete in themselves, natural, self-defined. The means by which this vista of desire is imaged is not through the appearance of any object in its representation as discrete entity [a unity, an object apart], which

immediately brings about a reduction of the spectacle's insatiable production of possibilities to the banality of what is already possessed. Its imaging proceeds through representation of the boundless relational abstraction which is the material promise of consumer culture. It constructs firstly as an ambience, a enveloping world of free-floating association where the referential attachment and value of things is constant [in their interchangeability] and a deep space of endless enclosure [desire being defined within its shifting parameters, its content being all-consuming, and its subject located as that which is ever-deferred]. Its realities can only be glimpsed at the surface.

Anyone who has looked at contemporary magazine advertising may or may not have noticed this post-object sensibility in pictorial practices typified by the disjunctive relations between image and referent. Perhaps the product they most accurately represent is our culturalised desire for possession of image.

The Real of Abstraction

Here with lightbox images of disengaged fragments of magazine advertising and the stark forms of catalogue office chairs, there is a play of heavy irony upon the slippery glow of transient surfaces and the social organisation of their consumption and address. The real of abstraction becomes visible as the Object a of the representational image culture. These images construct received representations of totality, as distantly inclusive ambient spectacle whose operative means include the blurring of objective distinction with the subjective insistence of category.

In the post-photographic surface, the space established between the flooded intensities of glimmering light and the saturations of deep indigo black contains all points of identification and all points of difference in a unified surface which anticipates image.

Light and Heavy

Installation in a gallery - whose white-walled expanses open spaces through which the non-self may empty and wander in mute meditation. To move in a space whose architectural promise is to focus the direction of attention, to obliterate all distraction, to bring certain things to a prominence of view, to allow the gesture of transgression to be experienced as a moment apart, before final return to an order of legality.

In this place of presentation, certain art becomes too heavy for its moorings and threatens to float away. Ambience precedes the weighted logic of material, spreading to embrace even the farthestmost corners in a quiet hermetic totality, as if it had always anticipated the specificity of each inclusive moment. The specific becomes visible, to disappear in the general.

Here, as anywhere, the slippery irony of image rests so hard-set upon our view, so intense and unreal, yet so delicate, transient, so light of touch that it could vanish or disintegrate before even the falling blink of an eyelid. Here, as anywhere, the finest mark of artistic rendering begins to yawn down with the expressed weight of sheer labor and focus of effort, transforming into slogans or jingles under our faintest passing scrutiny. Our burdens of deposition, the solid and immovable weights of obstacle, bound heavy to gravities of the personal and cultural, are sometimes lighter than the thoughts which hold them in train.



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