

Encounters with an Art-Thing

Jane Bennett, January 16, 2014

The Dinner

In the summer of 2012, I received an email from Elka Krajewska, a Polish-born artist living in New York City (www.elka.net) inviting me, a stranger, to a dinner in lower Manhattan. Its purpose was to discuss a small archive that Krajewska had recently acquired from AXA Art Insurance Corporation. The archive consisted of artworks that had once circulated in museums, galleries, or the art market, but had been broken or otherwise damaged (often in transport) such that AXA had deemed each a "total loss." Trucks, boxcutters, human error, water, mold, fire, and gravity all were important agents here. Once the owners of the insurance policies had been paid, these demoted objects (for example, a torn 1850 oil painting by Alexandre Dubuisson, bits and pieces of a Jeff Koons balloon dog) were stored in a warehouse, until some of them were donated to Krajewska under the auspices of her Salvage Art Institute.



Krajewska was now organizing a dinner, a collection of people to explore questions raised by a collection of things.¹ What was this archive and what could be done with it? I attended and spent a fascinating, hot summer evening in the company of a long wooden table, candles, tasty stews and breads, and people who practiced video-art, photography, art curation, poetry, environmental psychology, intellectual property law, art conservation, architecture, lighting design, artbook publishing, or art history. I was invited because I had written *Vibrant Matter*, a philosophical exploration of the strange agency by which "inanimate" things somehow produced real effects on and in living things. Was it possible, the book asked in dialogue with Spinoza, Kant, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the vitalists Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch, and Bruno Latour, to talk about an object-effectivity that was not fully explicable in either mechanistic terms or terms of the investments or projections of their human designers, users, or interpreters?

Much of the discussion that night circled around the question of what the archive of salvaged art *was*. Each of the items was once an artistic commodity, but what was it now that it had no market value? Had it become junk or trash, or did it (and to what extent) remain art by virtue of its distinguished provenance or the quality of its still discernible design? Was it best described as a "demoted object" in order to mark its place in a social hierarchy? Was it mere stuff as long as it was doomed to live out its existence in a dark warehouse, but again art once the possibility of its exhibition re-emerged? The items were the legal property of the Salvage Art Institute (Krajewska had the proper documents), but would the original artists

¹I am grateful to the others on the guest list: Eileen Myles, Martha Buskirk, Alexander Dumbadze, Sonia K. Katyal, Robin Reisenfeld, Virginia Rutledge, Barbara Schroeder, Felicity Scott, Linnaea Tillett, and Jeffrey Stucker. Special thanks to Elka Krajewska and Bill Connolly for their contributions to this essay.

make a (moral? political? aesthetic?) claim upon them if the Institute were to exhibit them publicly? (In November of that year, such an exhibition, "No Longer Art: Salvage Art Institute," was staged at the Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation.)

In addition to questions concerning the status of the items and what *we could do with them*, some at the table, including me, groped for a less anthropocentric approach. *What would they do to us?* What was their efficacy or affectivity? Could we understand our encounter with them more "horizontally," as an engagement between various material bodies and forces, each of which would re-form the others and be re-formed as a result of the exposure? How might these items be producing effects *in the flesh on our flesh* -- as active participants in body-to-body encounters? Clearly, some of the power "of" these items would be a function of the auratic, artistic, or commodity residue still clinging to them, a function, in other words, of human sensibility, imagination, pragmatic need, greed, etc. But it seemed to me that the normal (social constructivist, Marxist, historicist) ways of acknowledging the presence of (human) culture, politics, and economics in the artwork had its limits. It tended, for example, to blunt our ability to detect that extra something provided by the presence and posture of the thing, that affecting oomph issuing from its shapes, colors, textures, material composition -- from the way it inhabits space.² To try to hone in on *that* might afford us a

² Matt Edgeworth makes a similar point about the archaeological object: "an archaeological site is a space where artefacts and structures from other times and places break out into the open... [Our] ideas and models can influence what is perceived, to be sure, but there is also *something that pushes through beyond the boundaries of our social milieu*, which our models of reality are forced to assimilate. Theories are applied to shape the evidence that emerges, but there is the corresponding emergence of matter that resists and re-shapes" us and our ideas." (77, emphasis added) See Matt Edgeworth, "Follow the Cut, Follow the Rhythm, Follow the Material," *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2012, 76-92.

better sense of the new postures, shapes, or comportments that we would be taking on in our engagement with these (now avowedly active) things -- things "which have a kind of directionality to them, which orientate the body, which point us in this way or that, and which to a certain extent must be followed."³

My tentative efforts to inject such a perspective into the conversation that night were met with some nods, but also with a warning against slipping back into a formalism with its conservative elision of the socio-economic context of artistic production. Art criticism, I was told, had already gone past that. My knowledge of schools of art criticism is still rather rudimentary; I knew only that while I did seek to adjust the distribution of attention more toward the thing than our constructions of it, "formalism" was not really the point.⁴ I was looking for an orientation that would focus on the powers at work in the encounter between this archive and us, using power in Spinoza's sense of the capacity to affect (to make a difference upon other bodies) and to be affected (to be receptive to the affections of other bodies).

Conative Bodies

It is helpful at this point to make more explicit the ontological imaginary within which this orientation toward the salvaged art had begun to emerge for me. I had brought to the

³Edgeworth, 78. See also Tom Yarrow, "Artefactual Persons: Relational Capacities of Persons and Things in Excavation," *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2003, 65-73: "the material properties of the site act to modify the thought and actions of the people who excavate them."(71)

⁴I participated in a roundtable discussion at the opening of the Columbia University exhibition of the archive: "No Longer Art: Salvage Art Institute." My remarks tried to elide the framework of cultural criticism in the hopes of throwing into relief the "thing-power" of these damaged goods. The idea was to start with the assumption that material bodies, both human and nonhuman, produce material effects in excess of the symbolic ones they also bear.

dinner a Spinoza-inspired picture of a universe of "conative" bodies, human and nonhuman, that are continually encountering (impacting and receiving impacts from) each other. Deleuze describes Spinoza's notion of *conatus* thus: "A simple body's conatus can only be the effort to preserve the state to which it has been determined; and a composite body's conatus only the effort to preserve the relation of movement and rest that defines it, that is, to maintain constantly renewed parts in the relation that defines its existence."⁵ This is not a world divided into active subjects and useful, decorative, or commodified objects, but of bodies (human and nonhuman) striving to enhance their power of activity by forming alliances with other bodies.⁶ Spinoza speaks of *the capacity to affect and be affected*, a power intrinsic to all bodies and linked to the generative power of Nature.⁷ In the play of what Lambros Malafouris calls "material engagement," sometimes a nonhuman thing will become an extension of a human body and sometimes vice versa: "There are no fixed agentic roles in this game," but a continuous jockeying for "a 'maximum grip.'"⁸

⁵Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, Zone Books, 1992, 229-230.

⁶This was a monism of sorts, but one that is, as Deleuze puts it, "ontologically one, formally diverse." (Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin, Zone Books, 1992, p. 67.) Or, as Michel Serres says in *The Birth of Physics*, the universe is a turbulent, immanent field in which various and variable materialities collide, congeal, morph, evolve, and disintegrate. This might be called a "protean monism."

⁷Dorothy Kwek explains: "Spinoza's conception of power is rooted in his vision of Nature.... Spinoza repudiates the popular and philosophical-theological insistence on an omnipotent Godhead acting 'by pleasure or will' on a 'fallen' world (E1 Appendix; G/II/77)... Spinoza's explosive disjunctive, *Deus, sive Natura* (E4 Preface; G/II/207/1) — God, or Nature— identifies God with Nature. But it is Nature that comes out the triumphant term, and it is a Nature strange, pulsing with infinite energy, force, and life... Nature is not merely a sum of all finite realities or things. Nature is first and foremost a creative and generative power; it expresses, rather than sanctions; it produces, rather than forbids. The power of Nature expresses itself as finite realities (*modus*) and things (*res*) infinitely generating and (re)producing other finite realities and things (E1p28 and dem.)" (Dorothy Kwek, "Power and the Multitude: A Spinozist View," *Political Theory*, forthcoming 2014.)

⁸ Lambros Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind*, MIT 2013, 147. Malafouris pursues a project close to but not identical to my own. He is interested in developing a *theory of cognition* as a "synergistic process by which, out of

The idea that organic bodies such as our own strive to affect things (making them into food, tools, resources) in order to enhance our health and strength is uncontroversial; but it requires a special effort to entertain the notion that other entities *too*, as participants in larger assemblages and processes, *engage in some analog of striving*. William Connolly, drawing upon the philosophy of Whitehead, speaks in this regard of "searching" activities and of the "real creativity" of "actual entities."⁹ A second idea that requires little defense is that the health and strength of an animate body requires making a mark upon or affecting other bodies; but it takes a special effort to entertain the notion that my power could be enhanced by a *receptivity* to the affections of other bodies, including inanimate ones.

What I am calling for, then, is the endeavor to sound some minor chords in our thinking and sensibility: to approach the archive of damaged art with attentiveness to the ways *things* act upon and change us (while also, of course, being affected by our acts of discussion, exhibition, etc) and to the ways in which the human mind-body is susceptible to the affections endeavored by things. These affections are transfers of energy from one site to another, and insofar as one of the effects of this process can be the emergence of "meaning," these transports of affections might also qualify as a kind of semiosis.¹⁰

brains, bodies, and things, mind emerges." (17) Cognition, from his "material engagement" approach "is not simply what happens inside a brain" but also "what happens in the interaction between a brain and a thing." (67)

⁹ "... the universe is composed of 'actual entities' of innumerable types which help to set preconditions for new events. An actual entity is any formation that has some tendency toward self-maintenance, such as, differentially, a rock, a cell, a tornado... Creativity is not the simple product of an agent or subject. Rather it is imbedded in processes that to varying degrees go through periods of ... teleodynamic searches....The creative processes, at its most active, occurs in teleodynamic searches within and between entities whose relative equilibrium has been disturbed, and it draws upon the noise within and entanglements between entities." (William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, Duke 2013, 156)

¹⁰This is a theme developed in Malafouris, who distinguishes between a "material" and a "linguistic" sign, and warns against assimilating *material* semiosis to a linguistic model of "representation." (94) "Things," says

Animacy

In the late 1990's, I, along with many others, was captivated by a popular television ad in the U.S. for GAP khaki pants. In a large open white space, twenty or so young people in beige trousers danced the jitterbug with great exuberance. The tune was Louis Prima's "Jump, Jive and Wail." Are the pants animated by the flesh of the dancers or were the dancers animated by the clothing? The locus of vitality was unclear. But there was a strong presence of vital forces. A sense of the liveliness of the *fabric* was reinforced by the videographic de-animation of human flesh: at several points the camera would freeze the foreground dancer in mid-flight, turning him/her into stone or statue, and, as the music continued, it was now the room's turn to swing (thanks to the camera's 'stop and pan' technique). After that, the khaki-clad bodies, body-clad-khakis, and the white room returned to their default positions: the first as animate, the second as animated by human technology, and the third as a passive background for the animacies of the others.¹¹

That advertisement got me thinking about a liveliness or animacy *of matter*.¹² I like the notion of "animacy" as a way to think about vitality that is not dependent upon a dichotomy between organic life and inorganic matter. Animacy encourages us to parse out the several

Malafouris, "act most powerful at the non-discursive level, incorporating qualities (such as color, texture, and smell) that affect human cognition in ways that are rarely explicitly conceptualized." (95)

¹¹I give a more sustained reading of the GAP ad in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Princeton, 2001. The khakis are quintessential commodities: designed, manufactured, and sold for profit. But still, I argue, the ad reveals a strange *animacy* proper to the fabric, a liveliness not quite reducible to the social meanings (hip, cheap, young) of GAP clothing.

¹² Linked to consumerism and hyperconsumption. For a discussion of hyperconsumption and renewed interest in the power of things, see my "Powers of the Hoard," in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*, ed. Cohen, Punctum Press.

different aspects, elements, or registers of liveliness. I'd say that each materiality conveys a specific degree or kind of animacy, even if not all qualify under the biological definition of life.¹³

Many contemporary philosophers, following feminist, phenomenological, and "new materialist" paths, are today pursuing attempts to theorize this animacy in terms that are neither simply physiological nor simply psychological but both.¹⁴ It is beyond the scope of my essay to survey this rich and diverse literature. I want only to highlight the fact that the modern taboo against (anything approaching) animism functions both as a spur to that work and as an obstacle to it, to the emergence of a more robust vocabulary for marking material vibrancy and vitality. This taboo is increasingly rubbing up against modes of electronic and bioscientific technologies -- lively and responsive hand-held devices, electronic clouds, pharmaceutically-induced personalities¹⁵ -- whose materialities blur the line between organic

¹³See Mel Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, Duke, 2012, for a good discussion of the concept.

¹⁴As Bjørnar Olsen aptly summarizes, "The phenomenological approach to human perception implied two important insights: First, ... we are entangled beings fundamentally involved in networks of human and nonhuman beings. Second, we relate to the world not (only) as thinking subjects but also as bodily objects... Although the latter point may be ... more explicit in Merleau-Ponty's work than in Heidegger's, central to both philosophers was the attempt to break down the subject-object distinction implied in previous approaches to perception. As Merleau-Ponty's latest works suggest, the thingly aspect of our own being (our common 'fabric' as 'flesh') is essential for our integration with the world. The ability to touch and be touched, to see and be seen, to act upon things while at the same time being acted upon by them, *can only happen if there is some kinship, 'if my hand ... takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them.'* (Merleau-Ponty [*The Visible and the Invisible*,] 1968:133)." (Bjørnar Olsen, *In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2010, 67, emphasis added.)

¹⁵On the last, see Mary Lou Jepsen, "Bringing back my real self with hormones," *New York Times Magazine*, November 23, 2013 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/24/opinion/sunday/bringing-back-my-real-self-with-hormones.html>.

and inorganic. Some say that an neo-animism is underway in American culture, a thesis explored by Achille Mbembe in recent public lectures.¹⁶

Hyperkulturemia

People are affected by objects everyday. In a recent *Harper's Magazine* Ben Lerner invokes the term "hyperkulturemia" to describe an extreme version of this event. Lerner is concerned primarily with the relationship between art and commodification, and with the question of what happens to the market value of famous pieces that have been in some public way vandalized. He mentions the Salvage Art Institute to applaud its experimental "encounter [with] an object freed from the market" and its attempts to imagine "art outside of capitalism."¹⁷ Drawing upon the work of the Italian psychiatrist Graziella Magherini, Lerner defines hyperkulturemia (also known as Stendhal's syndrome or Florence syndrome) as "a psychosomatic condition in which museum-goers are overwhelmed by the presence of great art, resulting in a range of responses: breathlessness, panic, fainting, paranoia, disorientation."¹⁸

Hyperkulturemia, a term that expresses some dark or latent sense of the animacy of the art-object, appears in the context of Lerner's discussion of what motivates those who vandalize art. Was, Lerner wonders, the defacement of a Barnett Newman piece due to the fact that the

¹⁶ Mbembe's lectures are discussed by John Drabinski at <http://jdrabinski.wordpress.com/2013/12/06/mbembe-democracy-animism/#comments>.

¹⁷ Ben Lerner, "Damage Control: The Modern Art World's Tyranny of Price," *Harper's Magazine*, December 2013, p. 49.

¹⁸ Lerner, p.46.

vandal was "so struck by the work that he had to strike back, just as, in 2007, a thirty-year-old woman ... claimed to be so transported by a white panel of Cy Twombly's triptych *Phaedrus* that she spontaneously kissed it, smearing it with red lipstick?"¹⁹ Were some of the vandals as much victims of the force of the art-objects as they were perpetrators of a crime?

Lerner is skeptical. And indeed, the term "hyperkulturemia" itself raises the spectre of material agency (of an artwork that "strikes" and "transports") only to dispel it by placing the encounter within the framework of human pathology. It opens but then closes the possibility of an animacy whose existence is not exhausted by a malfunctioning system of human sense-perception, cognition, and imagination. The museum-goer's loss of consciousness thus ultimately appears, (perhaps reassuringly, in its maintenance of anthropocentrism) as a hyper-active human receptivity to human culture, an effect of the interaction between one individual's body-mind relays operating in a larger cultural context that idealizes great European art.²⁰ Indeed, Lerner's eye is trained (almost) exclusively on the powers of human individuals within a capitalist culture made by humans, with the result that the art object appears as essentially *our instrument*: we commodify it or, under exceptional circumstances, we free it from the reign of commodification, and in either case whatever work the thing itself is performing makes (almost) no appearance. Again, I say "almost" because Lerner's very

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰Of course, an *ideological* disposition is in play here, but not only that. For a good discussion of the methodological limitations of reducing "the complex network of intereactions that constitute a given socio-technical trajectory to a mental template or ideological disposition," see Malafouris, 126 (and chapter 6 in general). And as Matt Edgeworth notes, "acknowledging the shaping power of material things does not imply a denial of cultural diversity" in the reception of objects. "Rather, it reminds us that the many and diverse cultural universes are part of the same diverse and changing material world, not different worlds." Edgeworth here invokes the "protean monism" mentioned above in my note #6. (Matt Edgeworth, "Reply to comments from Åsa Berggren, Alfredo González-Ruibal, Tim Ingold, Gavin Lucas, Robin Skeates and Christopher Witmore," *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2012, 107-114.

inclusion of the term hyperkulturemia introduces into the story a shadowy role for a thing's contribution to the affectivity of the encounter.

The theme of a culturally-constructed psycho-somatic illness obeys the taboo against animism. But, as already noted, it also thus tends, both at the register of theory and in the regime of the sensible, to exaggerate the scope and efficacy of human agency and to minimize that of nonhuman bodies. Can we offer another account of the event and uncover a different etiology of its affectivity, one which lingers with the sense/intuition that a composition of colors, shapes, textures, smells, and sounds hanging on a wall could make an actual contribution to a swoon? Such an account would have to interrupt or forestall the urge to foreground differences between animate and inanimate, in order to feel what is shared by persons and things. Both sets are conative bodies, sometimes sympathetic to each other such that they form a complex body or assemblage and sometimes not -- but always affecting and being affected. The humans articulating this account would have to explore the taking on of new shapes for the "self." They would have to move out of the postures of (normal or pathological) subjectivity and try to inhabit something of the lived space of the artwork. From the (slower? less use-oriented?) temporality proper to that place, hyperkulturemia might feel like a healthy expression of material animacy. In what follows, I will try to enact such a responsiveness to that which emanates, focusing it around one particular encounter between human and nonhuman bodies.

Corpse, Woman, Thrill

At an early stage in the founding of the Salvage Art Institute, Krajewska encounters this

particular object:

When I arrived at an art conservation studio and saw 'the corpse': smears and clumps of chocolate stuck to its plexibox container and irregularly broken pieces accumulated at the bottom edge I thought I could simply take it. I was thrilled by its useless, demoted state, its orphan stance, its loss of ambition and almost erotic, glaring nakedness. But soon I found out I could not take it, and that though worthless it now belonged to the insurance company who as its new owner had right to its future.²¹

An effect -- a thrill passing between bodies -- has been produced, but how? Krajewska's account is a rich text whose close reading can, I think, reveal something about the effectivity of the cluster of materials present. The thrill-effect is associated with a set of characteristics the object is said to possess: this set includes not only what might be called physical traits (clumpiness, irregularity of shape, brokenness), and not only traits that betoken the human value placed upon the object (uselessness, demotion, orphanhood, worthlessness), but also traits ordinarily assigned only to moral agents (lack of ambition, erotic nudity). These latter carry a moral charge, implying some kind of choice or power over the trajectory of the body's movements. While some might say that Krawjewska's account is a simple instance of the "the pathetic fallacy" (the ascription of human characteristic to inanimate objects), I would say that her anthropomorphic language has the effect of sharpening our capacity to detect the presence and powers of materials. It exposes a *circuit* of "pathos" between different kinds of bodies, which bridges the gap between self and object.²²

²¹*No Longer Art*, Preface (March 16, 2011), Dancing Foxes Press, forthcoming.

²²I have argued elsewhere that a bit of anthropomorphism can catalyze a sensibility that discerns a world not of subjects and objects but of "variously composed materialities that form confederations." Anthropomorphism can reveal "similarities across categorical divides and [light] up structural parallels between material forms in 'nature' and those in 'culture.'" (*Vibrant Matter*, Duke 2010, 79) Malafouris offers this defense of anthropomorphism: "Anthropocentrism is bad intellectual habit... that we need to overcome. Anthropomorphism is a biological necessity of the human condition that we need to embrace, or else we run a constant risk of removing the human subject from the center of the social universe only to place this subject in a god-like position on top and outside of it." (131)

The gap shrinks further, however, if we were to acknowledge what Krajewska implies: not only can things participate in some traits of persons but persons have some of the qualities of things. Humans share with things, for example, a susceptibility to being broken, smeared, and useless. I will return to this theme of the human "it" later. But first, let me clarify what I mean by "thing" and how it differs from an object, for in crafting an alternative to the story of hyperkulturemia, terminology matters.

To speak, as Krajewska does, of "demotion" or the demoted object is to emphasize the power of humans to turn (nonhuman) things into useful, ranked objects. The demoted object is something defined in terms of its recent *change of status*, from more esteemed to less, from higher rank to lower. The demoted object is, in other words, the subject of a human judgment, a body judged wanting or defective in relation to a normative threshold or standard. Insofar as the object retains the aura of its former value, it remains largely a for-us. But something really interesting happens when the demotion goes all the way, when the object falls so low, so below the standard as to be rendered irredeemable or, in the language of the insurance industry, a "total loss." What happens is that it becomes released from the tyranny of judgment -- becomes, in my terminology, a *thing*. The radically demoted object becomes the worthless orphan, who, appearing on the scene without external value or pedigree, floats on the surface of context and bobs over and shrugs off the grasp of established norms and judgments.²³ As thing it paradoxically rises to a new status, that of a more active party in encounters. It becomes a body among bodies with the capacity to affect and be affected. And

²³In the wake of this bob (hiccup?) or shrug, a new set of values might emerge. What would it feel like to linger in that precarious and dangerous space of the hiccup? Would it be thrilling or more like Epicurean ataraxy?

we now become more sensitive to real forces that previously operated below the threshold of reflective attention. One could say that it becomes a *fetish*, in the sense of things that "operate as causative agents in their own right rather than for what they might stand for -- as with signifiers."²⁴

Let us return now to Krajewska's irregular, broken, useless, demoted, orphaned, ambitionless, naked, and worthless "corpse." The thing is the reverse image of normal subjectivity in entrepreneurial America: it is irregular, broken, useless, demoted, orphaned, ambitionless, naked -- in a word, worthless; a worthy I is a regular, whole person, useful, upwardly mobile, rooted in a family or at the very least family-friendly, ambitious, and carefully clad. The normal American is Promethean; the corpse is what Marcuse would call Orphic.²⁵ But of course it is very hard to be normal; it requires constant effort and maintenance.

Indeed, it seems to me that one condition of possibility of an "encounter" between person and thing, between the living flesh of Krajewska and the corpse, is the subterranean presence of certain material affinities between them. "Down" there in an underworld of Hades or Elysium, or all "around" us as a Deleuzean swarm of virtualities, or deep "inside" as an unconscious that nevertheless makes itself felt as uncanniness, things harbor animacies and persons enclose a rich vein of active thing-ness. Malafouris, invoking the anthropologist Alfred Gell, speaks here of a "fluid dynamic between 'agents' and 'patients' as states to be acquired in

²⁴Malafouris, 133-34.

²⁵ "If Prometheus is the culture-hero of toil, productivity, and progress ..., then Orpheus and Narcissus ... stand for a very different reality... [T]heirs is the image of joy, fulfillment; the voice which does not command but sings; the gesture which offers and receives; the deed which is peace and ends the labor of conquest; the liberation from time..." (Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 162.)

practice and not as *a priori* categorical positions.... The states of agent and patient [are] ... ontological moments or ingredients that persons and things share."²⁶

That vein of thinginess can manifest as a recalcitrant or headstrong materiality that both enables and chafes against, overflows, or even break the mold of subjectivity into which most of us daily labor to cram it. What can come to the fore for the human in an intimate encounter with certain art-things is what Katrin Pahl describes as the "utter banality of the common predicament of subjectivity" wherein "we all have to perform the emotional [and physical] labor of covering over the paradoxes of what it means to be a subject."²⁷ In the face of the artwork, we can become temporarily relieved of the burden of normal subjectivity, of the strenuous effort and bent-back posture of the autonomous agent, we can relax into and inhabit more fully the homely shape of thinghood.²⁸ This is part of the thrill of aesthetic experience, an affect that may become intensified as the art-object approaches full demotion.

Krajewska's corpse has no use, no ambition, no heritage. This stuff has no future to look forward to; the orphaned body itself has no past to which to appeal. But it is also a positivity: it is the shape of the *present as such*, an a-futural a-historical temporality-spatiality of just-here-just-now.²⁹ The broken, non-striving orphan is oriented only to the site at hand;

²⁶Malafouris, 149.

²⁷ Katrin Pahl, "Kleist's Queer Humor," Conference on The Aesthetics of Bildung, Johns Hopkins University, Fall 2012.

²⁸ It is worth noting that the "almost erotic" quality of the thrill seems dependent upon the relatively short duration of one's inhabitation of this object-like posture, for when I encounter profound and enduring uselessness, demotion, orphanhood, and ambitionlessness in a brother with schizophrenia or a friend severely depressed, the effect is not contentment but profound sadness, which may share the intensity but not the energizing quality of a thrill.

²⁹ It is a shape that is both useless *and* capable of producing powerful effects, a combination that neoliberal capitalism tries to rule out in its attempt to turn everything into a useful means for making profit. Things that are

the pieces of a Jeff Koons balloon do not participate in the pursuit of any goal but exist "as is"; the canvas (of another item in the archive) sits quietly with the "mold blotches and spots [that] have left traces of grey and black."³⁰ "Take it or leave it/take me or leave me," they shrug. And in the encounter with the resolutely presentist body of the corpse, Krajewska's own latent thinghood -- and its presentism -- rise to the surface. She finds that her own tendency to *project forward* some future (for the object, for herself) is temporarily confounded or suspended, a hiatus that allows her to see, feel, smell what is there with an "almost erotic, glaring nakedness." Krajewska syncs with the (unwhole) shape, the (jagged) edge, the (unintended) color, the (ragged) texture or, in other words, her "aesthetic" capacities are heightened. Perhaps what she describes as a "thrill" is the jolt of restless, projective time grinding to a halt, in the midst of a new experience that is *conveyed* to her.

The thrill may also involve something like recognition. By this I mean an uncanny feeling of being in the presence of an aspect of oneself that is located in the body of another, or an acknowledgement of a kinship between bodies conventionally said to be unrelated. We have recently become more comfortable acknowledging something like this at work between humans and animals, as in the following text of an advertisement for a travel agency's tour of Rwanda:

Wake up to a golden glow in the sky, mountains unveiling their mists... [a] dramatic natural setting for what is perhaps the most ... thrilling wildlife experience to be had in Africa. Nothing can prepare the visitor for the impact of encountering a troop of gorillas munching bamboo... The sheer physical presence of an adult male silverback ... defies

both powerful in their ability to draw human attention and yet non-commodifiable are threats to the system. This was Walter Benjamin's point when we wrote of the art connoisseur "who dreamed that he was in a world... in which things were freed from the bondage of being useful." (Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 168-69.)

³⁰ Elka Krajewska and Mathew Wagstaffe, *No Longer Art: Narrative* (with authentic inventory), Book I, Salvage Art Institute, August 2012, p. 55.

... description. Nor are there words to convey the thrill of recognition attached to staring deep into the liquid brown eyes of these gentle giants, who share some 97% of their genes with humans.³¹

As we come to experience things less as objects and more as a kind of wild-life that exerts distinctive forces of its own in encounters, might we not also entertain the possibility of affective currents coursing between person and thing? One could then say that Krajewska recognized in the manner of the corpse a comportment that she herself had hitherto (albeit, more darkly, lightly, or vaguely) experienced. There was an eerie familiarity to it.

The shift from hyperkulturemia to affinities of kinship marks a shift in theoretical terminology that directs attention to what a thing can *do*. And one of the things that a thing can do is expose the presence of a thinginess *internal to* the human, to reveal the animistic presence of an "it" internal to the "I." The self that acknowledges its thingness is, paradoxically, a body with newly activated sensory capacities -- including the power to detect the presence of material agency. That activation can now filter into other aspects of our ethical lives, our relations with nature, our political sensibilities.

Animacy without Ambition

The unbroken, esteemed object is encrusted with a thick coat of cultural meanings; the gravely demoted object qua thing allows a glimpse into uncooked material power. The thing's "sheer physical presence" taps into the sheer physical presence of my body, as external thing and my thinginess resonate. One result is that my experience of what it is to be "human" is altered, recomposed. Like Krajewska's ambitionless corpse that affirms what its body, in need

³¹http://www.enticingtravel.com/enticing_rwanda.html

of no improvement, already is, I too assume the posture of "take me or leave me." This is less a passivity than a vibratory tranquility. The useless corpse has no desire to become otherwise than it is, and the human body plunges with it into a hiccup that suspends the progress of time and restlessness of desire. It becomes, for a moment, thrillingly content. Animacy without ambition: writing or giving an account can bring us to the threshold of such a state, but it takes the encounter itself to make it happen.