

*“If everyday life, for the most part, goes by unnoticed (even as it is being revolutionized) then the first task for attending to it will be to make it noticeable (B Highmore, Everyday Life and Cultural Theory, p23). With reference to the work of two or three artists, discuss the idea that an art of the everyday is a very particular form of noticing.”*

**Tobias Bradford**

**Seminar Tutor: Stephen Johnstone**

**Student ID: 33468604**

**Word count: 2830**

## YOU ALREADY KNOW THIS

You are home alone. There is nobody else around, and even though you are a rational person, the deep silence of an empty house feels subtly discomfoting. In an effort to circumvent this lingering feeling, you decide to put some music on. Although you are not directly paying attention to the content of the music itself, the mere presence of an active source of sound is helpful in the sense of filling the figurative void of complete silence. The familiarity of the song assists in grounding you within the present, and you feel at ease; less lonely, even. However, suddenly the CD skips. A small segment of the music gets caught in a loop. The singing is deconstructed into an incomprehensible snippet of repeating vocal sounds, detaching itself from its comforting familiarity and reminding you of the fact that what you are listening to is not a person, but a machine. The stereo - which acted as an emotional substitute for human companionship - reveals itself as a dead object. What you are hearing is the recording of a human voice caught up in an infinite loop through the mechanics of a broken cd-player. For some reason this is unsettling, and you are jolted out of your perceived expectations of what is real and caught in a suspended state of uncertainty. A sense of distrust overwhelms you. Is any object truly what it claims to be? In time, this feeling passes - only to occasionally reemerge at various points in the future - as if to remind you of the very fragile nature of the human consciousness.

It is during those moments of breaking the linearity of standard routines that even the most banal situation can evoke surprising responses, an insignificant word repeated one too many times suddenly loses its linguistic character and reveals itself as a strange collage of human vocal sounds. The incongruous feeling of sudden nostalgia towards a location in which you have never previously been. The sense of scale as experienced through gazing upwards at the facade of a high-rise building transforms into an overwhelming reminder of your own smallness. In these cases of altered perception, some observations of our surroundings which we generally tend to dismiss have found a path to re-emerge and reveal themselves from within the periphery of our own awareness. Like the ambient sound of an electric fan at night, it remains passive until something triggers into demanding our attention. Basic body functions like inhaling/exhaling are automatic until we take note of them, and suddenly they have become a manual task until eventually dissipating back into the unconscious. For some seemingly indiscernible reason, the linearity of conventional thought patterns breaks away from its predictable path - much like the skipping of a music CD - and in that suspended sense of attentiveness, uncertainty and presence, new ideas, emotions, fears and observations may form freely and without obstruction from what we routinely repress into the linear logic of what is generally considered as normalcy, eg. everyday life.

## SURREALISM, PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE EVERYDAY

Through its emergence, analysis of such has fostered a continuous relationship with cultural practice. Particularly so within the emergence of art from the 1900's onward, as with the writings of the post-war surrealists, who - inspired by the emerging field of psychoanalysis - began to consider the workings of the subconscious mind in relation to not only art practice, but every facet of our conscious being. The idea of practically applying the language of dreams and the subconscious as a way of re-examining the narrative of everyday experiences; particularly so as a form of opposition towards a supposed societal obsession with rationalism (Sheringham, 2013).

*"It was, apparently, by pure chance that a part of our mental world which we pretended not to be concerned with any longer -- and, in my opinion by far the most important part -- has been brought back to light. For this we must give thanks to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud."* (Breton, 1924)

An example of art which spawned from this school of Surrealist thought is Meret Oppenheim's *Object* (consisting of a cup, saucer and spoon covered in fur). This piece was made to be included in the first surrealist exhibition on objects. Through its use of conflicting materials, it subverts our established preconceptions regarding the character of everyday objects and surfaces (these being the fur and the cup). The cup acting as a symbol of the familiar domestic, while by contrast, the fur covering the surface of the cup alludes towards thoughts about animism, the organic, life and death and etc. Simply put, it has become something ambiguous in the sense that while it hints at something familiar, there is no established way of approaching it. Our standard expectations of the character of a cup has been subverted, and so it succeeds in triggering something akin to an irrational impulse. The material dichotomy of the object allows for the piece to be both intriguing, endearing and repulsive simultaneously.

By considering this through the lens of psychoanalysis we can begin to unravel how the contrasting emotions responses induced by a piece such as Oppenheim's cup may relate to our understanding of the subconscious.



*Oppenheim 'Object', 1936 (MoMA.org)*

The neurological process of translating sensory information into a language of tangible impressions is one that is essential for us to be able to navigate our surroundings. It is what forms the applicable logic of reality, i.e. rationalisation. We have, for example collectively agreed upon the understanding that everyday objects like desks, cups or stereos lack any perceptive abilities due to the fact that they are not sentient, but indeed; *dead objects*. However, through the eyes of an infant whose rational mind is still in development, these boundaries between *object* and *subject* are less distinguishable, and their experience of the world is thusly one that operates on a radically different logic. Before having fully developed an understanding of subjective experience and the *ego*, a young child may for example entertain the assumption that every object in their surroundings have sentient qualities, and are capable of emotion, intent and empathy, like themselves.

*“We recall that children, in their early games, make no sharp distinction between the animate and the inanimate, and that they are especially fond of treating their dolls as if they were alive”* (Freud, 1919)

This belief system can be described as a form of *childhood animism*: a primitive way of viewing the world which we generally tend to transcend through the process of becoming functional adults. However, it is proposed that within this transitory process, we do not completely disregard these early animistic ideas, but merely repress them. And so, although we generally do not have any particularly vivid memories from our formative infancy, some figments of this belief system may still materialize in adult life, thereby prompting sudden feelings of distrust or skepticism toward one’s established rules of logic (Freud, 2004). Particularly so in situations where we are confronted with things that are familiar and yet strange, eerie or ambiguous (the fur on the cup may direct thoughts toward organic bodies). Academics of this era refer to this realm of experience as “*unheimlich*”, which directly translates to “unhomely” although in English it is more commonly referred to as the “uncanny”. This terminology was first expressed by psychologist Ernst Jentsch, and later expanded upon on - and arguably popularized - by Sigmund Freud. By this point, it is clear that the ambiguous materiality of Oppenheim’s cup has qualities hinting at the intellectual uncertainty inherent in the uncanny. It is a subversive approach towards our perception of familiarity by means of triggering a reemergence of repressed memories of our cognitive past.

## THE STATUE, THE CORPSE AND THE SELF

Theories relating to the uncanny are still a rich source of inspiration for artistic practice, and there is an abundance of examples riddled throughout the historical progression of contemporary art. In 1994, the conceptual artist Mike Kelley organised the first edition of his exhibition simply titled *The Uncanny*, primarily exploring the cryptic relationship between human beings and life-sized figurative anthropomorphic sculpture, automata, wax figures and sentimental objects. In Freudian terms, the uncanny nature of these might be attributed to an instinctual fear of the doppelganger (the fear of repetition, or of the double as an imposter). In reference to the western relationship with statue-making from the perspective of Abrahamic rhetoric, i.e, the problematics of idolatry, which was seen as an attempt to challenge the divinity of god, it is suggested that this mentality can be linked with the irrational eeriness of encountering a realistic statue. The instinctual need to empathize with our surroundings leads to the subjectification of anthropomorphic objects, while the inherent lifelessness of such object inevitably reminds us of our own mortality (Kelley, 2004). In this sense, any realistic representation of the human form will become a symbolic representation of mortality . The sculpture is a corpse. Once again, as with Oppenheim's cup, the materiality of the art object triggers a subconscious, primal response. The resurfacing of repressed thoughts pierces through our established frame of reference, subverting our experience of normalcy and the everyday by reminding us of the rather existentialist notion of our bodies as objects and the inevitability of eventual death.



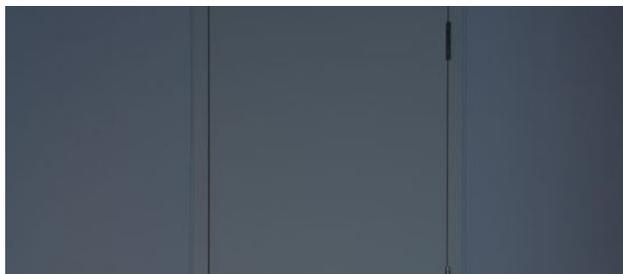
*“The aura of death surrounds statues. The Origin of sculpture is said to be in the grave; the first corpse was the first statue.”*  
(Kelley, 2004)

*Robert Gober, Untitled, 1991–1993 (Clyde Fitch Report)*

## THINGS PRETENDING TO BE OTHER THINGS

With this knowledge, let us reexamine the introductory example of the malfunctioning stereo. When comparing the psychological distress of experiencing the sudden skip and repetition of a musical recording to the uncanny as an art term, the parallels become apparent. Similarly to how the mannequin incites both empathy and disgust due to it seeming both dead and alive simultaneously; the event of a musical recording (which we had already established as a substitute for human companionship) suddenly de-constructing itself into repetitive nonsense due to a mechanical error induces a resurgence of the repressed perception of the stereo as subject rather than object. As a response, our conscious reasoning reminds us of its true nature; the object is dead, and we are alone. However, there is an obvious difference between the stereo and something like Mike Kelley's *The Uncanny*, this being that the former is a genuine surprise encounter of cognitive dissonance, whereas an art experience is composed, controlled and premeditated. Similarly to how, for example: a grand romantic painting by Caspar David Friedrich can allude to the sublime, but fades in comparison to a real life sublime experience, an uncanny surrealist sculpture might arguably never be as frightening as the harrowing banality of the surprise malfunctioning of a common house appliance. In regards to uncanny occurrences; an art object invites itself to be approached, while conversely in the everyday, we are instead approached by *it*. In a sense, the gallery is a safe space for encountering and prodding at our own self-awareness.

The uncanny is less distressing when it happens somewhere where we would expect it, simply because of our awareness of it being an act of purposefully subversive communication. As so, in order for an art piece to circumvent this, it must somehow detach itself from the traditional gallery context, either by rejecting it in favor of public art or by playing with the notions of the white space itself within the gallery. Imagine walking into an exhibition space, following the familiar sound which you know to be the mechanical clicking of a slide projector, only to find that the sound was only a recording of such played on an endlessly looping vinyl (Bussel, 2015). The object which you were expecting turned out to be something different. It was, in fact: only pretending, and you fell for it. This is an installation piece by the artist Ceal Floyer. In another instance, she presents a door with a suggestive light peering out from below it, - as if to indicate that the door is an entrance to somewhere - however upon further inspection, the light is in fact projected onto the floor.



*Floyer, Door (Installation view), 2011 (303 Gallery)*

In these cases we see a type of work which doesn't reveal itself immediately as an art object (one could say it is hidden in plain sight). The art experience is the act of rationalization, ergo, the decoding of the actuality of the situation itself. By using common objects and tropes Floyer allows herself to subtly approach the concept of familiarity by breaking it down and circumventing it, playing with the notions of our rational expectations of a certain moment.

When considering art that is situated completely out of the gallery setting - as in public art - there are other factors to consider. For example: while, in the gallery space one is easily permitted to have a focused, introspective experience, a public art piece has to compete with the already established sensory impressions of the outdoors. Perhaps this is why public art generally tends to be less subtle. It has to be monumental so as to not be absorbed by its environment. An art piece which is situated on the streets of a city will inevitably become part of the liminal space in between defined locations. When walking down the street, we are perhaps at our most introverted mindspace. Of course, this can

also be subverted. An artist might use the impressions already embedded within the public environment to their advantage, such as with the works of Elizabeth Wright, who within her public projects uses the location at hand to subtly question ones established notion of space. A familiar object is presented in a familiar setting, however there is something spatially incoherent, if only slightly. Wright may for example; take a common object, such as a popular bicycle model, remake it at a scale of 135% and then place it back in its original context. This is another example of things pretending to be something else, here being the sculptural object pretending to be an ordinary bicycle, the imposturous act only being revealed through a slight altering in scale, thereby prompting a hint towards intellectual uncertainty whilst still retaining the alluring familiarity of the original object. We are again left to deal with the subconscious and the fabric of reality by means of being confronted with a sudden absurd experience, or as she puts it: “subtle shifts in empathetic perception” (arts.ac.uk., 2018).

### **DEFAMILIARIZING THE ORDINARY**

Now that we have examined several means of transcribing intellectual uncertainty through art practice, it is notable that while those reviewed deal with similar themes, they also employ a broadly varying range of directional approaches. In each case, the content of these are presented in such a way that it prompts introspective analysis of everyday experience, whether it be through material absurdity, the unearthing of repressed memories or minimal interjections of everyday space, the most obvious commonality is the attempt to achieve a *defamiliarization* of what is so embedded into the ordinary that it tends to go unnoticed. Largely, one could define the everyday as the figurative space between extraordinary events in human activity. However, even though this definition might imply banality, insignificance and repetitiveness, it is also possible that this state of being can be considered as the baseline of human experience; a sort of springboard and legitimizer for extraordinary events to exist in contrast (Lefebvre, 2008).

It must be said that while many aspects of Freudian theory have been rightfully criticized, his contributions to surrealism, the aesthetics of repressed thoughts and the *unheimlich* are still of value, particularly in art discourse. The uncanny is intrinsically linked to the experience of everyday life as it can only exist in reference to normalcy. The act of considering the ambiguity of the self must come forth as an analysis of one's own everyday narratives and the ordinary as a level measurement of all lived experience. It is an interruption in the timeline of our everyday conscious narrative, i.e our continuous stream of predictable sensory input/output. The ordinary exists in between these interruptions, as in the ‘state of being’ where one is not directly grappling with the perceptive abilities

of the self. Perhaps a subconsciously communicative art piece can succeed in transforming that which is the foundation of everyday life (the established logic of which we depend on, the repression of primordial instincts, the rationalization of intangible impressions). In order to truly understand the everyday, these processes need to be noticed and questioned. Whether it be a hairy cup, a malfunctioning appliance, or an object which seems to be disguised as something else, the lingering uncertainty of an uncanny experience may perhaps (if successful) leave a lasting mark on our process of rationalization. And as such, in some way affecting the ways in which we understand our surroundings in accordance to the narrative of the everyday.

## REFERENCES

- 303 Gallery (2018). Ceal Floyer, Door (2011). [image] Available at: <http://www.303gallery.com/public-exhibitions/ceal-floyer5?view=slider#3> [Accessed 24 Apr. 2018].
- Arts.ac.uk. (2018). Elizabeth A. Wright - Staff Research Profiles A-Z - UAL. [online] Available at: <http://www.arts.ac.uk/research/ual-staff-researchers/a-z/elizabeth-a-wright/> [Accessed 20 Apr. 2018].
- Breton, A. (1924). *Manifeste du Surréalisme*. [Paris].
- Bussel, D. (2015). 'Carousel', Ceal Floyer, 1996 | Tate. [online] Tate. Available at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/floyer-carousel-t12325> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2018].
- Clyde Fitch Report (2014). Robert Gober, Untitled, 1991–1993. [image] Available at: <http://www.clydefitchreport.com/2014/10/robert-gober-moma-retrospective-sculpture/> [Accessed 20 Apr. 2018].
- Freud, S. (2003). *The uncanny*. London: Penguin, pp.3-24, 121-162.
- Kelley, M. (2004). *The uncanny*. 2nd ed. Köln: König, pp.4 - 26.
- Lefebvre, H. (2008). *Clearing the Ground*. In: S. Johnstone, ed., *The Everyday*, 1st ed. London: Whitechapel, pp.26-34.
- MoMA.org (2018). [image] Available at: [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/meret-oppenheim-object-paris-1936](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/meret-oppenheim-object-paris-1936) [Accessed 23 Apr. 2018].
- Sheringham, M. (2013). *Everyday life*. Oxford [etc.]: Oxford University Press.