

Report notes

Dear Hany,

What an experience to view the sculptures in *Moth*, have the opportunity to read your paper and to write a response to it; it was a pleasure and a privilege. Reading the exegesis I felt as though I have been given access to a hidden room and trusted with its secrets, sharing not only the inner-workings of your creative process, but also the touching disclosure of your fathers curious collecting habits, through to your daunting experience at the Aperto in 1993, which would have had most of us running for the hills.

The exegesis is very well written – compelling, thoughtful and articulate. The scope of your research covers questions very dear to my heart, namely the relationship between mimetic representation and the ever-elusive ‘Real’. The exegesis points out some of the exquisite, subtle – almost imperceptible – paradoxes in this relationship, as they are made apparent when an everyday artefact transitions into an artwork.

As a body of work, *Moth* very evocatively slips between the real and its representation moving furtively back and forth between these two states. As the exegesis suggests, this body of sculptures is forever folding in on itself: each sculpture is at the same time a formalist-abstraction operating on its own terms (more on this below), while also operating as a hyperreal facsimile of the real. In both cases, the works in *Moth* are utterly self-referential. These sculptures ask us to hold a contradiction in our heads where the real collapses into the representation and vs versa, in a perpetual sliding between, as you noted, recognition, doubt, and capture, cognisance, uncertainty and holding (P37).

There is a lot being explored in this exegesis, and at times it felt like a riddle to solve. For my own clarification I have summarised what I believe to be some of the key points. These I have sought to unpack and further discuss as part of this report in the notes below.

Note 1. The vulnerability of the creative process

Your honest approach to the creative process was refreshing. On P10 you stated that “mimicry and facsimile have become drivers of my sculptural explorations, almost default, *and often without question*”. This is a great, transparent inversion of the typical PhD exegesis: through your exegesis you are questioning the driver of your practice, seemingly to come to understand it better yourself (having previously developed the works more-or-less ‘unquestioningly’), rather than to explain or theorise it to us. Too often an exegesis will foreshadow a body of work, which then is left with no space to move, grow or expand, and ends up simply illustrating the text.

Equally, your exegesis doesn’t reflect retrospectively on already-completed artworks as a means to explain the reason for having created them, or to impose theories upon them after-the-fact.

Rather, your words seek to unpack – for yourself as well as for us - *how* your artworks operate in the world, and *why* they are able to do this.

Through your discussion of representation and the ‘real’ we learn that the way these works operate in the world embodies their entire meaning. The work’s existence *reveals* to us something about the nature of perception and how slippages in our perception shape our apprehension of the real.

Note 2. Structure and Images

I appreciate the logical structure of the exegesis. It is woven around 4 key texts (Agamben, Danto, Baudrillard and Sorborne) and two bodies of work (*Mr. Big* at the Aperto in 1993 and *Moth* at Fine Art, 2021).

The fact that there were no images was in itself an interesting self-reflexive critique of mimetic representation, and a clever, playful device used to deny the reader a *mimemata* of a *mimemata*.

The lack of imagery urged me to dig deeper into the jungle of the internet to source images of 1993’s *Mr. Big*. While I didn’t find any images, the journey nevertheless led me down a rabbit warren of other discoveries including peripheral essays and statements on the work including an essay by Ted

Colless¹, and a catalogue from the 1993 Aperto exhibition itself², a journey of discovery which I thoroughly enjoyed.

Note 3. Overview of exegesis: the infinite loop?

You have situated your work along what I initially understood to be a spectrum of two opposing positions: that of Danto who suggests that *art cannot exist without philosophy* insofar as art needs philosophy - or 'language' or 'discourse' or 'symbolic form'³ - to frame its existence, and Agamben, who suggests that *art has the capacity to transcend philosophy*. As part of this exploration you question artworld ecologies and the role these have in framing an artwork, a frame without which an artwork may cease to exist entirely. Particularly in the case of the readymade object, where the reframing of everyday items into art objects demands a metaphysical leap on the part of the artist and the viewer.

What I came to understand upon a closer reading of the exegesis, however, is that these two positions are not actually in opposition to one another, but rather they are moving in a continuous loop. In this loop, both positions operate within the realm of philosophy, because even while Agamben critiques the influence that philosophy asserts over art, the "not-doing" or "inoperativeness" that he advocates is *itself* philosophical. In this sense, *Moth* both transcends the realm of symbolic form (existing as a seemingly incomprehensible, esoteric cluster of abstractions that you've had little to no hand in, beyond extracting them from the world), and also relies completely on this realm to frame the sculptures as 'Art' rather than as a plethora of inconsequential abandoned objects rescued from the grave of art school dross.



You question whether your works (*Moth*, *Mr. Big*) can exist outside of this cycle: is it possible to transcend philosophy, or are they forever recuperated back into this loop?

To better understand how your work's function within this loop – or penetrate beyond it - you have turned to the creative practice of mimesis. While traditionally mimesis is all about creating lifelike representations in art to reflect the 'real' world as closely as possible, your work is in fact an active *critique* of representation.

You use the works of Duchamp (*Bottle Rack*) and Warhol (*Brillo Box*) to illustrate how this critique works, and to challenge its efficacy.

As you describe on P46, these works use mimesis in very different ways. Each serves a mimetic function in that they both represent something which they are not. Even as an unaltered object, *Bottle Rack* has been separated from its normal utility and allowed to exist in its primary condition as pure image, no longer an object in a cellar but instead, a more authentic version of itself.

These works – *Brillo Box* and *Bottle Rack* – form the backdrop against which your works sit. This backdrop reveals the second infinite loop at play in this exegesis: *Moth* and *Mr. Big* do not adopt the same methodologies as *Brillo Box* and *Bottle Rack*, but rather build-on and extend their lineage, in a way that ultimately folds back in on itself, forming this secondary loop.

¹ Edward Colless *The Error of My Ways* Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 1995

² MR BIG, 1993, Published by BARBERism / Sydney. This catalogue accompanied the work of Hany Armanious included in Aperto, 45th International Exhibition of Art, Venice Biennale, 1993

³ Agamben uses the term 'philosophy', which I understand to mean 'language' in the Lacanian sense – language being the key to the entire *realm of symbolic form*: visual communication, philosophy, discourse, etc. Once we enter into the language upon childhood, Lacan suggests we can never exit – we cannot *un-know* language and are forever trapped in this realm.

As you suggest in Chapter 2, the circulation looks like this:

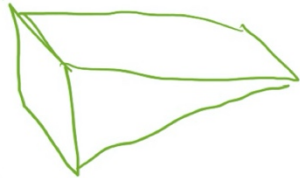
1. The history of painting has largely adopted a mimetic approach where art imitates life.
2. With *Bottle Rack*, Duchamp claimed that rather than representing an object through paint, he decided that the found object *IS* the artwork, and required no intervention outside of the act of arrangement. In doing this, he consecrated objects as already-made art, and by denying imitation, *Bottle Rack* subverts the inherent falsehood of mimesis.
3. *Brillo Box* was Warhol's response to Duchamp's readymades. In a reversal of Duchamp's gesture, to an extreme version of the original, Warhol continues to pose the same critique, albeit more acutely. The found-object, considered a 'readymade' in an artworld context, is replicated – with no formal or expressive intervention whatsoever. By creating lifelike replicas of readymade art objects, Warhol used “art to ape art” (P16), revealing the potential function of mimesis as pastiche or commentary.
4. The next iteration in the loop has been your ability to extract seemingly inconsequential objects from the world (student cast-offs), carefully assemble these in such a way that appears to be incidental, and meticulously replicate this assemblage with such accuracy that the resulting sculpture appears to dissolve directly back into the everyday world from whence it came. Were it not for the framing of the gallery, the work would – Danto and Baudrillard might argue - cease to exist.

I recognise here that the selection of artworld-objects (art student fails) is not neutral. The *Moth* sculptures belonged to the artworld before your eyes first laid upon them. While I understand that these cast-offs were not chosen for their explicit art school and art world references, they nevertheless carry with them the rich spirit of effort, duration, frustration and disappointment that underpin the creative practice, and which keeps us surging and struggling forward.

Below is how I pictured this trajectory, using the example of a wood chock block:

The wood chock block.

Armanious
(moth)



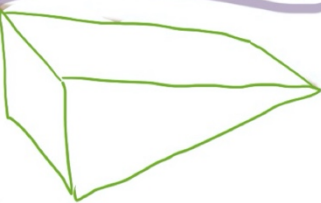
hyperreal copy of wood chock block that has been found at the artschool and has already been tampered with by art students. In the pursuit of art. Remade from resin.

In this context its a representation of a ready made that is already an art work / or in art world circulation

ARTWORK of AN ARTWORK of AN ARTWORK.

This chock transcends philosophy by being so hyperreal that it collapses back into the everyday.

Warhol
(brillo box)



copy of wood chock block, made from wood, presented in the gallery.

In this context its a representation of a ready made.

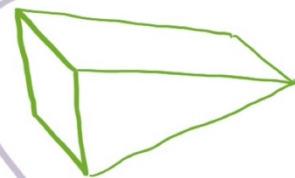
ARTWORK of AN ARTWORK

These chocks are at the same time philosophical as well as a critique of philosophy

philosophical (Danto)

critique of philosophy (Agamben)

Duchamp
(bottle rack)



wood chock block relocated to the gallery.

In this context its a ready made

ARTWORK

Everyday object



wood chock block holding open the kitchen door
In this context its a 'real' everyday object.

Note 4. Realism and/or Formal Abstraction

Rather than clearing a simple path for simulation, your hyperreal casting makes a case for its relevance: critically reflecting upon mimesis *through* the use of mimesis. More than commenting on production and consumption, the works are instruments for the extravagant, almost virtuoso, experimentation with form, material and affect.

To this end, as with Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, I find *Moth* to be highly formal. Contrary to criticisms of formalist art as being overly minimal, reductive, impersonal and apolitical, it is precisely in its denial of personal expression and its critique of the latent illusion that I believe formalism is, rather, an art of resistance, and therefore political, potent, and powerful.

Your precise hyperreal sculptural renderings reflect the paradox of the representational realm most distinctly, where the principles of the hyperreal project come to intimately resemble those of the formal - Greenbergian - project, thereby offering yet another loop:

No composition
No gestures
No artificial colour
No distortion
No angst or effort showing
No ego

In *Moth*, the polar tendencies of realism and abstraction begin to collapse into each other. The sculptures interrogate the very mechanisms of the mimetic representation through the exploration of their own formal possibilities, ultimately mirroring the work back onto itself.

Despite their highly mimetic nature, such hyperreal constructions in *Moth* tell us surprisingly little about the world that they represent. In your sculptures you are always showing us some *thing*, their seamless fabrication appearing as a flawless and entirely natural reflection of the world, yet the act of flattening and smoothing over the world you re-present, suggests that you might be concealing something. To deliver the reality of experience, you have given us an art that not only pacifies the real but seals it behind surfaces, embalming it in appearances.

Despite its claim to 'inoperativeness', it seems that the minimalist genealogy present in *Moth* nonetheless points to philosophical questions about what there is to be seen in an 'empty' surface; a surface in which what you see is *not*, just, what you see. While formal abstraction is typically opposed to any symbolic interpretation and claims to deny religious or mystical content to be read into an artwork, your work ultimately comes to carve out a space for us that is actually extremely metaphysical, esoteric, even spiritual.

In fact, in viewing the sculptures in *Moth*, their life-likeness was forged to such a degree that they were completely imperceptible from their original referents. It is precisely this lack of the need to distinguish the real from its re-presentation in the works that allows for a different type of reality to emerge: a conscious moment where we begin to *see ourselves seeing*. This is the moment when perceptual preconceptions are ruptured. This rupture is not in the world but in the viewer's perception of it. It is this self-consciousness, or awareness of self, that grounds the viewer as a phenomenological subject – this is the metaphysical experience, the ultimate philosophy embedded in the works: in looking at *Moth*, my eyes began to open wider.

As a disruption to symbolic form and mimetic likeness, these issues become categorically potent and political: the viewer is asked to reinterpret his or her understanding of representation to consider what there is to be seen in an 'empty' object or surface, and to reflect on his or her role in subscribing to the overall structure, function and perpetuation of representational encoding in visual culture more broadly.

Note 5. Ironic or Sincere

The final note I'd like to linger on is the overall tone of the work, which I loved.

On P16 you have posed tough question for yourself: is *Moth* an "elaboration of art aping art? Does reproducing it in plastic make it any better, any smarter? Is value enhanced through a material investigation?"

The simple answer, I believe, is yes – when addressed as you have done in *Moth*.

One of the dangers of operating in the realm of the readymade, is becoming overly cynical. Danto suggests Warhol's *Brillo Box* could be construed simply as a deadpan pastiche of a mass-produced object or an academic critique of the banal. Gosetti-Ferencei's account of the work is "an ironic mimetic act" where we feel we are sharing an inside joke. But I believe your works could not be construed in this way. There is no pithy one-liner, no inside joke. Rather, there is a great deal of sincerity in your works that underpins their overall tone and saves them from cynicism.

Your art works (and practice more broadly) reflect quiet, thoughtful care. When I look at the works in *Moth*, I see not just the sculpture, but also the shadow of a solitary figure, intensely focused, working in the quiet hours, eyes squinting, peering intently across the surface of an object held up to the light, searching for imperfections, ruptures, bumps, burrs, the razor tooth edge of a popped resin bubble.

This invisible performance, witnessed by no one, imbues the sculptures with a particular force that galvanises the works beyond their physical presence. Perhaps the force is one of recognition – as artists, we have all at some point *been* that isolated, shadowy, often lonely, silhouette. What might conceal itself initially as belonging to the genre of "junk sculpture" (P16), upon closer inspection reveals itself as very intimate, endearing, even romantic.

While there are clear affinities with Warhol's work, I feel that your art works display much more vulnerability, depth and richness: through their subject matter (the dusty moth, which seemingly disintegrates upon touch), their formal characteristics (precarious arrangements, appearing to tetter on collapse), your highly sensitive material articulation and the great care and rarefied skill with which they are made.

Finally...

As an aside, I have recently been thinking about naming my studio – a small, very rundown, leaky shed in the Blue Mountains – and upon reading this exegesis I have decided to name it *The Repair Shop*. As a nod to Warhol's *Factory*, it speaks to labour and production, effort, work and purpose.

The Repair Shop also toys with the notion that it is not so much a place where things are created, but a place where things are mended, problems are grappled with, puzzles are solved – both practical and philosophical. An ode to repairing the everyday world around me, one miniscule gesture at a time. Although the studio name embraces the idea of creation, production and consumption, to me it is actually engaged in a stasis or resistance to production.

I could keep going, there is so much to say about this body of writing and creative work, but I will pause here, for now.

I'd like to acknowledge again that it was a great pleasure and privilege to experience this PhD. I know the PhD candidature is a long, baffling journey, but I hope you've found the passage rewarding. If not, I'm sure that you will in time. It's a deep, difficult dive and from my own experience I've found that sometimes the real rewards aren't felt until long after the fact.

Very best wishes,
Sanné

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