

MONSTER FIELD

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INTRODUCTION

"Have you ever known a place which seemed to have no beginning and no end? Such was Monster Field." So begins the notes of "a discovery recorded by Paul Nash" in 1939, and published in 1946 in a small catalogue. While motoring in the English countryside, Nash kept coming across a field with two fallen trees in it, which he subsequently wrote about and photographed, drew and painted. These trees he wrote, were not trees but Monsters, they had undergone change, had "passed on", and were now "alive in quite another world". It is to the possibility of this new life, this other world, with its implication that through change new worlds may appear, that *Monster Field* attends. I found this slim catalogue in a second-hand bookshop in Sydney while thinking about the work of some artists who were exhibiting objects, things, which seemed to come directly from them, their world. This work found life, not through elaborate fabrication, but through a kindness to things, an attention to the nearly overlooked and the ordinary, the kind of attention that Paul Nash had given to the trees of Monster Field. And like the trees, the works in *Monster Field* have been uprooted, at first from the world around us, and then from the artist's studios, their particular worlds, and they are shown here, gently and directly, hoping that our consideration for the work at least approaches theirs. It is this consideration, this perhaps endless series of processes and procedures, of folding and stacking, of hanging and collecting, of finding and choosing, of stretching and pressing, of placing and seeing and remembering, that is at the root of the work's sensibility, its atmosphere. What I have tried to do then, is to record an assertion, both of the presence of things, and of the lives of the artists for whom the world is material.

A.D.S. Donaldson Sydney 1993

TO EXPRESS THE OBJECT

I observed that the more air I left around a thing, the happier the results, for that allowed him to do the crucial work on his own: to construct an image on the basis of a few hints, to feel his own mind travelling towards the thing I was describing for him.

Paul Auster, *Moon Palace*

All the discourses of 20th century object-making can be seen in the works of *Monster Field*: modernist sculpture, installation, minimalism. But the two most important of these are undoubtedly the readymade and assemblage. More than stylistic principles, they mark the two boundaries of these works' ambition to speak of the object, the limits beyond which they cannot go: the readymade shows us what happens when we get too close to the object and assemblage what happens when we stray too far from the object. It is against these two possibilities that the works in *Monster Field* define themselves, and accordingly it is to them that they can most closely be compared.

When Duchamp put the urinal in the art gallery, merely reorientating it from vertical to horizontal like the tree in Nash's "monster field", he opened up a whole new type of object-making. Anything, it seemed, could be art. The object needed to have no special aesthetic qualities of its own; it was the mere fact that it was exhibited in an art gallery that made it art. In this sense, the object is stripped of its aura, its uniqueness: it could be any object often mass-produced: to show that they were absolutely not unique and not even the only one of their kind. The bare object is presented in its full material presence, untransmutable - but the paradox is that Duchamp no sooner puts it in the gallery than it becomes a pure idea. With no power of personal association with it, it is in fact the institutional power of the gallery that is made manifest, the fact that this object could be anything.

By contrast, the objects here in *Monster Field*, if they have something of the readymade about them, are not deliberately "unaesthetic" and impersonal. If they are often mass-produced items, they are things we are in contact with in our daily lives, objects with which we want to surround ourselves (precisely the point of the urinal is that, although it is to be found in our house, it is what we exclude from our image of daily life, what we repress: uncanny and unfamiliar). And, unlike the readymade, the objects in *Monster Field* do not enter into a polemic about the institutional space of the gallery, its power to define what counts as art. The pieces here are not simply effects of the gallery space but occupy or inhabit that space. There is a certain illusionality about them: they create a kind of stage or setting around themselves; and if they are domestic and intimate, there is also a sense that we are not to come too close to them.

Hany Armanious

Open section 1993
melamite craftwood,
Blu Tak, pencil

The dictionary
presented by time 1993
light fittings

Tony Clark

Platoon 1991
shelving and objects

Untitled 1985
mixed media

A.D.S. Donaldson

Cotton 1 - 3 1993
cotton and
embroidery hoops

Untitled 1993
mixed media

Mikala Dwyer

Untitled 1992
china plates

Untitled 1993
mixed media

John Nixon

Untitled (Square) 1993
masonite

Untitled (Box) 1993
cardboard

Kathy Temin

Terracotta - Das Sculpture 1990
das and wood

Untitled 1993
paper and acid-free tape





And the objects here differ even from Duchamp's "assisted" readymades, in which certain changes are made to the object. The "assisted" readymades constitute a problem for interpretation, but they always offer the key to their solution, even if it is absurd or impossible. The spectator might fail to find the answer, but this is because there is too much information rather than too little. The readymade is social in this sense: a form of knowledge must be brought to it, its puzzle can be discussed and shared. By contrast, the works in *Monster Field* are elusive, there is no sense of a possible solution to them or even really of a problem that could be formulated in words. The discipline they require is not cultural but personal; what connects them to their spectator is not a joke or a pun, but a remembrance or mood. And we would say that the works in *Monster Field* do not require their spectator in the same way as Duchamp's readymades do: he is free to take up or leave the work as he wishes, he is not left hanging on a punchline or waiting for something to happen ... If we "get" the work in *Monster Field*, it is as a recollection or memory of something that has already occurred.

If the works in *Monster Field* are not readymades, then, can we speak of them as assemblages? Certainly, there is a kind of metamorphosis of the object here, but as opposed, say, to Picasso and Giacometti, there is no metaphor that is formed, the work fails to come together in another form. But this does not seem to be a failure of execution, as in much recent installation practice. There is not the sense here that the artist is trying to transform his materials, to show something in the object that has never been seen before. We do not have the feeling that there is some artist-genius standing behind the work, whose singular vision we might somehow share. The transformations enacted upon the object are not unexpected, virtuosic; the object is personalised, initialled, "detailed". What is revealed here in the work is the evidence of an experience with the object, a record of time spent with it. The work is the artist's way of speaking of his own life through the object: his memories lie within it and are reawakened through it.

This work thus marks a break with those uses of the object in art of the preceding decade. There, if real objects were used, they were either fabricated according to instructions or simply bought, the artist having already had the idea for the work. If an ordinary object was incorporated in the piece, it was not to be mistaken for this object in its everyday sense: it was always either quoted or generic, purged of any individuality. Here, on the other hand, when the artist uses a cardboard box in his work, we have the impression that it is with just *this* cardboard box that the idea for the work began and that the work is an attempt to do something with *it*. If the artist places it in some fashion, it is not a format that was planned regardless of the actual object, but an attempt to bring out some quality peculiar to it (but, again, this is not to be mistaken for assemblage where the whole work is designed to bring out some

poetic quality discovered in its materials - the fact that a bicycle seat and handlebars look like a bull's head when arranged in some way - this quality belongs to the object but it does not allow it to become something else: it illuminates it but we can never forget its primary meaning). The work here comes from the *studio* and not the factory.

If the materiality of the object is transformed, it is not formally but personally: it is only for the artist that it represents something else. Indeed, for the artist it already *is* something else: the changes he makes to the object are already enough to mark it as his own, different from all the others like it. And art in this way acts as a way of physically redeeming its object, of saving it from anonymity (made up as it is of cardboard, cotton, shelving and plates, the work here is a catalogue of things that would otherwise be ignored). And this explains the sense of contingency and impermanence that hangs over these works: not only are they composed of poor and non-durable materials, but their identity remains dependent upon the memory of the artist who made it. This is why, as spectators, we feel a sense of responsibility when we are looking at these objects. Their meaning does not rely upon cultural norms or art history, but upon the possibility of our empathy, of discerning what the work might mean for the artist. If the work does not speak to a secret group of initiates, as in Duchamp, it does nevertheless require like-minded people of a certain temperament and sensibility. We are like guests in the artist's house.

The works here want to speak of a certain care or openness in the experience of the object, an object beyond the rhetorics of all the other art movements which have wanted to speak of it. It is a personal object claimed by the artist against all the demands of art history. It is an object that does not imply any style or aesthetic, that does not involve us in any issues of representation. And yet the question remains: what does this art do to this object? How does it negotiate a passage between the readymade and assemblage? Perhaps without realising it, the work here is grappling with the power of all objects, the irony of all objects: the fact that the fuller the object is the less it seems to say, and the emptier the object the more significant it appears. To bring out the object or to give it room to breathe, is neither to leave the object as it is, nor to add it to something else. It is instead, in the words of Paul Auster, to "leave air around it". All the problems of style, of aesthetics begin from here.

Rex Butler Brisbane 1993

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