

[First published in *fine print*, issue #5, December 2015]

Guernica and the Impossibility of Objects

Take any object: at first, it looks contained within itself with well delineated edges and limits; then something happens, a strike, an accident, a catastrophe, and suddenly you discover swarms of entities that seem to have been there all along...

—Bruno Latour (2010, p. 2)

Is it too pithy to say that objects are objectionable? The art object is a curiously difficult thing to critique—it's so prevalent in our understanding of art that it stretches beyond any one oeuvre or specialisation. Parallel to this immensity, however, is the art object's subjection to the erosion of centuries of reactionary artists. Why do we challenge, interrogate, and subvert this poor art object? We obviously see something problematic in its unresponsive monumentality. But what I suggest here is that our discontent is, in fact, the intuitive response that this view is flawed, and that objects as discrete entities are not what they seem.

A problem of the object is its membrane; the seemingly unassailable line between the object and the rest of the world. Table and not table. Plinth and not plinth. Painting and not painting. This division is seen with such audacity that the poor art object is often framed (hah) with claims of grandeur: that it is itself and no other. This is problematic for a number of reasons, but I have no intention of pinning any brazen claims on an object; after all, objects are pragmatic constructions (though not without their own power). Objects are means of 'cutting together-apart' (Barad, 2014, p. 176) as physicist-philosopher Karen Barad would say; defining one thing by positioning it in relation to others. Ways of drawing divisions in the world—the

object of investigation is constructed through the enactment of particular cuts and not others' (Barad, 2007. p. 217) We see an object as a discrete physical entity precisely because we privilege discrete physicality in our assessment of it.¹ But it's getting very abstract in here. Let's dissect this 'cutting together-apart' by looking at the chapter of an object's life that does not feature the 'object' itself (in a traditional understanding).



Pablo Picasso, 1937, *Guernica*, oil on canvas, 349 cm x 776 cm, Museo Reina Sofia, Spain. © Succession Picasso/Licensed by Viscopy, 2015.

Pablo Picasso's masterwork, *Guernica*—a much loved staple of a number of soporific art history documentaries—offers us quite the titillating tale on the mutability of the art object. In reporting a particular (alleged) series of events in 2003, I hope to demonstrate that not only do objects not have solid boundaries, they also have agency—they push and pull the world and evade demarcation (and in the spirit of the object,² I will mercifully focus on Picasso's painting, and not Picasso himself). Let's jump.

¹ Do not take this sentence to mean that human perception is in any way special. I will cut down that preconception shortly.

² Colloquially, not literally—I am not a vitalist.

It's the 5th of February, 2003, in the United Nations Building, New York City. Colin Powell and John Negroponte have assembled a press conference to argue the case for an armed intervention in Iraq. Behind the politicians is hung a tapestry replica of *Guernica*, depicting the German/Italian bombing of the Basque town after which the painting is named. The preparations are made, the media file in, but when the cameras start rolling, what appears behind the politicians is not the Cubist masterpiece, but a blue shroud. In a media release the next day, UN officials claimed 'the mural was a distracting background for the TV cameras covering the press conference.' However, it was later claimed by diplomats that the Bush Administration pressured the censoring: the spectacle too violent for discussing armed intervention. Realise that this sequence of events is still contested today; but even in fallacy, its use by the anti-Bush administration still makes a case for the political agency of the image.³ But how does this tapestry *Guernica*—half a world and 78 years away—influence events in the UN offices and subsequent media furor? In short, its relationality—its inextricable connectedness with a fluctuating world. Through *Guernica* we can address some issues inherent in believing that objects are discrete physical entities defined by their appearances.

The first issue is one of proximity. There is a peculiar human (perhaps biological or evolutionary) bias towards spatial relationships. When we see an apple in the store we think about it in relation to the apples next to it, not the apples that sat in that same crate two days prior (or the ones likely to be there in two days' time).

Guernica suffers a similar bias; much like the rain in Spain, people are concerned largely with its location. Its position 'on the plain' is tantamount to its relationality—

³ Even more interesting than the 'truth' of this fable is its fiction. Regardless of the actual events of that meeting (and my attempts to find footage have all failed), the tale was still spun against Powell and Negroponte, and articles 'debunking' the tale were largely ignored.

it is concerned with the farmers, the crops, the plains' close proximity to the oceans, etc. *Guernica* is similar—it is assessed in the context of its curated space. Its spot in Room 206.06 in the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía exists in relation to its surrounding works, the colour of the walls and its use in the public programs of the institution. Little consideration is given to its millions of facsimiles in gallery bookshops, textbooks, UN office walls, and even its likeness appearing in the episode 'The Lawless' in the animated series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*.

These otherwise disparate entities are bound together by the events of February 5th 2003, mapped as a web of relationships. The tapestry has links back to its original in Madrid, the politicians assembled before it, the media, the Bush administration (and the anti-Bush administration), the Iraq War, the *Guernica* prints in your local gallery's bookshop, etc.

This privileging of 'space' in mapping relationships betrays a peculiar lack of consideration for another vital characteristic of the world: time. Artworks are also temporal entities. This is most obvious in ephemeral or performative works, but all works—including monuments—are at the mercy of time. And this relationship to time is not only of erosion, but of redefinition, as objects (and art objects) are swept up into the world's restless repositioning. As these events of 2003 unfold and reposition themselves, so too does *Guernica*, defined by its position in a web of oscillating relations.

What I've just done here is commit a transgression by neatly separating spatial and temporal relationships—and I've lied by making it seem easy. The spacetime of our world is not so readily divvied up. Curator and art theorist Claire Doherty articulates an object's dependency on spacetime as a 'situation':

I've been intrigued by this term 'situation', I'd say for its capacity to capture the presentness of the moment of an encounter with an artwork. The ground of its making... the spatial and temporal architecture through which a work is produced and through which we come to experience it. (Doherty, 2009)

Situations are experiences at the incidence of space and time which, as you may expect, encompasses all human experience (try to experience only one and not the other, I dare you). Because even if one is 'fixed' (if time stops or you don't move), the other is redefined in relation to its sibling.

This leads us nicely into the second issue of objects—immutability. *Guernica*, like all artworks, is largely dependent on its 'context' in what type of message it conveys. Let's say that the tapestry's censoring was not an isolated event, but someone in the room glimpsing the links in the web that connects the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War to that of the Iraq invasion. These two conflicts are now linked across the better part of a century *through Guernica*. This act of concealment is an intervening agency⁴ that vastly changes *Guernica's* trajectory; our understanding of the masterpiece is now branded with the UN censorship. The events that *Guernica* sets in motion fold back in on themselves, redefining the masterwork by its own impact on the world.

We have enough context now for me to make my claim: art objects as solely physical entities with fixed meanings are impossible. I can assert this point by offering two suppositions:

1. Let's say as I have suggested above; that an art object is defined by its relationships with the world.

⁴ This is a bit of a tautology as all that agency actually *does* is intervene.

2. Let's also suppose that the world is a *constantly mobile* network of complex relationships.

Like any interconnected structure, any movement agitates the network by way of its connections. Now if an artwork is situated within that entangled structure, then the values and understandings tied to that object are surely as mutable. Sociologist John Law describes this as:

... the unfolding and uncertain character of the world. Because if the web holds steady, so do the 'actors' in it. While if it shifts, and mostly it does, then so too do those actors. (Law & Singleton, 2012)

When we combine this perspective with Claire Doherty's 'presentness' of an encounter with an artwork, we realise that each time we witness the object it will be the product of a web of relational effects that is different *every time it is viewed*. Sometimes in minute ways, others (like *Guernica*) in quite substantial ones.

But how is this relational mutability relevant to those that craft these art objects? I believe it lies in the expectations artists have that their works convey a particular meaning. We can guide this, of course, as our intent as artists prompts us to make some decisions (or cuts, as Barad would say) and reject others. But as Brian Eno suggests:

an artist doesn't finish a work ... you design the beginning of something, and the process of releasing the work is the process of planting it in the culture and seeing what happens to it. (Eno, 2000, p. 141)

Making an artwork, like any other action, agitates this web of relations we are all embedded in. As the work pushes the world, the world pushes back. Objects (and

by extension art objects) bleed meaning—they are actors in the world. And in Latour's (2010, p. 5) words 'an actor is nothing but a network, except that a network is nothing but actors.'

Using Latour's superposition, it can be said that we as artists don't only craft works (actors) but relational force. Our work, often in minute ways, can set in motion distant events through spacetime; swept up into the world's agitated and tensile becoming.

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