

# In the Making, of Objects, Artists, and Publics

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In 1818, at the end of a celebrated teaching career, Joseph Jacotot found himself in a curious position. Exiled to Brussels and knowing no Flemish, he faced the predicament of teaching Flemish students who knew no French. Resourcefully turning to a bilingual edition of *The Adventures of Telemachus* (1699), Jacotot discarded his habitual role of disseminator of knowledge and instead directed the students to the text, from which they successfully instructed themselves. Born of necessity, the teacher-as-explicator model was displaced by the educator-as-facilitator who framed an experience for student-centered learning through individual experience and collaboration. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Jacques Rancière recounts Jacotot's pedagogical adventure and expounds upon the implications of learning being independent from instruction.<sup>1</sup> This includes the conviction that everyone has equal and unlimited potential to learn, beyond existing bodies of knowledge and the delimiting authority of power structures.

Like Rancière's ignorant schoolmaster, the museum might shift in its habitual role of possessor and purveyor of knowledge, to provider of conditions for yet unimagined creations, exchanges, and scenarios. In this repositioning, works of art are not representations of historical fact, but can be thought of as "historical events that continue to act in the present," as Jules Prown suggests.<sup>2</sup> This leads to the notion that the inanimate in fact *animates*; that objects can play an active role in learning and making processes. Most objects in museum collections do not act now as they were intended. Indeed, they often act in unexpected, even unruly ways. Their actions have varied significantly over time. They may act differently for each of us, and might be active in shifting customary ways of thinking. They can simultaneously act physically and virtually in markedly dissimilar ways. Ultimately, active objects offer opportunities to act. The vital role that objects can play in reconfiguring thought and action lies at the heart of actor-network theory, as articulated by Bruno Latour, as well as Jane Bennett's related concept of thing-power materialism.<sup>3</sup> These theories help acknowledge and account for objects and social networks, in this case, art and artists or art and publics. Taking objects as active parts of social structures not only reflects the conditions of their making—be it centuries past

or yesterday—it also attends to the productive, heterogeneous, even incongruous ways in which they actively present concepts, cultures, and perspectives outside ourselves. The materialization of this effect can be found in the work of artists who give form and expression to ideas inspired by an object by reconfiguring their intended action.

One can argue that the objects in museums now assigned to discipline-based categories of art, design, artifact, etc., have long been active. They have aided and abetted expressions of power and accommodated the domination of one culture over another. They have been put to work embodying essential characteristics of national schools and various stylistic isms. They have schooled artists who dutifully emulated the masterful gestures of those before them. They have also played nicely into the hands of artists called upon to displace these very ways of acting. For example, in 1969, Andy Warhol willfully ignored the decorum of display conventions, assembling Victorian umbrellas, Windsor chairs, Native American blankets, and European paintings (fig. 1). By retaining the anachronistic happenstance of storage, he brought into question the rhetoric of disciplines and systemization of knowledge as typically played out through objects displayed in the galleries of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design Museum (RISD Museum). Half a century later, Warhol's *Raid the Icebox I* persists as one model in which institutions might allow their objects to act in alternative ways via an artist's intervention.<sup>4</sup> This example of objects acting up reflects a shift from the artist schooled by the museum to the artist schooling the museum in the idiosyncrasies of its ways.

Warhol's project was a step towards the artist-as-curator version of institutional critique that has been ubiquitous and productive in revealing the hegemonic systems within which objects have been made to act and thus perpetuate.<sup>5</sup> Invitations to artists to select from collections or intervene in museum spaces have been a go-to means for institutions to share interpretive authorship, draw attention to the overlooked, and embrace critique. Despite the sheer variety of such projects, they appear to share the gestural quality of "a gauntlet thrown down to the idea of the exhibition as a neutral arrangement of artworks in a given space and time for didactic or spectacular display," as suggested by Elena Filipovic.<sup>6</sup> Even so, the museum remains omnipresent, and these subtle arguments resonate for the limited few privy to its operations. The critical discourse on these projects is as rich and varied as the artists and their curatorial projects, but by its nature the focus remains on artist-museum relations, with little to no attention given to how a given artist's practice is impacted by working with objects, or how the interrelations between objects and artists might resonate more broadly in the public sphere. An artist's object-based learning and research not only reveals the possible positions other than the curatorial and critical, it makes evident and models modes of meaning making that can be independent of institutional and disciplinary limitations.



Fig. 1 *Painting and Sculpture storage recreated for the RISD Museum installation of Raid the Icebox I with Andy Warhol, April 23-June 30, 1970.*

So how might objects and collections act with broader social and artistic relevance? How can objects be active in manifold ways, despite the singularity of the mode of presentation? Can they be active, in the spirit of Gayatri Spivak's work, in an aesthetic education that involves "training of the imagination for flexible epistemological performances," and participate in alternative versions of knowing that are always in the making?<sup>7</sup> As Jacotot displaced himself for the text for the sake of his students' learning, the museum could allow objects to be more active and expansive in the formation of knowledge, awareness of differences, and the meaningful exchange between more varied audiences. The object lessons that follow share these dispositions, in that existing works of art and design have played an active part in shifting ways of being and making. While examples of this type of work can be found in many institutions committed to productive relationships with practicing artists, these scenarios emerge from the context of the RISD Museum, an institution that is situated within an art and design school and with a civic mandate. Established in 1877, the Rhode Island School of Design and Museum is one of a number of late nineteenth-century educational institutions founded on the conviction that high-quality art exposure and art instruction would have lasting civic and economic benefit.<sup>8</sup> What follows is highly situated in one institution and four case studies entwined in my own work. While this account is necessarily limited, such intimacy affords access to the artists' durational research, learning processes, and collaborations that exist between and around typical institutional narratives and art historical accounts, and often goes unaccounted for.

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In 1988, wandering the galleries of the RISD Museum, painting student Spencer Finch derided the irrelevance of Claude Monet's *Basin at Argenteuil* (1874). Dared by fellow art-school student Paul Ramirez Jonas to copy the painting, Finch mockingly donned a beret and performed that age-old practice of replicating the accomplishments of his forefathers. While remaking the painting started as an irreverent act, the process of copying the piece was instructive. What Finch learned from the act of remaking the painting were the questions Monet had set himself. Indeed, for the last two decades, Finch has persistently pursued a study of light, color, and atmosphere through a variety of media—from laying down delicate watercolor marks intended to capture the dust in a shaft of light to building an immersive environment of hanging panes of glass that investigates light and reflection, as inspired by Monet's garden at Giverny (fig. 2). "I thought that Monet's work, especially the serial work, was about this idea of trying to capture something—a place, a moment, an impression, a light condition—and by repeatedly returning to it, to get closer to its essence, while at the same time admitting the impossibility of doing so."<sup>9</sup> Thus, a historical work acting in the present set the direction of Finch's work for decades.



Fig. 2 *Spencer Finch, Painting Air, 2012, installed at the RISD Museum in Spencer Finch: Painting Air, February 24-July 29, 2012. Photograph ©David O'Connor.*

In this case, Finch's experience through remaking is directly connected to Monet's experience of making. The historical work presented an occasion for Finch to step out of his usual ways of thinking, seeing, and creating, and to engage in specific, discrete discoveries. The process produced the process, binding together working and thinking, making, and learning. As John Dewey described, "Art denotes a process of doing or making," and therefore has the unique capacity in that it both "concentrates and enlarges immediate experience."<sup>10</sup> In this learning-by-doing model, what happens in the museum—like what happens in the classroom, the studio, or lab—needs to lead to something beyond itself. "As an individual passes from one situation to another, his [sic] world, his environment, expands or contracts. He does not find himself living in another world but in a different part or aspect of one and the same world. What he has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow."<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the century that separates Monet's creation from Finch's encounter collapsed through shared thought, actions, and experience. While Finch's act of copying replicated transmission model learning in which the knowledge passes from master as explicator to the student as receiver, the critical re-performance provided a framework for Finch's emancipatory encounter. Like Jacotot's students, he was left alone with the text/painting, and through self-directed learning made discoveries unimagined by the schoolmaster/museum.

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In 2012, Graphic Design MFA student Kelly Walters was set the task of finding a museum object that would aid an active exploration of the systems, structures, and intentions that shape content and its delivery. Walters's research and work focuses on the linguistic and visual structures and patterns that construct black cultural expression, and seeks to reframe the interaction with and consumption of black culture. Wandering galleries devoted to European art, Walters found this pursuit was thwarted both by the daunting overabundance of objects and the dearth of material through which to pursue her particular research interests in black culture. Ultimately, a literal and figural face-off between two nineteenth-century sculptures presented binary conceptions of African and European beauty, into which Walters wanted to intervene.<sup>12</sup> She described the active tension between the objects as follows:

*In the African Venus by Charles Henri Joseph Cordier, the realism of her body surface, the detailed nature of her pores, the arrangement of her twisted locks and the draped fabric around her torso were fascinating. At the same time, the Bust of Madame Récamier, only two feet away, by Joseph Chinard, appeared to have this untouched "purity" due to the smooth milkiness of her skin texture. In questioning the physical characteristics that made them "elegant," "pure," or*



Fig. 3 Kelly Walters, *Hidden Beauty*, 2014.

*“real,” Hidden Beauty began to highlight these late nineteenth-century notions of exoticism and beauty through the creation of a folded broadsheet poster (fig. 3). After taking close-up images of the busts, it was important to work with the folds of the paper to hide and reveal parts of each image. On the reverse side, large bold uppercase typography is used emphasize the language used on the wall label and the physical qualities of the bust themselves.<sup>13</sup>*

Through two photographs, two colors, six words, and one sheet of paper, Walters used a close meditation on the form and linguistic interpretation of the sculptures to trump one version of beauty over another as the poster is unfolded and folded, flipped and turned. Reflecting on the process, she explained, “I am aware of how institutions meet certain demands and how museums reflect the canon in extraordinary ways. There is value to this, but at the same time, there is significant alienation. In museum spaces I seek to connect with artifacts as inspiration. However, I quickly realize that as I enter spaces that are predominantly white I feel like an outsider. As an artist I resist and subvert this by pushing into these fertile spaces.”<sup>14</sup> Walters acknowledges the important precedent of Fred Wilson’s *Mining the Museum* (1992), which revealed structural racism endemic in museums and historical societies, but she adds that critiquing the museum is also critiquing society “as both operate with similar value systems.”<sup>15</sup> Walters intervenes between the objects and reframes the essentializing conceptions of beauty that they embody, and that their museum display perpetuates. This can be read as an act of critical consciousness in the spirit of Paulo Freire, who argued that, through deep engagement with material, social and political injustices can be revealed and action can be taken against oppressive structures.<sup>16</sup>

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In 2014, composer and sound artist Shawn Greenlee encountered a fragment of a Chinese jade lithophone from the mid-eighteenth century. These ancient instruments dating back to 400 BCE usually included between twelve and thirty-two pitch-ranged, L-shaped jade chimes, but Greenlee only encountered a single chime. The fragmentary nature of this situation was underscored by the fact that the instrument-turned-museum-object was made mute in the name of preservation and stewardship. As Greenlee described, “This circumstance prohibited listening to the stone, as this would require striking it percussively with a mallet. Unsatisfied that the sound was left to the imagination, I formed a plan in which I would compose a new musical work responding to the museum piece. This was made possible by creating a granite replica which by design is for instrumental use and a prototype for continued research.”<sup>17</sup> Greenlee’s “substitute,” or near surrogate, of the original afforded him the ability “explore the stone chime as a percussive interface for computer-based sound synthesis and signal processing”<sup>18</sup> (fig. 4). By affixing a

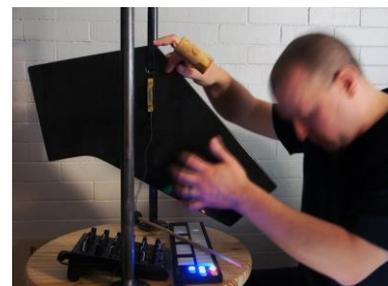


Fig. 4 Shawn Greenlee, *Substitutions*, 2014.

contact microphone to the granite lithophone, he could pick up, analyze, recreate, and re-synthesize the audio, which was mixed with pre-recorded percussion tracks. Greenlee's agile use of the jade lithophone as primary source and interface for a new body of work built upon a research period in which he studied traditional Chinese and Korean instruments. Through this, opportunities arose to become a student of another discipline and "to learn about performance/composition approaches, techniques, and aesthetics outside of what I've known... to be a student, where you can really feel like a beginner and fail productively. Of course, I'm not a beginner with regard to the approaches I do know. So, I think this exchange creates a dynamic space for experimentation and discovery. Something new can come out of it."<sup>19</sup> Following Rancière's reading of Jacotot's epiphany, Greenlee's situation embodied that of the master and student, beginner and expert, knowing and not knowing. The distance between these states provided fertile ground for learning and making.

This intersection of ancient instrument and digital technologies suggests an active coexistence of past and present, but also that such temporal disjunctions or anachronisms offer unique opportunities to intervene and participate within and outside of one's particular time and culture, as well as outside areas of one's expertise and comfort. In her call for a repositioning and critical reading of the contemporary in terms of specific aspects of the historical, Claire Bishop urges "a dynamic rereading of history that pulls into the foreground that which has been sidelined, repressed, and discarded in the eyes of the dominant classes. Culture becomes a primary means for visualizing alternatives; rather than thinking of the museum collection as a storehouse of treasures, it can be reimagined as an archive of the commons."<sup>20</sup>

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In spring 2015, Raqs Media Collective members Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta took up residency in a gallery of the RISD Museum. *A Myriad Marginalia* consisted of a thirty-day investigation in which the modalities of studio, lab, archive, gallery, and teahouse converged as Raqs explored the visual and philosophical concept of marginalia with students, scholars, curators, and visitors (fig. 5). Conversations and collaborative investigations inspired by medieval manuscripts, maps, texts, and films found their way to the margins of large sheets, whose imaginary texts were redacted by blocks of indigo blue. As described by painting student and participant Jagdeep Raina, "Students would wander over to the tables full of waiting manuscript pages. We added our marginalia to the scorching indigo-blue designs that peppered the printed paper. Collaborating on the same sheets made the pages even richer, as did taking them home with us and inviting people outside the Museum's walls to make their mark. Each class was different from the last, adding an element of surprise and mystery; we were never quite sure what would happen.... Over the course of the month, the Lower Farago



Fig. 5 Raqs Media Collective, *A Myriad Marginalia*, 2015.

Gallery transformed from what I had known as a restrained space for quiet visitors, academics, museum curators, and prowling guards into a vital communal space for not just looking but creating.”<sup>21</sup>

Just as the marginalist constructs a counter-narrative to the main body of a text, this durational project acted as a counterpoint to the main functions of the museum, a convivial co-production “with the promise of a space that asked to be filled from the margins, to the center,” as Raqs Media Collective described.<sup>22</sup> When a space is filled from the margins to the center, that space is no longer what it was. The center is destabilized and takes on a new character. The containing, ordering, and defining function of the museum was temporarily suspended as Raqs Media Collective engaged deeply with historical materials in partnership with students and museum visitors. Together they co-authored and constructed polyvocal counter-narratives through which the museum acted not as a storehouse or textbook, but as an unfixated, hybrid third space, in Homi K. Bhabha’s sense. “A Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew.”<sup>23</sup> This suggests a state of affairs in which objects held in public trust function within an archive of the commons. They are contained and preserved, while also acting in ever evolving ways when “opened up to citizens and the general public as an exercise in civic and democratic culture.”<sup>24</sup>

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For these artists, objects were “historical events that continue to act in the present.”<sup>25</sup> Exhibition conventions might have inculcated the painting, sculpture, musical instrument, and manuscript in performing master narratives about cultures, nations, and artistic movements. However, the artist’s individual and sustained encounters allowed these objects to act in ways that differed from institutional framing, and instead operate as active sites of learning and experimentation, connection, and difference. As complex intersections of materials, narratives, beliefs, and subjects, each object served as a potent and multivalent locus from which unprecedented and unconventional relationships to history, self, and other developed. As such, the museum’s contents played a part in questioning dominant structures, unearthing sidelined narratives, and diversifying interpretations.

Such productive activity need not only be an artistic endeavor. The malleable, inquisitive, even irreverent relationships to objects as exemplified here can be a far more widely shared experience. However, it can be argued that the dispositions to decode and derive meaning from objects are far too often bound up with the privilege of “cultural capital” acquired through access, exposure, and

instruction.<sup>26</sup> Museums and educational institutions are implicated in this when such skills are offered to some and not to others, as Pierre Bourdieu argues. “The museum “presents to all” but is reserved for those who, equipped with the ability to appropriate the works of art, have the privilege of making use of this freedom, and who thence find themselves legitimated in their privilege, that is, in their ownership of the means of appropriate of cultural goods.”<sup>27</sup> Acknowledging this is to start from a place of inequality—that some have the capacity to interpret and connect to art and others do not. Rancière argues that to start from inequality is to prove it so, and thereby maintain the distance between the teacher and the student, those with cultural capital and those without.<sup>28</sup> The lesson of the ignorant schoolmaster essentially proposes that we instead start from a place of equality. In this case, it would mean that everyone has the capacity to derive their own meaning from objects in ways yet unimagined. This practice of equality means that museums might more often surrender their role as schoolmaster to the productive conviviality of objects and publics. Jocatot’s pedagogical adventure rested on the dissociation of intelligence and will. No longer subservient to the schoolmaster’s will, the students obeyed their own intelligence and that of the book. In fact, the schoolmaster and the student held “in common the intelligence of the book that was also the thing in common, the egalitarian intellectual link between the master and student....We will call the known and maintained difference of the two relations—the act of an intelligence obeying only itself even while the will obeys another will—*emancipation*.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise, if objects are held in common, their intelligence and that of their publics might act more productively together. How museums learn to be more like ignorant schoolmasters and start from a practice of equality is where the work will begin.

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1. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. with an introduction by Kristen Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).
2. Jules Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* (Spring 1982): 3.
3. See, for example, Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social - An Introduction to Actor Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).
4. For an account of *Raid the Icebox I* with Andy Warhol, see Deborah Bright, "Shopping the Leftovers: Warhol's Collecting Strategies in *Raid the Icebox I*," *Art History* 24, no. 2 (April 2001): 281. See also, Anthony Huberman, "Andy Warhol, *Raid the Icebox I* with Andy Warhol, 1969," *The Artist as Curator*, Issue 7, *Mousse* 48 (2014): 1–20
5. Recent literature on the curatorial, the artist as curator, and artist interventions in museums abounds. Elena Filipovic's series for *Mousse* is an important contribution to writing a history of artist as curator exhibitions in the postwar period. See [www.theartistascurator.org](http://www.theartistascurator.org).
6. Elena Filipovic, "When Exhibitions Become Form: On the History of the Artists as Curator," *The Artist as Curator*, Issue 0, *Mousse* 41 (2013): 1–31, 20.
7. Gayatri Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 185.
8. In the United States, other examples of institutions founded as museums and art schools include the Museum of Fine Arts and School Boston (1876) and the Art Institute of Chicago - Museum and School (1879).
9. Spencer Finch, in conversation with Judith Tannenbaum, *Exhibition Notes*, no. 39 (Winter 2012): 3.
10. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, 1934), 207, 219.
11. *Ibid.*, 207.
12. Kelly Walters, in conversation with the author, February 17, 2016.
13. Kelly Walters, "Hidden Beauty," *Manual: a resource about art and its making*, accessed February 23, 2016, [http://risdmuseum.org/manual/360\\_hidden\\_beauty](http://risdmuseum.org/manual/360_hidden_beauty).
14. Kelly Walters, in conversation with the author, February 17, 2016.
15. Kelly Walters, in conversation with the author, February 17, 2016. See also *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*, Maryland Historical Society, 1992–1993. Joint exhibition with The Contemporary, Baltimore.
16. Paulo Freire, *Education for critical consciousness*, 1st ed. 1973 (New York and London: Continuum, 2005).
17. Shawn Greenlee, "Substitutions," *Manual: a resource for art and its making*, accessed March 1, 2016, [http://risdmuseum.org/manual/331\\_substitutions](http://risdmuseum.org/manual/331_substitutions).
18. *Ibid.*
19. Shawn Greenlee, email correspondence with the author, March 10, 2016.
20. Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology or, What's 'Contemporary' in Contemporary Museums of Art* (London: Koenig Books, 2013), 56.
21. Jagdeep Raina, "Raqs and 'Raunik,'" *Manual: a resource for art and its making*, accessed March 1, 2016, [http://risdmuseum.org/manual/332\\_raqs\\_and\\_raunik](http://risdmuseum.org/manual/332_raqs_and_raunik).
22. Raqs Media Collective, "A 200 Hour Studio in Providence," *Take on India* 1, no. 2 (July-December 2015): 26–33, 26.
23. Homi K. Bhabha, "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences," *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin (Routledge: New York, 2006) 157.
24. Mela Dávila and Carlos Prieto del Campo (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía), Marisa Pérez Colina (Fundación de los Comunes), and Mabel Tapia (Red Conceptualismos del

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Sur), "The Archives of the Commons Seminar, Madrid 2015," *Decolonising Archives*, ed. L'Internationale Online with Rado Ištók (2015).

25. Prown, "Mind in Matter," 3.
26. See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
27. Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and their Public* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991), 113.
28. In her introduction to *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Kristin Ross offers a compelling read of Bourdieu and Rancière's contrasting points of departure in approaching emancipation. See Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991).
29. Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 13.