

The Monster Seminar explores questions of art making by focusing on the processes we undertake to “arrive” at final work. What methods do we develop or follow in the studio, and how do these define our artistic work and understanding of art in general? How do we cultivate our process, and what relation does process have to presenting final work? The Seminar draws out these questions in a speculative manner, exploring process as a deeply complex form of “infra-consciousness” – the madness behind every artwork. The Seminar will work through a range of theoretical frameworks, from psychoanalytic theories of desire and depression, fantasy and sublimation, love and guilt, to feminist notions of gestation and labor, in order to engage the artwork as a form of monster: the radical uncanny, or the absolute intruder. This will allow us to question the relation between process and presentation, and in what sense art is never fully what we expect. Considering how we may deepen an approach to process, and the “birthing” of the artwork, we will map out four key methods, including: The Incomplete, The Thing, The Gift, and The Joke. These will be put into play as poetic vocabularies and paths toward collaborating with the monster. The Seminar is organized as four lectures including group discussion and examining particular artistic works.

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Seminar 2 (Oct. 28, 2020): The Thing /

Last time we spoke about the incomplete and the unfinished; to think about process as something that never leaves the moment of presentation or exhibition; but rather, that haunts the work. This was founded by reflecting on subjectivity, as a state of fragmentation: how the self is shaped by a negotiation with absence, withdrawal, loss; leading to a range of methods, practices, which help us recreate the world around us:

*so creativity emerges as key to working through this fundamental state of fragmentation and incompleteness – we are in a way driven to reorder the world around us.

Incompleteness opens the question of the monster as well: again, if we understand the monster as a projection of what we fear, fear being often related to what we do not understand or recognize: the other that seems to threaten the fragile order around us. The monster is precisely what disrupts categorization, the order of language; it sits between or comes out of the dark; it is often related to the materiality of the body, in terms of what we often do not want to see: our own insides. These are pushed to the side, kept out of view, and the monster forces them back out – the monster is often grotesque, inhuman.

The monster then is extremely complex: it is the exteriorization of the insides, and therefore, it is very close to us while seeming to appear from far away: a stranger, a foreigner, an alien. This brings us to the question of art, to recognize how the art work or object is often the materialization of what we do not understand; we cultivate the unrecognizable, we approach the unknowable through art; aesthetic experience is founded on a suspension of meaning, an illogical logic, a sense of rapture, or poetic force, that delivers a kind of discomfort:

*as we often think, art works at showing us the marginalized, the repressed, that which is unrepresentable.

Extending from the incomplete, today I want to come close to the art object: to think about materiality, things, or what we will call: The Thing.

We'll start by focusing on the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan whose work through the 1960s extends much of Freud's thinking. Lacan maps out the question of subjectivity, or the organization of the unconscious. He would develop this through the three terms: the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real.

*the symbolic, as the order of language; the realm of the signifier: how we participate as social subjects within the symbolic order;

*the imaginary, for Lacan, is then the realm of representation: what can be imaged; this relates more to signification, and the images that are designated or registered; the world of meanings.

*finally, the real is understood as presymbolic, or prelinguistic: it has no representation, no image, therefore it is opposed to the imaginary; it is in fact impossible to image; it also resists the symbolic, it is outside language.

The three aspects or ordering principles of the unconscious can be elaborated by Lacan's theory of The Mirror Stage; the mirror stage describes the moment when the infant (under a year) is confronted with its own reflection; the scene Lacan describes is one where, as the Mother holds the child in her arms, she turns to face a mirror, pointing into the mirror to show the child its own reflection: the child sees itself, and it sees the mother pointing, and it realizes that it is separate from the mother: separation is initiated by way of looking.

*suddenly, it sees itself as an individual whose body is different and unique; this moment interrupts the primordial pleasures or unity of the subject; this brings the child into the world of the imaginary, as well as identity: Freud and Lacan accentuate this instant as a cut, a break with the mother, a separation that brings the child into the world of desire: for desire is set loose in this separation, and it fixates itself on other objects, even itself – the mirror becomes an instant of narcissistic identification: I must fill this emptiness with the pleasure of my own reflection; I complete myself through myself.

What in fact is happening is also the loss of the real: the real relates us precisely to what we can no longer have: this presymbolic, prelinguistic cohesion or unity.

*The real then always has a "traumatic" quality: it is experienced as rupture – the real for Lacan always breaks into the symbolic and the order of language.

What's important to recognize, is how the real is never representable, and yet, it shows itself nonetheless; this is what Lacan calls The Thing.

*the thing can be thought of a "remainder" that falls out from that moment of identification: in that instant of seeing myself, of realizing myself as an I, there is an excess, something that is cut off; that something is the Thing;

*as identification takes place, as I become myself, there is also an experience of alienation: I am only myself through a kind of estrangement, an alienation (from unity); so as we spoke about before, we are founded upon fragmentation, leading to recognize that there is always something "not-me" about "me"; this "not-me" is the Thing.

*the Thing is a kind of "empty center", a "nothing" at the center of subjectivity; a void.

*at the same time, this empty center, this not-me, becomes the first "outside" – the remainder that falls out from the moment of identification is figured as the "first outside", something foreign to myself: the thing in this way is always uncanny: *unheimlich*, the unhomely – the thing is always close to home; as a stranger, it lives always closer than imagined.

*finally, the thing comes to designate the order of the real, and takes shape through fantasy: we might think, that following the cut, and the entry into language, the symbolic, we turn back, seeing the real as what needs to be symbolized: while there is no returning, no going back, the real spins off into fantasy: it figures itself as "an impossible object".

From such a view, it may start to become clear how the art object takes on the status of the thing:

*it is interesting to reflect upon the degree to which artists work at things: it is somehow an obsession, yes? What is this strange science, this strange alchemy called art making? A type of laboratory, a type of magic, a type of mysticism? A form of therapy?

*Art making attends to the world of representation and of materiality; it dwells upon matter, pushing and pulling it; breaking and mending; molding and composing; we are busy with *thinging* the thing:

*as we spoke about last time, art making is often aimed at “de-sublimating” the order of the civilized, trying to provoke a relation with the unconscious, with the nature of nature, what we might call: the deep body – to destabilize the symbolic and the imaginary with things:

*things which never quite fulfill our desires, never quite add up: the art object is an impossible object, because it always fails beforehand;

*we might consider this in relation to the question of meaning: how is it possible to answer the question “what does it mean? What does your artwork mean?” We could argue that this is the wrong question, the wrong way of approaching the artwork, because the artwork is always on the side of “the inexpressible” – the “not-me”, the “remainder”, the “monster”.

*as a thing, the artwork troubles meaning, it provokes feeling, it is an attempt at materialization.

In thinking about things, we can return to DW Winnicott, who we spoke about last time, and his work with child’s play; as we discussed, play acts as an arena for the child to negotiate separation; play becomes a creative process aimed at filling in that gap left by becoming a subject, an identity; as we see, play often happens in the company of the parent – early on, children play in front of parents, are watched over; separation becomes a performance, a stage with an audience; the child knows it is being watched, watched over; within this space, the parent turns into an object; as Winnicott proposes, toys and playthings are essential to this original space of creativity; where the child substitutes the parent, inserting the object or the toy into a range of narratives, actions, games;

*the toy assists in the child working through separation, and helps in moving from “union” to “use” – where the handling of objects, the close material touch of things, the taste of them, slowly moves into a world of use: into the everyday.

Interestingly, Winnicott says that the child must destroy the object, and the object must survive: this is part of the difficult task of separation.

Toys, dolls, playthings, these are equally The Thing: they are maybe the first Thing, the first indication or marker for the real, the empty center around which we develop; the Thing is therefore also a kind of partner, however untrustworthy, however uncanny, however impossible;

*somehow or another, we must fantasize, because desire needs somewhere to go; if it can’t take us back, it must find objects and others by which desire is directed, and possibly fulfilled.

Coming back to the toy (we might think of the textile animal, which is so clearly a substitute for the maternal bond), I want to also think about the doll, or the puppet:

*this is more generally about the ways in which the inanimate object comes to life; this is clearly an aspect of playing, if not one of the fundamental moments of creativity (even a poetics): this scene of imagination, maybe an imagination that gets carried away, loses itself amidst things; a kind of otherworld emerges when playing, a play-world, which can also

include the child's body: fingers and hands, toes and lips, these can also participate in becoming-thing; where the animate and the inanimate cross-over, blend;

*the plaything, the doll, the puppet, these bring us close to the monster: reminding us how the monster is always underpinning the creative act; here, we can appreciate how giving life to the inanimate is a monsterring tactic or dimension; things, in other words, start to move; the world of objects, of matter, in coming to life necessarily upset the order of things: and the order of human perception: suddenly, we are not in control, we are not the master of nature; things rise up, showing their material agency.

So there is a joy and a terror in the puppet, the doll: they may participate in the pleasures of playing, an aesthetic enjoyment in projecting life onto things, and they may also turn against us, shattering the stable categorization of human and nonhuman, life and death:

*the doll, the puppet, may also open up to the figure of the zombie: which is the ultimate monster, for it radically confuses the natural order, the social order – the zombie quite literally returns to haunt the social order; it rises up from the grave, out of the soil, and strangely enough, it craves human flesh: the zombie wants to bite us.

*returning to the Thing, as a scene of fantasy, we can see how fantasy and desire, take us into all sorts of directions, some pleasurable and joyful others more terrifying and tortuous:

*we can see this in the ways in which the puppet performs, particularly if we focus on the scene of ventriloquism, and the speaking puppet.

*here we have the puppet and its master together; the entire game of ventriloquism is based on forgetting which is which: is the puppet in fact the master? This game of confusing the animate and the inanimate, the human and the object, is a scene of laughter: the ventriloquist is mostly a comedy act, and so we take pleasure in this confusion, but it is also a laughter tinged with darkness: often, the dummy plays tricks, is a trickster; a sort of revenge of the object emerges, where the dummy becomes devilish;

I want to just mention one detail here, which I think is essential to play, to animation, to creativity, and that is the question of the Hand / the hand is our first toy: and our first monster; before we can really grasp objects, our hand appears before us – it is suddenly away from me, I marvel at its ability, its thingness; and then suddenly, it connects to things, I grasp the objects around me, and they become extensions of my body: hand and object become one, and this assemblage starts to move, to behave, to create narratives; suddenly, it is a thing, I can even name it, and I do so by allowing the hand to disappear into the object – in other words, I create a puppet; the hand slips into a cloth, a bag, and this thing then stares back at me: we speak to each other.

*so there is a deep relation between the hand and the thing, in terms of the first outside: the first act of playing that tries to negotiate the real: to quite literally hold onto what has gone missing; to recreate it.

*here, we can appreciate the term “hand-craft” / where the crafting of objects, of artistic forms, becomes the work of the hand.

*the hand has its own intelligence.

Returning to artistic practice, I think we can see how the question of the animate and the inanimate is central to artistic process:

*there is an approach to objects and materials which clearly sets out to bring a kind of “radical meaning” to things, to draw from materials an extra-meaning, to literally, bring the material to life in new and unexpected ways:

*do we not fantasize there in the studio?

*in this regard, we might question how is it possible to speak rationally about our artistic work? It is no wonder that often we cannot explain what it is we do – or, maybe the question should be: why do we expect rational explanations when it comes to understanding art?

*if, in fact, artistic practice is about bringing things to life, about fantasizing our way through the conditions of fragmentation, about collaborating with the monster, about creating encounters with the real, it is no wonder there is often a moment when we say: I prefer that my artwork speaks for itself.

*This might in fact be the absolute truth of artistic work: to let the Thing loose; to confuse our sense for who is in control, who is doing the talking?

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Artistic examples:

Hans Bellmer /

the thing: to create a second body; its relation to dolls;
dolls are such an expression of hanging onto the mother;
*fetish: what replaces the missing object; obsession.

Henri Michaux /

poet, Mescaline drawings; disorienting oneself, process of “desublimation”

Mike Kelley /

textile animals / blankets as “transitional objects” (replacement of the mother)

More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid and The Wages of Sin, 1987

More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid is a chaotic assemblage of handmade dolls and blankets that Mike Kelley found in thrift stores. Kelley does not designate to whom more “love hours” are owed, but simply puts forward the condition of loving something too much, or of receiving too little in return—like the cast-off items that make up the sculpture. The title also conjures associations of guilt: when parents and relatives create these toys and blankets, are the countless hours of stitching, knitting, and crocheting a kind of penance, and for what? Do we expect children to repay the time and love lavished on them? Using Jackson Pollock’s large drip paintings as his compositional model, Kelley transformed the orphaned handicrafts into a swirling mass of unrequited affection that is beyond human reciprocation.

Annette Messenger /

Installations and sculptures, of “lost objects”: haunted imagination, and an aesthetics of “ghosting”.

Hanne Borchgrevnik /

Painting the house; repetition of the same motif – staying with the memory, the image, the home becomes a thing: an impossible object.