THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

"The Common Object As Art"

A Written Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition

by

Peter Greendale

A PAPER

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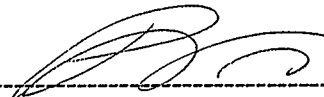
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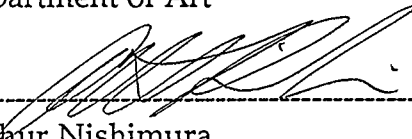THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

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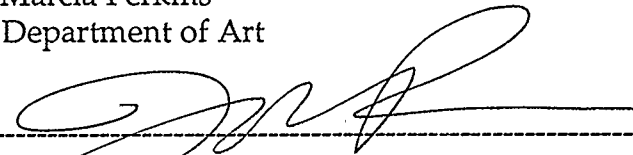
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ABSTRACT

"The Common Object As Art" is a paper in support of a thesis exhibition titled; "Allegorical Objects," written in partial fulfillment of the degree of Masters of Fine Arts at the University of Calgary. It deals with issues relevant to the use of common, familiar objects within the context of art.

I begin with a discussion of how various artists of the twentieth century have seen within the typically passed-over items of everyday life an arena for artistic consideration.

The following section examines the inherent limitations of modernist theory which has constructed the conceptual framework by which the common object has been employed in this century. This section also provides an analysis of the breakdown of that framework, allowing for the re-emergence of an allegorical mode in visual art.

In the final section of the paper, I focus upon my own art pertaining to the common object; relating my approach to the issues I have brought forward.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this paper to my mother and father,

Ingeborg and Gunnar Greendale.

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INTRODUCTION

The elements of everyday life have long been seen as viable motifs for the production of art. Through appropriation and reproduction many artists of the of the twentieth century have found within common and familiar objects outlets for their artistic endeavors. For some artists dealing with strictly formal concerns, common objects have served as the locus for traditional approaches. For artists of the avant-garde, familiar 'non-art' objects have constituted vehicles for commentary on the artistic status quo.

Yet, in both cases, concern has remained confined within a formally based, modernist conception of art. Effectively this notion of art, wherein discourse has been relegated primarily to the formal attributes of the art object, isolated art from involvement with issues relevant to its greater cultural context.

However, there has arrived on the scene artwork which manifestly challenges the formal and conceptual purity which form the underpinnings of modernist art theory. This shift in concern, in which art is no longer centered upon formal aesthetic criteria, is signaled by what Craig Owens describes as the re-emergence of the allegorical "impulse" in contemporary art. [1]

In my thesis exhibition, "The Common Object As Art," and in this, its support paper, I have explored how the reproduction of common everyday objects can function beyond the merely referential to operate as a critique

upon the culture from which they derive.

This support paper is divided into three basic sections. The first section consists of a cursory survey of artists who have in this century employed the common object as an integral part of their artistic strategy. This should not be seen as a comprehensive study of the topic. Such an endeavor would be well beyond the scope of this paper. However, a synopsis of selected artists' exploration of the area will elucidate, I suggest, the significance of the common object and its place in the art of the twentieth century. This brief overview will also provide an historical context helpful in the clarification of my own work discussed later in the paper.

The second section of the paper deals with the modernist theoretical foundations upon which those artists mentioned have based their artistic strategy. It deals as well with the inherent limitations of such an approach and how the re-assessment of that approach has affected contemporary art.

The final section is an examination of my own artistic strategy dealing with the use of the common object. Here, I will discuss the potential, supplied through re-presentation, for the objects of our everyday lives to supply meaning(s) beyond which they have traditionally held.

CHAPTER 1

THE COMMON OBJECT IN TWENTIETH CENTURY ART

Any study, however brief, of the use of the common object in twentieth century art must include the readymade work of Marcel Duchamp. His truly revolutionary perspectives, manifested in the readymades, have forever altered our understanding of what can be seen as art. Though never a direct member of the Dadaist movement, Duchamp has been labeled a "Dadaist Prototype" as his life and art embody the spirit of the movement.[2] He sympathized with the Dadaists' disenchantment with established canons of art, and their negation of what the established art community saw as the "sacred and inviolable" values of the existing order.[3] Duchamp, himself, felt that traditional notions of taste in art were reflections of a society that he considered aesthetically bankrupt. "Impression, sensations; the 'equipment' of what he called 'retinal' painting were deemed empty, merely sensual - insignificant."[4] For Duchamp, the negation of traditional values in art took form in the 'creation' of his readymades.

In 1914 Duchamp signed his first readymade, a common household object, a galvanized iron bottle rack. With the signing of a familiar item he had, as an artist, successfully extracted an object from its utilitarian status and placed it into the realm of art. Through this re-contextualization, Duchamp imbued the object with an authority it did not possess in its "everyday" context. He effectively "[made] the viewer aware that an anonymous

consumer product may acquire an aura if one concedes that its utilitarian reality represents only one of its many levels of reality."[5] Contrary to some interpretations, it was not Duchamp's desire to expose ignored aesthetic qualities of the object; rather, his gesture had to do with the artistic questioning of established notions regarding the status and identity of the art object and consequently that of the artist as well.

Duchamp's choices (in effect, his creation of the work) were based upon the objects' detachment from traditional notions of beauty. His selections stemmed from the objects' essential neutrality, their lack of the qualities seen as necessary by preconceived values in art. Duchamp describes the process:

> The great problem was the act of selection. I had to pick an
> object without it impressing me, and as far as possible, without
> the least intervention of any idea or suggestion of aesthetic
> pleasure. It was necessary to reduce my personal taste to zero.
> It is difficult to select an object that has absolutely no interest
> for us, not only on the day we pick it, but which never will,
> and which finally, can never have the possibility of
> becoming beautiful, pretty, agreeable or ugly.[6]

In 1917 Duchamp, under the name of R. Mutt, entered a piece of work in the 'Salon des Independants' in New York. His exhibit, a urinal, was rejected on grounds that it was immoral and plagiarized. The rejection prompted this reply from the artist:

> Mr. Mutt's fountain is not immoral. It is a fixture that you see
> everyday in plumber shop windows. Whether Mr. Mutt with
> his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance.
> He chose it, he took an article of life, placed it so that its useful

significance disappeared under the new title and point of view,
and created a new thought for the object.[7]

Duchamp's readymades were most significant for their disruptive nature, and the conceptual weight of his questioning of established values. By destroying the viewers' frames of reference, Duchamp attempted to alter our way of thinking, and to establish new units of thought. His work demanded our re-assessment of the artist's role as the creator of unique objects and of the intrinsic qualities of an object understood to be a work of art. Devoid of traditional formal aesthetic qualities, the readymades become art by an act of the artist extrinsic to the traditional concept of the object as art. By extracting them from their usual status as utilitarian items and recontextualizing them as art objects within the confines of the art gallery, Duchamp implicated the artist in the whole notion of art. Duchamp claimed that "everything in life is art. If I call it art, it's art, or if I hang it in a museum, it's art."[8] Yet, as Ellen Johnson suggests, while it was Duchamp's desire to "narrow the gap" between life and art, his readymades remain still an intellectual gesture, exclusively involved with an art issue.[9] The gap between art and life may indeed be narrower; it would, however, appear to be deeper than ever. Duchamp's re-assessment of the conditions of the common object as 'art' produced shockwaves throughout the art world. The aftermath continues to resonate to this day.

Dadaist reconception of the art object did not end with the work of Duchamp. The German artist Kurt Schwitters, associated with Dadaism as well, also recognized in everyday objects, a new way of making art. His work however found its origins not in the appropriation of pre-existing objects of

utility, but in the cast-off refuse found in garbage bins and dumps. Here Schwitters claimed the material for the production of his art:

> I began to construct pictures out of materials I happen to have, such as streetcar tickets, cloak room checks, bits of wood, wire, twine, tissue paper, tin cans, chips of glass, etc. These things are inserted into the picture either as they are, or else modified in accordance with what the picture requires.[10]

Much like Duchamp with his readymades, Schwitters formed recycled elements into original productions, thus investing those objects with new meaning. Unlike Duchamp, however, Schwitters's concerns were focussed on the aesthetic, rather than the intellectual. He believed that, mediated by the artist's sensibilities, the detritus of everyday life was capable of transformation into aesthetically pleasing objects. He believed that the significance of the constituent material was unimportant. His art of assemblage placed emphasis upon syntax rather than vocabulary.[11] The character of the individual object itself is lost to the context of the overall work.

In Schwitters's work the juxtaposition of the objects against one another "de-materializes" them, and they unite to become simply media for the picture.[12] As Schwitters himself stated, "The medium is as unimportant as myself. Essential is only the forming."[13] Thus, the use of the common object had become a device employed by Duchamp and Schwitters in order to reject the art establishment of the day. A generation later, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns employed similar tactics by using the common object to question the values of Abstract Expressionism.

Abstract Expressionism dealt with the projection of the individual directly through the paint media. The work of both Rauschenberg and Johns emerged out of the Abstract Expressionist movement, but finally both artists were to reject its intensely personal, self-referential attitude. Robert Rauschenberg opened up his work to the outside world through the inclusion of found objects and imagery of everyday life, in effect allowing an association between life and art which was not formerly possible in terms of the purity extolled by Abstract Expressionism. Rauschenberg, in his 'combine' work saw that objects "found in nature or in the trash can" could be "assisted," through the sensitivity of the artist, to become works of art. [14] One effect of Rauschenberg's approach was, in the course of the free, stream-of-consciousness method which he retained from Abstract Expressionism, that the particular character of the individual found object became secondary to his use of them. The objects lose their personal, private identity as they are transformed into the "inevitable oneness of the work".[15] The appropriated 'stuff' never reaches the status of subject in his work, but rather functions as constituent material - a part of the palette. A pair of socks was, in the artist's words, "no less suitable to make a painting than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric".[16] John Cage writes about Rauschenberg's work that "there is no more subject in a 'combine' than there is in a page from a newspaper, each thing there is a subject."[17] The success of Rauschenberg's work lies in its re-presenting of the haphazard fragmented nature of contemporary life. Through the artist's sensibilities, the qualities of discrete objects are subsumed by a larger abstraction - a metaphor of contemporary life.

Jasper Johns, a friend and contemporary of Rauschenberg, also employed found images in his art. Johns, however, took a somewhat different approach. In the 1950's, Johns appropriated common cultural symbols such as flags, maps, and letters, objects that by their very nature are two-dimensional, and used them as foundations for his paintings. Although both artists engaged objects and images from the everyday world, a fundamental difference in sensibility separates their work. Rauschenberg's approach is very personal, with his work maintaining a strong individual presence. Johns's attitude is cooler, more detached and intellectual. His approach reminds us more of Duchamp's cool ironic stance, than of the personal, free-wheeling conglomerations of Schwitters.

Johns's ground-breaking work of the 1950's was based upon what we call generic symbols - targets, American flags, letters - "things the mind already knows", but to which it seldom gives careful attention.[18] Echoing Duchamp, Johns does not investigate these objects in terms of their potential to convey established meanings. Rather, like the readymades, their selection involved the ability of "a thing not being what it was, but with its becoming something other than what it is."[19] The world of familiar signs with embedded meanings constituted the theater in which Johns performed as a painter, the ultimate effect of his endeavor being to drain the original symbol of its social meaning. Although the objects remain recognizable, in the course of their recontextualization as an arena for the act of painting they lose their socially conferred power and become formalist art. As Ellen Johnson explains, "In the course of his method Johns strips his objects [and symbols,]

of their fixed identity and cloaks them with the paradoxes of his mind."[20] Both Johns's and Rauschenberg's appropriation of common objects and imagery from the everyday world inspired many who, like these artists, felt alienated from the dominant Abstract Expressionist movement. Johns and Rauschenberg have been recognized historically as important intermediaries between the intensely personal stance of Abstract Expressionism out of which they developed, and Pop Art's cool appropriation of cultural symbolism.[21]

As with earlier movements in the twentieth century such as Cubism, Futurism and Dadaism, Pop Art emerged from new concerns within the realm of fine art. In this particular case, interest developed out of the pervasive imagery of the mass media in contemporary society. As Henry Geldzahler has said, Pop Art could be effectively understood as a sort of "two dimensional landscape painting... the artist looking around and painting what (they) see."[22] Although concerned with the presentation of the cultural landscape and using recognizable imagery to do so, Pop Art's focus differed from traditional forms of descriptive realism. In its extreme form, Pop Art sought to give the impression of the mass produced and mass marketed, reflecting the face of consumer society with which we are surrounded in contemporary life. With the arrival of Pop Art, it became popular to associate this new work, which also found its force in the reproduction of common everyday imagery, with that of the readymade work of Duchamp. For a short time in some circles, critics relied on the term "NeoDada" to describe the movement we now refer to as Pop. It soon became apparent that the motives of some of these artists were, in fact, quite distant from the radical nominalism of Duchamp and the nihilist precepts of Dadaism. While

Dadaism actively put into question the very values of society, Pop Art revealed itself as essentially non-judgemental, as an ambivalent presentation of the way we live.

Whether due to some narcissistic fascination with commercial imagery, or as a necessary relief from the inherent intellectualism of abstract art, the Pop Art of the 1960s found immense popularity within the general public. In its wake, Pop propelled the careers of artists whose work is perceived now as only peripheral to the mainstream concerns of Pop Art. Such is the case with the artist Claes Oldenburg.

As was common with many young artists beginning their careers in the 1950's, Oldenburg's early interests focused upon the hot Abstract Expressionist movement centered in New York. However, Oldenburg quickly became disenchanted with what he saw as the derivative work of the younger, second generation of Abstract Expressionism. More importantly, he felt disaffected by what he interpreted as abstract art's inherent detachment from real life. While sympathetic to its concern regarding the expression of emotional content, Oldenburg felt abstraction was not the best means of transmission. He looked for a forum in which to deal with emotional content outside of abstraction.

After a period of exhaustive self-analysis, Oldenburg discovered fundamentally contradictory elements within his personal nature. On the one hand, he felt drawn to the traditional desires of producing universal statements regarding the human condition and a means by which to communicate with the general public. On the other, he felt uncomfortable

with contemporary formal conventions and aspired to create art in a radical new way. Oldenburg resolved to create art reflective of the very contradictions that he recognized within himself. The result: art based on contradiction, wherein given statements of forms, through free association, bring forth their own reversal; an art of "inherent paradox."[23]

Seeking to involve the general public, Oldenberg became involved in the production of a number of environments, "The Store", and "The Street", one aspect of which involved the production of three-dimensional representations of objects typical of those environments. Before too long, individual objects began to become increasingly important: "the problem became how to individualize the simple objects, how to surprise them (through) fragmentation, gigantism and obsession."[24] The experiments of "The Street" and "The Store" established Oldenburg's association with commonplace objects. Common objects from the everyday environment provided the ideal outlet for Oldenburg's interest in projecting the "inherent paradox" he recognized in his own nature. They also satisfied a desire to communicate with a less specialized, non-art public.

Oldenburg explains his choice of subject matter in a section of his 1961 manifesto. He tells us, "I am for an art that scratches itself, that sits on its ass, I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap and still comes out on top."[25] The most mundane of objects inspired him, and like Rauchenberg and Schwitters before him he was drawn to what others ignored. Oldenburg's manipulation of common objects involves a process of free association. He reflects upon the inherent qualities of an object, and brings to

life the inversion of those qualities simultaneously presenting the object and representing its "inherent paradox". Through this procedure, a world of possibilities is created, any number of possible contradictory elements are made visible: hard/soft, black/white, colourful/non-coloured, rigid/non-rigid, small/large.[26]

Oldenburg's art thrives on contradiction. He places himself in a position between how an object looks, and how he feels about it at that moment.[27] The result is what Barbara Rose sees as a "distillation of form through content,"[28] a process whereby Oldenburg works with real objects in free play with his feelings and associations regarding it, leading to "significant form." [29] What results is the creation of art objects which; "like caricature have simplification and intensification of certain effects appealing to my specific appetites... but not caricature."[30] Oldenburg feels that his creative reproduction of common objects allows him the ability to affect a wide range of people, where abstraction would not. He considers abstraction inherently "divorced from life."[31] "It doesn't relate to everyday life... I am using the objects because I want to employ the world around me, which I feel a relationship with..abstraction is not complicated enough to do that."[32] Oldenburg takes pleasure in the idea that the nature of his work allows different people to be affected in different ways. He sees that quality allowing him to remain ever elusive, never tied to one set reading, always alive.

In 1963 Oldenburg created a number of reproductions of household items in vinyl, an approach he was to develop for several years. An example of one of these "soft sculptures" is "Soft Toilet" (1966). In this instance,

Oldenburg recreated that most common of household objects in a material with qualities contrary to that of the original. The soft, pliable quality of vinyl replaced the cold hardness of porcelain. Through the objects transformation it assumes human-like qualities, suggestive of our own bodies: "like it, we are covered with skin (and) are filled with things we don't know much about."[33]

The critic Martin Friedman, in commenting on Oldenburg's highly popular soft sculpture of the '60s, suggests that they seem to exist in an ambiguous area between figuration and abstraction, "not as indifferent to the body as non-objective art, yet not as fleshy as figurative art, they are somewhere in between."[34] Barbara Haskell believes that it is this middle ground which allows Oldenburg to present statements not possible in either figurative or abstract work. By avoiding the direct representation of the human body, he avoids the figure's associative and connotative baggage. Where we might have a problem accepting a human figure altered in size, texture etc., we do not have such a problem with an object. "A soft vinyl form is evocative; a crumpled black vinyl figure is alarming."[35] Haskell also makes the point that Oldenburg's art is revealing in that it shows that we create objects which are "created in the image of man" who "wants his own image or doesn't know any other."[36] Oldenburg confirms this idea, saying that his work is essentially self-referential, that he consciously projects his own physical qualities into his work.[37] Significantly, Oldenburg's works function metaphorically, thus giving rise to multiple associations and interpretations. Oldenburg's strategy is to take an object which interests him and to isolate it from its normal context in order to explore its expressive

potential. In a process of free association, he analyzes the object's inherent qualities and manipulates them in order to arrive at new, yet recognizable forms. This manipulation causes a suspension of our understanding of the common object, and with it, our relationship to the object as well. Oldenburg thereby forces us to reconsider, to reassess, the ordinary.

Oldenburg uses the common object as a personal form. His approach exists in stark contrast to the work of Andy Warhol. In his reproductions of ubiquitous objects and his images of consumer culture (ie. Brillo Boxes and Soup Cans) Warhol's work epitomizes the impersonal, mechanistic character of Pop Art. Everything, from the means of production, to the subject matter, to appearance of the work and Warhol's own life itself speaks of detachment. As an artist, Warhol can be seen as a paradigm for the nature of popular culture. What is ultimately "expressed" in a Warhol work is his detachment from his subject, from himself, and ultimately, "on detachment itself."[38] Warhol wanted his pictures to be artless, styleless, anonymously painted; in other words, he wanted to be like a machine. This desire is reflected in his mass produced images, in which the evidence of the machine aesthetic, rather than being hidden, is heightened. Warhol demands that the viewer sees the medium, which is, in itself, a representation of contemporary culture.

Warhol placed no value on originality or the uniqueness of the image. Images are, instead, reproductions of ubiquitous commercial imagery. Notions of "uniformity and quantity, standardization and replication" are by Warhol taken as virtues; originality and uniqueness hold no currency.[39] As

we see in Warhol's "Soup Cans" (1964), the identification of the actual contents of the object is irrelevant. Rather, everything is treated as a "flattened facade, surface oriented images that give no hint of what is inside, or even that there is an inside."[40] Warhol's work becomes the ultimate statement of disengagement. His representations, done in the 'style' of a machine, distance us from any possible attachment to the sources of his imagery. He gives grisly scenes of a car crash, or the face of a movie star, the same mechanical treatment and we receive them with equal indifference.

The public's fascination with the work and life of Andy Warhol did much to heighten the awareness of Pop Art. As the movement's popularity grew, so too did the number of art exhibitions which dealt with the vernacular of the everyday world. One artist who benefitted from the increased exposure of Pop Art was the painter Wayne Thiebaud. His presentation of such items as cakes and gumball machines resulted in his inclusion in a number of large influential shows focused on the Pop phenomenon. Although he welcomed the recognition, Thiebaud's choices of subject matter relied more upon the inherent formal qualities of his subjects rather than on any conscious ideological stance. While more orthodox Pop artists were "preoccupied with signs and sign systems", Thiebaud was and remains absorbed with objects per se - "the sensual perception of them, and the transition of this perception to canvas."[41]

For Thiebaud, art is an experimental challenge, each new work an exercise in "Translating...normal everyday impressions" onto canvas. "I think of myself as a beginner" he says, "sometimes that's the whole joy. If

you could just do it, there'd be no point in doing it."[42] When asked what meanings lie behind his paintings of ordinary objects, Thiebaud has consistently stated that his subjects are chosen primarily for the formal problems they pose, such as "how does one paint light" or "how does composition affect perception of scale."[43] His early choices of images - pies, cakes, icecream dishes, - all have basic simple shapes; circles, rectangles and triangles, allowing him the freedom of altering the objects any way he thought fortuitous or interesting in terms of potential compositions.[44]

Thiebaud claims that the metaphoric or symbolic are of little importance to him. "I have a somewhat deep suspicion about being too aware of the symbolic references or conscious message ... I tend to be quite formal in terms of the problems of painting, but not so formal in terms of subject matter."[45] He maintains that his own concerns lie primarily with the "formal idiosyncrasies" of the object.[46] In this way he makes little distinction between realism and abstraction, between the representational and the non-objective. "When you reduce the three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional surface, to me that's the language of painting."[47] Thiebaud's overriding concern for the formal aspects of his work extends beyond the object itself. The relative placement of objects on the picture plane is a fundamental factor in the compositional structure of his painting. Although his arrangements of objects are considered primarily for their strengths as design, the selective placement of objects has the ability to affect our understanding of the articles. themselves. Thiebaud's work is also distinguished by his unique interest in the use of shadow as a formal motif. Shadows are represented as solid areas of colour, as able to communicate as

their antecedents. He is appreciative of shadow's potential to "express various positions or attitudes."[48]

In the painting, "Dark Lipstick" of 1983, Thiebaud places the singular object in isolation, in a "decontextualized space."[49] By removing the object from its normal habitat, he rids the object of its functional and therefore "subservient" status, allowing the essence of the object to be made visible, and thus allowing it to "exist with a kind of respect of its own, as a single unique identity."[50] Divorced from their normal contexts, "common objects become strangely uncommon" and assume qualities and "significance normally denied them."[51] Thiebaud takes joy in this aspect of his work: "objects are for me, like small landscape buildings, or characters in a play with costumes ... when the painter creates a microcosm, a little world that he is able to manipulate and bring parts of it into existence, [he] gets downright pleasure from the experience."[52]

Thiebaud's presentation of multiple objects within the picture plane produces new considerations. Thiebaud will often employ a unique series format when presenting a number of like items. This format can be seen in "Shoes,(Shoe Rows)" of 1980 . Here we are shown two rows of women's shoes, neatly arranged - lined up as in a store. This particular arrangement of similar objects elicits provocative notions regarding individuality and conformity. Karen Tsujimoto in her study of Thiebaud's work makes an interesting comparison between this manner of presentation and Andy Warhol's repeated images. While both Thiebaud and Warhol deal with "mass produced consumer oriented displays", Warhol's work "documents

standardization". Thiebaud's work, on the other hand, deals with a "study of the dialectic between systematic repetition and individual variation."[53] Thiebaud seems fascinated with the "juxtaposition of similarities and dissimilarities, and the ability to discriminate between the two."[54] In spite of representing himself as strictly a formalist painter, Wayne Thiebaud does, as Alex Katz says, "paint social symbols, his subjects, ranging from store windows to arrangements of cakes comment upon our society."[55]

> When we line our shelves with blocks and panda dolls or
> bricks, guns, jeeps, and G.I.Joe monkey outfits, we are showing
> our preoccupations in life.[56]

Thiebaud's banal subjects of the everyday are a part of and a reflection of our society, our common culture. Yet Thiebaud does not comment negatively upon them. Rather, by "focusing on these banalities, [he] pushes them in the direction opposite to the familiar - mediocrity is raised to the level of significance."[57]

Like Oldenburg, Thiebaud employs objects which, because of their contextual banality, we generally overlook.[58] We are blind to those things which make our culture unique, and are "hesitant to applaud or criticize what is essentially us."[59] Thiebaud suggests that the store windows and their objects are "tattletale evidence of what we would like to be, or might be or should or shouldn't be."[60] He takes interest in how such articles in a supermarket are dealt with "ritualistically... [where] displays are contrived and arranged in certain ways to tempt us or seduce us or to religiously transcend us."[61] He sees the clerks who create those most common of displays

as folk artists who are innocently reflecting upon the culture at large.[62] Because of his commercial art background and preoccupation with formal artistic concerns, Thiebaud humbly describes himself as a "sign painter gone uppity." Some would, however, prefer the epithet "wordless poet of the banal", whose work, like that of Edward Hopper's, comments on the "comfortable desolation of much American life."[63]

The artists I have mentioned have, each in their own particular way, found within the common object new ways of making art. Marcel Duchamp's recontextualization of mass produced items taken from the domain of the real world and placed in the confines of Art was a strategic gesture which disrupted long-established notions regarding the form and status of the art object. Kurt Schwitters, too, made comment upon what could be called art. Where Duchamp capitalized upon the disruptive nature of the common object, Schwitters, however, saw within the familiar throw-away items of everyday life the potential to create formally based art. To him, there existed no hierarchy of forms: Anything could, through the creative mediation of the artist's sensibilities, be used in the creation of art. In the 1950s, Jasper Johns and Robert Raushchenberg renewed the tactics of Duchamp and Schwitters in the production of their own unique art. Facing the then dominant Abstract Expressionist movement, these two artists incorporated objects and images from the outside world to create work appropriate to their individual sensibilities. Claes Oldenburg also found within the common object a forum for self-expression. The inherent qualities of an object, (i.e. size, texture, rigidity), provided an arena in which to act creatively. And while Oldenburg played with the character of familiar items as a projection of self, Andy

Warhol's work represented the detached, character-less attitude of contemporary society. Warhol's flat, iconic approach in conjunction with his appropriated machine aesthetic render a movie star or a can of soup with the same ambivalence, an ambivalence reflective of our consumer based society. Warhol's work contrasts strongly with the primarily formal work of Wayne Thiebaud. To Thiebaud, common objects of the everyday world exist as an ignored, yet fertile, field in which one can create traditionally informed, formally based art.

The artists I have mentioned share a desire to introduce, albeit for their individual purposes, objects and imagery from the everyday world. Yet, as successful as these artists have been in employing the common object as part of their artistic strategy - and in doing so commenting upon the prevailing artistic status quo - their criticisms remain contained within the context of art. While they may in their art include imagery and objects common to the ambient, everyday world, they remain essentially non-judgemental with regards to that world.

CHAPTER II

THE LIMITS TO MODERNIST THEORY
AND THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE ALLEGORICAL

John Rajchman has interpreted modernist art of the twentieth century as falling into two distinct, and philosophically opposing, camps. On the one hand, there are those artists, sympathetic to a Dadaist nominalism, who felt that the concept of art as a specific, definable category of objects is not real, but that our assumptions regarding the nature of the art object are merely a historical construction. Arthood is conferred upon an object independently of any given aesthetic qualities. Given this philosophy, it becomes imperative for those artists to strategically display work which questions "what one is willing to count as art."[64] On the other hand, diametrically opposed to this notion of art are those artists who, while still regarded as belonging to the avant-guarde, saw art's true nature as existing solely within its formal attributes. Arthood is seen as contingent upon an object's possession of certain prescribed aesthetic qualities. This conception of art reached its apogee in the theories of Clement Greenburg, who holds "that art, in abstracting from external content, discovers what it essentially is when left to itself, or its characteristic languages, as its object."[65] Fundamentally, this radically modernist strategy lay in striving for an ever more refined distillation of the constituent properties of art, which resulted in art of a progressively minimal or essential nature.

Though these two interpretations of art are diametrically opposed, they

must still be considered as existing within the larger context of modernism. Even in as radical a gesture as that of Duchamp's readymades, the intent of the art did not extend beyond the confines of the art object, and as such, can be perceived within modernism's "play of stylistic differences."[66] While Dadaist nominalism dealt with an ever expanding field of art and modernist formalism saw the "progression" of art as ever more reductive, both must be considered within the modernist agenda.

> ...to be absolutely modern according to the requirements of
> modernism involves a reading of modern painting via its
> trajectory through a linear series of necessary stages of devel-
> opment ... (this) concept of the development ties it to a version
> of progress; to follow the trajectory is to go beyond, to be ahead
> of what is behind. Tradition is rendered diachronically as a
> series of surpassed moments each of which was necessary to
> its progress.[67]

It is here that literary theory can help to explain the limitations to a modernist approach in which discourse is confined within a media based play of stylistic differences. Modernist art is tied to the traditional notion regarding the 'righteousness' of the sign following its interpretation by Sausseure.

Ferdinand Sausseure saw language as constituted by what he called the sign. The sign is made up of the perceptible image, or in the case of verbal language, "the sound image" or word, which is termed the signifier, and the concept, that is what the image means - which is termed the signified.[68] "The structural relationship between the signifier and signified constitutes a linguistic sign, and language is made up of these."[69] Modernist art holds that

the relationship between the signifier and signified - that is, "between propositions and reality" are stable, thus inferring the possibility of language's ability to transmit essential truth.[70]

In Roland Barthes's article <u>Theory of the Text</u>, he describes what he terms a "crisis of the sign", "a point of rupture in the pretensions to meaning that underlie any work of art."[71] He states that our traditional notion of the sign as a "sealed unit" is a "historical concept, an analytic (and even ideological) artifact."[72] Traditional concepts of the text, and by extension, transferrable to visual art, are interpreted as following the classical model of the sign; " [that] is, on one side the signifier the perceptible and on the other, the signified, a meaning which is at once original, universal and definitive, determined by the correctness of the sign that carries it."[73]

Implicit in Barthes's conception "is the inseparability of form and content that serves as the foundation for classical aesthetics."[74] Following this logic, the author or artist is seen as the sole creator of unique products and it is the place of the viewer to "uncover", to "dis-close", to reveal the bestowed meaning.[75]

One effect of this conception of the sign as a "sealed unit" is the containment of discourse within the context of the individual work and its potential separation from the rest of existence. This self-referential notion of the intrinsic value of a work has been basic to those artists of the modernist tradition, including those artists whom I have mentioned as employing the use of the common object. Barthes, however, sees the modernist perception of the sign as a "sealed unit" in the process of coming apart, allowing

"multiple meanings" within "formerly inseparable terms."[76] While the modernist notion of the closed sign saw discourse contained within a self-referential mode, the effect of which was to restrain the concerns of art within its formal attributes, Barthes sees this new sign as an opening up to exposure to the social space beyond its formal attributes. "It is not closed upon itself as in traditional aesthetics; instead it fronts on the terrain of the external world."[77]

> Nor is its meaning singular and inherent in the object, but shifting, contingent, variable according to the context, and thus constantly in process... the central change articulated by this concept is from the text [artwork] as product to text as production of meaning.[78]

This "crisis of the sign", wherein the sign is perceived as existing not as a concrete whole but rather in a state of flux, can be seen to affect the way in which any given motif, including that dealing with the common object, can be understood. With the rupture of the self-contained sign, an object is not tied to inherent, specific meanings. Changes in context, among other factors, alter our readings, and hence, our understanding of the object.

As stated earlier, with the rupture of the sign, and with it, a corresponding self-referential structure, art is no longer relegated to issues dealing merely with the play of stylistic differences, but is rather opened up to exposure to the ambient culture. This exposure thus allows art, and with it art employing the common object, to act as commentary upon the external world from which it is derived.

Craig Owens suggests that this movement towards an art no longer

centered on self-referential, formalist notions is signalled by a re-emergence of the allegorical "impulse" in art. Allegory is defined as: "speaking otherwise than one seems to speak; a description of a subject under the guise of some other subject; an extended metaphor."[79] Allegory assumes the presence of "inner" meanings which are independent of the literal, surface reading of a text. It "attempts to evoke a dual interest, one in the events, characters, and settings presented, and the other in the ideas they are intended to convey or the significance they bear."[80] Allegory's "inner meanings" most often deal with "religious, moral, political," as well as "personal" or "satirical" issues. The underlying intent of allegory is traditionally exhortative, employed to "manipulate the reader [viewer] so as to modify behavior."[81] Clearly, the techniques and attitude of allegory conflict sharply with the precepts of modernism. Throughout the period in which modernism has dominated the approaches of art, the allegorical has been conceived as an unviable or repellent mode or as Owens tells us, as "aesthetic aberration, the [very] antithesis of art."[82]

Allegory clashes with modernism from several perspectives. Allegory's traditionally didactic and moralistic agenda are essentially antithetical to the modernist perspective of the inherent separation of art and society and which claims that meaning is intrinsic to the art-object. It is important to remember that modernism's earliest battles called for the disengagement of art from its possible functioning as an ethical, or moralistic vehicle for the enlightenment of the masses. To the modernist mind, re-enlistment of the allegorical mode to art's service would imply a regression to pre-modern times, and would be perceived as antithetical to the precepts of

modernist thought. Orthodox modernism's credo of 'art for art's sake' belies its willing or conscious disengagement from social concerns.

As most clearly exemplified in the medium-specific formalism of the Fifties and Sixties, modernism espoused a purist, homogeneous conception of art and claimed that within the very media of specific art forms, (painting, sculpture, drawing) existed the <u>essential properties</u> of art. It sought to maintain discourse within formal attributes inherent in the medium. Allegory, in this light, would appear inferior. For by its very nature, allegory is impure. It is "metatextual" and occurs whenever "one text is doubled by another."[83] The allegorist "adds another meaning to the image and the text becomes something other."[84] It is always more than that which it appears to present; its essence exists because of the concept of re-presentation.

> ...allegory [is the] possibility of an otherness, a polysemy
> inherent in the very words [or image] on the page; allegory
> therefore names the fact that language can signify many things
> at once... it names the often problematic process of meaning
> multiple things simultaneously with one word [or image] [85]

Given modernism's fixation on the purity and hence stability of form, the possibility of multiple readings of the text would be condemned as mere "rhetorical ornament or [superfluous] flourish."[86]

Hopefully, Modernism's conflict with the allegorical is now clear. Owens however, interprets the movement towards the allegorical in art as constituting a clear conceptual break from modernist theory. Whereas modernism "presupposes" the concrete unified structure of the sign, the allegorical implies by its very nature, that the meanings of language are not

closed but in fact arbitrary, and that an object or word can, "signify many things at once."[87] Owens argues that the allegorical mode is the enactment of what Barthes saw as the disruption of the "sealed unit" of the sign.[88]

A shift towards the allegorical can be seen in the recent sculpture of Claes Oldenburg. In 1984 Oldenburg, along with his wife and artistic collaborator Coosje Van Burgin, were approached by a Miami citizens' group about the production of a fountain for a downtown government complex. In investigating possible forms for the fountain the pair took great care in reading the site, assessing the physical and cultural context in which the fountain was to be produced. The result was "Dropped Bowl With Scattered Pieces" (1990). The work is a large construction appearing much as the title suggests a "group of orange sections and peels, with pieces of broken crockery dispersed by impact."[89] In describing the piece Coosje has stated: "every piece of the bowl is unique, yet they belong together", this is understood as reflective of the diversity of ethnic groups in the Miami area.[90] A strong note of violence is visible as well - a condition not unknown in the area.

It is apparent that there has occurred a definite shift in the concerns and approach of Oldenburg's art. Earlier in his career Oldenburg dealt with issues centered on himself, but his newer work, while still employing the use of common objects as motifs, extends the parameters of his concerns to involve issues relevant to the physical and cultural context in which his work resides. His reproductions of common objects now function quite differently than they have in the past, now assuming the capacity to transmit information beyond the referential.

As stated earlier, allegory can be defined as "an extended metaphor." It can be interpreted as the continuing metaphorizing of the readily apparent, referential (metonymic) meaning of a text towards a deeper, more significant reading. Craig Owens describes this property of allegory as "the projection of the metaphoric axis of language onto its metonymic dimension."[91] Due to the importance of this notion to the discussion in the final chapter of the paper a brief overview of the functioning of the metaphoric and metonymical forms is helpful here.

The metaphoric and metonymic are two differing processes by which we receive information from, and make reference to, particular objects. Metaphor is fundamentally "a way of conceiving one thing in terms of another."[92] Metonymy, on the other hand, serves primarily a referential function, where one entity is used to "stand for" another.[93] The example of the 'crown' makes clear the distinction between the two. As a result of a common cultural heritage, a crown is understood as a physically elaborate object shaped to fit a person's head. Through arbitrary decisions made long ago, that particular object was utilized to designate authority. The crown, but one part of royal regalia, has the ability to make reference to the greater whole of the concept of royalty. It is a single item, part of the larger concept of royalty, which has the ability to make reference to a greater whole. The relationship here, between the crown and royalty is metonymic. Due to its characteristically referential function, the metonymic form is typically employed when the author or artist attempts to provide a clear and direct exposition, as in the case of prose or realism.

But an object also has the power to make reference to original concepts to which it has not been traditionally tied. The representation of a crown could also be used to designate, say, a brand of beer. Yet here, unlike the aforementioned case where the crown is already understood as part of an established set, the association is new. The employment of the crown is a creative one, taking advantage of implied assertions of similarity. The brewer (or adman), with a knowledge of the crown's associations to such positive notions as dignity and quality, attempts to transfer those qualities towards his product. The relationship between the crown and the beer is metaphorical; it is the projecting of one entity's qualities onto another, to have the beer perceived in a particular, in this case positive, way. "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another."[94] Within the context of art, metaphor's ability to colour our perception of an entity aligns it closely with romanticism and the poetic.

Allegory implicates both the metaphorical and metonymic; Therefore Owens can suggest that allegory

> ...cut[s] across and subtend[s] ... stylistic categorization, being
> equally possible in either verse or prose. and quite capable
> of transforming the most objective naturalism into the
> most subjective expressionism, or the most determined
> realism into the most surrealistically baroque.[95]

Owens sees the re-emergence of the allegorical confounding the divisions which modernism has determined as art's "essential aesthetic boundaries", to allow an interplay of what were previously distinct artistic forms.[96]

CHAPTER III

MY WORK IN THE EXHIBITION

As with the previously mentioned artists of the 20th century, my art centers on the re-presentation of the common object. Like them, I feel that the familiar everyday object has the capacity to function as a viable aesthetic motif. However, unlike these modernist artists, I intend my drawings to function beyond the directly referential, in order that they may facilitate a commentary upon the culture from which they derive. I enlist an allegorical approach which would, I believe, speak most clearly to my intentions.

Allegory has been described as "the projection of the metaphoric axis of language onto its metonymic dimension."[97] The metonymic dimension with which I deal is that of the everyday world, the ambient physical and cultural environment in which we lead our lives. That environment is formed by the common, anonymous articles which surround us, but which due to their very familiarity, elude recognition. Our appreciation of the common object is usually based upon its utilitarian performance and this focus can leave us blind to its other potential "meanings."

Many artists in the past have seen within the passed-over, neglected items of our everyday world, material worthy of artistic consideration. I feel, however, that their consideration of the common object has been limited to notions of inherent beauty, or to the potential of so-called 'non-art' objects to

engage in modernism's continual play of stylistic differences, both ideas constituting essentially formalist issues. However, by adopting the allegorical mode, common objects are given the capacity to supply meanings differing from those to which they have traditionally been tied. This allows the representation of common objects to deal with issues beyond those merely related to formal concerns. Allegory assumes the potential to speak outside of its residency within an artwork, allowing it the capacity to comment upon issues related to the so-called external world.

In my drawing, "The Tie" (1991), I have depicted a men's tie oriented so as to assume the shape of a mobius strip which resembles the mathematical symbol for infinity. As an object, the tie's only utility lies within its function as a cultural symbol; it is a metonymy of the corporate uniform. Within Western culture the tie constitutes a particularized symbol of power. Re-presented in the shape of the symbol for the concept of infinity, the 're-formed' object assumes an allegorical quality - its metaphorical dimension as infinity is 'projected' onto its metonymic dimension, its cultural associations.

The reproduction of the physical object becomes 'metaphorized' within its new configuration. The tie is implicated in a plethora of cultural meanings with regards to business, power, status. Also, as it is embodied as the symbol of infinity, the image functions textually, as a 'field' for the free play of associative and connotative references. No single definitive meaning or interpretation claims privilege. Rather as text it functions without closure, thus leading to "the very plurality of meaning"[98] Though there can

be no final or concrete resolution to the drawing, the piece speaks to questions regarding the permanence and extent of male dominance in our culture. In "The Tie", as in many of my other drawings, the very title is implicated in the play of signification. Aside from its direct reference to the object, the word tie is also used to describe the act of binding or attachment. This notion must also enter into the "network", the "tissue of codes" that identify the text.[99]

In one of my larger drawings entitled "The Present" (1991), a white dress is draped upon an ironing board. Next to the dress is a small decoratively wrapped 'present'. This drawing differs from "The Tie" in that a number of particular items are represented. As with the previous drawing, the individual constitutive objects are ripe with symbolic import. Within our culture, the white dress symbolizes purity and virginity. Though less tied to traditional symbolic interpretation, the ironing board suggests domesticity and subservience. By including the 'present', I draw the image away from being read as merely a representation of a domestic scene. Through my selection of articles and their relative placement, I in effect, create the context in which the entire work must be considered. Rather than being interpreted as the reproduction of a naturalistic scene, the work elicits responses dealing with feminine identity and its possession within our culture.

Here, too, the title supplies another element into the viewer's consideration of the piece. The phrase, 'the present' implicates the concept of time, in terms of occasion, and like the alternate meanings of the title in

"The Tie", enters into the tissue of the text. It thus affects the viewer's possible readings by offering an extra dimension.

In the discussion of my work I refer to the conceptual aspects of my art through the use of established literary forms. I will continue this approach in the explanation of my formal methodology.

In his book, The Transfiguration of the Commonplace, the philosopher/critic A.C. Danto gives strong argument to the belief that the formal aspects of art can be successfully perceived as essentially rhetorical. Rhetoric functions to engage the audience through the skillful use of language, be it literary or visual; it calls upon the audience's experience in its agenda of persuasiveness so as to have any given information seen in a particular pre-determined light.

Because of its association with persuasion, rhetoric has been generally taken as manipulative and deceptive. This association has resulted in the term being met with almost universal contempt. However, in any work of art, there is a conscious, (or in the case of the automatists, a consciously unconscious) manipulation of the constituent visual elements. The artist manipulates his or her subject, if there is one, so that it is perceived in a particular light. The basis of rhetorical strategy lies in the artist, "not merely asserting facts", but in "transforming the way in which an audience receives [those] facts."[100]

By their very nature, Languages are almost never wholly objective. Verisimilitude is impossible in any language system. One can argue that

scientific language or mathematics approach objectivity, but the languages of man, visual or verbal, resist perfect translation. Any presentation which involves language is necessarily mediated. Therefore, - "rhetoric is unavoidable."[101] Thus, re-presentation of a subject is rhetorical.

Fundamental to my artistic strategy is the attempt to promote a heightened awareness towards the particular items which I have selected for consideration. As such, I have, in the course of their reproduction, attempted to present those items in such a way as to restrict attention to particular contextual aspects of the objects and away from their standard utilitarian codification. An example of this approach can be seen in my drawing entitled "Empty" (1991). Here the image consists of an unmade 'empty bed' upon which is placed an open, 'empty' suitcase. Beside the bed is seen an 'empty' white chair. All of the constituent objects in the work are presented with their ability to present emptiness, my concern being to relate the physical state of emptiness in the physical objects with that of the emotional state of an individual.

In his essay, The World as Object, Roland Barthes addresses what he interprets as the submissive status that objects hold in Dutch still life painting. In this genre, as Barthes notes, the paintings are literally filled with objects, individual objects which are "never alone, never privileged."[102] The character of the individual entity is lost in the busy context of a mass of objects. Their subservience is extended by the manner in which those objects are presented. According to Barthes, "Whether it is the crisp greenness of cucumbers or the pallor of plucked fowls," the objects are presented not in

their "principal form" but in a way which highlights their utilitarian aspects.[103]

I have in my work attempted to avoid the utilitarianism and subservience of common objects. What we see in these objects is readable only through our use of them. An object's utilitarianism should not debase it as the subject of aesthetic consideration. However, the very idea of utility and its place in the cultural hierarchy has made it so. By extracting various objects from their utilitarian context, I allow the common object to be considered beyond its standard prosaic reference and draw it into a redefined aesthetic context.

But how does one reassess an object's referentiality? One way is by isolating the object and recontextualizing it, simply distancing the object from its usual environment. In isolating the objects, the artist decontextualizes them, thereby removing the frames of reference by which we would normally define their relative size and function. Set off on its own, the object loses its status as a part of a naturalistic scene, and is instead confronted in terms of its own validation. This recontextualization of the common object allows other possible associations and connotations to emerge anew. For example, in my drawing , "Tin Heart" (1991), I have represented a cookie cutter. Typically this small household item is associated with romantic notions of nurturing or of love and motherhood. Decontextualized and rendered on a much larger scale, this object in its new context of aggrandizement, calls into question its standard traditional associations. In other words, the transplantation of a common object from a domestic space

into a readable artistic space asks the viewer to re-assess the very issue of standardization and emotion.

To explain my formal approach in the representation of common objects, I must here rely upon analogy; I relate the object on the picture plane to the actor on stage. The object is given center stage. This metaphoric device gives the depicted object the authority to command our complete attention. Extending the metaphor, I heighten the awareness of the object by the use of a stark, directional light source, the effect of which is to send dramatically cast shadows falling into the background, lending a sense of theater. In addition to setting the tone for the drawing, the shadow is also a formal device used to instill a sense of three-dimensionality. In my drawing "Whiter Than White" (1992) where the object is a packaged white shirt, (the same 'colour' as the ground) the shadow becomes a necessary element by which that form is defined.

In my drawing, I do not attempt to provide a photo-realist like representation of the object, rather I economize on visual information, highlighting the general form of the object and keeping inessential details to a minimum. This is analogous to stage actors, who, for dramatic effect will use make-up to exaggerate particular facial features and to exclude others.

I take a very traditional approach to the formal aspects of my work. For various reasons I have over the last few years consciously restricted my formal procedure to the use of compressed charcoal on paper. While charcoal is certainly among the oldest of art media, I have found it to be among the most flexible. I particularly appreciate its essential materiality, which allows

for a great amount of handling, and its ability to present everything from terse discrete marks to large areas of subtle tonal gradation.

There is an obvious reverence for traditional drawing and formal presentation in my work. Given my earlier statements regarding what I see as the confinement of modernism due to its preoccupation with formal concerns, one may perceive a conceptual conflict within my work. How do I reconcile the care I take with regards to the formal aspects of my drawing with its conceptual intent?

Fundamental to my procedure is an attempt to raise the common object above its standard prosaic status. Treating the common object with the privilege of an art object allows for contemplation of the item beyond its ordinary reference, providing the possibility for further consideration. As the critic Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen writes:

> When everything seems prosaic. we find ourselves
> deprived of the stimulus of astonishment that seems
> to present itself as a challenge to understanding[104]

My use of traditional techniques and formal approach stand diametrically opposed to that of the Pop artist Andy Warhol. Where it is my desire to involve the viewer with the subjects of my work, Warhol sought detachment. He wished his pictures to be artless and anonymous, and his trope of style reflects this desire.

Warhol appropriated and indeed intensified the characteristically flat, rough aesthetic of commercial photo-silkscreening methods. By combining

this 'look' with the use of primary colour and other visual devices he could effectively drain any 'personality' from his subjects. Every motif, be it a movie star or tin can, could by his method be reduced to a "flattened facade, [giving] no hint [as to] what is inside or if there is an inside."[105] By his mechanistic formal methodology, we are effectively distanced from any possible attachment to the sources of his imagery.

While Warhol's formal approach engenders a sense of indifference towards his subjects, it is my desire to engage the viewer with the object. In my drawing "Damaged Goods" (1991), I have depicted a tin can without a label and dented as though by impact. Early in his artistic career, Warhol too used the motif of the tin can in such works as "Campbell's Soup Can" (1962). In his approach to the object, Warhol appropriated the flat, graphic 'style' present in the commercially produced label and applied it to the depiction of the entire object, the visual effect being to render the physical object as nothing more than an extension of the label, leaving the object to which it is attached, literally, no independent existence. The effect is the antithesis of my own. In "Damaged Goods", I have given the tin can features that separate it from its standard commercial codification as a consumer item. Seen literally without a label, its contents remain a mystery. Separating it from standardization as well, is its unique disrupted surface, suggesting a myriad of potential interpretations. Where through his formal approach Warhol reduces his subjects to a physical and emotional 'flatness', I have attempted in this drawing to imbue the object with unique, suggestive characteristics. The rhetoric of my style is to privilege the objects with the capacity to speak beyond their standard prosaic situation.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper I have dealt with issues relevant to what I have defined as the common object in art. I began by providing an overview of the concerns of particular artists of this century to whom the common object has figured as the central motif in their work. Such a study makes it apparent that common objects have served as the foundation for art ranging from the most conservatively traditional, to that of the most radically avant-guarde.

As witnessed in the work of the American painter Wayne Thiebaud, the passed-over items of everyday life can provide a viable forum for the exploration of the formal problems of art. To him, the world of commonly neglected items serves as a rich resource in providing imagery for art concerned with traditional motivations involving the translation of sensual data into two dimensions on canvas. In a philosophical position diametrically opposed to that of Thiebaud's, Marcel Duchamp employed the common object as a strategic device by which to question just such a notion of art. Through the recontextualization of what he interpreted as aesthetically neutral, 'non-art', objects into the realm of art, he effectively suspended the aesthetic, the 'sensual', as art's imperative criteria.

Yet as disparate as their relative positions are, both must be regarded within the modernist conception of art as a discipline centered upon the continuous play of stylistic forms. With its focus directed at the relative purity or impurity of its constituent media, modernist discourse was tied to what are essentially formalist issues, effectively isolating art from the greater

social context. But as the theoretical foundations upon which modernism stands are eroded, so too is the notion of art as an endeavor isolated from the issues of society.

Manifest in the drawings which constitute my exhibition "The Common Object As Art," is an investigation into the potential, inherent through reproduction, of common objects to provide a commentary upon the ambient culture from which they derive. To those ends, I have enlisted what is best described as an allegorical mode in my drawing.

As opposed to illustration, which seeks to provide a relatively straightforward visual equivalent of something, allegory conveys meaning(s) on more than one level. Allegory functions textually, requiring the viewer to take an active role in the signification of available evidence. As Joan Simon states, allegory plays on the collective consciousness; manipulating recognizable imagery to elicit available meaning(s).[106] Allegory thus relies on two factors for its success - the use of recognizable imagery and the engagement of the viewer's imagination.

To involve the viewer, I invoke a rhetoric of style which highlights the selected objects presence thereby raising it's stature above its standard prosaic status. Seen as items of artistic consideration, the common object demands re-appraisal within a heirarchy of forms. Distanced from their typically banal reference and mediated through representation, the items of everyday life have the ability to assume a voice. Though the common object may only speak when spoken to, it may indeed have a lot to say.

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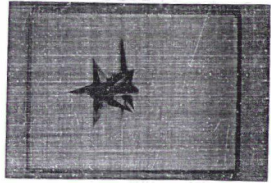
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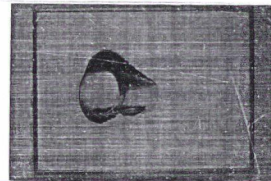Charcoal on Stonehenge paper
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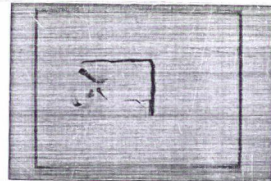
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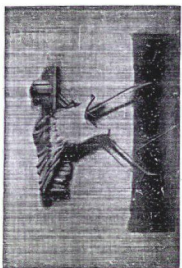
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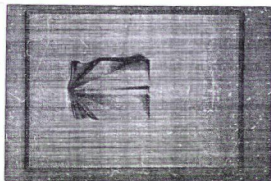Charcoal on Stonehenge paper
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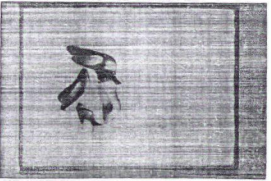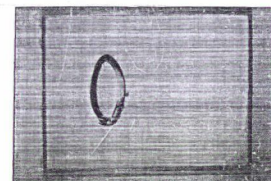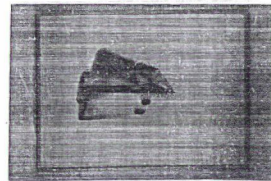Charcoal on Stonehenge paper
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