

Untitled 2023, Taxidermy Owl, Iron Bell With- out Clapper By Michael E. Smith

A speculative methodology.

by Hugo Hagger

Imagine that the white page on which this writing exists is as imperfect as any room, even a room that wants to touch zero. There are scuff marks on the floors and walls, painted lumps of polyfilla, and crumbs – evidence of people. The white page on which this writing exists smells – it smells of the gallery assistant’s microwaved leftover Dhal, of fresh white paint, and of your own softly fart.

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The artist is driving on an expressway in Rhode Island, they have one eye on the road and the other on the side of the road, they are alert to the discarded objects on the road’s dusty edge, the artist scrolls flea markets, they wait for something to happen.

(GUN to your HEAD. Think of two objects.)

The artist finds object number one on eBay. Object number one is a taxidermy Tawny OWL. The artist finds object number two at a market in Providence. Object number two is a black cast iron church BELL.

These objects have arrived.

Erasure of these objects is now impossible until the problem of them has been examined. They are here: A BELL and AN OWL. They are in a white gallery room which is the white page.

The artist begins un-working without destination – thinking as departure! The artist is researching as if one’s research can simply be one researching. They are researching as if research is “essentially nomadic, something that happens – an interruption, a hiatus in the very possibility for cultural (re) production.”¹

Bernadette Mayer asks us to “Take an object then spend a few days looking and noticing (making notes, etc?) what comes up about that idea (object), or try to create a surrounding atmosphere, where everything that comes up is in relation.”² So we do this.

The artist begins to unzip the objects. They search for patterns and doublings, ironies, antagonisms.

- ↪ Description of taxidermy owl
- ↪ Description of iron church bell
- ↪ Campanology (study of bells)
- ↪ Owl taxonomy (study of owls)

The artist becomes a cartoonist – they make the objects: BELL AND OWL cartoons

Doing this frees the object from the shackles of a limited corporeal physics, but in a way we can still understand and see them in our minds, it is object anarchy in childhood.

(We swing our legs and stuff cereal in our mouths while exposing our eyeballs to a technicolour language of radical plasticity.)

These objects, now they are cartoons, can suddenly animate, they can speed out of view and leave behind little tornadoes, they can burst through walls and leave perfectly described negatives of their bodies in the plaster/brick/metal, they can hover in mid air before plummeting to the ground in a puff of smoke – cartoons leave vapours, traces.

Objects, also leave traces.

These objects can now survive certain abuses because they are cartoons.

Because they are cartoons they also become an alphabet in that they hold simple values – Road Runner; smart, Wile E Coyote; foolish, cartoons are phonetic in this way – they are easy to articulate, to stretch, and squash, to kill and resurrect – they are also highly implementable and associative.

A cartoon bell is struck by a cartoon owl. The artist pulls on the thread of this. They elaborate on the inaugural, imaginative impact of these two objects.

Elaboration: A series of cartoon owls fly into a cartoon bell tower and ring the bell inside. They fall to the ground in a puff of feathers. The amount of owls that fly into, and ring, the bell corresponds to the hour of day. If 4 owls fly into the clock it is 4am.

The artist is into this idea so they take the uvula, or clapper out of our bell because the bell, in this instance, is rung by cartoon owls.

The artist has taken the clapper out of the bell – now the bell is partly broken, its politics have changed.

A useless object becomes more visible – it intrudes on our consciousness because it can no longer hide within its own utility promise.

The bell, because its use has been put into question has *more* PRESENCE. More? *QUEER?*

Like a word that appears: *wrongly*.

Malapropism is a really great way to imbibe an object with presence. Simple poetic intervention can emphasise

a distinction of our object from something readily legible, invisible, ‘useful.’

Sculpture, like poetry, is about how one THING (idea/object/word) makes contact with another THING (idea/object/word). An exercise in assemblage adds emphasis to this.

One THING can be held tightly against another THING with a tourniquet, one THING can be screwed to another THING, taped violently to another THING – one *thing* can make contact with another *thing* like how a ballerina’s pointed toe slides a faint semi-circle in a varnished wooden floor, or a pillow feather lands on a sleeping baby’s eyelashes.

PRESENCE is connected to use. PRESENCE is also about a compression “elongated with torque”³ PRESENCE happens when a kind of moving stasis is felt. Darren Bader describes it like a “static or slow track long-shot in a film where time clearly lapses but you are forced to remain.”⁴

These kind of antithetical energies, (moving stasis, elongated compression) can be expressed through fixture – one THING to another THING. The object in a sculpture that impacts a different object in said sculpture, delicately, like a feather landing on an eyelash, does so again and again for however long the objects are arranged that way.

How the atoms in one object interact with the atoms in another are where the sculpture HAPPENS.

A synaptic problematics; objects are contagious, they can colour one and other, dominate, subjugate, collaborate with, resonate with, kiss, edge, and fuck each other. Issues of time, power, scale, weight are brought up through relation.

The artist may italicise a moment of connection or they may turn down that moment. An investigation of objects might inform these decisions of fixture, but it also might be an instinctive choice, a haptic choice; a moment of connection and the intensity of that moment of connection may just feel right, *or feel wrong in the right way*.

Liz Magor: “I can use the physical quality of things, like gravity, transparency, or flexibility, as analogs to social forces or psychological conditions.”⁵

Understanding an object’s physical density, transparency, flexibility and weight. Understanding an object’s hermeneutic density, transparency, flexibility and weight.

In 2023 the artist lays a piece of transparent sheet over a faux leather sofa. Transparency is often a red herring

when in the habit of disrupting signs. Transparency can indicate a truth revealing, a window, an imminent revelation; “It is sunny, I think I will take a walk.” But transparency can also signal an inverted truth; good PR, subterfuge, *like; we as an institution are transparent about our historic involvement in...*

Note: Obviousness is a baited hook.

Death has a density, the artist handles a skull in 2020. The artist understands that to make the sculpture happen, the artist must aerate the skulls referential density of “To be or not to be.”

Contemporaneity; fashion, technology, media; objects that are more entropic, i.e carry speedily defunct references, are useful to nebulise dense universals and assumptions.

The poem or the exhibition is a pressure plate. When weight is distributed correctly the door grinds open sweeping away the bones of the artist’s failed forebears, which are the skeletons of the artist’s previous attempts.

In 2020 The artist puts dry, long handled gourds in a skull’s eyeholes. They are surprised cartoon eyeballs!!! Impertinence signals a virtuosic object freedom. The artist smudges the punchline of a visual gag with material curveballs.

But the gallery room is also an object. The gallery room is full of itself.

Your reader is an object too – I digress.

The artist digresses, but this is totally useful to them in the situation of found objects. To digress is to ingress.

↪ Evolution of bells

↪ Evolution of owls

Morning thought:

The idea of sounds being swapped. A bell is struck and screeches. An owl opens its beak and chimes.

The artist pursues ideas of sound further.

The artist hides the taxidermy owl inside the bell. The taxidermy owl is now only visible in the material list. The artist enjoys this concealment.

ANAGRAMS teach us something about objects through semantic atomisation. A lesson in everything hiding in every-thing else. We challenge a word’s hermetics, we blow on the word like a dandelion.

BELL OWL, bellow, below, bowel, elbow, bell, blew, blow, bole, boll, bowl, lobe, loll, lowe, well, bel, bol, bow, ell, lob, low, obe, ole, owe, owl, web, woe, be, bo, el, eo, ew, lo, oe, ow, we, wo.

(Etymological note: The word bell is also said to be derived from the old English bellan, to roar, to make a loud noise. Which later became 'bellow'.)

A word reduced down to all its possible two letter words becomes a series of grunts, meows, and warbles – these disrupt certain social contracts which is productive when in pursuit of a certain kind of PRESENCE. Bellow these meows into a white gallery room full of people, and the social order, contingently cloaked and upheld by language and legibility are momentarily exposed by the pariah sound.

digress=ingress.

The owl in the situation of the cartoon has made contact with the bell violently. The artist wants to know how they might express this (objects need not touch to make contact, remember the room is also an object) the artist becomes the cartoon, the artist becomes the cartoon owl because the artist has granted themselves certain freedoms. The artist walks circles around the objects and tells them a story:

I am an OWL – a technology of time. I fly at night and my downy fringed talons dip into the side of a squirming mouse, *dies*. I cruise the crenelations of a castle and swoop cartoon chimneys – near miss! (near misses are a game for the most rehearsed owls with the most finely tuned wings).

The artist is fixed on the owl and the bell – they are in intense thought. Their right hand is in a fist against their chin. They search for patterns and doublings, ironies, antagonisms. The curator drops in to chat with the artist about titles, the curator stands next to the artist and self consciously mirrors the artist's pose. No title has yet emerged for *any* work in this show so the artist says to the curator that they are all untitled. The curator gives the artist a vague compliment and then leaves.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

"English Weather comment."

"Yes. English Weather rejoinder."

The artist begins circling the objects and is the cartoon owl again.

I dip my index feather at the last micro second

to avoid flaming arrows – I turn quickly and then sloooooowly in a big beautiful slow-motion circle. The pigeons I goad flap loudly and stupidly away from my swoop; they are prosaic flyers. They buffer.

A sense of an ending comes in the form of an invective breeze that rudders me carefully back toward the city centre, toward a tall, BELL tower with moss and verdigris in its brick tooth gaps. Over the bustling of late night retail and pub loving public.

I am flying in a line behind two other owls, strangers. I do not know them, but recognise a familiar pathos in their expression. None of us speak. We fly in an unnatural sentence, in perfect metre we stride smooth and equidistant through the blue night toward the bell tower. Now, without wince or hesitation, without the song of nervous pleading that sings; please let me live, hunt, and swoop, let me dip my claws into the side of mice dies, and cross seamlessly from city into forest. One by one we crash into the bell tower's big iron BELL.

DONG. DONG. DONG (3 am).

It is 3am. The artist is a night owl. They spend all night in the white gallery room (which is the white page) with their objects. They articulate ideas through fixture. They move things about. They experiment with vapours. They stretch, kill, and resurrect. They write as if one's writing can simply be *one writing*. The artist only has one owl so they place the one owl they have exactly one metre from the round bell, in the position of where the number '1' would be on an analogue clock.

Something maybe happens.

The artist becomes a cartoon bell because the artist has afforded themselves certain

I am a big iron BELL – a technology of sound. My big iron uvula has been removed. I am useless and so become visible. Hello, I intrude on your consciousness, I am a word used wrongly, move me around in your mouth, or, if you are looking at an image of me on your computer move me around with your mouse *dies*, zoom in, out, articulate me, chase me! I am a partly defunct bell in a tall bell tower overlooking a medieval city, I am struck hourly by consecutive owls.

“Somebody told me you sound like an owl.”

“Who?” I say,

“Who!?”

DONG DONG DONG DONG (4am).

The artist sighs having descended into something facile and not in a useful way. It is 4am. The artist’s eyes become blurry, they sit on the floor in the corner of the room, they look at the bell and the owl, they roll the dregs of their coffee around in the bottom edges of their mug. They put on their coat and leave the room to go back to their hotel. Before they shuffle out, the artist turns off the light without looking – the artist has learnt their room.

Meryl Streep is said to go and feel every object on set before her scene. She learns her room. Meryl’s rigorous feeling makes her a master of props, a master of timing – she fills objects with time through performance. A silver crucifix dangling on a necklace is thumbed in a way that expresses a long worn relationship, between her character and her prop.

The artist counts imaginary owls flying into imaginary bells, the dead cartoon owls that create tall piles in his mind are the wastes of avarice. He thinks about migration, about labour, time, and the nation state. “Birds flying is always seemingly about transcending national borders, animals don’t have to pay to participate in their own life.”⁶

The taxidermy owl is proof of payment, a receipt?

A coercion of nature? Of decay? An entropic perversion?
The owls ring the bell *dies*, they pay to participate in their lives.

The world closes in as the artist’s eyes slowly close,

A pillow feather descends from darkness and lands delicately on the artist’s eyelash, the artist’s eyelid twitches.

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The artist is often called a minimalist.

The artist is from Detroit. Links have been made to the situation of civic dereliction, closure, and mass exodus (‘white flight’) in the post industry city, and how the artist might manifest emptiness as a kind of eviction metaphor. The artist leaves a lot of white space in between his objects. This is perhaps a reference to both the luxuriant sparseness of wealth, but also to ideas of poverty and paucity.

The writer Mary Robinson is asked how she felt about being called a minimalist.

“I detested it. Subtractionist, I preferred. That at least implied a little effort. Minimalists sounded like we had tiny vocabularies and few ways to use the few words we knew,” She says.⁷

Ghislaine Leung echoes: “Minimalism invokes precision, a certain economy, whereas subtractionism removes, it leaves these dirty looming tears. It’s editorially analogous to moving image.”⁸

Subtractionism>Minimalism

All writing is subtraction, we subtract all the words we don’t choose.