

Spring 2020

Embedded: The Bed as an Art Object

Maya Annika Teich
Bard College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2020



Part of the [American Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Art Practice Commons](#), [Contemporary Art Commons](#), [Feminist Philosophy Commons](#), [Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons](#), [Metaphysics Commons](#), [Sculpture Commons](#), and the [Theory and Criticism Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Teich, Maya Annika, "Embedded: The Bed as an Art Object" (2020). *Senior Projects Spring 2020*. 160.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2020/160

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

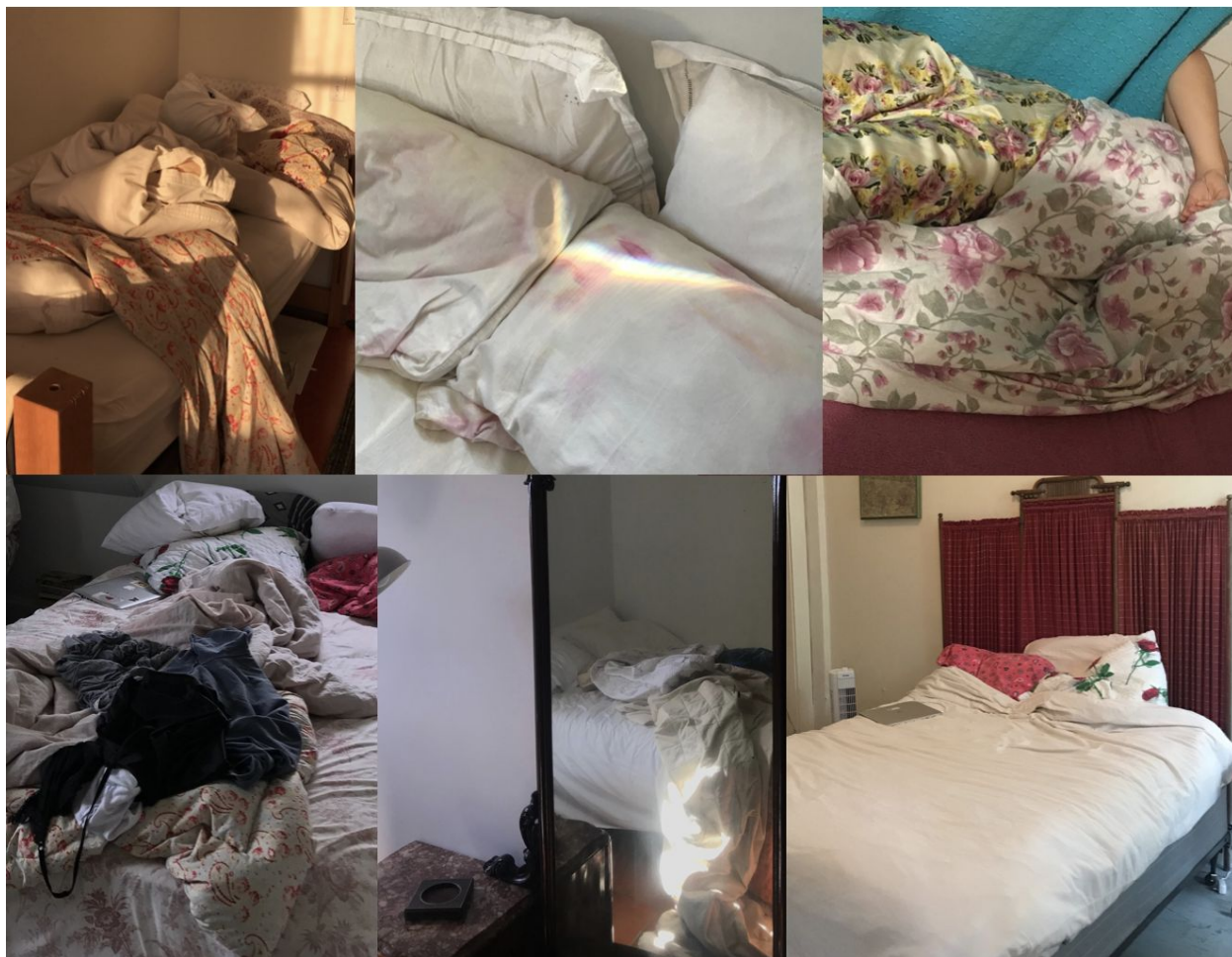
Embedded: The Bed as an Art Object

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Maya Teich

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2020



Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my professors at Bard for instilling me with a profound love of knowledge, curiosity, and thought. Thank you Laurie Dahlberg and Marina van Zuylen for your help on this project. Thank you to Susan Merriam, my advisor. I constantly feel histories, concepts, and notions I thought I had understood open, complexify, and entrance me, simply after hearing you utter a sentence. I have thought about my ideas with more fascination and regard in this past year of being your student than ever before.

Thank you to my mom, Bettina, who is like fresh air - everpresent, supportive, and true. To my dad, Douglas, who's love for, and interest in, all facets of life never ceases to teach and inspire me. I'd like to thank my brother, Felix, for cherishing and sharing emotions with me, and for his friendship. Thank you to my Nana Soup, for whom art is much of life. Art and life is from you.

Lastly, to my friends, who make my memories dreams and fantasies. Like glass in the sand, you are found, beautiful, and treasured indefinitely.

Table of Contents

Introduction: Fabricated Sensations	4
Chapter One: Assembling the Bed	12
Chapter Two: Performing Associations	28
Chapter Three: The Object Language of Witness and Experience	40
Chapter Four: Charismatic Attraction and Contextual Positions	55
Conclusion: Matters of the Heart	69
Images	72
Bibliography	81

Fabricated Sensations

I am 5 years old in the blue-grey mist of a Massachusetts beach. The time of day is lost upon me. My parents are busy consoling me in the parking lot and I cannot keep my eyes dry, because I have lost my flip flop.

With age, and its accompanying loss of memories, my sense of trust in this moment is wavering. My emotional connection to this instance proves to be potent, and has compelled me to ask why I had been so attached to one shoe, a flip flop nonetheless. Perhaps I was distraught because one foot was flush with the sand, because the shoe was my favorite, or due to the fact that losing one half of an object was too much to bear, when I could have inhabited a world where both were present.

Soon thereafter I forgot what the flip flop looked like, but the sense of loss survived. The attachment I felt towards those flip flops, and successive objects, has never ceased to affect me. After that moment, I would continue to treasure my things, ostensibly accumulating beauty and personality through the possession of objects. When writing essays in high school I would choose prompts that would allow me to ponder my room and my comforter, displaying my devotion to inanimate things. I stopped enjoying sleepovers soon into teenagedom because a night apart from my room seemed too long. These elusive feelings regarding inanimate objects seem complex, even to me. My own relationship to my bed has always been a sacred one, intimate and exclusive. I have often wondered what has compelled me to see my bed as an extension of myself. To this day, my deep-seated connection to objects, to my bedroom, seems irregular and yet integral to my personhood. My fascination with objects raises a question: am I materialistic, or sensitive?

While beds have been used in painting, drawing, and sculpture for centuries, usually as a backdrop, it seems likely that the first bed portrayed as an art object in and of itself was in 1955, when Robert Rauschenberg made an assemblage piece entitled, *Bed*. (Figure 1) The pillow and comforter that were included in the piece were owned and previously used by Rauschenberg. Since then, beds have emerged in a multitude of contexts, wherein artists have photographed them, rendered them out of found and personal material, or used them in performance. I believe that within the bed there is deep, potent meaning that has called artists to (re)create it. In this senior project, I will examine how the bed as an art object produces meaning through multiple lenses of art historical analysis. I argue that beds are evocative of emotional and temporal experiences, many of which are profoundly memorable. I will show that the bed as an art object (as opposed to an everyday use-object) has what might be termed an ‘agency,’ which invokes these associations for the viewer.

The handful of the artists I will be discussing have not only made works including the bed, but have also spoken on its behalf - locating it as a compelling object because they have had emotional, sensational, and potent contact with it. In 1979, Sophie Calle photographed 45 participants on her bed, during their hours of sleep. (Figure 2) Watching another sleep is an intimate act, which is usually left for the bed to witness alone. Calle creates a temporal experience in the bed, in that there is duration within the *hours* of sleep. The work’s success is based on the resonance of the bed and viewer, insofar as they can relate to the experience of sleeping in a bed. Calle had a desire for participants to “give” her a few hours of their sleep, to come and sleep in her bed, to “let themselves be looked at and photographed.”¹ *The Sleepers*

¹ Sophie Calle, *No. 1: First Works by 362 Artists*, 70-1.

touches on the way the use of the bed, as a location where intimacy, time, and experience happen, could fulfill Calle's desire to see her participants more closely. By way of the bed, Calle could find contextual, intimate, bodily relationships between that participant, the world, and their experience - all of which could not be revealed in another setting.

Calle, then, has used the bed as a space for understanding and witnessing more about the participant, displaying that an object may have significance beyond its function. The bed has experience that it participates in and witnesses, which gives it a multitude of intimate associations - each specific to every one of us who inhabit a bed. Therefore, once the bed is displayed in an artistic context, these associations are sparked by the bed in the mind of the viewer. The bed as an art object announces its own agency that is related to, and shared with, emotions, memories, and bodies. The associations sparked by this complex object are nuanced, and can be analyzed through a variety of perspectives. That is precisely why, for this senior project, I will analyze the bed in four chapters, each with a different analytic lens.

My goal is twofold: one, to interpret the bed art object in its complexity, and two, to make a case for art historical analysis that is geared towards the positionality and recognition of the interpreter. In other words, this senior project is one example of the way in which art history may grow - to consider each object as containing infinite readings, each dependent on where and what you are seeing.

In the first chapter, I will analyze two works, Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed*, and Janice Lester's *Personal Space*, focusing on the historical context in which they emerge. (Figures 1 and 3) Both of these works are early examples of art featuring a bed, and give us a sense of how the bed was first conceived in artistic terms. I will argue that within the bed artwork, the physical

material used is crucial in conveying its conceptual meaning. Unlike oil painting, and other mediums of the sort where materials are used in their transformation, to *become* a representation, in bed sculptures the material of the bed (comforters, sheets, frames) are preserved. Because of this preservation, they remain legible by the viewer as being a part of a bed. In this chapter, I will argue Rauschenberg and Lester retain the coherence of the beds materials to literally represent a bed, while also transforming the state of the materials enough to promote commentary.

The association of the bed with domestic space has made it appealing to the contemporary, and “feminist” artists. The bed works made by Raushcenberg and Lester are both reflective of artistic periods in which the artists’ choice of material, technique, and reception were associated with their gender. In this chapter, I do not wish to essentialize gender in its relationship to the bed, but rather explore these two works in their making as a response that is contingent upon the maker’s experience, wherein gender is a part. Rather than generalizing bed sculptures and their history, it is important for me to point to the history of these two works in isolation.

In the second chapter, I will show that the bed performs an absent body. The performance of an absent body is integral to the bed in that it suggests the body while simultaneously eliciting the viewer’s own experience. I will be discussing *Mattress Performance* and *Mama Bed*, both of which display the absence of the human body by way of the presence of the bed. (Figures 4 and 5) In doing so, the bed’s facility for emotional, memorial, and experiential potency is highlighted. As the poet Linda Hogan writes, “Sometimes I see the dress of muscle and flesh worn by these bones, and wonder why I can’t heal myself, why I can’t change the body clothing

as some believe, and let the bones be free.”² The desire to break free of, while holding near, ideas of material relationships which Hogan references rings true among creators who have portrayed the bed. Relationships are conceived of between nonhuman and human alike, wherein material and body are confused and related. These materials come to represent more than fabric when they hold experiences and memories, both as a participant and witness. The bed, then, is a transient space of habitation at one with the body, which causes it to recall present and absent experience, use and fantasy.

In chapter 3, I will use ontological theory to analyze the agency of the bed. The bed, as an art object, is meant to transcend its literal meaning - one of functionality. To view it within an aesthetic context contradicts its inherent designation. When you see the bed by itself, in a museum, it's not your bed and you cannot sleep there overnight. You are meant to interpret a “thing” that you cannot use fully. I will explore qualities of the object that facilitate its transcendence from an object of everyday use to one in which the object “speaks” both physical and emotional memories, which are evoked for the viewer.³ For this chapter I will be analyzing Doris Salcedo's *Untitled* and Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled*. (Figures 6 and 7) To explore this relationship, I have referenced *Object Oriented Feminism* as it has responded to *Object Oriented Ontology*. Ontology, here, is used as an entrance point to understanding the object and

² Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman, *Material Feminisms* (Indiana University Press, 2008), 252.

³ “Design / Privilege” The ability to discuss the bed as an aspect of personhood, rather than a form of utility, is a privileged one. Interior design and the aesthetics within it have been constructed as a marker of one's likes and dislikes, therefore linked to identity. I would argue that the artist's ability to transform the everyday utility object into one that tells us information about the self, society, gender, emotion, are all derivative of a privileged position in which the utile supersedes into an object that can be inquired, critiqued, dispended, aestheticized. To look at the bed beyond a shelter in which you sleep is to participate in the world as a beneficiary of multiple constructed systems at play. See: Lucinda Kaukas Havenhand, “A View from the Margin: Interior Design,” *Design Issues*, vol. 20, no. 4 (2004), 32–42.

subsequently its relationship to personal experience.⁴ In order for a person to participate functionally in everyday culture entails a separation between the user and the object, so that inanimate objects may be used more readily.⁵ It is *easier* if one delineates the self as the agent apart from the object, in order to justify the use of the object as a tool. In everyday use, one doesn't assign this agency to a table, chair, or bed. Delineating a subject and object creates a practical dichotomy for use.

However, when one has complex feelings for, about, or like the object, the dichotomy between agent and object is confusing. The relationship between the two is prescribed for utility, and therefore ignores sensations and feelings between one another. Ontology, however, tries to find the agency within all entities (including objects) in an attempt to locate the nature of being within them. Ontology views objects as having agency so that interactions between two entities are more visible. In this chapter, I will explore the experience of the “person” and the “thing,” as they are intertwined in ways that are overlooked or ignored. The works of Salcedo and

⁴ Newer ontological theory, such as OOF, wishes to veer away from anthropocentrism. During this political era, where the climate is deteriorating and the feeling is of the utmost apocalyptic, a wish to adopt a more “sustainable” viewpoint seems like a small request. Feminism, in its intersectionality, requires an ecological awareness that validates a biocentrist way of participating in the world. Thus, for this project, attempting to change our understanding of objects, so that we may interact with them, each other, and space with a deeper feeling, is one goal. To implement an ontological viewpoint in the relationship between humans and objects alike lends itself to a more sensitive, long lasting attentiveness as it incorporates feeling into everyday use.

⁵ “Psychology” I have read texts that discuss the psychological understanding of objectification (Szymanski, Dawn M., Lauren B. Moffitt, and Erika R. Carr. “Sexual Objectification of Women: Advances to Theory and Research,” *The Counseling Psychologist* 39, no. 1 (January 2011): 6–38.), and understand that the way objectification is experienced (through familial practices, sexual encounters) have serious effects on mental health and behavior. While this experience is valid and important, for the purposes of this essay I will not discuss the psychology as much as the ontology, philosophy, and materiality of objects and people, and a few iterations of objectification.

Gonzalez-Torres are opportunities in which the agency of the object, and its experience, is conveyed.

Lastly, in chapter four, I will be exploring ontologist Timothy Morton's theory of an object's "Charisma." I will also be using texts by Walter Benjamin, Sara Ahmed, Seph Rodney, and others, to analyze phenomenological discourses regarding the art object. I will discuss the experiential elements that accompany viewing an object, and how this experience is based on both the viewing position of the audience as well as the "charismatic" elements of the work itself.⁶ I argue that the catalyst one feels when coming in contact with an artwork is an amalgamation of contexts defined by one's spatial, experiential, and identity position, yet the inherent feelings of interest are often, at first, unexplainable. That the object elicits a 'charismatic pull' means that it conjures forth an individualized experience and consciousness. And so, when the bed is taken out of a domestic, functional context as we know it, and seen in an artistic, and often institutional space, it becomes more than material.

Many people would be familiar with the types of beds discussed in this project, and can relate to them upon encountering the work of art. The bed's ubiquity means that individual expression tends to lie not in the selection of the mattress, but rather in the choice of comforters, blankets, headboards, placement, and level of cleanliness. No one's bed ever looks the same. In *Untitled (Bev and Frank Bed)* (Figure 8) and *My Bed* (Figure 9) the beds display a mattress and pillows as we know a bed to be constructed. In both of these works, the bed is portrayed as a

⁶ On position: This paper is undeniably western. My own cultural experience, the perspectives from and of which I have studied, and the majority of the writers, artists, and philosophers used in this project are westernized viewpoints. In no way could I generalize the experience of objecthood on a global basis. Rather, I wish to explore the way in which this contemporary period in the west has theorized and understood the object dichotomy as I see it pertaining to the bed.

personalized, intimate experience, yet is displayed within public space. I will argue that this display highlights the viewer's position in space, pointing to both the various contextual readings of the audience as well as to the energetic charisma of the object, which allows the viewer to attain and internalize it. In this case, a phenomenological lens is helpful in understanding the charisma within the object. As we find the catalyst for feeling pulled towards an object we find the catalyst of feeling within ourselves. Feeling is innate and immediate, and subsequently informs our experience and participation.

It is through these four lenses that I wish to trace nuances within the fabric of the bed, pull the comforters closer and envelop my body within them, sharing parts of my thinking with a reader who experiences their own mattress distinct from my own.

Assembling the Bed

Rauschenberg's *Bed* and Janice Lester's *Personal Space* were made some 20 years apart. Both of these pieces emerge as turning points for assemblage and performance, as well as in the lineage of bed sculpture. In each piece, the artist's take on material, (materiality being crucial in defining a bed) is important in their respective thematic exploration. These two pieces *use* material for its conceptual representation, not only for its portrayal of the bed in the literal sense.

Rauschenberg's use of his own bedding and pillows in what was considered a "painting," which usually denotes a two-dimensional plane, transformed both the type of format he used as well as the meaning of the personal, soft, and assembled material. Lester's piece *Personal Space* was an installation of a physical bed for viewing, not an aestheticized form of an "ideal" bed but actualized, messily and authentically. In both of these instances, I find that the artists can be considered utilizing assemblage or "femmage" techniques, the latter a phrase coined by Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer, to be discussed later in this chapter. As both works use material in differing and specific forms that is inherently connected to their contexts as artists - dependent on their period, gender, and experience - it is crucial to detail the history in which these materials and methods emerged for the bed sculpture. In this chapter, I will be analyzing these two works in their historical contexts, arguing that the artists' use of material specific to their experience is a tactic to convey personal accounts, as well as to transform conceptions of representation within art to a more thematically geared realm.

While the historical contexts of the other works in the rest of this senior project will be considered and mentioned, for this chapter I will argue that bed sculptures began due to the artist's fascination with its material, quite literally. Inherent to each work are the contexts of the

work and artist, contingent aspects in the function of the work. From these two relatively early bed sculptures, a pattern of materials will follow in more contemporary bed works. In other words, using an *actual* pillow, recreating what looks like a *functional* bed, did not happen naturally within artmaking, and should not be considered a given. It takes the work of an artist to have first publicized this decision, or thoughts and ideas accumulated collectively in society for these materials to be considered possible for use within art. In order to explore these first instances of literal bedroom materials being present within a bed sculpture, I will be analyzing *Bed and Personal Space*.

Conceptual Art and the Combine

Assemblage was prevalent in the beginning of the 20th century, with artists like Picasso and Manray using disparate media to make sculpture. Artists brought a range of materials- newspaper, rope, metal pieces - together to create new formal relationships in images. Rauschenberg's "combines" were conceptualized in similar ways; materials used in tandem with paint in order to disrupt the usual form of the painting.⁷ Rauschenberg was considered a pioneer of the Conceptual Art Movement of the 1960s, due to the combines. He created multimedia collages using traditional media and household objects alike, which were unlike previous understandings of sculpture and assemblage as they often used big sections of paint: thick, layered, and dripping. He manipulated the aesthetic form of painting and collage by bringing them in union, not quite a painting, yet not a form of collage. In doing so, he ultimately created a new form of assemblage yet to be seen or recognized with any legitimacy. The combines'

⁷ "Robert Rauschenberg Artist Overview and Analysis," TheArtStory.org, First published on 05 Jun 2014, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/rauschenberg-robert/>.

positive reception set a precedent for unconventional material in spite of, or maybe because, they went against the grain of traditional sculpture. Rauschenberg's choice to alter the application of paint in order to transcend its usual meaning was highly effective when it came to most of his combines, and certainly within the *Bed*.

Rauschenberg created his combines during a period in which household items were used commonly, although often in isolation. In the 1960s, many artists used chairs and furniture within their work. Perhaps the most famous among these is Donald Judd. While Judd was interested in geometric, industrial forms, he made apt observations regarding facets of the conceptual art movement:

Actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface. Obviously, anything in three dimensions can be any shape, regular or irregular, and can have any relation to the wall, floor, ceiling, room, rooms, or exterior or none at all. Any material can be used, as is or painted.⁸

Judd comments on the use of three dimensional space, in that it can embellish and push two dimensions to convey more. He describes what Rauschenberg did nine years before - painting over material, creating relationships between the two dimensional "painting" plane and three dimensional objects (the pillow, for example) and using material that is his own. Among sculptors within the Conceptual Art movement using furniture was a tactic that retained the utilitarian form, while suggesting the existence of a human form, without the presence of a figure.⁹ Artists found that altering a piece of furniture could retain an essence of a known industrial form, as well as encourage a complex set of associations through the implied body.

⁸ Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," in *Donald Judd: Early Work, 1955-1968* (New York: D.A.P., 2002), 7-8.

⁹ Elizabeth Richards Rivenbark, "Corporeal Furnishings in the Sixties: Furniture as Art and Its Intimacy with the Body," *Artibus Et Historiae*, vol. 35, no. 69 (2014): 275.

Rauschenberg's *Bed* (Figure 2) maintained the bed, in its anthropomorphic form, as well as using it as a display of decorative elements which hold their own commentary.

Rauschenberg's Bed

In Rauschenberg's non-traditional combines, and his first representation of a bed, he uses materials that have domestic connotations - and are even personal to himself. However, he also alters their connotation of intimacy. Rauschenberg goes beyond recreating a physical form as he does not make a bed in the literal sense. He transforms the bed into a work of art due to the material elements he incorporates into the piece. Rather than using a chair - sterile, ubiquitous, and nonpersonal, he opts for his own quilt and pillows. Rauschenberg's first *Bed* comments on a variety of ideas; the bed is physical and palpable, while the interruption of its usual form with paint abstracts its appearance. Therefore, he evokes ideas that comment on the conception of the bed, the painting, and the material all at once.

Rauschenberg brings the art object close to himself in both the physical presence of the quilt (his own), as well through the connotations evoked by the bed sheet, an intimate material.¹⁰ Pillows are placed at the top of the piece. The paint creates ridges and lines, making a dent apparent in the pillow for the head and folds in the quilt that one could grab as if to crawl in. The quilt is laid flat, close to the underlying canvas, taut, just as it would be on the body. The floral quilt is laid atop the canvas, painted over and dripped on in the upper half of the canvas to both abstract, and make, the bed. The paint strokes are messy, disturbing the bed's form by rendering it uninhabitable. The top half of the canvas is covered with paint, fading into the bottom half in

¹⁰ "Robert Rauschenberg. *Bed*. 1955: MoMA," The Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78712>.

which there are stray marks of paint which look like mere specks. Rauschenberg has modified the bed, yet preserved it in the bottom half of the quilt: defacing it in its most anthropomorphic elements (that of the pillow, where the indent of the head lives), while retaining the decorative, flat, visual of the quilt.

Aspects of *Bed* conjure more decorative, rather than bodily, associations, such as the multicolored quilted bedcover. Before the 1950s, the use of such decorative material in sculpture would have been considered superfluous and inherently feminine. Quilting, and textiles were often considered ‘bad craft.’ Sewing was seen as a signifier of femininity, the maker as lacking advanced artistic expression. The cultural view of these crafts promoted misconceptions regarding female artistic capability.¹¹ It can be theorized, then, that the use of the quilt within Rauschenberg’s bed can be an example of the inclusion of his own emotion, experience, softness, and perhaps “femininity” as being placed into material, rather than a material used for aesthetic purposes. The bed is related to complex activities and emotions, it is a charged space in which the fabric not only inhabits, but participates.¹² Because the bed evokes memory, Rauschenberg is pointing to a material with a charged emotion, not seen as ‘proper art,’ as well as a hyper-masculinized form of painting that recalls what *is* respected, commonly viewed, and revered. In doing so, Rauschenberg blends the decorative quilt with a more masculinized form. Generally speaking, the use of metal, wood, and harder forms within assemblage are associated with a masculinist discourse.¹³ Therefore, Rauschenberg’s use of the furniture object evokes

¹¹ Catherine Harper, “Sex, Birth, and Nurture unto Death: Patching Together Quilted Bed Covers” in *Love Objects: Emotion, Design and Material Culture* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 34.

¹² Harper, “Sex, Birth, and Nurture,” 31.

¹³ Tom Folland, “Robert Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism: The Early Combines and Decoration,” *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 92, no. 4 (2010), 353.

perceived, stereotypical, meanings that are juxtaposed with the softer forms of the quilt, which are more associated with domestication rather than industrial fabrication. The use of the household object would have been familiar to him, but the type of household object he used and the manipulation he imposed upon it were new for that period. By using an established idea of an assemblage piece but modifying the type of furniture and materials used, Rauschenberg reworked what it meant to portray an intimate furniture object in sculpture, commenting on the gendered perceptions of materials, as well as pointing to their locations. He contrasts the ubiquity of “masculine” artmaking and the privacy of the bed and textile.

Bed is a palimpsest, a mixture of ordinary material, some used to alter-- like the nail polish and toothpaste that drip and tarnish the fabric-- and some preserved, such as the quilt. Rauschenberg’s dramatic corruption of the bed by way of nail polish and toothpaste separated him from “high art” canons, while retaining much of the quilt’s form inherently elicited implication of the decorative labor of women.¹⁴ In altering this decorative material that evokes the feminine he does not simply use these materials; he taints them. By contrasting the conserved decorative material with interfering elements, Rauschenberg asserted this modernist perspective that rejected the classical form of sculpture. He distinguished himself from popular culture, while not wholeheartedly embracing the aesthetics of textiles, as he would have had he retained the simple form of the quilt and displayed it. It is unclear whether this manipulation of the bed form is due to a “fear of the ornamental” that would call his postmodernist sculpture “impure by injecting a domestic aesthetic of craft and frivolity.”¹⁵ Whether or not Rauschenberg had a fear of “feminine” material, he nonetheless made an aesthetic choice to incorporate these decorative

¹⁴ Folland, “Robert Rauschenberg’s Queer Modernism,” 350.

¹⁵ Ibid.

materials. The domestic, in this piece, is a commodity as well as a ‘conceptual device’ - it performs the bed while remaining an aesthetic form.¹⁶ By using household materials within a canon of sculpture Rauschenberg was able to evoke the “ornamental” while traversing the established understandings of artmaking.

The Womanhouse Project and its Beginnings

Rauschenberg’s use of material navigated perceptions of gender and artmaking in *Bed*, as the use of soft elements, such as his quilt, were connoted with female craft, aesthetics, and ornament. Designations of “femininity” are often attributed to artistic movements, styles, and periods. While artists may not wish to subscribe to these gendered perceptions of their work, in the case of the Womanhouse Project their gender is considered a central part of their artmaking. In order to analyze Janice Lester’s *Personal Space* it is important to locate the object in art history, as it emerged during a period in which “feminist art” was being defined in the mainstream. Beginning in the 1960s, female artists initiated the use of household objects in their work in order to discuss and sign the contentiousness of domestic space.¹⁷ For many artists, the home became a charged locale in which gender dynamics could be readily analyzed, and

¹⁶ Harper, “Sex, Birth, and Nurture,” 36.

¹⁷ While the domestic space is historically understood as a charged location, in which women were deemed necessary yet unrecognized for their labor, it is crucial to mention that highly publicized feminist authors, scholars, and artists were not the initiators of gaining whatever labor ‘equality’ can be gained in the home. One sector of women who initiated the mentality of “wages against housework” were women who received AID for Dependent Children, during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. These women displayed the hypocrisy present in paying more to those who foster children over those receiving welfare, who were still expected to work other jobs. The contention of the home, as it promoted unpaid labor for women, was (is) widespread and affected many, though not all women charged with battling it are recognized for that labor itself. See: Silvia Federici, “The Revolt Against Housework,” in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (PM Press, 2012), 43.

subsequently critiqued.¹⁸ This era is designated as “Second Wave Feminism” and is often linked with “White Feminism,” noted for its upholding of the concerns of white, upper middle class, cisgendered, heterosexual women.

Contemporary feminist politics have embraced intersectional feminism as understanding of the many axis of identity, which are contingent upon social constructions due to racial, gendered, economic, societal, and sexual understandings. I would like to underline that many of the artists making bed objects that predate the 21st century, and the spaces they inhabited, can be considered at fault for simplistic understandings of gender. Bed sculpture that predates the 1990s often holds interpretations of feminist empowerment that one could argue are exclusive, and limited, experiences. I do not want to essentialize older conceptions of feminism, but it is crucial to follow the trajectory of the bed object as it began in the context of its domestic, intimate, and “feminine,” association. Rather than upholding these conceptions of the feminine, precedents of early feminism provide the basis for understanding the evolution of the bedroom exhibition through time, as well as the rationale for placing emphasis on many of the more current bedroom works that have been done (by contemporary artists, queer artists, and artists of color). By

¹⁸ Early feminist aesthetics are critiqued for being outdated and problematic by modern viewers because of their association with a previous conception of feminist goals. One could feel self-conscious when aligning with them because they hold the capacity of being seen as cliché. For example, Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* (1974-1979), owned and exhibited in the Brooklyn Museum, is a work of art displaying a triangular dinner table with the place settings of 39 “important historical figures,” all women. It is a multimedia project in that it contains textile, and ceramics, including yonic imagery. This work can be interpreted as having failed to capture enough intersections of identity within the piece (regarding race and nationality), due to its preoccupation with “vulgar” themes. Yet overlooking the context in which the work is made is to ignore the beginnings of widely recognized domestic portrayals in feminist art, crucial to the history of the bed. See: Karen Keifer-Boyd, “From Content to Form: Judy Chicago’s Pedagogy with Reflections by Judy Chicago,” *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research*, (Pennsylvania State University, 2007).

formulating the constructs of which early bed sculptures were made and understanding that the position the viewer has to it today has been shaped through a canon of “feminist art,” a path may be offered to acknowledge early conceptions of domesticity in order to transcend them contemporarily.

The Womanhouse project in which Lester made *Personal Space* emerged out of the Feminist Art Program at California Institute for the Arts in 1972. Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago led the project, which was exhibited for a month in 1972. Through the womanhouse model, female college students were given the opportunity to be taught by women who were successful in their field. The artists purchased and renovated an old Hollywood mansion, using each room as an installation space.¹⁹ Many of the students performed in the exhibition, and it was interactive by nature as audience members were to walk through the house to view the exhibits. As the project was based on the collaborative process between the students and professors, collaboration was central to the fruits of the work. Large scale collaboration between artists may not have been a new concept at its time, but as the project was led by a highly recognized arts institution, and the participants were established, white, female artists, it was the first instance where this type of collaboration was well received and publicized.

Schapiro and Chicago asked students to call into the space ideas of collective identity, memory and individual experience in order to emerge with a project of common themes. Art critic Lucy Lippard commented on Womanhouse, stating: “This immense and immensely successful project was an attempt to concretize the fantasies and oppressions of women's experience...Most of the work I've seen that deals with household imagery does so either by

¹⁹ Temma Balducci, “Revisiting ‘Womanhouse’: Welcome to the (deconstructed) ‘Dollhouse,’” *Woman’s Art Journal* 27 (Fall/Winter, 2006), 20.

means of a cool, detached realism, or funky fantasy.”²⁰ While Womanhouse at large contained tropes and stereotypes about women’s experiences, they are also the product of each member’s thought process. Through this type of collaboration, they proposed a space for female artists which was posed against the white male canon. Womanhouse, to its participants, became an alternative to what they saw as the predominant creation of art. Womanhouse was able to provide a large scale of what work by a group of women could look like on a grand scale, countering conceptions of artmaking that many feminist writers, including art historian Linda Nochlin, refuted: “Scholars will have to abandon the notion, consciously articulated or not, of individual genius as innate.”²¹ The “male genius” is in direct contrast with conceptions of “women’s craft,” wherein male art is natural and gifted and female work is constructed, learned, and practiced. Due to this tension, female work was often conceived of as unable to identify itself within historical styles. Architect Susana Torre suggested that perhaps female artists “are really more interested in *art itself*, in self expression and its collective history and communication, differing from the traditional notion of the avant-garde by opposing not styles and forms, but ideologies.”²² While it is not problematic to view women artists as making art that is meta, critical of the discipline, artists of every gender do the same thing. It does on the other hand, suggest a kind of gendered responsibility on the part of female artists - where they are not able to participate for participation's sake itself, but once again need to work *at art*, laboring in the analysis of it as much as they do the making.

²⁰ Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Womens Art*, (Dutton, 1990), 57.

²¹ Linda Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?” *Art and Sexual Politics* (London, 1973), 11.

²² Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Womens Art*, 6.

Another way in which Womanhouse provided a counterexample for the male genius canon was through the types of materials and art practices it utilized which, at the time, were unconventional.²³ Many critics have since commented on Womanhouse's relationship to the dollhouse, as a convention that was appropriated for the purpose of showing both the internalization of the doll as property 'belonging to women' and using it to display the inner minds of these artists.²⁴ The artists immersed their audience into the brains and views of the world the artists held by requiring them to walk through Womanhouse. This project reframed participants' way of seeing -- enclosing audience members in a space that caused them to adopt that view and experience, even if only for the period of the exhibition. The gallery and museum systems at the time were not presenting work that looked like their own - which were performative, interactive, and sculptural. In Womanhouse, the themes incorporated into their work overlapped and were due to these women's shared personal, artistic, and political experiences.²⁵

²³ I'd like to comment here that the "unconventionality" of Womanhouse is historically understood, and while I cannot comment on what it felt like to walk through Womanhouse as an audience member, inherent to my analysis is the underlying phenomena of a "belated" understanding of feminist aesthetics and art. That is to say, as women were, at the time, compared to "male" forms of artmaking, analysis about their own contexts, aesthetics, and successes often occur(red) retrospectively. See: Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Womens Art*, (Dutton, 1990), 5.

²⁴ Balducci, "Revisiting "Womanhouse," 20.

²⁵ An aspect that I believe is vital to recognize is the lack of diversity in the Womanhouse project. All of the women involved were white women who were perceived as cisgendered and heterosexual. Each of them were privileged enough to be part of the program by way of a college education. That is not to say their work cannot be pivotal, however it does display that the work is inherently derivative of a certain demographic.

Personal Space

While Schapiro had not yet written “Femme,” and there was no widespread concept of a feminist aesthetic, this group of women were developing their own artistic dispositions with the help of the program.²⁶ Janice Lester's contribution to Womanhouse entitled *Personal Space* (Figure 3), which shows a room with an untidy bed, clothes strewn across it, light fixtures and chairs. In the corner the artist is standing facing the wall, her face obscured. While many of the preserved images of the piece are in black and white, the messy aspect of the room is one of the most poignant regardless of its form of capture. It looks lived in, an unorderly state that feels intrusive to see, personal and unmasked. The intimacy of the bedroom both invites and repels the audience. Lester's presence in the room augments this, suggesting that one is being a witness to an intimate moment that would normally be reserved for her. Yet not seeing her face makes her anyone, the room is not real and too real.

In Lester's comment regarding the piece she says:

I dreamed I had a new bedroom. People came to visit me there, it seemed like a nice place. But when I was alone again, I discovered a secret room where only I could go – fantasy became reality there and everything was beautiful. Compared to this inner room, the outside room was dull and drab. Later I realized that the inner room represented the art that never gets made, the richness that most people, especially women, keep locked inside themselves. Then I saw that the secret room was a trap as well as a sanctuary, and that's why, when I'm inside the room I built, it is both beautiful and frightening.²⁷

²⁶ A so-called “feminist aesthetic” is nearly impossible as feminism is not a style, a method or material, as much as it is a set of beliefs. In fact, as any essentialist argument, it would be problematic to suggest there is. Lippard references some of these objections to ‘woman's art’: “An individual's art will not be seen with a free eye, or seen with equal concentration, or seen as one intended it, or seen at all, if preconceptions and categorizations overwhelm it.” This is not to mention problems that arise with essentializing experiences of “feminist artists” of different races, economic status' and familial experiences, sexualities, genders, and so on. See: Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Womens Art*, (Dutton, 1990), 9.

²⁷ “Personal Space - Womanhouse,” *The Housing Project*, 16 Mar 2013, <https://thehousingprojectcollective.wordpress.com/2013/03/16/personal-space/>.

Within her quotation, Lester highlights the discrepancies felt between reality and fantasy. Her room represents a physical reality, while her internal experience exists beyond her in a separate space, a place not often accessed. She discusses this place as being an “inner room” which provides a likeness between her internal experience and the object of a room itself. Instead of simply noting the existence of an inner room, she actualizes it. The materials used, then, are not only to create the bed in its aesthetic likeness to her own, but are to convey and describe what happens in the inner versus the outer room. I will discuss this inner and outer dichotomy in the next chapter when referring to more ontological understandings of the bed and its performance in space. However, Lester’s remark lends itself to a deeper understanding of the impacts of this material that “most people, especially women, keep locked inside themselves.” By portraying a bed that is her own, she comments on the witnessing of her personhood within intimate space, her emotional experience within it, and what lies within the fabric of the bed that resembles the ‘inner room.’

Lester’s use of the bed in an authentic form traverses the designation of the art object to its conventions. *Personal Space* is inherently performative, containing both human interaction through the presence of the audience, and sculptural elements which are realistic, actual, and soft - not hard material. Traditional sculpture ubiquitous until the late 1960s lacked soft materials, and as soft sculpture began to emerge it provided an opportunity to value new materials - the bedcloth being one of them.²⁸ Cloth represents the body as it acts like a “second skin,” protecting and reinforcing.²⁹ One goes inside the bed, while the bed is physically outside oneself. One’s

²⁸ Rivenbark, “Corporeal Furnishings in the Sixties,” 284.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 286.

body goes into a room while they traverse the ‘inner room’ inside their mentality. These dichotomies of inside and outside are mirrored in the interaction Lester has with her audience - she is in the inner room of her mind while others witness the outside of her, witnessing the inside of the bedroom. Cloth, similar to skin, can receive permanent stains, tears, scars that all manifest in “physical memory.”³⁰ Therefore, as the comforter or bed cloth has connotations to natural, bodily functions it is both united, and separated, from Lester’s body and subsequently her experience.

Femme

In Schapiro and Meyer’s essay, “Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into What Women Saved and Assembled--FEMMAGE,” the question of whether there is a feminist aesthetic is replied to with a new word -- femme. They determine whether a work can be considered femme by applying a 14 point criteria to it.³¹ Femme derives from collage, assemblage, photomontage and decoupage alike, in hopes to rewrite the way these practices have been recognized and neutralized -- ultimately erasing the feminine context they emerge in. While Schapiro and Meyer theorized this term 6 years after *Womanhouse*, and 25 after Rauschenberg’s first bed, they wanted to rewrite history with a deeper understanding of the genesis of assemblage aesthetics.

Rauschenberg’s first combines fall under what would later be considered “femme,” though this would’ve been unknown to him. His early works in the 1950s can be read as presages

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer, “Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into what Women Saved and Assembled--FEMMAGE,” *Heresies* I, no. 4 (Winter 1977-78), 69.

for queer and feminist art in spite of his lack of self identification in those respective communities. There are a few ways of viewing Rauschenberg's bed - one in which it is a potent example of assemblage in its use of unconventional material, and another in that it is a moment in which the roots of sculpture are able to find their footing in decorative, intimate, and assembled materials. Femmage argues that feminist art has the possibility to aestheticize itself, through the material used as well as the content brought by way of said material. For this reason, Womanhouse and its process, in which Lester's work developed, is crucial to grasping the way that the bed evokes meaning: to understand the way a feminist aesthetic can be created and interpreted can open it up for use and exploration.

A work is required to fulfill at least half of the 14 point criteria to be considered Femmage. In *Personal Space* alone, Lester achieves the following criteria:

1. It is a work by a woman.
2. The activities of saving and collecting are important ingredients.
3. Scraps are essential to the process and are recycled in the work.
4. The theme has a woman-life context.
5. The work has elements of covert imagery.
6. The theme of the work addresses itself to an audience of intimates.
7. It celebrates a private or public event.
8. A diarist's point of view is reflected in the work.³²

While 'femme' at first glance could be seen as a reductive term in order to draw a link between female artists and their work, it has merit in that there are themes of Lester's work that can be defined by these criteria, and inherent in these criteria are elements of process, experience, and intimacy. Lester's piece utilizes her own body and that of the audience,

³² Schapiro and Meyer, "Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into what Women Saved and Assembled--FEMMAGE," 69.

referencing the female body through the bed as it belongs to Lester herself, while creating a new body - one of the work and its space. By using the bed, a household object, the material is understood in its form while simultaneously being abstracted. Just as the chair, the bed recalls memory of the body and acts as a “location for the absent body,³³ to reference the body. The use of the bed as an object is able to refer to personal experience, seeing oneself within it.

While the aesthetic qualities of Rauschenberg and Lester’s beds differ, they both emerge as touchstones in the creation of the bed as an art object. Both have soft sculptural elements, using literal bed cloth, emphasizing the bed’s link to corporeal experience while it exists artistically. Each a reflection of the period they are constructed in, the bed objects make a case for a use-object that *conveys*, that is emblematic of an inner experience of intimacy and all of which that connotes. *Bed* and *Personal Space* use physical material related to their own experience in a way pertinent to their period in order to traverse a new realm of thematic material, where personal context is vital.

³³ Rivenbark, “Corporeal Furnishings in the Sixties,” 276.

Performing Associations

The bed is part of everyday bodily experience: it is where we are born, die, eat, sleep, read, have sex, dream, kiss, and relax. This everyday experience becomes a site of individual associations and references - no one's sleep, dreams, or nightmares are the same. These specific, individual associations are present even when the bed is placed in an artistic context. In this chapter, I will argue that works of art featuring a bed suggest the presence of a body, where the bed's performance is used to indicate bodily acts which are not shown. Because of the various actions enacted on the bed, it becomes a location for subjective memory, emotion, and experience. The suggestion of these acts evokes memories and emotional experiences of both the viewer and the artist.

I will be looking at two works of art that reference the body. The first will be Emma Sulkowicz's *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*. (Figure 4) This work is an endurance performance piece done during the school year 2014-2015 in response to Sulkowicz's sexual assault on the Columbia University campus. The second work I will be discussing is Julia Scher's *Mama Bed*. (Figure 5) This work performs the surveillance, objectification, and sexualization that can occur on the bed, contingent on the reference of the body. Both of these works contain performative elements that reference a missing body undergoing harmful experience. Sulkowicz and Scher use the bed's potency to display the bed as an arena for the misuse and subjection of the body.

Mattress Performance

Mattress Performance is a performance piece in which artist Emma Sulkowicz carried a Twin XL mattress with her at all times while on the Columbia University campus. She was never to ask for help carrying it, but could accept help if offered. The artist, and at that time college senior, was to carry the mattress with her from the beginning of the performance, in September 2014, until the perpetrator of her sexual assault was expelled from Columbia or until graduation, failing his expulsion. The work included a set of rules of engagement, which were written on Sulkowicz's studio walls, open to the public but not to be advertised by her. The mattress was a Twin XL, the same model as the one provided by Columbia University housing, the same as the one on which Sulkowicz was assaulted. *Mattress Performance* lasted nine months, resulting in Sulkowicz receiving her diploma while carrying the bed, as her assailant was never expelled by the university.

Mattress Performance suggests three types of associations of the bed. It suggests eroticism, emotion, and memories. Each of these associations are embedded in the body of the bed, as Sulkowicz carries it daily. The first I will analyze is the bed's erotic nature. The bed is a setting that is associated with sexual acts and desires. Artist Nan Goldin has explored this potency in her photographs, and noted that:

Sex itself is only one aspect of sexual dependency. Pleasure becomes the motivation, but the real satisfaction is romantic. Bed becomes a forum in which struggles in a relationship are diffused or intensified. Sex isn't about performance; it's about a certain kind of communication founded on trust and exposure and vulnerability that can't be expressed in any other way. Sex becomes a microcosm of the relationship, the battleground, an exorcism.³⁴

³⁴ Nan Goldin and Marvin Heiferman, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (Aperture Foundation, 1989).

Goldin's conceptions of sex encapsulates much of what Sulkowicz's piece achieves. She comments on the way that sex and relationships emerge in the "forum" of the bed, and argues that experiences in the bed leaves traces upon it. Just as the bed arouses romance and pleasure, it can evoke the "battleground" Goldin mentions. Sulkowicz develops the same battleground within *Mattress Performance* through the language of her own body, which references the struggling experience that has occurred in the forum of the bed. When Sulkowicz carries the mattress around Columbia's campus, she isn't allowed to explain to bystanders why she is carrying it. Rather, through the language and form of the bed that struggles with her body, engaging her muscles, causing discomfort, she recreates the battleground that the bed can become. The bed becomes the perpetrator, subjecting her body to a challenging physical experience. In *Mattress Performance* the bodily act that is witnessed by bystanders is uncomfortable, taxing, and isolating, suggesting that the bed has the potential to create physical experience that is unpleasant, harmful, and painful- like sex itself can sometimes be.

The second layer of associations that *Mattress Performance* evokes are emotional, even traumatic. The bed resonates for many as a location for emotional contact between people, where feelings of attachment, love, and excitement exist together with sadness, dissociation, and pain. As the viewer identifies the bed as the location for these emotions, the bed therefore expresses them.³⁵ Rather than reiterating what John Dewey categorized as "a history of morals that have brought about contempt for the body, fear of the senses, and the opposition of flesh to spirit," Sulkowicz uses the bed as an art form in order to point to the sensory, emotional experience that our bodies can undergo while laying with the bed.³⁶ The bed, carried in her arms, points to the

³⁵ Harper, "Sex, Birth, and Nurture," 2.

³⁶ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Capricorn Books, 1934), 20.

recurring bodily experience of the person, and its lasting (emotional) power held within the object. Sulkowicz uses emotional experience previously within the bed object, then transforms that object into performance. Dewey describes objects as reservoirs that contain experience: “the objects of art are expressive, they communicate...Art throws off the covers that hide the expressiveness of experienced things.”³⁷ Throwing off the covers to show its experience, the bed expresses its role as a location where emotional interaction occurs; ‘emotion’ being one aspect of the multilayered experience Sulkowicz had on her own bed from Columbia University.

Sulkowicz grapples with the physical burden of carrying the mattress for the entire school year. She recreates what it is like to carry an emotional burden - which is also daily, isolating, and traumatic. Beyond her physical interaction with the mattress, the object is a location with its own bodily history. By using the same model Twin XL as the one in which her assault took place, she points to the way one attaches emotional experience to the object, as it is a participant, or a witness, to the act itself. As Dewey writes in *Art as Experience*, emotions are “attached to events and objects in their movement...Emotion is the moving and cementing force...It thus provides unity in and through the varied parts of an experience.”³⁸ Duration of the experience, especially if traumatizing, can be unknown: but is marked in facts such as where, or on what, it occurred. In *Mattress Performance*, Sulkowicz expresses her own association with the bed as a witness to her physical trauma. Just as the trauma itself is burdensome to bear, the bed is considered enough a part of the experience to also become burdensome. In *Mattress Performance* the bed is not only a signifier of her own erotic and emotional associations with the

³⁷ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 104.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

bed, but a signifier of the experience as a whole, which is intrinsic, shared, and impressed within its fibers.

The mattress is an extension of every one of Sulkowicz's actions and movements, just as memory is an extension of every one of our actions and movements. That is, memory informs the way we behave about the world. The way we view a bed is linked to our memory through the beds of our past. We remember the beds in which we have slept in year's past, just as we remember what conversations or events have taken place on them. Due to these subjective associations, we engage our memories in the interpretation of each new bed we see, to know it is not our own bed, as well as to remind us of experiences that share the same object. In *Mattress Performance*, Sulkowicz uses the performance of the bed, as an object carried with her at all times, to point to the lasting, remembered experiences that lie within it.

Gaston Bachelard has written about the link between memory and the imagination in his conception of home. His ideas are useful in this context, as we might imagine that sentiments about home might be similar to those concerning one's bed, as a place of shelter. Bachelard argues that we create notions of home that are tied to all of the houses we have ever lived in, and because of this, there can be no objective conception of home.³⁹ Within each of our experiences, memory is inseparable. When we are in new habitations the old are conjured. Imagination and "daydreaming" are the locations where experience and memory meet.⁴⁰ The house "shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace."⁴¹ The bed is related to this dream state not only because it is where one dreams, but because, like the house,

³⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Penguin Classics, 2014), 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

memories exist in a space where they are contingent on the object. In the present, one is always recalling the past, dipping into the well of memory. *Mattress Performance* suggests that a new bed would still cause the inhabitant to transcend the current bed into the memory of bed's past. While the mattress that Sulkowicz is carrying is not her exact Twin mattress of her assault, it conjures the memory of her past experience, "which often interfere, at times opposing, at others, stimulating one another."⁴² Sulkowicz solidifies the contentiousness of the bed's space as well as reiterates Bachelard's conceptions of imagination. She not only posits that the bed space is evocative of her past experience, but that it is also recurring.⁴³ The Twin XL suggests the "accumulations of long-gathering energy," present in Dewey's example, wherein a new object that carries the same form can still evoke "a return to a scene of childhood that was left long years before floods the spot with a release of pent-up memories and hopes."⁴⁴

The bed may, then, give power to the viewer to transcend into a state of remembrance. Sulkowicz not only creates this with her own memory of the twin XL, but in the work she elicits the same recall of memory for anyone who has had a twin sized bed. Anyone who had the same one in their respective college relates to the bed at the sight of it. Additionally, the austerity of the twin XL gives enough detail to reference her own college and its type of mattress, while not obscuring the viewer's personal associations with their own twin XL. The viewer's own body and past experience with a comparable object is raised through Sulkowicz's performance between her body and the mattress. The performance allows the viewer to carry the past into the present "so as to expand and deepen the content of the latter."⁴⁵ *Mattress Performance* appeals to

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁴ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 24.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

the viewer's imagination in its subjectivity, in its intimacy which "induces in the reader a state of suspended reading,"⁴⁶ so that their own reading may be brought about by a potent object. In pointing to her own college mattress - since charged with erotic, emotional, memories, she allows the viewer to see her experience and ponder their own.

Mama Bed

Mama Bed (2003) echoes the contentiousness of the bed space by highlighting the subjective nature of the experiences that occur on it, many of which are fraught. *Mama Bed* is made up of an iron bed frame with four posts, each which are sharpened at the top into a square pyramid. The bottom of the posts look as though they have at least three, if not four, points - forming a rectangle. At one end of the frame, there are cameras mounted on two posts. Two display screens are secured on the closest two posts, away from the wall. In addition to the mounted cameras is a third, handheld camcorder that lies on the center of the bed, mobile. The footage from the camcorder is rerecorded and projected on the monitors, causing a lag delaying the footage at a speed uncontrolled by the viewer or the user of the camcorder. There is a microphone which records the nearby sound. Black wires hang in a tangle around the entire piece, from each electronic to the next. There is a twin sized mattress on top of the bed frame, covered by a pink floral sheet. A black leather whip rests in the middle of the bed. The bed is in the corner of a room, displayed in an exhibition room that mimics its form, a light pink wall with a dark, solid colored floor.

Scher comments on her choice of the bed as the subject of the work, emphasizing that it is a place marked by transitions, some of which cause trepidation. She says:

⁴⁶ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 13.

My interest in the bed did not come so much from its association with privacy; rather, I was interested in it as the site for various transitions. In bed, you move from being awake to sleep, from control to no control, from consciousness to the unconscious. In addition, the bed is *the* location of domestic drama.⁴⁷

Scher's remark highlights that the bed is the location for much bodily experience - wake, sleep, control, unconsciousness. Scher is interested in referencing states bodies undergo in the space of the bed. Her fascination with the bed muses about its transitory nature, capable of forming and witnessing experience. As in *Mattress Performance*, *Mama Bed* uses the bed to evoke various associations. While there is no performer or artist upon the bed, Scher has constructed it so that it points to various wells of allusions within the bed's position.

Mama Bed utilizes props, visual cues, and suggested performance within the piece, ultimately uttering more about the experience within the bed, rather than using the bed as an opportunity to show Scher's facility with the craft of sculpture. *Mama Bed* uses visual connections to sexual experience, (through themes of BDSM and sex toys), age (the twin sized mattress), gendered experience (that of the floral bedsheet), and surveillance (through the use of cameras), in order to display the bed as a loaded location, full of subjective experience.

Scher uses a whip, ties, and cameras to create sexual connections to the experience that occurs on the bed. The whip in the center of the bed is assumed to be a sex toy. The iron posts of the bed frame hold wires that are tied up, a visual clue that references BDSM. Here, Scher offers experiential associations to the audience. BDSM is connoted with participation, whether it be active or by way of viewing. As one watches the screens mounted on the frame, or decides to participate with the use of the camera or whip, one is engaging with the sexualized experience on

⁴⁷ Noemi Smolnik, "While You Were Sleeping." *Frieze*, 10 Mar. 2016, <https://frieze.com/article/while-you-were-sleeping>.

the bed. As these elements of the bed give sexual cues, they are contrasted with a kind of “softness” of the mattress. *Mama Bed* is at once a sexual location, where one is invited to participate, as well as a place in the well of memory - perhaps a bed much like the one in your parent’s home. It is reminiscent of childhood, due to the bed being a twin sized mattress - the size often associated with children, teenagers, or college students. A twin sized mattress is associated with smaller, younger people due to the idea that adults own full, queen, or king sized beds. It suggests constriction or uncomfot due to its lack of space. The ability to purchase a large bed suggests one has monetary power. Scher manipulates the bed’s visual details in order to convey the transitory nature of the bed, it is at once sexual and innocent at the same time.

Scher also incorporates visual cues which suggest gender and surveillance. The floral bed sheet on the mattress is juxtaposed with the leather whip and the sharp iron posts of the frame. The bed sheet could refer to the user of the bed’s “femininity” perhaps - through its being floral and pink - as well as the presence of the pink light within the room. While *Mama Bed* sometimes has a participant, it does not always. No limits are placed on who may participate in the piece, so one may not be certain who will come in contact with the bed. The bedsheet refers to a body intended to lie there: as bedsheets are often chosen and placed by the people who inhabit their mattress. A made bed proposes a user. The floral bed sheet, then, says more about who the sheet is sold and advertised to, and who has internalized feelings wherein floral sheets are desirable. In Scher’s allusion to a (female) body, she has reduced it to a bedsheet as the only indicator of personhood. She has created the body as an object by alluding to it. Through the bedsheet, Scher

fragments the body and abstracts it into the “woman object,” the “heel removed from the head” where using “one object of arousal for another constitutes the basis of fetishism.”⁴⁸

The objectification that Scher enacts in using the floral sheet is heightened by way of her use of cameras and mounted screens. The presence of these technological elements meant for capture speak to the idea of perceiving and surveilling the body, as well as objectifying it. *Mama Bed* explores the relationship between the bedroom and surveillance in two ways: 1) as made available through the presence of the handheld video camera, through self surveillance and portrayal, and 2) through the surveillance done by others in the exhibit, as they are in the vicinity of the participant and the screens projecting the footage. The camera’s footage is rerecorded on a loop which is delayed, promoting voyeurism beyond the initial recording as an unseen force has chosen the rate of delay of the video. By way of this delay, there is a sense that the footage is stored and viewed by a third party source. The participant does not control the delay or the distribution of the footage, nor do they control the stationary cameras at the foot of the bed. This leaves them with the power of the handheld camera. There is a medley of video, some self directed and some that witness, which can be chosen without the consent of the participant. That is, lying on the bed, in the line of vision of the cameras, is consenting. This leaves the participant with very little control. The footage is a sort of property, further perpetuating the idea that the (female) body can become objectified and used in the setting of the bed as a commodity. Rather than reclaiming the power of the video camera, and the image of oneself, the footage is owned by a second party whose “possession of the image perpetuates a further act of violence,” before being witnessed by audiences.⁴⁹ With the presence of the whip, the camcorder, and the screens,

⁴⁸ Jean Fisher, “Objects of Fetishism,” *Art Monthly*, Iss. 52 (1981), 172.

⁴⁹ Fisher, “Objects of Fetishism,” 171.

the participant who chooses to place themselves on the bed is ultimately defined as a sexual being, through the manipulation and abstraction of their body in images.

Scher has created a microcosm of tensions, in which the bed is referencing the body and its experience (of objectification, surveillance, gender, and privacy) while subjecting the object itself to these same dynamics. *Mama Bed* is not a 'normal' bed, in that it does not look like it would be conducive to sleep, due to its lack of comforter, pillows, etc. If it is not a utilitarian object, then it is for other experiences that can occur there. Neither is it simply an aesthetically driven work of art. In Scher's reference to the weight of the experience that can occur on the bed, she subjects the bed to an embodiment of said experience. It becomes more than a location, it becomes a symbol of the reality of intimate bodies. Judith Butler reflects on the body, considering it a "modality," through which speech and action take place, instead of viewing the body as solely its corporeal incarnation: "bodied forth in the saying."⁵⁰ She theorizes that the body is not only a physical form, but is an ever changing place, a mechanism for speech and therefore meaning. It contains autonomy through its physicality, but has the potential for repression: "In other words, the body is given and withdrawn at the moment in which we rely on language to convey our love for someone else."⁵¹ The body acts as a courier for speech, just as the bed acts as a messenger for the body's associations of experience. By way of a body's action it can create other bodies: bodies of language, emotion, etc. that are all linked to the original, physical body. It is transient in nature just as the bed is as a location.

⁵⁰ Judith Butler, "Response: Performative Reflections on Love and Commitment," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. ½ (2011), 237.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Scher uses the bed as a signifier, stand in, and embodier of physical experience. She uses her “mind without participation of the body,” acting “vicariously through the control of the bodies and labor of others.”⁵² While she is pointing to the bed’s bodily references, she is not there. She chooses not to inflict upon herself the objectification, sexualization and surveillance that occurs on the bed through performance but relies on a safe position, where in the bed acts, and experiences, for her.

Both *Mattress Performance* and *Mama Bed* use the bed as a performative object, performing the experiences and references many of us understand or have within the bedroom context. In these pieces, the bed recreates sexual, emotional, physical, and memorial events that can occur on it, referring to those of the artist or viewer. While Sulckowicz’s piece uses her own body as the endurer of physical strain of the mattress, and Scher’s piece offers a multitude of charged experiences to a willing participant or witness, the two artists share and amplify the bed’s potential to be an symbol of lived occasions. The bed stands in for the body and is subjected to the emotion, memory, and experience of its own, the artist, and the viewer. Sulkowicz and Scher reenact the process of fabricating the self and understanding their own experiences, (re)creating what Bordo refers to as a “fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies through our performances.”⁵³

⁵² Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 21.

⁵³ Susan Bordo, “Postmodern Subjects, Postmodern Bodies,” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1992), 288.

The Object Language of Witness and Experience

In this next chapter, I will analyze works by Doris Salcedo and Felix Gonzalez-Torres to argue that bed as an artwork can be used to produce associations of time and experience, in ways that mobilize the agency of the object. In order to show how this agency functions within the object, I will use Object Oriented Feminism (OOF), as it has responded to Object Oriented Ontology. OOF is helpful in analyzing these works because it provides a philosophical understanding of how agency is interpreted within the inanimate. The bed's everyday form of functionality is subverted by displaying it within public space, which causes the audience to question the object's arrival to the art form. In turn, the beds point to their experiential history, which suggests the existence of a timeline within the object. The suggestion of the bed's temporal experience formulate it as a kind of relic, where it becomes an agent that animates and expresses its nonhuman experience. Salcedo and Gonzalez-Torres employ their beds in recognizable forms that retain their status as a use object, in order to preserve the experiences that are intrinsic to the objects. These pieces highlight the agency that the bed already has, using the forum of the artistic context to display this agency.

Untitled (1995)

The first piece I will analyze that suggests the bed's experience through time, both as a witness and participant, is Doris Salcedo's *Untitled (1995)*. (Figure 6) *Untitled* displays a wooden bed frame intersected by an armoire. The bed frame and armoire are primarily chestnut,

although parts of the armoire have been filled with concrete.⁵⁴ The armoire is placed inside the bed frame, the back supported by the bed's headboard. One of the sides of the bed frame appears to pierce the armoire, looking as though it has stuck a hole through the armoire. The armoire is held by the bed frame while simultaneously being impaled by it. The body of the wardrobe is being cradled while hurt.

Salcedo's work animates the objects while retaining their status as pieces of furniture. The bed frame and armoire are preserved almost completely in their original form, as they would appear in a household. The retention of this form speaks to the construction of the piece more than it does to its aesthetic value. The work is less about Salcedo's "creation" than it is the structure of the objects themselves. The architecture of the piece is gestural, the frame and armoire having an interaction rather than existing as two separate use objects. Salcedo's choice to keep recognizable forms of furniture rather than abstracting them appeals to our experience of the household. The armoire and bed frame are recognized by the viewer, due to the viewer's life experience, as there are usual shapes, forms, and constructions of bed frames and armoires to render them useful. The objects are viewed as such, while simultaneously conveying ideas regarding absence, interruption and loss.

Introducing OOF

I would like to introduce OOF, and ontology at large, as I will be using it to speak about the two works in this chapter. I argue that Salcedo and Gonzalez-Torres' beds announce a certain

⁵⁴ Julie Rodrigues Widholm, "Presenting Absence: The Work of Doris Salcedo," in *Doris Salcedo* (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and the University of Chicago Press, 2015). <https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/texts/presenting-absence/index.html>.

agency that is supported and understood by using ontological theory. Objectification in daily life leads to a specific and limited type of thinking regarding an object's meaning and place in society. Using OOF as a backbone, in conversation with ontologists such as Heidegger and Harman, among others, the agency of the object can be brought to the fore as the object speaks of its temporal experience.

Object-Oriented Feminism, known by its abbreviation OOF, is an anthology that approaches the experience of the object primarily from three lenses: political, erotic, and ethical. As a response to Object Oriented Ontology and likeminded theories, the goal of Object Oriented Feminism is to explore ideas of agency in nonhuman contexts.⁵⁵ It attempts to understand where the root of being exists in the world, and supplementarily rejects a notion of anthropocentrism - the belief that humans are of the utmost value in the world. Katherine Behar, during the introduction of the anthology, makes the point that OOF exists as a feminist intervention into the world of ontology. In doing so, she argues that there is no totality of understanding when it comes to the object. OOF claims to recognize that exploring the question of being while lacking racial, social, gendered, and economic factors could be problematic in understanding personhood alongside that of the objects, as it is reductive and solely philosophical, rather than functional. Creating a theoretical framework that analyzes the workings of what we designate as “objects” removes stagnancy in object/person relationships and produces changed relationships. However, it simultaneously detaches some motivating forces, effects, and causes from the object by privileging which are chosen to be spoken about. Solely discussing the object in its theoretical framework is problematic, as it can analyze the object’s function mentally, yet retain the

⁵⁵ Behar, Katherine. *Object-Oriented Feminism*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

capitalistic, oppressive forces imposed on the object for use. Activist Silvia Federici has said, “To view wages for housework as a thing rather than a perspective is to detach the end result of our struggle from the struggle itself and to miss its significance in demystifying and subverting the role to which women have been confined in capitalist society.”⁵⁶ While Federici is not referencing ontology in her use of the term ‘thing,’ her comment points to the fact that the view one takes can detach the matter from perspective, significance, and roles if not careful. OOF’s understanding of itself displays exactly the way in which ontology, as it deals with the nature of being, is inherently self-referential.⁵⁷

In the introduction, Behar outlines that OOF, among other things, is an opportunity to use ontological theory to explore who is perceived as the object - which feminism has attempted to clarify for decades. She argues that ontology can be useful in understanding how objects become objectified, in order to rework how objectification happens to people. OOF looks at the way relationships function when they are built out of, and result from, objectification. As both objects and humans are produced out of the same systems, ideas, and constructions, OOF attempts to rethink what objectification of the feminine means. For example, if one can analyze the reasons society is able to look at a shoe and remove its agency, objectify it, and use it - then more can be discovered regarding the similar thought processes that occur when objectifying a woman or person. The adoption of Object Oriented thought explores the relationship between object and subject, spending time and resources on the identity of the object and in doing so renounces human exceptionalism.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, 15.

⁵⁷ Katherine Behar, “An Introduction to OOF,” in *Object-Oriented Feminism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 3.

⁵⁸ Behar, “An Introduction to OOF,” 9.

Heidegger and Objects vs. Things

Philosopher Martin Heidegger's ontological theory which explores the relationship between the object and its functional role is detailed in Irina Aristarkhova's piece in *Object-Oriented Feminism*. Aristarkhova uses Heidegger's theory in order to develop examples which illustrate her points regarding objectification. By distinguishing "things" from "objects," Heidegger suggests an object agency allotted and found in some objects, while not in others. In the upcoming pages, I will discuss his theory in order to elicit a distinction between objects for use and objects that are "accessible" to us, that are "made out of the world."⁵⁹ These conceptions of an accessible object suggests we share an experience with them. To be 'made out of the world' is to contain experience. We relate to and understand object experience in assigning them agency in their own right, which is seen in the beds of both Salcedo and Gonzalez-Torres.

Heidegger uses "objects" and "things" to explore the meaning that certain objects inhabit and produce. Aristarkhova first explains Heidegger's definition of objects and things, and how they diverge from one another: "a thing is not simply a no- thing- nothing. Things, properly speaking, are "lifeless beings of nature and objects of use."⁶⁰ Here, the term "thing" is "a precondition to becoming an object" - as a thing is either used, holding functional purpose, or even considered a "being."⁶¹ Within Heidegger's conception, a thing transcends some original conception of the use-object, and possesses a new title for it when considered an object. However, this view where the thing is deemed beyond a "lifeless being of nature" or "object of use" and given objecthood is not formulaic, there are layers of understanding which inform this

⁵⁹ Irina Aristarkhova, "A Feminist Object," in *Object-Oriented Feminism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 43.

⁶⁰ Aristarkhova, "A Feminist Object," 43.

⁶¹ Ibid.

shift. To Heidegger, it appears that “thingness” is attained *subjectively*, as is the object’s conceived psyche and emotion.

Things Made Out of the World

The difference between object and thing, creates ambiguity around what is considered an object and what contains ‘objectness.’ The transcendence between these two terms demonstrate a meaning and power that can be attained by the inanimate. Heidegger’s use of a young girl is a good - and charged - example of the uncertainty of object relationships. It reveals the era of his conception and the problematic nature of the objectification at large. While Heidegger doesn’t state that a young girl is an object, she is considered a “young thing.” Therefore, she is not nothing, she has attained more “thingness” as a “lifeless being of nature” or “object of use.” However, she is not yet viewed as an object. He states that “it is mere things, excluding even use-objects, that count as things in the strict sense,” explaining objects as “a thing that has been made available to us.”⁶²

The idea that things are made available to us, that they are “for us” can be problematized within an anthropocentric reading. In Heidegger’s example, the young girl is “available” to the philosopher, and whether or not she is yet an object ontologically, he has already objectified her. However, I would like to argue that through Heidegger’s language there is space for a conception of objecthood in which power and agency is found within the object themselves, rather than through the philosopher’s designation of availability. In Heidegger’s theorization an object is accessible and available, which differs from a “thing,” where “only what conjoins itself out of

⁶² Ibid.

the world becomes a thing.”⁶³ Conjoining out of the world a requirement which sounds much like the definition of the term experience. Experience is defined as “the fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through direct observation or participation.”⁶⁴ An object can observe, be affected, and participate and therefore experience. In doing so, does the object conjoin itself out of the world? Perhaps there are more “things” than Heidegger suggests.

Aristarkhova views this transcendence between object and thing as a call for awareness:

Nature is not a mere thing, though some of her elements are, as well as some human-made things, such as a jug, stones, a hammer, and so forth. They stop being objects as soon as we allow them to be things, for they present themselves to us in their independence, in their ability to gather the whole world in the self-contained manner. The ascendance of objects to things is what would help to treat them differently, as things-in-themselves, rather than being used for human consumption.⁶⁵

At the core of the issue when discussing objectification is the difference between being viewed as an object and experiencing agency. Objects are “allowed to be things” once people designate agency, yet they are experiencing and participating in interactions before this designation. Aristarkhova argues that objects should be treated differently, more readily viewed as things-in-themselves. She states that things are “right in front of us...the thing is here by its aesthetic quality; before we think it, we already taste it, touch it, see it, feel it, sense it variously.”

66

Witnessed Experience

Salcedo manipulates the armoire, retaining aspects of their form as they normally appear within the household in order to produce a specific set of associations of time, presence, memory

⁶³ Ibid., 49.

⁶⁴ “experience.” *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2020. Web. 27 April 2020.

⁶⁵ Aristarkhova, “A Feminist Object,” 48.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 45.

and experience. In doing so, she creates a form that suggests the furniture's own agency as a participant and witness. Salcedo's work is based on the experience of war in Bogotá, Colombia, where the civil war has endured for over 50 years.⁶⁷ She uses furniture that either belongs to those who have been affected by the war such as the victims or their families; or that are available to those marginalized within Colombian society. By using objects available to and owned by people in Bogotá, Salcedo makes the content reminiscent for them. Salcedo has chosen objects which have witnessed the experience of people and society within the homes of Bogotá. While furniture appears ephemeral, it has endured manipulation and experience correlated to that of its owner. The object has witnessed, as well as held its own, experience. Salcedo displays how objects can be markers of experience.

One analysis of Salcedo's work states that she "makes tangible both an assault on the human body, of which death is the most extreme and horrific result, and the never ending grief experienced by the survivor of the dead, the disappeared, the dispossessed."⁶⁸ Salcedo calls on this grief that points to the moment of assault, as well as its aftermath, through her own interruption of the white cube gallery space. She disrupts the conventions of two dimensional artforms by employing three dimensional space, unfinished and interrupted use-objects, and pointing to their presence within the gallery. As a piece of modern and contemporary sculpture, she points to the simplicities of form but does not equate it with the "simplicity of experience."⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Widholm, "Presenting Absence,"
<https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/texts/presenting-absence/index.html>.

⁶⁸ Widholm, "Presenting Absence,"
<https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/texts/presenting-absence/index.html>.

⁶⁹ Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 26.

The effects of war are shown through the furniture as agents: longstanding, corporeal modifications to the pieces elicit the connotations of displaced, affected people. As stated above, the armoire's interruption of the bed frame creates another, third frame of the work that is missing - a bed, a body, a home, a location. There is a notion throughout the piece of presence and absence - the suggestion of missing parts within these forms that are usually present. The object refers to the body, space, and subsequently time, which are all locked together, through the furniture's form.⁷⁰ By altering the items given by or reminiscent of the victims of the civil war, Salcedo wishes to employ the victim's perspective, developing a direct agency for the victims through the furniture as the active participant. The objects recreate the human desire and struggle for agency within this civil conflict.

The fact that the objects can speak to the experience of the victims, point to their ability to speak at all. Salcedo *uses* the agency the objects have in order to convey meaning. That is, the objects can speak on the war because they have, in fact, experienced it. While she draws the boundaries of the work through pointing to its place in the gallery space, the work is simultaneously "inseparable from the experience of looking," suggesting that the gallery viewers are just that, witnesses to the experience of objects: who have witnessed death, grief, and disappearance themselves.⁷¹ Salcedo highlights the furniture's ability to animate itself and convey its experience. In displaying the bed frame and armoire she shows the relationship between humans and objects are more alike than disparate in that "each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its own being."⁷²

⁷⁰ Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation*, 27.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

Untitled (1991)

The second piece I will discuss that explores the bed's objectness is Felix Gonzalez Torres' *Untitled* (1991), which brings about ideas regarding ephemerality, loss, and the ubiquity of those experiences. (Figure 7) The piece is a photograph mounted on a billboard, first displayed on the streets of Manhattan in New York. The image is stark in its exhibition, contrasted by the busyness of passersby. It shows a bed with two pillows, both of which are impressed with indentations that suggest two heads on each pillow have recently laid there. The bed is unmade, with its sheets crumpled and messy, as if one just got out of the bed. It is displayed on billboards above parking lots, on the side underpasses, highways, and buildings, or on a street corner.

The white sheets which are seen in the image are commonplace and nondescript, found in hotel rooms and bedrooms alike. As they do not disclose information about the owner of the bed, the sheets are instead markers of the state of the bed. The indentations on pillows and the disheveled comforter express a temporal experience that has left its mark, yet disappeared. The two impressions on the pillows make the audience aware of the partnership that is present within the bed, of two people through sleep.

Gonzalez-Torres created many works during the time of *Untitled (1991)* and until his death that related to his partner's, as well as his own, struggle with AIDS.⁷³ The absence of the figures in the piece point to the disappearance of the body, the presence and absence of life, which occurs rapidly due to the disease. The body is there, making an indent one day and

⁷³ Tom Folland, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (billboard of an empty bed)," *Khan Academy*, (Accessed 2 May 2020), <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/global-culture/concepts-in-art-1980-to-now/identity-art/a/felix-gonzalez-torres-untitled-billboard-of-an-empty-bed>.

suddenly gone the next. The use of the image on a billboard also suggests publicity and silence, much like the discussion of AIDs, which was both a matter of public knowledge while remaining an intimate, silenced matter.

Gonzalez-Torres' use of the stark billboard in busy New York City traffic brings about the ubiquity of the bed experience. The bed belongs to everyone, as it is being viewed by many, while holding visual cues that suggest a certain pair have lied there. The billboard adds a "dissonant note [disturbing] that visual unity on which the function of the city as spectacle depends."⁷⁴ *Untitled (1991)* is within a display method that points directly to its being an object, it is two-dimensional and shows a scene that is associated with the everyday use of the bed. However, Gonzalez-Torres' displays how the bed's potency of experience can relay it for itself, and therefore lend itself to a potent agent within the billboard, that needs none other than its own agency in order to speak.

Object Language

The beds shown in both Salcedo and Gonzalez-Torres' work use the furniture object as an active agent which relays its own experience. The object refers to itself in its objecthood, reliant on its position in place, time, and history. Both pieces refer to the objects 'self awareness,' which in turn alludes to the object's experience as participant and witness. Another element of the object considered in OOF, and which I have referenced earlier in this chapter, is it's "objectness." I use this term to refer to the object's ability to be read, understood, and participate in its existence as an object.

⁷⁴ Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation*, 35.

In Frenchy Lunning's "Allure and Abjection," she uses philosopher Graham Harman's description of the dichotomy between the object and its performance (of its objecthood), stating, "there is a combat between object and itself, between the monad and its traits."⁷⁵ In this quotation, Harman suggests there is a conflict between the object participating in everyday life in its objectness and being "self-aware" of this objecthood. Take the 'monad' as the bed, for example. Harman argues there is a combat between the bed and itself, between the bed as the object and the bed's awareness of its traits in its being a bed. This combat Lunning describes also relates to the object's capacity to be removed from its usual position or location, while carrying signs of its original position within it. Harman's theory describes that objects, which are primarily "made accessible and available to us" unlike things, carry with them signs of their original location, which suggests that an object does not only inhabit this role but is able to point to itself inside of that role, and to the role itself. Through art, and both Salcedo and Gonzalez-Torres' beds as examples, this is a possibility for the object. By becoming artful and aestheticized as a use object, its very traits are separated from the usual locale they inhabit. The relationship of the object to itself creates an "object language," where the self, and the experience of the object, are distinguished from the use.

The manipulation of the bed from its "original" form, and the "combat" this produces, are used in Salcedo and Gonzalez-Torres' works. Salcedo's *Untitled* uses the "object language" through the material she uses. The pieces of furniture which belong to families, were used in everyday life, and show signs of wear and tear. However, due to her manipulation of their limbs, placing the bed frame inside the armoire and filling the drawers with concrete, the objects are

⁷⁵ Frenchy Lunning, "Allure and Abjection: The Possible Potential of Severed Qualities," in *Object-Oriented Feminism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 84.

disrupted from their normal form. As Harman describes, the object “breaks loose from its own qualities and meets them in a kind of dual.”⁷⁶ The “dual” that Harman refers to is within the object’s own knowledge and reference of itself. It is self referential in that it points to its objectness, as if to question its status as such, as well as its own experience. Fragments “imply a certain anti logical, anti linear approach,” much like the disjointed, interrupted, complicated way we conceive of our experience.⁷⁷ Salcedo contrasts exhibitionism and performance as well as notions of personal possession or intimacy that call forth the object’s complicated perspective in space. In this shift of context from the home to the gallery, the objects use their position as a location for metaphor. In Lunning’s piece, this metaphor is described as “a mode of narration to explain the invisible, the real / not real, and the possibilities of the desire-disgust binary as not only the generator of the gestures of separation and attraction but also the landscape of a potential agency, as they lie at the very limits of representation.”⁷⁸ This representation is direct in this case as art is built around the very concept of representing or disengaging with representation. The objects, then, are able to inhabit the role of the narrator to explain their own witnessed and lived separation and attraction.

Interpreting the Matter

Perhaps the fact that both Salcedo and Gonzalez-Torres’ bed works are called “Untitled” is no accident either, as it suggests an element of projection on the part of the viewer, and lack thereof on the part of the artist. “Untitled” suggests that the interpretation is for the viewer, or, as

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Womens Art*, 81.

⁷⁸ Lunning, “Allure and Abjection: The Possible Potential of Severed Qualities,” 83.

I would argue, that the content is relayed by the object - and therefore the artist need not speak. These two works do not ask for aesthetic marvel, the questions regarding the works are not “who made this bed?” but where the bed has been and what it has witnessed. Salcedo creates the experience as legible to the audience through its desolation. Gonzalez-Torres’ piece uses different methodology that speaks on the issue of “mattering.”⁷⁹ Through the billboard, an elevated location in which ads, announcements and paid content is privileged, Gonzalez-Torres inherently deems the work as being a prioritized vision. While the matter, in the sense of the content, could be anything, it only comes to *matter* insofar as it is chosen to matter by practices of everyday life: through discussion, vision, and circulation of content. Matter is thus constructed. Karan Barad, author of *Material Feminisms*, argues “agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world,” which can be applied to Gonzalez-Torres’ work in that the agency of his partner could be stripped from him, rendering him invisible, unimportant, and neglected yet in Gonzalez-Torres’ reconfiguring of the bed, object, space, and vision the designation of agency can be returned.⁸⁰

In Barad’s “Posthumanist Performativity,” she discusses the ‘performativity’ of the object, stating that it is not an attempt to translate the work into words and clear understanding of the object’s experience but rather a “contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real.”⁸¹ Her concept of the performance of the object calls for less theoretical clarity but for more understanding in the motives behind our object’s experiences. According to

⁷⁹ Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” in *Material feminisms* (Indiana University Press, 2008), 121.

⁸⁰ Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” 135.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

Barad, the viewing of these use objects are not just the viewing of “things” but “things”-in-phenomena,” meaning they raise questions about what we give time, energy, and resources to ponder.⁸² In our own pondering of these objects, we are privileged to these objects as tellers of a grander story. Just as the things are “in phenomena” so are the way we conceive of them due to “material-discursive phenomena.” That is to say, our objects are not created in voids. There are factors, forces, material, economic, social and so on that create objects and that inflict experience upon them. The things we privilege attention to are given that attention because of our own conceptions of time, worth and productivity. Human based language and practices produce the objects and their meanings: “‘Human’ bodies are not inherently different from ‘nonhuman’ ones. What constitutes the ‘human’ (and the ‘nonhuman’) is not a fixed or pre-given notion, but nor is it a free-floating ideality.”⁸³ With this in mind, the status of bed is not inherent, but dawned based on human conceptions of objectness, and therefore, bed-ness. If the object is viewed as *experiencing* from its conception, then human consumption is a secondary, not primary, concern. The gaze that has been created to view objects and assume their readiness to be consumed, illuminates the way viewing an object can point to itself in dual, subsequently promoting the very critique of the ideological environment as a whole.

⁸² Ibid., 135.

⁸³ Ibid., 141.

Charismatic Attraction and Contextual Positions

In this chapter, I will use phenomenological theory in order to discuss and motivate the concept of “Charisma.”⁸⁴ To build upon the previous chapters, in which various bed sculpture’s historical context, associations, and agency have been explored, I will argue that the bed has a charismatic quality that entices and attracts the viewer. This quality in turn makes the viewer aware of their own spatial and experiential position. Morton has applied charisma to art objects to investigate the first-hand experience that the art object produces for the viewer. It is useful, then, to turn to phenomenology in tandem with Morton’s ontological theory, in order to further understand the way our consciousness works when we are pulled towards objects.

As we’ve seen throughout this project, the bed is a location where people have individualized experiences and develop a set of personal associations. In chapter two, I demonstrated the way the bed sculpture mobilizes these respective associations. I argued that the bed is a charged location because intimate experience occurs there. The charged nature of the bed evokes the viewer’s memories, in order to motivate interpretation. In chapter three, I discussed the bed in its separation from the body, where it references the absent body through its own agency and experience. The two works I will discuss in this chapter offer two more examples of the bed when it is put on display separate from the body. The first piece I’ll discuss is Zoe Strauss’ Billboard Project, *Untitled (Bev and Frank Bed)*. (Figure 8) The second is Tracey Emin’s *My Bed*. (Figure 9) These two works use forms of display that are public, and in doing so

⁸⁴ In brief, Charisma is a conceptual term discussed by ontologist Timothy Morton, who argues that an object can cause an energetic effect which attracts another being to it. In this senior project, I have decided to use the term charisma as a reference to his concept. See: Timothy Morton, “Charisma and Causality,” *ArtReview* (November 2015), https://artreview.com/features/november_2015_feature_timothy_morton_charisma_causality/.

they point to the viewer's position in space, thus making the spatial position of the viewer intrinsic to their perception of the object. However, in this chapter I will not only be discussing the spatial, but also perspectival position of the viewer. Subject position has to do with the viewer's situate in three-dimensional space. The perspectival position is a more abstracted one, that has to do with subjectivity, experience, and facets of identity. While these objects differ in their display, and aesthetic qualities, they both elicit Morton's concept of charisma, nonetheless. Charisma asks the question: what calls us to a work of art? In this chapter, I will explore why this charismatic pull occurs within bed sculpture and how this pull subsequently catalyzes experience.

Viewing and Context: Simone Leigh and Reception

In order to understand what elements of the art object produce a charismatic quality, it is crucial to analyze what about the viewer's context, location, and emotion is reacting to that quality. Phenomenology can be used here to attempt to understand how the experience of the audience is formed. An example of the way a viewer's context affects their understanding of an artwork can be found in Seph Rodney's 2019 text about the Whitney Biennial, "Probing the Proper Grounds for Criticism in the Wake of the 2019 Whitney Biennial," in which he discusses the criticism that artist Simone Leigh faced for her work within the Biennial.⁸⁵ The works by Leigh that Rodney addresses include both ceramic and bronze sculptures. Co-curator Rujeko Hockley noted that Leigh's work used references of "West African sculpture and architecture, particularly adobe homes and structures built in that part of the world, world's fairs of the early

⁸⁵ Seph. Rodney, "Probing the Proper Grounds for Criticism in the Wake of the 2019 Whitney Biennial," *Hyperallergic Media INC.* (2019).

part of the twentieth century, specifically a cafe in Mississippi called Mammy's Cupboard, in which a woman's skirt encased the structure that people would enter through, with at the top of it a Black woman in a kind of mammy costume."⁸⁶ Leigh's work uses these visual references in order to ask the viewer to rethink stereotypical notions and ideas, as well as provide her own commentary that ensures the black woman is not subjected into separated, fragmented parts but is upright at the center of the work. Despite Leigh's intention for the work, critics of the biennial commented that Leigh's work lacked "radicality."

In Rodney's text, he debates the "unnamed" critics and notes that 'radicality' is subjective. He argues that critics were incapable of seeing Leigh's radicality, because of the limitations imposed by their own contexts. Leigh's response to the critique is included in Rodney's article:

If you didn't know what I meant when I said In The Wake. If you never studied Independence architecture. If you don't know why Pauline Lumumba walked through the streets of Kinshasa bare breasted. If you have no idea who Katherine Dunham is or her scholarship, but yet you consider yourself well versed in the work and contributions of the woman she hired as a secretary, Maya Deren. If the words Black Feminist Thought bring absolutely zero concepts to mind... Then you lack the knowledge to recognize the radical gestures in my work. And that is why, instead of mentioning these things, I have politely said black women are my primary audience.⁸⁷

What Leigh states, and Rodney emphasizes, is how the knowledge and experience of the viewer is integral to extrapolating meaning from a work. Leigh argues that her work is radical, if one knows the history she references. Viewers who lacked the right contextual knowledge weren't able to see the works in their radicality.

⁸⁶ "Whitney Biennial 2019," Whitney Museum of Art, <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/2019-biennial?section=43#exhibition-artworks>.

⁸⁷ Simone Leigh, *Instagram*, 16 May 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/BxiJI58gl4t/?utm_source=ig_embed.

In Rodney's discussion of the Whitney Biennial, he explains that canonical art history is limited in its methods of understanding a work of art, or, in other words, provides predetermined, non-subjective ones. He reiterates that art history's prescription of how to view, read, and comprehend artistic production, based on antecedents of artmaking, not only limits the discussion of what kinds of art are viewed. It creates a specific rhetoric and cultural system of value that details what art is powerful, effective, and radical. Rodney, then, theorizes that radicality in the arts has already been aestheticized, and in doing so, proposes that the contexts in which art is made must be reconsidered and redefined in this contemporary era. Rather than promoting a concrete definition of what a radical work of art looks like, he suggests that work must be analyzed with an understanding of the role of the viewer and their own subjectivity. The viewer's experiential and intellectual formation, as well as that of the artist, are crucial to understand readings of an artwork.

Rodney suggests that in art criticism one must "become conversant with the history of the object's making, its allusions to particular discourses, canons, and historical circumstances, or with the artist's biography and concerns...What is now possible that wasn't before the encounter with this object or experience?"⁸⁸ He offers that there is a difference between using traditional art historical analysis and analyzing art within our own contemporary period, and advocates for a melding of the two. Rodney has a new conception of art history, one that this project supports, which utilizes technical and historical understandings of art with personal, intimate, and experiential ones:

⁸⁸ Rodney, "Probing the Proper Grounds for Criticism in the Wake of the 2019 Whitney Biennial."

Another is a more phenomenological one [approach], which gives space to the viewer who may come to the work with naiveté, just as I did the first time I set foot inside an art museum. Despite my lack of knowledge, the work spoke to me and still keeps speaking. For this reason, as personal experience is fundamental in the understanding of an object, phenomenology is crucial to the art object.⁸⁹

Art, like other areas of study in which philosophy may be useful, is where the conceptions of being can be analyzed *while* they are being experienced. Art catalyzes experience, it arises the feelings and responses in the viewer, which ultimately produces their perception of it. In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey addresses the contingency of prior knowledge, personal and learned, in experience: “As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself...Because of continuous merging, there are no holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers when we have an *experience*.”⁹⁰ Dewey points to the fact that our experiences of artworks are linked together in ways that are not visible to us. There is no definitive moment when we decide to interpret an artwork in a specific way - artworks are interpreted by us in that they link our past experience to our present one, through our senses and opinions. Moving forward, towards an art object, is to have your prior context surround and inform you.

“Turning” to the Bed

Rodney’s discussion of intellectual and personal context is one part of understanding the way we relate to an object. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed reorganizes the way our physical relationship to an object is established in our connection to it. Ahmed comments on our

⁸⁹ Rodney, “Probing the Proper Grounds for Criticism in the Wake of the 2019 Whitney Biennial.”

⁹⁰ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 36.

position to the object (as it has been understood) by queering our orientation to it. In her theorization of Positionality, she suggests that one doesn't simply perceive an object. One apprehends it, rather, by making an opinion of it, calling it a 'thing,' and therefore locating it in one's consciousness. That is to say, our spatial position to an object allows us to *take in* the thing, and inform our thinking about it. One's position is relative to the thing:

“We are turned toward things. Such things make an impression upon us.. We perceive them as things insofar as they are near to us, insofar as we share a residence with them. Perception hence involves orientation; what is perceived depends on where we are located, which gives us a certain take on things.”⁹¹

Ahmed discusses our physical position to a work of art, in that a viewer can “share residence” if they are near, if we are oriented to them. She comments on our viewing position, that in the “first place depends on which way we are facing.”⁹² Perception of the work is sensual, then, in that our senses and the way they are configured effect it. These senses experience the work physically, and therefore present us with meaning in an immediate, experiential way.⁹³

Bev and Frank Bed: Layers and Tensions of the Experience

Strauss' image for her Billboard Project in 2009, *Untitled (Bev and Frank Bed)*, induces the viewer into a conscious state of their physical and experiential position. The photograph depicts a mattress in the corner of a room, the location of the bed undisclosed by any captioning or language. On first seeing Strauss' billboard, I was drawn to the composition of the photo, as it depicts a bed captured in a photograph, displayed on a billboard. I was drawn to this method of

⁹¹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2007), 27.

⁹² Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 29.

⁹³ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 22.

display, as an art object, as much as I was to the way the bed was made. My own relationship to these two factors was brought to my attention in the viewing of this bed, which I would argue is intentional. The attachment to my own bed, and subsequently my fascination with Bev and Frank's literal bed, were catalysts in conceiving what the object can represent for personhood and identity at large. Strauss uses the method of display and the bed object as an opportunity for the viewer to question their own experience. Ahmed's theory on Positionality places an emphasis on the "fantasy" of transcending our personal experience: that there is an older idea within art and its history that our perception can be bracketed, that we can put aside our own context when viewing an art object. This is not the cause, however, when our interpretation of art is contingent and promotional of our conception of space, personal experience, and knowledge.⁹⁴ Our perceptions get 'in the way': "experience is limited by all the causes which interfere with perception of the relations between undergoing and doing."⁹⁵

The angle from which the photograph of *Bev and Frank Bed* is taken frames the bed in the corner of the bedroom, so that the bed is flush to a side and back wall. The wooden headboard rests against the back wall and corner. The room has white walls and a floor covered with brown carpet. The two windows are covered with black iron bars. There are two metal posts shown as a part of the frame which have wheels. The bed is high off the ground, as it has a box spring and a mattress. There is a floral mattress, a floral sheet, and a red shiny blanket which, due to its zippered edges resembles a sleeping bag. On top there is a folded quilt. A black electrical cord, unplugged, emerges from underneath the bed. White paint, spackle, or some other, similar material, is broken into flecks on the carpet. The bed looks tidy, yet it does not resemble the

⁹⁴ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 33.

⁹⁵ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 44.

atmosphere of the room, which is not disorderly, but seems on edge. The angle which the corner of the bed is viewed creates a sort of diamond, that aligns the middle line of the image with the corner where two walls of the room meet. This angle both widens the room, as it pushes the closest two corners of the bed to the left edge of the photograph making it appear longer, and narrows the perspective, suggesting that the width of the bed and room is short, giving the sense that the bed is squished into the corner.

This perspective of the bed highlights the “absence and nonpresence” of the object.⁹⁶ Not all views are given of the bed, both because it is flush to one corner of the room and because it has been flattened to a two dimensional plane of a photograph. The bed only remains the “same” object from our assumption of all sides. This absence of information within the photograph is concurrent with the absence of information within the billboard display. Strauss withholds information as much as she provides it. Strauss’ displays the bed above another abstracted, painterly, spatially ambiguous image. *Bev and Frank Bed* is an image that literally displays a bed, whereas the image above it displays a location and subject that is unclear. While she uses an object that signifies intimacy, she places it on a street corner in front of a parking lot, without any indicator of what it is doing there. The juxtaposition of an intimate object in a public space, and of the abstracted image above the representational, creates a confrontation in the parking lot between the images and the viewer alike, who is suddenly aware of their position in space. Space becomes, as Dewey notes, “something more than a void in which to roam about... it becomes a comprehensive and enclosed scene within which are ordered the multiplicity of doings and under

⁹⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 36.

goings in which man engages.”⁹⁷ No longer just a parking lot, the street corner is a bedroom, a painting, a window into different spaces all occurring at once.

Strauss creates tensions between the billboard, the photograph, and the bed itself. By virtue of its form, traditionally used for advertising, the billboard is at odds with the complexities we usually associate with art, two of which are individual experience and truth telling. The billboard is antithetical to works of art. There is a tension between the portrayal of intimate space in a form associated with the banal. While advertisements want to convey their meaning directly, art is poetic - it evokes associations and depends on complexities.

Bev and Frank Bed is a three-dimensional object which has been documented through photography, pasted on a billboard in two dimensions, and is viewed by passerby in three-dimensional space. These layers complicate the relationship one has to an intimate personal object. The bed is jarring in this location - its original location has been abstracted a number of times. While the locale of a billboard is supposed to be transparent in nature, *Bev and Frank Bed* is stripped of its transparency in that it does not resemble its original form. The viewer, then, encounters a layered, complexified, and tainted version of the intimate object.

Due to the abstraction and public location of the bed, the viewer’s spatial position arises as a comparative measure that can further inform their analysis of the bed. The bed is abstracted enough in its layers that one can ask oneself: does it look like mine? The piece simultaneously makes the audience question the space of the billboard at all as a conceptual vehicle. The environment of the bed on the billboard, and its additional lack of context, is questioned as much as the appearance of the bed is interpreted. Given the way that Strauss’ work evokes the way the

⁹⁷ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 23.

viewer is approached by the object, the question of the object's charisma emerges. We are "turned" towards the bed, perhaps understanding its context, but why are we enticed? What is pulling us in?

The Charismatic Pull

Morton discusses charisma in its connection to ontology. He defines ontology as 'the structure of how things are,' arguing that this structure reflects how causality works in the world at large. Rather than viewing art 'as decoration,' then, it is an "operation of cause and effect."⁹⁸ Art can "tamper directly with cause and effect" in that an artist can manipulate materials, birth a new object, and create experience. Our ability to create shows the processes of cause and effect at work. Morton theorizes art as a group of gears, turning. It is not solely materials or parts, beauty or disgust, contexts or creators. Morton's understanding is similar to a more widespread cultural interpretation of art: it has a duty, one that is inherent, to inform greater understandings about the world at large. As art objects are created by artists in the world - they therefore reflect it. He explains that art is essential to the deconstructing of cause and effect, meaning, the art object is placed in front of us not only for our viewing, but for the place we are standing, our position in relationship to the object, to be questioned. We may question our physical and contextual position to the object just as much as we can the shape, color, and tone of the object.

Morton also states that art is "charisma, pouring out of anything whatsoever, whether we humans consider it to be alive or sentient or not." Charisma, as defined by Morton, is a type of power beyond one's control. Rather than a literal aspect of the work (i.e. a material, color,

⁹⁸ Dylan Kerr, "What Is Object-Oriented Ontology? A Quick-and-Dirty Guide to the Philosophical Movement Sweeping the Art World," *Artspace* (8 Apr. 2016).

format, history, price) it is an essence, a philosophical conception of the way that the work motivates agency. This energy is interpreted as effective in that “it emanates from some unseen (or even unseeable) beyond, in the sense that I am not in charge of it and can’t quite perceive it directly, in front of me, constantly present.”⁹⁹ Within art historical interpretation, charisma can provide insight about what we may be reacting to, as well as how. With my knowledge in tow and my spatial position recognized, what is emanated from *Bev and Frank Bed* that draws me in? In other words, if charisma is “not quite perceived” yet “constantly present,” how can one be aware of the viewing position in a way that transcends into the charismatic space given by the object, while also regarding the historical, social, political, and innumerable contexts of the object as informative, indispensable elements within an art historical approach.

My Bed, Aura, and the Motivating Experience of Objects

Tracey Emin’s *My Bed* highlights the charismatic qualities of the art object, through its physicality and immediacy. I would like to argue that Walter Benjamin’s concept of “aura” is related to that of Morton’s ‘charisma,’ in that they both believe in an essence, when it comes to a work of art. Benjamin’s conceived of “aura,” a quality integral to a work of art, as its presence in time and space. He argued that the aura is lost through mechanical reproduction. I believe that aura and charisma are related in that they speak of the art object as having a kind of affective quality. It is because of these qualities that the viewer is drawn, changed, and touched.

My Bed (1998) (figure 9) is a sculpture constructed of a physical mattress with its covers unmade, a bedsheet, comforter, pillows and various blankets - as well as stockings on the sheets.

⁹⁹ Kerr, “What is Object-Oriented Ontology?”

There is a blue rug underneath the mattress. The mattress is on a thick wooden frame. Beside the bed are items strewn on the rug or wooden side table. There are papers, Absolut Vodka, condoms, a stuffed animal, tampons, cigarettes, suitcases. The items seem random yet highly relatable in that they are not beautified: some are gory, gross, inappropriate, fuzzy, cute, excessive, and so on. Emin's work here is personalized yet generic in its state of messiness. Like that of Lester's "Personal Space," (Figure 3) produced in Womanhouse, this piece portrays an intimate space. However, as it is not a house, Emin is not present and therefore, the phenomenological repercussions are different for this work. One becomes a witness not to the artist herself, as in Lester's work, but rather to the objects themselves. The objects surrounding her bed, and the bed itself, are to portray Emin in her absence.

A desolate yet messy bed within the center of a gallery causes the viewer to "orient" themselves to the object. The objects by the side of the bed are commercial and ubiquitous, yet the arrangement of them suggests their use is specific to Emin. *My Bed* is typical of many contemporary sculptures, in that it would require a diagram and detailed set of instructions to recreate it. One would think that the specificity in the work's arrangement would allow it to be recreated identically, but that is not what occurs. While Emin may write down the designated location of each object and the dimensions and distance between each thing, no object's can be placed precisely the same way twice. The galleries and museums the work is placed into differ. Therefore, the work emerges less as a display of objects but rather as a *state* of objects: contingent upon time and place, and life events.

Emin is creating her own 'proof' of existence through the bed's assertion of agency. The bed here is designated as hers through its title, assuring the viewer that it has had some previous

lived experience, a designation of time, that has occurred before it has been placed within the gallery space. Emin's work suggests that experience lies in objects. Experience being "the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment."¹⁰⁰ The objects are a measure of the experience they have endured, as well as a testament and relic of Emin's own experience. The object's presence, which resembles their original state of use, reiterates an idea of the object's 'authenticity': "the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced..."¹⁰¹

Emin's work has elements of tradition in its display, yet disrupts this in the unconventional use of the objects.¹⁰² Her work is a marker for personal intimate objects that speak through their own experience, which are intended to create a position for the Emin. The bed attempts to define her life while augmenting their own.

Benjamin conceives of 'aura' as it contrasts reproducible objects (through processes like printmaking or photography) against natural objects, which contain aura in the "remoteness" of their presence, rather than a remoteness literal space.¹⁰³ Benjamin argues that reproduction of the object rids it of the "here and now of the work of art- its unique existence in the place where it is at the moment."¹⁰⁴ He suggests the remoteness of reproduction causes transitoriness.¹⁰⁵

Benjamin describes the way humans have the tendency to bring objects closer- i.e. to understand, to make palpable, to reproduce items we view.¹⁰⁶ An everlasting "search of an object

¹⁰⁰ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 22.

¹⁰¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217.

¹⁰² Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 10.

¹⁰³ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Penguin Books, 2008), 9.

¹⁰⁴ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 219.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

outside himself...this object answers the innerness of the desire.”¹⁰⁷ Similar to Ahmed’s “turning to” the object, and reorienting the viewer, Benjamin is suggesting that both the authenticity, essence and presence are linked in the first handedness of experiencing the object. We turn to the object outside ourselves to find reflections of the inner being: whether we are aware of those processes or not. Benjamin’s “aura” is similar to Morton’s “charisma,” in that human desire is pulled closer to our awareness by the object when we witness it, we obtain the object by experiencing it in our own consciousness, and learn from the object as we perceive and understand its meaning.

¹⁰⁷ Georges Bataille and Mary Dalwood, *Eroticism: Death & Sensuality* (City Lights Books, 1962), 29.

Matters of the Heart

This senior project has attempted to analyze works of art in which the bed is the central focus for two main purposes. First, I wanted to explore the way a utilitarian object functions when displayed in an artistic context. Within the works I have analyzed, the bed's designation as a use-object in everyday space is removed, in turn transforming it into an object that holds poetic and conceptual value. The bed no longer signifies a commodity, then, but represents its potency as an object and place for other associations. Through this project, we have found that the bed produces complex sets of associations, by way of its emotive suggestions of time, experience, and memory. The meanings extracted from the bed are contingent on the memories a viewer has of the bed and their own associations with it, dependent on their positionality. The bed encourages reflection on the part of the viewer, wherein one's own spatial, temporal, and experiential position is revealed.

The second goal of this senior project is methodological. I have analyzed the bed in four chapters, each with a distinct, yet interrelated, lens. I used historical, phenomenological, and ontological theories in order to interpret the multilayered nature of the object, which provides it with many entrance points. We have accessed the bed through its history, performativity, agency and charisma. By using various theories to access the bed, I have posed an opportunity to rethink how works of art are interpreted within the discipline of art history. I have offered a type of analysis that relies inherently on the subjectivity and complexity of the viewing position. This analysis has proved both the bed, and art historical analysis more generally, to be a palimpsest of information: layered and ever evolving.

I believe art history provides a rich opportunity to perceive work and create conclusions that are not eternal, but flexible. While this project is ambitious in its scope, it has proposed a multi methodological analysis that tries to understand the object. I have analyzed various case studies of the bed art object from a myriad of vantage points, with an understanding of the subjectivity within each reading.

I would particularly like to underline Kobena Mercer's conception of positionality, as his work has deeply inspired this senior project. In "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," Mercer revisits Robert Mapplethorpe's black male nudes, after having written about them years before.¹⁰⁸ Initially, Mercer had adopted Laura Mulvey's framework of the gaze, wherein a subject/object dichotomy is created in "the field of visibility," associating "masculinity with the activity of looking and femininity with the subordinate, passive role of that which is being looked at."¹⁰⁹ While he had originally argued Mapplethorpe had objectified black male bodies and fetishized them within the photographs, upon years of reflection, he revisited and rethought his earlier claims. He recognized he had not taken his own position as a viewer into account, and how his identity, as a black, gay man, caused a subjective response to the images that cannot be overlooked in his reading of them. His own identity became imperative in his understanding of the works, both why he had once taken issue with them, and why subsequently, he realized the complexity of his position in relation to them. Mercer's piece allows space for a rethinking of his previous perspectives on Mapplethorpe's photographs. He suggests his own viewpoint as ever changing, so why shouldn't his analysis be?

¹⁰⁸ Kobena Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," *New Formations*, Vol. 16 (Spring 1992), 1-24.

¹⁰⁹ Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," 4.

Incorporated into this project are questions about how we exist with everyday things. At the start of the project, I inquired about my relationship to my own bed and the deep seated connection I have with it. Now, I have accessed the bed in a manner that hopes to mirror looking at oneself on the surface of a reflective pond. Through this multi lensed analysis, I have arrived upon conclusions that inform future interpretations of our relationship with the object. This project has shown the potency of existing alongside objects that share our experience, yet witness it distinctly from us. It has shown that memories we hold are held by another. It poses that going forward, each new object may resonate with those of the past, that our imagination ensues upon a bed of lived experience.

Images

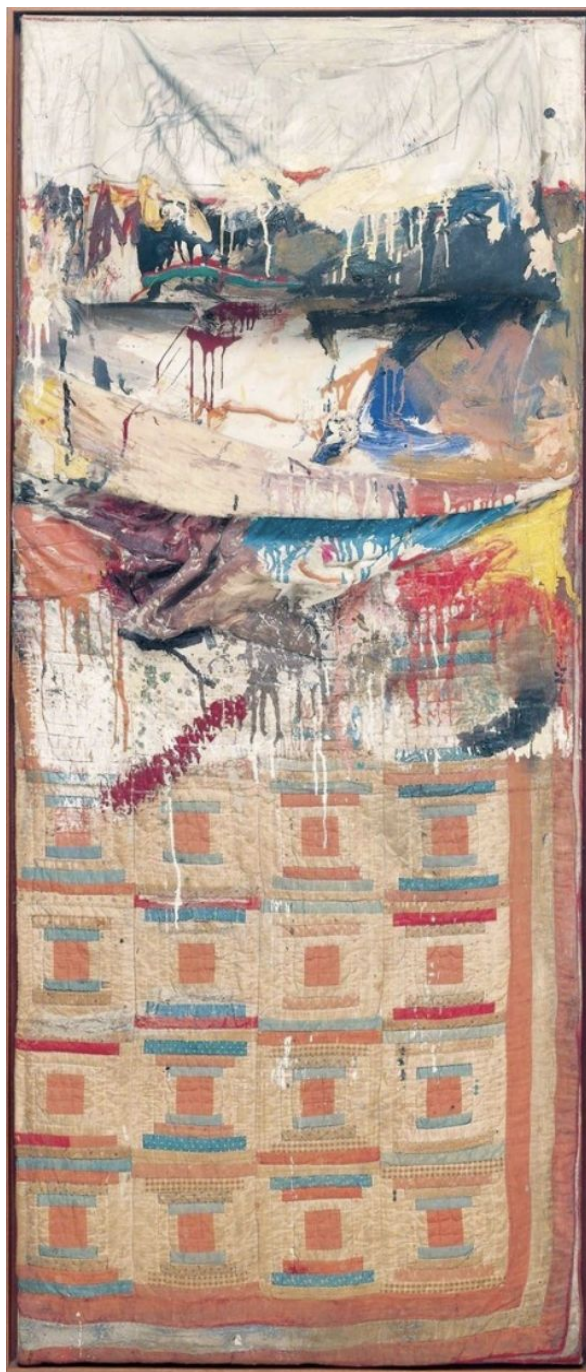


Figure 1. Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed*, 1955.



Figure 2. Sophie Calle, *The Sleepers*, 1979.



Figure 3. Janice Lester, *Personal Space*, The Womanhouse Project.



Figure 4. Emma Sulkowicz, *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*, 2014-2015.

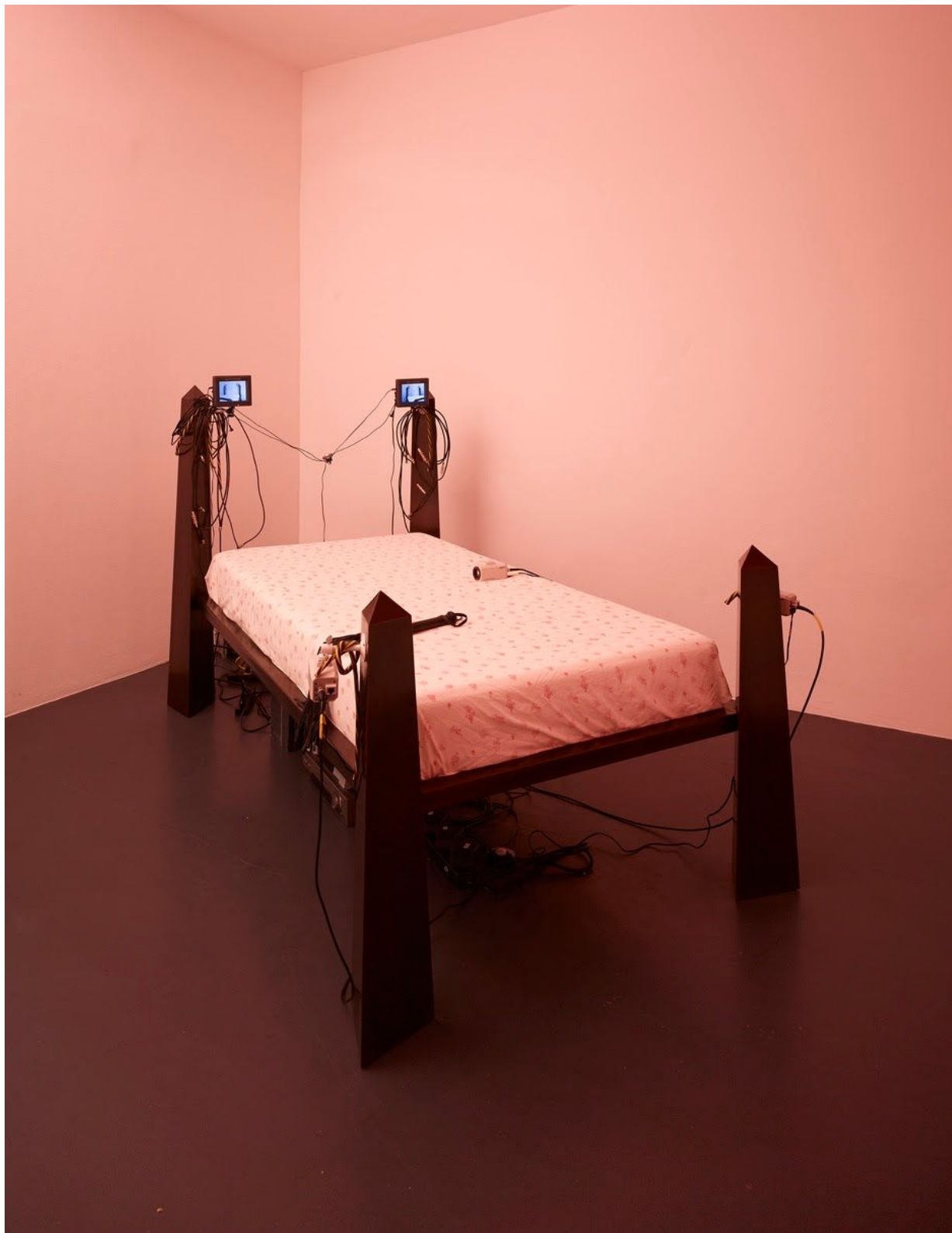


Figure 5. Julia Scher, *Mama Bed* (2003), Natalia Hug.



Figure 6. Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 1995.



Figure 7. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (1991), Museum of Modern Art.



Figure 8. Zoe Strauss, *Untitled (Bev and Frank Bed)* (2009), Billboard Project, Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Figure 9. Tracey Emin, *My Bed* (1998), Tate Modern.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press, 2007.
- Alaimo, Stacy, and Susan J. Hekman. *Material Feminisms*. Indiana University Press, 2008.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Penguin Classics, 2014.
- Baker, Laura E. "Public Sites versus Public Sights: The Progressive Response to Outdoor Advertising and the Commercialization of Public Space." *American Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2007, pp. 1187-213. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40068485?seq=5#metadata_info_tab_contents.
- Balducci, Temma. "Revisiting "Womanhouse": Welcome to the (deconstructed) "Dollhouse,"" (*Woman's Art Journal* 27 no.2 Fall/Wint 2006)
- Bataille, Georges, and Mary Dalwood. *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*. City Lights Books, 1962.
- Behar, Katherine. *Object-Oriented Feminism*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Translated by James Amery. Underwood, Penguin Books, 2008.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 217-251.
- Bennett, Jane. "Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton" *New Literary History*, Vol. 43, No, 2. Johns Hopkins UP 2002.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Berger, Arthur Asa. *What Objects Mean: An Introduction to Material Culture*. Left Coast Press, 2014.

Blazwick, Farr, et. all. *The Object*. Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2014.

Bordo, Susan. "Postmodern Subjects, Postmodern Bodies." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1992.

Botescu-Sireteanu, Ileana. "The carnivalesque, parody and irony in the contemporary american visual art: Project Womanhouse, a case study." *Transilvania University of Braşov, Philology and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 7 (56) No. 1 - 2014.

http://webbut.unitbv.ro/BU2014/Series%20IV/BULETIN%20IV%20PDF/05_BOT.pdf.

Butler, Judith. "Response: Performative Reflections on Love and Commitment." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 1/2, 2011, pp. 236–239.

Carr, Moffitt, and Szymanski. "Sexual Objectification of Women: Advances to Theory and Research," *The Counseling Psychologist*, The Authors, 2011.

Cerulo, Karen A. "Identity Construction: New Issues, New Directions." *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 23 (1997), p. 385-409. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2952557>.

Kerr, Dylan. "What Is Object-Oriented Ontology? A Quick-and-Dirty Guide to the Philosophical Movement Sweeping the Art World." *Artspace*, 8 Apr. 2016, www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/the_big_idea/a-guide-to-object-oriented-ontology-art-53690.

Demetrakas, Johanna. "WOMANHOUSE." 1974. *Women Make Movies*.

<https://www.wmm.com/catalog/film/womanhouse/>

Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. Capricorn Books, 1934.

Firat, Begüm Özden, and Aylin Kuryel. *Practices, Dilemmas, and Possibilities*. Brill, 2011. *ProQuest Ebook Central*,
ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bard/detail.action?docID=668959.

Fisher, Jean. "Objects of Fetishism." *Art Monthly*, Iss. 52, 1981.

Folland, Tom. "Robert Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism: The Early Combines and Decoration." *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 92, no. 4, 2010, pp. 348–365. *JSTOR*,
www.jstor.org/stable/29546136. Accessed 13 Jan. 2020.

Folland, Tom. "Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (billboard of an empty bed)." *Khan Academy*,
<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/global-culture/concepts-in-art-1980-to-now/identity-art/a/felix-gonzalez-torres-untitled-billboard-of-an-empty-bed>, Accessed 2 May 2020.

Federici, Silvia. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. PM Press, 2012.

Goldin, Nan, and Marvin Heiferman. *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. Aperture Foundation, 1989.

Gouma-Peterson, and Matthews. "An Exchange on the Feminist Critique of Art History," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 71, No. 1. CAA, 1989.

Gouma-Peterson, and Matthews. "The Feminist Critique of Art History," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 69, No. 3. CAA, 1987.

Havenhand, Lucinda Kaukas. "A View from the Margin: Interior Design." *Design Issues*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2004, pp. 32–42. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1512000.

Hudek, Anthony. *The Object*. Cambridge, MIT Press. 2014

Jones, Amelia. "Presence" in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation." *Art Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 4, Performance Art: (Some) Theory and (Selected) Practice at the End of This Century (Winter, 1997), pp. 11-18. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/777715>

Kaye, Nick. *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

Keifer-Boyd, Karen. "From Content to Form: Judy Chicago's Pedagogy with Reflections by Judy Chicago," *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research*, Pennsylvania State University, 2007.

Kellein, Thomas. *Donald Judd: Early Work, 1955-1968*, (New York: D.A.P., 2002).

Kingsley, April and Semmel, Joan. "Sexual Imagery in Women's Art," *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol.1, No. 1 p.1-6. 1980.

Klein, Nichols. "Memory and the Sense of Personal Identity," *Mind*, Vol. 121 No. 483, Oxford UP, 2012.

Lippard, Lucy R. *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Womens Art*. Dutton, 1990.

Lorde, Audre. *The Uses of the Erotic*. Audre Lorde and The Crossing Press, 1984.

Mercer, Kobena. "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," *New Formations*, Vol. 16, p. 1-24, Spring 1992.

Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer, "Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into what Women Saved and Assembled--FEMMAGE." *Heresies I*, no. 4 (Winter 1977-78): 66-69.

Molesworth, Helen. "House Work and Art Work." *October*, vol. 92, 2000.

Moran, Anna, and SORCHA O'Brien. *Love Objects: Emotion, Design and Material Culture*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

Morton, Timothy. "Charisma and Causality." *ArtReview*, November, 2015.
https://artreview.com/features/november_2015_feature_timothy_morton_charisma_causality/.

Nochlin, L. "Why have there been no great women artists?" (*Art and Sexual Politics*, London 1973).

"Rauschenberg Sculptures, Bio, Ideas." *The Art Story*,
www.theartstory.org/artist/rauschenberg-robert/.

Raymond, Claire. *Women Photographers and Feminist Aesthetics*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

Rich, Adrienne. "Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976)" *Essential Essays: Culture, Politics and the Art of Poetry*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.

Richardson, William J. "The Thing," *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*. Fordham University, 2003. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1g2kmp.39>

Rivenbark, Elizabeth Richards. "Corporeal Furnishings in the Sixties: Furniture as Art and Its Intimacy with the Body." (*Artibus Et Historiae*, vol. 35, no. 69, 2014) pp. 275–288., www.jstor.org/stable/24595743. Accessed 13 Jan. 2020.

Robertson, Rebecca. "Zoe Strauss: Finding Humanity Where It's Hidden." *Art News*, 20 June 2013, www.artnews.com/2013/06/20/finding-humanity-where-its-hidden/.

"Robert Rauschenberg. Bed. 1955: MoMA." *The Museum of Modern Art*, www.moma.org/collection/works/78712.

Rodney, Seph. "Probing the Proper Grounds for Criticism in the Wake of the 2019 Whitney Biennial." *Hyperallergic Media INC.*, 2019.

Rodrigues Widholm, Julie, et al. "Presenting Absence: The Work of Doris Salcedo," *Doris Salcedo*, (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and the University of Chicago Press, 2015). <https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/texts/presenting-absence/index.html>.

Roy, M.N., *Materialism*. Calcutta, Renaissance Publishers Ltd. 1940.

Seifert, Carolyn J. "Images of Domestic Madness in the Art and Poetry of American Women," *Women's Art Journal*, Vol.1, No. 2 p.1-6. 1980.

Schippers, Mimi. "Recovering the feminine other: masculinity, femininity, and gender hegemony." *Springer Science + Business Media*, 2007.

Scott, Emily Eliza, and Kristen Swenson, editors. *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics*. Oakland, California UP, 2015.

Scott, Joan W. "Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1988, pp. 33–50.

Sheldon, Rebekah. "Form / Matter / Chora: Object Oriented Ontology and Feminist New Materialism," *The Nonhuman Turn*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Smolnik, Noemi. "While You Were Sleeping." *Frieze*, 10 Mar. 2016, frieze.com/article/while-you-were-sleeping.

Sparrow, Tom. "Phenomenology: A Philosophy of Access," *The End of Phenomenology: Metaphysics and the New Realism*. Edinburgh UP, 2014.

Stewart, Susan. *On Longing*. Duke University Press, 1993.

Strauss, Zoe. *America*. AMMO Books, 2008.

Strauss, Zoe, and Sally Stein. *Zoe Strauss: 10 Years on*. Edited by Peter Barberie, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2012.

Tedford, Matthew Harrison. "Zoe Strauss." *Art Practical*, 23 Oct. 2012, www.artpractical.com/column/zoe_strauss/.

Uzwiak, Beth A. "Make of This Whatever You Want: Violence and Intimacy in Zoe Strauss' I-95 Project." *Photography and Culture*, vol. 11, no. 1, 8 Jan. 2018, pp. 19-39. *Taylor & Francis Online*, www.tandfonline.com/eprint/Eu7emSFFFeVXJvrhzZ7d/full.

Wood, Jon, et al. *Modern Sculpture Reader*. Henry Moore Institute, 2012.

Weber, Jasmine. "Judy Chicago Responds to Criticisms About the 'Dinner Party,'" *Hyperallergic Media INC.*, August 2018.

<https://hyperallergic.com/455572/judy-chicago-responds-to-criticisms-about-the-dinner-party/>.