

# Problems of Things and Objects

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1. Lawrence Weiner, 'Intervention', *Lawrence Weiner*, Gilda Williams (ed), London: Phaidon Press, 1998, p.132

Is it possible to identify an art of this particular version of the present? What can possibly be added to the world from the realm of art? Lawrence Weiner asserts that 'art is something human beings make to present to others to understand their place in the world.'<sup>1</sup> Does such a claim have a continued currency? What use are objects to understanding one's place in the world? What about sculptures? Figures? Expression? Art history? Art making is an activity that constantly tests what is thought to be known, seeking out alternative forms of communication as familiar tools become inadequate for the task. It is a process that employs art history, and its perversions, to speculate on what might be at stake in art today, reverberating against the peculiarities and particularities of each version of the present.

These are some of the imponderables posed by Thomas Houseago's sculptures. Masks, coins, gates, figures. Plaster, rusting iron, bronze, graphite, redwood. Buttocks, tensed torsos, striding legs, staring eyes, piles of material scraped into shape by hand. Always incomplete, never ready-made. Houseago's objects are iconic with no reference point, monumental with no claims, macho with no muscle. They are built from material, time and labour, that then wait to be filled by the imaginations of those that encounter them, all the while embracing the inherent impossibilities of art making.

In 1953 Samuel Beckett completed a trilogy of novels with a monologue, *The Unnameable*. Narrated by a disembodied voice, the text wrestles with the limits of language and the impossibility of reconciling thought and its expression. Language, whether constructed from words or objects, always is an approximation of perception. Translating experience is a task guaranteed to fail before one even begins. Beckett's closing lines of *The Unnameable* announce: *You must go on / I can't go on / I'll go on*. Persisting with an activity in spite of its inherent failure is a task suffused with optimism; persisting with art in spite of its inadequacies to express is a task capable of reconfiguring understanding. Grasping failure takes us beyond assumptions of what we think we know and what we think can be represented. In an interview, Dieter Roth once described that: 'Smearing and destroying are the result to achieve what I want. That's why it became a method in my work... I realised that even Malevich's black square resulted from a feeling of failure. One always arrives at something one can no longer depict.'<sup>2</sup> Houseago's sculptures arrive at something that can no longer be depicted and with it propose a mode of art making so of the present that it escapes the fixity of language. Such is the power of an art of the now.

2. Dieter Roth, Felicitas Thun, 'Resulting in Failure: Dieter Roth on Art and Ruin' in *Flash Art International*, 37, May/June 2004, pp.104-105

Contradictions of unrepresentability are the condition of communication - any cluster of signs brings together fragile gatherings of meaning through their juxtaposition. In 1949 the journal *Transition* published *Three Dialogues*, a text where Beckett ostensibly discusses with Georges Duthuit<sup>3</sup> the painterly practices of Tal-Coat, Andre Masson and Bram van Velde. Although published as a conversation, with notes on the participants variously exiting in tears and reminiscing warmly, the text was primarily written by Beckett - many Beckett scholars regard *Three Dialogues* as the closest the writer came to a statement of his own position. Emphatically stating that failure is the inevitable outcome of artistic behaviour, Beckett argues that engaging *with* failure offers a possibility for art to refuse expression: a concept he proposes is an erroneous desire at the core of the reception of artworks. An affective communication can only be achieved by adopting a stance where one admits that, as

3. Samuel Beckett, 'Three Dialogues with George Duthuit' in *Proust and Three Dialogues with George Duthuit*, London: John Calder Publishers, 1999, pp. 101-126



Beckett advises, 'there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.'<sup>4</sup> If there is nothing to express in art, no compulsion nor means to do so, and yet one persists, he suggests that: 'To be an artist is to fail as no other dare fail... this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, [is] a new occasion, a new term of relation.'<sup>5</sup> Stepping out with failure as a faithful travelling companion is to move aside from the orthodox order to enter a realm of doubt and not-knowing in a refusal to give or take authority. It is from here that one can be in, and engage with, the present.

And it is from this position that Houseago interrogates what it might mean to add an object to the world, while incessantly grappling with the problems of things and objects using established grammars of sculpture, such as reducing a lump of material into a form, or building one up, layer by layer, from dust. Weiner describes sculpture as being, 'the relationship of human beings to objects and objects to objects in relation to human beings.'<sup>6</sup> Houseago's artistic practice directly addresses such relationships and slippages, filtering art history through images and objects that lie outside of the realm of rarefied art – from film to domestic clutter, pop music to comics and, most crucially, through experience and perception. His sculptures do not represent, allegorise or reflect the world – rather, they are additions *to* the world and are *of* the world. This is an art concerned with looking, thinking and perceiving; an encounter with this art is an admonishment to look harder and think deeper about all that surrounds us.

*Wood Gate I* (2009), for example, is pure sculptural presence made by processes of reducing, cutting and scraping into redwood – the trees with the thickest trunks of all. One-eyed figures and carved skull heads hold up a heavy lintel to mark an entrance to be passed through to arrive... simply on the other side. As with Houseago's totem-like works, there is an allusion, but no promise, here to the transformative potential of objects, be these notions propagated by artworks or fetishes. Both of these irrational structures of understanding demand a suspension of disbelief in order for them to work their magic. Simultaneously *Wood Gate I* is a sculpture and a prop: it is a thing-in-itself and a thing-pointing-elsewhere. It recalls those wobbly sets of early *Star Trek* television programmes that endlessly rerun on British television as much as it does dusty museum displays of the spoils of conflict presented as trophies of the domination of far-off cultures. In *Sunrise/Sunset (Coins)* (2010) three shining aluminium thin circles are seen leaning casually against a wall on top of each other. Their iridescence makes them oddly totemic, while the title indicates they might have an exchange value. No clues, though, are given as to what can be had for what. In another floor-based work, *Clay Mountain I (Sun)* (2010), a plaster cast of a pile of clay, as the title suggests, sits on the floor, rough-hewn with finger marks rising up into a minor mountain. In *Cave II (Lump)* (2010) another pile of material, this time cast in bronze, has been dumped on the floor, cowpat-like, spreading its form horizontally. Inspiring laughter in their ridiculousness, Houseago's objects defiantly dare those that encounter them to believe in these things as being nothing more than objects. Avoiding metaphor is one of the boldest gestures an artwork can make. Here, a sculpture simply is what it is – it cannot stand in for anything other than itself, it is an irreconcilable force, a forceful material form.

Struggling with what to do with objects, Houseago brings a different register of indifference, gesture and intervention to the familiar structures of the dematerialised art that has drawn so heavily on the first wave of conceptual art, and which characterises the art of the last two decades. Like artists such as Michael Krebber or Matias Faldbakken, Houseago's artworks are recalcitrant and obstructive, escaping language and recuperation to rudely push themselves into the present. Art is a demand to rethink assumptions and find fissures in consensus; a process that can sharpen attention to the surrounding world. By testing and contesting, art productively makes

4. Ibid, p.103

5. Ibid, p.125

6. Lawrence Weiner, 'Interview by Dieter Schwarz' in *Writing and Interviews with Lawrence Weiner 1968-2003*, Gerti Fietzek and Gregor Stemmrich (eds), Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2004, p.192





Matias Faldbakken, *Untitled (Film Cans #4)*, 2007



Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Red Stone Dancer*, c.1913

the present more difficult and uncomfortable than it would be otherwise. Houseago's objects celebrate wrong turns, building structures infused with doubt to recharge *this* present as if in a parallel universe, turning their attention to the objectness of sculpture, drawing on the refuted modernisms that once promised a singular idea of cultural history. *Giant Mask (Cave)* (2010) sits on a rough wooden plinth. It has been hand-pressed from Tuf-Cal plaster, and is held in place by an iron bar. In profile the mouth is open. On one side a cheekbone falls into flesh, forced into form by fingers. The other side is smooth and skull-like, with eyebrows approximated from strips. Part skull, part flesh; part mask, part form; wholly object. This pushing and cajoling of material into object is ever-present in Houseago's works. In *Bottle II* (2010) a bottle squeezes itself into a head or, perhaps, a head squeezes itself into a bottle. The neck is scraped down, the surface recalling just-starting-to-age-skin as the stretch marks of longevity count out time. One eye is a hole, the other an outline.

Cyclopean figures – giant, single-eyed, ill-humoured and always up for a fight – are frequent players in Houseago's collection of forms. In *Cyclops No. 1* (2009) a man seems to be making to stand up from the floor, arms lifted above his head; his torso pushed and pulled into muscle and sinew. Gym-fit and big, this is a man of power, one of a number of freestanding figures, all trying to push themselves to stand tall. They are arrested mid-movement, awkward, as if their bulk and weight is too much to bear. They stand still – of course, as sculptures must – yet are filled with motion. Caught in a suspended moment of time, they hurtle into the future dragging the past, with the help of their long limbs, reluctantly into an unwelcoming present. These figures are full frontal, inviting themselves to be walked around; with an erudite economy, the artist completes the work at the point of being just-good-enough to hold their ground, nothing more is needed. These sculptures stand in the centre of the room, as one circumnavigates, each form dissolves into material.

*Untitled (Sprawling Octopus Man)* (2009) stands firm as if just about to leap, this time knees bent and hand pushed to the floor to give him more propulsion upwards. What strange movement could be about to begin? Some kind of ritual? Or that particular dance that the long-limbed and badly-coordinated perform on dance floors in the early hours of the morning after a few extra glasses of wine. One eye is round, the other cascades in a series of circles into a mask-like appendage. One foot is flat, holding as steady as a tokenistic public art sculpture, while a single smooth brass arm is flung back with chubby fingers. *Baby* (2009–10) also is a figure just about to stand. One arm, made from Tuf-Cal plaster, is pushed out in front of the body, while the

other is firmly pressed on to the floor behind, showing its iron bar support that becomes branching, throbbing veins. *Baby's* right hand side is firmed into shape with plaster, while the left is a drawing transferred onto plaster from a shiny melamine board, its lines made solid and supportive. Drawing here becomes object. In these freestanding sculptures limbs are extended and engorged. As one becomes familiar with any human body that is not one's own, it is impossible not to notice the oddness of a body – perhaps the way a big toe extends a little too far and curves inwards or the choice of how to stand, one leg at right angles to another. With repeated looking any body becomes a contorted twisted form; Houseago grabs the brutal facts of looking.

What are these things, then? What makes them so of this moment in spite of themselves? These sculptures could surely be from any time. Are they made by an almost forgotten and just remembered artist? Someone like Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, perhaps, a sculptor collected by Henry Moore, mythologised by Jim Ede and Ken Russell, and admired by Houseago. These sculptures seem to be related to that particular period of British modernism just creeping its way into the art of the present – be it in Steven Claydon's hessian-clad plinths and busts or Sarah Lucas' *NUDS*, cellulite-like twisted bodies knotted into sexual gymnastics. Or are they plucked from the corners of a provincial museum, antiquities bequested in a gift but never quite ready to go on show. Or are they somehow related to Picasso's heavy portraits that hold expressive emotion that today feels uncomfortable to situate in relation to contemporary art in spite of, or maybe because of, the art historical weight. Or, even, are they from periods of art just too recent to be filled with nostalgia; just too brash and too close to accrue hipster value. Houseago's sculptures are all these things: they noisily pull into the present references from Claes Oldenburg to Tony Cragg, John Chamberlain to Eduardo Paolozzi, Georg Herold to Jacob Epstein, clunky science fiction to comic book fantasies.

Art history is always transformed through distribution, whether illustrated in books, recuperated by artists generations younger, or adopted by popular culture in cliché-ridden styling. Houseago draws on art history in all of its perversions, denying it as an activity that can be either precious or autonomous. His works force art history out of art history, leaving it dirty, awkward and new, releasing the avant-garde from its expectations and constraints. His are irascible, objectionable objects – things that get in the way, that are useless, irreconcilable to type. They drag the notion of art-as-idea back into the realm of objecthood. These are rude, unwieldy and wrong objects that reframe assumptions of what art should, or more importantly could, be.



Georg Herold, *Priest of Shame*, 2009



Sarah Lucas, *NUD (16)*, 2009