

SCVA November 2016

## The scene

I observed this session at the University of East Anglia, Sainsburys Centre of Visual Arts. The session was run by the Head of Learning, with a group of young associates and included their usual facilitator.

These objects had not been used by the facilitator before, although she had a significant experience of using other sorted objects in other galleries and museums. The facilitator was also new to the collection and the group. The group is an established yet flexible group of young associates at BA and MA level or recent graduates in a range of subjects. Whilst the YA had never worked with the facilitator before and had never encountered any sorted objects they were comfortable in the environment of the gallery and had worked with the collection many times. The leader of the Young associates was present and introduced the session. For the remainder of the session the leader worked alongside the group as though a young associate herself.

Therefore, all facilitators had taken a different role for the session and there were many unknowns for everyone involved. For the purposes of this reflection I will be concentrating on the object encounters with the group participants. There is another narrative that accompanies the object observation which uncovers the shifts in power and role when individuals step out of their normal frame of reference.



The objects had been wrapped in brown paper and were each housed in their own cardboard box. One object was exempt from this rule and due to its size and weight the object that is formed of antlers, fake apples and old damaged decoy pigeons sat center stage on the table. This placement mirrored how the antlers had been shown 6 years ago in another part of the gallery in an interactive exhibition. At that time all the objects had been laid out ready for use on a large table that stretched across the gallery bay.



I had imagined that using this collection of objects again would be straightforward as whilst they were reframed through this session, they linked to the SCVA and I was comfortable in their previous success. However, the process and their delivery through this session was very different.

Some objects from the original collection no longer existed and my relationship with objects that were 6 years old had altered. The 2011 incarnation of the objects was linked to the collection the original background had been an invitation to make objects that were relevant to the surrealist exhibition that was showing at the time. The uncanny nature of the objects sat appropriately and resonated with the exhibits and the objects became surreal counterparts.

Therefore, the shifts in how the objects would be shown and delivered for this session were important and considered. As the objects returned to the SCVA they were also reframed to enable a led session. This is the predominant process used with all other sorted objects but originally these objects had been free to use by all visitors to the gallery. The objects were used constantly through the months of the exhibition and some objects were understandably damaged through their usage. Objects were mended and replaced throughout the exhibition. The Director of the SCVA said that more people had used sorted objects than spent time in the main exhibition.

Comment from 2011.

I see (hear, feel, smell, touch) these objects as openings – sometimes you can't see beyond that but you know somehow there's a gap that you want to squeeze through because what's on the other side is unknown and exciting. You can turn certain parts of your brain off – and start with a feeling not a concept – the connections bubble inside, popping on the surface of an internal dialogue – is it pain? Is it pleasure? Is it play? Then a thought or idea emerges which you almost dismiss because it was unexpected and is perhaps unwelcome.

Now, where will we go with that idea? Now the door is open.....now we have used these objects as 'pokey sticks' messing up the 'normal' order of things – we will hold it until, like a pair of magnets we are pulled towards something with a 'clang' of clarity, as if it was meant to be.

When I had arrived at the SCVA for the session the facilitator had looked at the objects and had said 'welcome home' to them. This slight personification and the idea that there was a sense of the objects belonging seemed appropriate. The objects wrapped and packaged in their boxes were pulled through the gallery on a trolley and it felt right that they had returned to the context they had been made for.

## Slow starts and unpacking

The session began with the group of 5 then 6 participants around a table of boxed objects. As I remained quiet I was very aware of the stage that had been created for the unwrapping of the objects, the table filled with closed boxes stood in the middle of the exhibits. There was a tension, almost a sense of foreboding of the imminent experience that was about to unfold for the group.

There is a performance needed when using the objects and a particular process of introduction that enables a group to shift their ordinary thoughts and habitual reactions. This wasn't as present I would have expected. The facilitator was passive in her delivery and I felt the almost physical pressure of my silence, my lack of performance and engagement in the unraveling session. The ownership I felt was not centered on the objects or how they would work or generate dialogue. I was confident and comfortable in the knowledge that the objects would perform themselves once they were held and touched. The ownership that I felt robbed of was the delivery; the charging of the space, of the experience and of the layers of potential language that I could not convey. So, whilst I felt uncomfortable I was simultaneously focused, attentive and aware. Everything seemed heightened, the words and comments louder than before, the air conditioning hum, the way that the fake apples shone under the gallery lights making them seem more real, more resonant. I could hear the brown paper being unwrapped and the tape unpeeling and I could see the objects taking up position, ready for use.

A student was unwrapping the box and noted it was like pass the parcel. I remember thinking that this was already the language of play and it was as though the group had been given the license to feel this by the unwrapping action of the paper. The objects felt charged and confident in their odd identities as they were slowly unwrapped and investigated.

The gallery was nearly empty and it was dark outside so there was quietness to the space and a quietness to the process that the facilitator delivered. I was aware of the energy that I use with the objects, I can feel almost shaman-like as though I am conjuring something up be it another state, or an alternative environment to think and act within. When the performative is strong it enables a very particular event to unravel, it is one that is unfamiliar but contained and held by the facilitator. This enables the individuals to gain confidence in their intuitive reactions and responses. In this scenario, the delivery was slower, quieter and paced and again the silence of the space and the silence of the starting process was palpable for me.

Each person unwrapped an object and as they did the facilitator asked them what they had opened, what their object was. Someone had opened an object that combines a boat and a brush and they said out loud quickly as they turned the object

around in their hands that a ship had gone on an adventure on a brush. She moved it through the air as though on her own in the space and unaware of the others around her.



Another individual opened their object, a purse/nose/spectacle mask, it is 'wacky' she said laughing and stroking the nose of the object whilst opening and closing the hinge. She looked around the space, looked through the lenses, squinting.



One person opened an object, a stone covered in red wax. Someone next to them said it is an apple and the facilitator asked what is it? The individual who had unwrapped the object said it is not like an apple and described what he saw that it was simply a stone with wax on it. There was the voice of the skeptic; I felt a pull of recognition, as I knew that someone needed to take this role within the group. He had said a truth; he said what he saw and that was what he wanted to see and nothing beyond it. The facilitator didn't ask him anymore and moved on around the table.



Someone held their objects up in front of them, They had a pair of tree roots/running legs and she would pick them up one by one hold them and then put them down. She asked out loud if they were a pair, 'they look very odd and unnerving' she said. The facilitator asked her why and she simply said to look at their legs.



the other objects opened were;





The group was asked to keep or choose an opened object from the table. They were told that these objects were made as compasses to lead people around a space/gallery collection/museum. You can take them on a journey around the space the facilitator said to the group...where do they lead you?

I wanted to interject and unpack the information further. I wanted to say that the objects were providing possible routes around a space, to describe possibilities, explore how the objects were having conversations and how they sat between the presented and exhibited and they could enable an encounter. I remained silent even biting on my biro as the group filtered off independently into the gallery space and the collection. I could not follow the individuals and was conscious of letting them experience the space and objects without feeling self-conscious and overly aware of my presence as observer. As I walked around the space I watched and noted the private conversations they had with their objects. They offered up objects to objects, standing back, testing something...a fit, a resemblance, a link maybe. It was as though the objects were meeting long lost relatives and slowly leaning in for a hand shake. Or someone trying to match a fabric sample to a garment or curtain they owned or had inherited. The moment that a potential connection was rejected and the object was pulled away from a sculpture, painting or artefact was so particular. I felt that it was as though the participant was looking for something they knew or would recognize but had actually failed to find it. How did they know what they were looking for?

I was so aware of the movement and handling that took place as all the participants slowly rocked the objects in their hands, back and forth, stroking, rolling and turning the forms. One individual was clasping the small alabaster balls, smoothing the surface and then gently clinking the objects together in their hands. The participants held the objects to their faces, touching their skin, or obscuring their vision when lifted in front of their eyes, objects were even sniffed and there was a strong sense of ownership of the objects from the participant's actions. I watched them navigate around the spaces of the gallery, some even holding the objects in front of them as guiding sticks that led them like divining rods, seeking out water.

One of the group who still had chosen the brush/ship held the stick aloft and moved it up and down around the gallery as though sailing it through the space. I watched as someone holding the etched and altered spectacles held them against the many portraits and sculptures of faceless figures in the space.

The group individually and quietly moved around the gallery as I noticed two individuals (not from the group) standing by the objects left on the table. The facilitator moved towards them and asked if they wanted to join in. They were looking at the objects in front of them. 'What are they, what are you doing?' they asked quickly as they were invited to pick the objects up and play with them in the space if they wished. Whilst I was intrigued by their interest they had a very different attitude, attack and energy and were immediately playful and confident with the objects. They picked them up and walked into the space. One of the them took the long stuffed embroidered 4m skipping rope object and wrapped in around his rucksack and he walked around the gallery as though the object had become part of his attire, his belongings or a wound-up lasso on his back.



I was anxious how these two sets of people sat together and whether the original young associates would feel vulnerable with the accommodation of the interlopers. Again, I was silent and walked away into the space. A late member of the group arrived and after apologizing was taken to the table and took an object, she felt it in her hands and confidently walked into the space with little instruction. Everything felt undone, or like a loosely tacked pattern only just holding two pieces of material together. I wondered whether the naming of the skipping rope as a lasso was my way of wanting to herd the experience back to order. However, there was no chaos, just a calm investigation unfolding before me.

These two strange interruptions had bothered me but the Young associates seemed contained with their actions and objects and came back together to discuss where the objects had taken them. As they walked together as a group again one of them noted how her object had provided a completely different experience of the collection, 'I never go this way or up this part of the gallery,' she said and others nodded as though they recognized what had happened. I wanted to ask, comment but stayed in my role.

They were collectively asked to discuss their objects and what had happened, what had they thought, what had they encountered? I was conscious of the earlier skeptic and the stone covered in wax that he had chosen. I watched as he attentively listened to others in the group and moved in closer to hear them. All the time he moved the stone in his hands and I knew the wax that coated the flint (formed from



the wax around cheese) would be getting warmer and tackier in his hands. I wondered how he felt and why he hadn't rejected his object. I was waiting to hear his response.

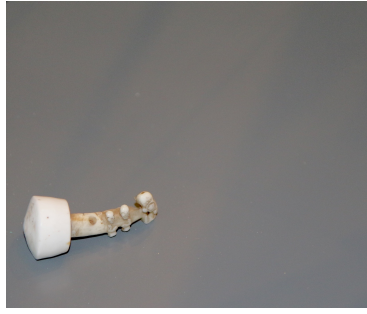
He moved the object in his hands holding it up at times when he spoke, 'It is still a stone with wax on it,' he said although less assertively this time. 'I chose it because I like rocks and I was thinking of them in this space as an organic presence. Then I thought if this object has no real function then actually what are the functions of any of the objects in this space. How do we understand them? How should we understand them?'

The group commented on both ideas of both status and of knowledge. I had so many things I wanted to say but remained quiet probably nodding too often and I felt his thoughtful contribution as a change in his position. The wax/stone seemed suddenly like a cricket ball as though it had been caught and held in his hands but was potentially leaving a stain. Both object and participant were softening quietly like the wax in his hands.

Someone who had chosen the alabaster balls took us to a cabinet that was displaying an array of buttons spread from one side of the vitrine to the other. 'This is where I went first.' she said.



The group had named the small balls earlier as possible eyeballs when first opened at the table. Each ball has a balloon end embedded into the alabaster and whenever they have been talked about previously with other people in other spaces they were often named as tummy buttons. The participant holding them in this session had interestingly travelled to a line of buttons but this visual/ semantic link was not mentioned. The intimacy of the way the balls were gathered in her hands seemed so in keeping with the scale of the objects we were led to, first the buttons and the next being the smallest ivory ear piece. This object was smaller than a fingernail and as one of the smallest objects in the galleries I was interested in the attention it would have taken to orientate oneself to this tiny artifact.



The participant commented on part of their success of the objects being that they are nested together. There was an intimacy to the objects and the language used to discuss them. Later when everyone returned to the table she said, 'I would highly recommend these' as she placed the collection of alabaster balls on the surface. I wanted to ask what the recommendation was for.

The participant who had chosen the brush/ship told the group her narrative in an animated and confident way. She had decided to 'sail' the object around the gallery holding it aloft and moving it in swaying motions as though the ship was sailing up and down over waves throughout the space. She had taken the ship to a cabinet of ceramics and had imagined the vessel full of water and the ship sailing within it.



She said that the more that she looked the more she felt that all the objects in the gallery were full of water regardless of size or material. It felt like she had used her object to metaphorically flood the space. As she continued to move and sail her ship she showed us how she had taken it to a video of a sailing boat and allowed her ship to sail alongside. There was a deepened and thoughtful poetic to her story she had had a transformative experience with her object it felt to me that it had become like a wand. It had changed the identity and function of everything it touched or was offered up to. She had taken control of the space, navigated her new ocean, drawing everything in to it. However, all the time she was telling the group her story she stood in front of an enormous Fijian Boat which dominates the space and is part of the current exhibition alongside the collection.



Its presence or boat-ness seemed diminished by her boat/ship. As she looked towards the Fijian boat she said how obvious it would have been to take her ship to the boat but that she had momentarily. As she told this part of the narrative her forceful sailing hand movements became limp and resigned as though her ship stopped sailing. As she turned her back on the Fijian boat the animation came back again. This element of control and the investment in her object was temporarily challenged by the reality of the Fijian boat, as though it momentarily limited her story, her own journey with her object and her ship.

The participant who had chosen the root/horses legs object pulled us all towards a cabinet where she showed us the object had been drawn too. She hadn't looked at this object before she said but named it as a crab. She twisted her object in her hands changing the roots to legs and legs to roots and held it up against the glass cabinet as though her object and the one displayed in the vitrine were conversing. There were two root/horse leg objects, a pairing, one black and one white and as she held one to the glass it felt like an invite for the new object to become one of them. The holding of the object against the glass felt like a reflective act, as though becoming a mirror showing the object its new reflection.

As the group looked and commented on the amazing similarity of shapes, some pointed out an object on the shelf below. It was a paintbrush attached to a paint tin, everyone looked at the participant who had the brush/ship and waited for her reaction. However, she was again unmoved by the immediacy of the connection and almost shrugged off the suggestion as though it was far too easy to make.

The participant who had arrived late had her object in her hands and was stroking the feathers that spouted out from it.



Having just arrived she hadn't had much time to take it around the space but had had an experience with the object's own identity already. I had dismissed this object prior to the session as I felt that it wasn't finely tuned enough and had wanted to leave it out of the group of objects. However, because of the importance of the authenticity of this experience I knew that it needed to be part of the collection of objects as it always had been. I put my assumptions of its relevance to one side. She was animated in her narrative. She conveyed an immediate attachment to the object and had to grapple with and interrogate its identity. 'Firstly, it's a gun' she told the group holding it in her hand as a weapon, 'then it was a door handle' she remarked as she turned the object in her hand and held it differently slowing turning part of it round. 'A door handle' she suggested; 'that could unlock knowledge to all of the art objects, a knowledge that she would like to have'. Then it became a tap she stated and had started to reference Duchamp.

She discussed how the water had become feathers and the whole object narrative had gone from the manmade to the organic. She had wanted to take it home she said and placed the object in her arms like a pet and began again stroking the feathers as though a cat.

The attachment and connection with the object was evident and pronounced. The spinning of the object within her hands echoed the sailing ship and the uprooted roots. It seemed that the participants were in a process of double readings. Readings of themselves and the objects, of the objects and the collection.

Seeing, vision or lack of it seemed present everywhere in the objects and the collection. The spectacles and the purse nose object, the alabaster balls. Neither object allowing a clear vision but nodding in the direction of viewing or at least perceiving. The participants who had these seeing/unseeing devices stood together and held the glasses to bronze busts of lord and lady Sainsbury.

There was an obvious clash of contrasting materials but the act of giving these altered lenses to the dark blackened bronze busts with their blanks as eyes seemed to fit. Everyone nodded as though this fit was right and there was a confirmation of something, possibly a shared understanding. The double un - vision of the blank eyes and the opaque/ blurred viewing glasses felt different to the other object connections. The action seemed to have claimed the territory of the space itself. We were standing in Lord and Lady Sainsbury's space, their collection, as they stood immortalized staring (or Not) out into the space. Their busts spoke of tradition and status whereas these new appendages were like an interruption in that narrative. For me they were performing as opera glasses only with lenses like cataracts, unseeing and unseen. The group commented on how many elements in the gallery could not see, had no eyes, blurred faces, no faces.



Alan Davies was noted as an obvious link but again the participant hadn't wanted to use that connection with her viewing nose mask object. She mentioned that she had observed this as the initial and most obvious link. Gathering back at the table of objects the facilitator asked if everyone could choose another object and use it in the space to find a narrative more than a material link. I was interested in this suggestion, I thought they had already built narratives and was worried that they had made their connection and formed rich relationships with the objects they had originally chosen. How would this work without replicating or diluting the experience they had just encountered?

The group chose again from the table picking up and putting down one object at a time to decide. One person took the alabaster balls but wanted to take them all with her and was offered the box that they came in to carry them around in. When she discussed this later she said that she had started to categorize the balls and make decisions on which to choose. This had made her uncomfortable as though some would feel rejected and so she made the decision to take the whole group of balls with her. She walked around the space clutching the box as though the contents were gaining importance, she looked as though she was carrying an animal in the box. She had a strong narrative with the objects taking them to different artifacts/objects and images and building a story that reinforced the balls status. Stopping at one group of very small figures she paused to tell the story. She had counted the figures in the case and then counted her collection of balls, there had been one more ball than figures she had noted. There was one gap in the line of figures in the vitrine where no object stood. This she said was for one of the balls.

I was conscious of the two collections of objects meeting as she continued to cradle the box in her arms. As before when the balls were taken around the space by the first participant and again the connections were tiny and intimate objects. She had wanted to let the balls out of the box she said and let them loose. Now that her journey through the gallery was over she wanted to roll them out across the floor, but she hadn't done this as she was aware that they would be out and free. I had so wanted to interject and ask her to roll the balls, this unfulfilled end felt stifling to me and her box in her arms remained gripped.

The horse legs/roots were not the choice of the next participant, she had wanted the balls herself and so her choice was second best. She took us over to two clean smooth white pebble like spheres, a pair like her pair? Holding the horse's legs to the object she remarked that her object was like a virus infiltrating the other object. Her object was attacking the spheres and its negative viral connotations were invading the purity of the object on display.



The participant who had held the flint wax now had the nose mask purse, he had started to question the building and this had followed on from his earlier conversation about how the objects functioned in the space. He had been making connections and particularly with a book that was concealed in a covered vitrine. As he talked and opened the conversation to a more conceptual understanding of the process and questioned if the objects I made were ever made to connect to a space rather than collection people started to lift the fabric covering the vitrine. This action seemed like an over confident gesture or action. This object obviously temporarily obscured was being peered at by the group. They were not hesitant in this action they were almost brash as though they had claimed the space and the objects were theirs to view, use and uncover. Their position had changed, their authority was heightened.

The session was coming to an end the gallery was empty except the group and the last participant to speak said that they couldn't connect with their second object in the same way. 'I didn't feel it' she said and held the object casually. This was the participant that had invested so heavily in her first object the alabaster balls, she had recommended them in a way she wouldn't with this object.

I knew this process and recognised that this was a natural and common response to an object after a commitment to an earlier narrative. Everyone was looking my way I was aware of questions that I could answer that I was being asked. I spoke to the group. Without a long explanation, I explained how interesting I had found their connections, how difficult I had found it to remain silent. They all asked me about the process of making the objects, how why, where and I unpacked some of the details. They had shown generosity in letting their session be driven differently by the objects and I felt I needed to respect that and thank them.

