

the art of placement

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The meaning, if I have it right, is philosophical, and internally related to its viewers. It [art] put their lives in perspective. It tells them what, really, they already know.

—ARTHUR DANTO, *The Abuse of Beauty*

Having given attention in chapter 1 to the nature of things in relationship to the conceptual framework of grotesque realism, I mean in this chapter to provide a sense of the relationship between things and art through the process of construction or creation and to do so by first briefly reflecting on Robert Fuller's sense of bodies reconstituted. In *Spirituality in the Flesh*, Fuller explores the body by means of an interdisciplinary perspective with a particular aim in mind. He writes, "I am exploring the intriguing thesis that many aspects of religion can be understood in terms of the body's efforts to reconstitute reality as part of its ongoing adaptation to the environment."¹ Fuller is concerned with the biological nature of the body and what that means for understanding religion. While related to a certain degree, my concern is with the mechanics of the naming-thing, not its constitution as such other than to say it might be framed as a "thing" or as Hans Belting names it, "a living medium" that speaks to the fact that these naming-things relate to, if not produce, other things that interplay in/with naming-things.² Furthermore, while the bodied naming-thing is vital in this process, the things created and

arranged by these naming-things have fundamental importance. One might think of this in a rough sense as entailing the making of absurd circumstances familiar—or our “metaphysical servant” (*famulus*).

The Situation

The bodied naming-thing is not fully known, but that is of limited consequence in that it remains historically felt, and the consequences of its movement inform and influence what we have come to call identity, community, society, and so on. In a certain way, one might consider this sense of the bodied naming-thing to constitute a “living media . . . by processing, revising, and transmitting images.”³ Along these lines, traditional theories of religion that point to a fixed “something,” to a sense of the religious as *sui generis* (and to the body as closed off) might be categorized as those holding to the praxis of the image. Hence, they posit a “something” represented by the image, while this “something” seeks to point beyond itself.⁴ Again, as noted earlier, my concern is not with the economic value or the tradability of things. I am concerned with things as things “constructed” and arranged by other things. Naming-things so understood do something; they forge, they make, they produce and reconstitute things. And they are affected and influenced by thing-things.

My goal here is not a discussion or study of material as such. But when viewed by means of religion as a technology, what are these things forged by these bodied naming-things (as well as things encountered but not made by naming-things)? What does the “creation” and placement in time and space of things tell us about embodied naming-things as represented by their relationship to other things?

Humans are naming-things, and we interact with other things, place them in time and space, and have them “speak” to, for, and through naming-things. Connection and distance mark the naming-thing’s relationship to other things, and this mirroring urges a range of deep questions we cannot answer but that in asking afford greater awareness and lucidity of our circumstances without curing our existential-ontological ills. One might extend what Belting says regarding images and the body: “It is through the vast array of images to which humanity accords meaning that the human being proves himself a cultural being, a being that cannot be described solely in biological terms.”⁵ Of importance here are not the image-picture processes related to meaning making noted by Belting, but rather in a more general sense I call attention to the bodied naming-things and other things (objects turned things)

shadowing his remark. There is “substantial” (as in substance) overlap here in that the bodied naming-thing can be conceived of as a thing and also as a container holding *something*.⁶ The naming-thing stores other things—for example, organs and blood—as well as a range of cultural and social codes. Furthermore, the naming-thing as thing is connected to other things through the process of creation, movement, and attachment (physical as in artificial limbs, psychological as in security blankets, or emotional as in pictures). In another way, the bodied naming-thing uses other things to extend itself further into the world, and in the process both thing-things and naming-things are affected and influenced.⁷ This is because the bodied naming-thing can be physically and culturally penetrated, altered, shifted in time and space; and interaction with thing-things serves as cartography of this characteristic.

According to Bill Brown, “The body is a thing among things.”⁸ For Brown this remark pushes toward a critical discussion on the nature and meaning of things—those objects we have tended to “look through” in order to discover a deeper meaning and purpose. Their “thingliness,” he remarks, is present to us best when things no longer offer an opportunity to discover more, to unpack meaningful meaning. All this, from his perspective, says something about the human relationship to things.⁹ Naming-things are always and already in the presence of other things. Mindful of this, and prompted by the previous chapter’s argument, I end this section with a question: What does the arrangement and impact of things suggest? As will become clear, artistic production provides a useful way of mapping and exploring this question. I begin with the visual arts in order to mark out a particular way of framing artistic production’s highlighting of naming-thing and thing-thing interplay. This is not to suggest an interest in only the visual arts; rather, the framework suggested throughout this discussion carries over to other modalities of the arts addressed later in the volume.

Art

I am concerned with art developed from the twentieth century to the present, and I am most intrigued in this regard with art not of a Modernist mindset. That is to say, I am not concerned with art that seeks to devoutly represent or duplicate images of the world. Privileged in this volume is work (from a variety of genres) that calls into question that duplicity and instead seeks to challenge clean perception. As Arthur Danto notes, “Today art can be made of anything, put together with anything, in the service of presenting any ideas whatsoever.”¹⁰ Yet he tries to center on the

concept of embodied meaning—the “thought of the work,” which is expressed “nonverbally”—as a characteristic, a definition of art that captures its nature across genres and forms.¹¹ For Danto, this meaning provides particular and intimate information connected to each viewer, and in this way the work of art “tells them what, really, they already know.”¹² While I disagree with the element of representation and instead think in terms of art as posing a challenge, I find significant Danto’s recognition of art as drawing from anything and being constructed of anything. Still, I have to offer a shift in perspective in that art as a grammar (or one might call it a strategy) does not give information but rather is significant precisely because it offers no answer in the form of “truths” or even right feeling. Instead, art prompts awareness of our circumstances and our place within those circumstances without resolution.

Danto has argued that the nature and meaning—or definition—of art changed during the twentieth century when it could no longer be assumed to imitate reality or to promote beauty and taste. Particular art movements of the twentieth century—such as Dada and Pop Art—push beyond a framing of art and art history guided by those assumptions in ways that trouble what we can be and what should be categorized as art. Still, there is for Danto something compelling about art, something that distinguishes it. Hence, “there is really nothing like it when it comes to stirring the spirit.”¹³ It is this perception, this take on art that is of particular interest to me here. This thick relationship motivates questions and pushes forward concerns. The referencing of Dadaism and the highlighting of Pop Art point to a tragic perspective, a measured realism that signifies specialness as a quality of thought and being is significant for me in that it suggests the need for an alternate vocabulary and grammar for exploring the significance of cultural production.

Danto is interested in the manner in which Pop Art blurs the line between art and reality, as he puts it, and the questions promoted by that dissonance. I find that intriguing, and initially it is why I turned to Danto and continue to read him. However, my interest in artistic production has more to do with the thingliness of things and what that troubling of perception does to human experience. That is to say, I turn to art because art provides insight into incompleteness. Put differently, the placement of things in time and space constituted by art urges viewers to see something they might otherwise ignore, but this is a temporary situation. It is a condition that tells us equally about our limitation and our promise. It points to bodied naming-things’ struggle against the world while being deeply enmeshed in the world and using resources from the world (cultural and “natural”) to interrogate the world. More to the point, artistic production provides an invaluable means

by which to isolate and interrogate the interplay between things—that is to the extent it recognizes rather than hides the thingliness of things.¹⁴ Put differently, “perhaps, after all, it takes art to bring out the thing-li-ness of things.”¹⁵ Materials are combined to make things, and the artist then further manipulates these materials to create things that will urge us to think about, but more importantly, think within what is represented to what they offer as a prod toward awareness of the world and our circumstances. In saying this I remain human-centered over against what some call for as a thing-centered perspective.¹⁶ Still, I appreciate in this work the manner in which things speak beyond fixed status and, in doing that, inform and influence a range of relations. Hence, I am not concerned with a guiding logic of beauty or a politics of aesthetic respectability; rather, I am concerned with exploring art that is attuned to circumstantial arrangements of life and their various sociocultural codes. If nothing else, they urge the naming-thing to speak questions and existential considerations.

Art both requires something and surrenders something. It shows the complexity of things—the multidirectional nature of their influence and impact—and the thick nature of the naming-thing’s connection to other things. As Danto argues and I have noted numerous times in earlier work, if Warhol’s *Brillo Box* could not be distinguished physically from the Brillo boxes at the grocery store, what then?¹⁷ “Warhol had brought art and reality to such a point,” writes Danto, “that it’s only a matter of ingenuity to try and think of circumstances under which any masterpiece and something identical to it could have come into existence, under conditions in which one would and the other wouldn’t have been a work of art.”¹⁸ The difference has something to do with thingliness—with the ability of the former to prompt certain considerations that are not achieved through the latter. And this must be in relationship to conscious placement in time and space that pulls things beyond status as objects and thereby exposes their porous nature. In a word, Pop Art and other contemporary art movements speak to the ability of this modality of expression, of placement of things (which is similar to the importance Danto gives to the exhibition as conveyer of meaning) to foster the types of questioning and insight religion as a technology exposes. For instance, take Danto’s question—“Why do things look the way they look?”¹⁹ This is not a question of aesthetics as beauty in that there is no assumption regarding the centrality of issues of wholeness embedded in this work. While there might be something resembling animosity toward beauty in Dada (which rejects the certainties and assumptions that made world war possible), there is in Pop Art something more akin to disinterestedness in beauty as a marker of

“art.” No, such questions encourage depth of exploration, including existential considerations but also epistemological and ontological considerations all related to fundamental concerns. Pop Art pushed for integration of what is “real,” and in so doing it urged an interrogation of those realities that shape the manner in which the naming-thing touches and is touched by the world; such interrogation claws at our metaphysical frameworks. The blending of art and the “ordinary” became an invitation to explore. Naming-things and thing-things anchor both art and the “ordinary.”

Keeping in place the theme of the *Brillo Box* produced by Warhol that is so very similar to the Brillo boxes designed by artist James Harvey and used in stores to transport Brillo pads, I suggest that the importance of art for my project, over against art for Danto, involves the tragicomic quality inherent in this re/presentation. Harvey, who provided the initial material and inspiration for Warhol’s work, is practically forgotten for this connection to both things—*Brillo Box* and Brillo boxes.²⁰ It is the tragicomic quality to relationship with things that points in the direction of what I intend to suggest through *awareness* rather than *meaning vis-à-vis* the placement of things.

The naming-thing selecting and displacing other things is important not so much because of the things themselves but for that to which the interaction points.²¹ As Dada artist Marcel Duchamp exemplifies with his “readymades,” discussed at various points in this volume, it is not simply the thing that is of vital importance, but rather it is the selection and placement of the thing that is meant to motivate deeper thinking.²² Things point beyond themselves—pushing toward their thingification and away from objectification. For instance, as Danto notes, Warhol’s boxes meant to “subtract the perceptual differences between art and reality.”²³ I would phrase it a bit differently in light of the intent of this book and say that Warhol’s boxes, like Duchamp’s readymades, push viewers to encounter.

What can be said about the things that play this role? And what is to be made of the bodied naming-things that construct these things? Meaning found, produced, or assumed is not the correct response to such questions. Meaning is too firm; it renders static or fixed what is pliable, flexible, and mutable. It is to view circumstances from only one vantage point.

Art prompts through an intentional manipulation of time and space, and secondly (but not secondarily) through the intentional positioning of things so as to urge viewers toward their thinginess.²⁴ On this score the worst an artist can do is demand her intent, as if it is a signifier that must be carried forward. And the curator’s note highlighted typically in writing on the wall introducing the “meaning” of the work is not much better in that it, like the

artist's statement, works to restrict the openness of the work once moved from the artist's mind to a selected time and space. Perhaps this is why Andy Warhol often gave limited insight into what his art was meant to achieve. To do so would have been to end his art.

The prompt proposed by artistic work is the only thing transhistorical about art, for which that language remains vital. Still, it is more accurate to say that art points us toward ourselves, that it holds us at that station and urges us to examine a naming-thing's condition and its relationship to other things' conditions. There are no restrictions to what this art can prompt in the viewer, and there is no one dimension of our openness—such as senses—through which it demands we process these offerings. Beauty—one way of thinking about aesthetics—is not the focus of art so conceived, at least not more traditional framings of aesthetics and art. However, this is not to say that beauty or wholeness is rendered unimportant. Aesthetics is transformed from being a way to measure art, and instead aesthetics becomes another way of describing things in their thingliness. Art exposes a human's effort to, on some level, in the words of Albert Camus, be other than she is. So presented, art then is an utterance of human interaction with other things staged in a particular time and space.²⁵ Art has been referenced as something of a question without firm resolution. Or as Camus remarks, “Art is the activity that exalts and denies simultaneously.”²⁶ Still, I depart a bit from Camus, privileging a different moment in art history without mimetics in that I argue that what is left with art is the essence of characterization as interplay made possible. All this entails what I see as art's motivation toward openness maintained.

Danto raises a question: “How to distinguish between art and real things that are not art but that could very well have been used as works of art?”²⁷ At one point he decides to think of art as “wakeful dreams” that can be shared and discussed and that can be effective beyond the private world of the “dreamer.”²⁸ He noted in 2013 that at a point he had thought of the intersection of art and reality as the end of art, the inability to discern a difference. Yet he had changed to posit that the difference might be invisible but substantive and might have to do with different modalities of embodiment.²⁹ In a word, there is something that gives art its difference from the “things” it interrogates, or symbolizes, or explores. There are ways in which this issue shades what interests me about religion as a technology: it marks out the difference not as essential or necessary but rather as a matter of consideration and presentation. And this technology of religion isolates particular arrangements of “things” and thereby stimulates.

I would say art prompts a tackling of experience, a repositioning of some of its pieces and forms, so as to urge difference of thought that encourages nothing more than lucidity—greater awareness of our circumstances and our desperate place within those circumstances.³⁰ Works of art symbolize a desire, the configuration of this desire, but they provide no answers. If anything, it is this moralistic awareness—of our circumstances and our place in these circumstances—that constitutes the gain made.

Art, then, becomes a particular geography in which and by means of which religion as a technology does its work.

Why and Where Art?

Other arrangements of things seek to accomplish this same work; that is the nature of cultural production. Yet I suggest the multiple codes and strategies of communication represented by the arts as a general category of expression provide perhaps one of the most compelling of such strategies. This is not to suggest, as did figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois, that art is political and must serve the purpose of advancement on sociopolitical lines. Such a framing of art's function is too preoccupied with outcomes, with easily marked out transformation. There is some of that in my earlier theorizing of religion, but here I prioritize the process of engagement, the putting in play of particular techniques of interrogation and arrangement of experience as opposed to the existential and ontological outcomes of that process.

Art, in connection to religion as a technology, poses a question/comment: “Look through and think . . .” And though this yearning to examine experience (i.e., the interplay of things) is a part of our human nature, to do so through the mechanics of religion is to select a particular theoretical-methodological tool for this “natural” cross-examination of sorts. Mindful of this framing, and thinking with moralist Camus, what we have here is the dreadful invitation to contemplation—not resolution, not answers, nor meaning found or held, but simply contemplation, which in fact keeps alive those things that concern us.³¹ And along the way we place markers, or things in relationship to things, that urge more contemplation, more struggle, and at our best a bit of moralistic awareness and lucidity of circumstance.

There is no hope embedded in this process, but rather the location—the gallery, for instance—does not provide final containment or a type of fixity of possibility beyond impingement. That is to say, it prompts a particular time and space for contemplation through things that are not just things. This pull-and-push dynamic I am describing is similar in effect to the “resonance” and

“wonder” phenomenon described by Stephen Greenblatt. He argues that exhibits can be arranged along two possible effects. The first, resonance, allows the displayed object to pull viewers beyond that particular object and into a larger context. And wonder points the viewer in the direction of what is unique about that particular object.³² For Greenblatt this seems to entail a relationship between distinct materials—the human viewer and the object viewed. A dimension of this involves an economic consideration of ownership, which, he suggests, is both encouraged by but prohibited by the museum’s displaying of the goods.³³ The economics of presentation is not my concern. Still, although the flexibility of things in Greenblatt’s formulation implies something of their thingliness, the relationship he describes is really about the bodied naming-thing observing things in ways that speak to other things. I suggest in my depiction the possibility of something more taking place, something that entails an interaction between naming-things and thing-things on a more fundamental level.³⁴

I want to say more concerning the gallery as confinement but also as things—for example, building materials, light, sound, and art—in movement, in flux before moving on. Danto says the gallery is the new church, and for Duncan Cameron it is a temple (when it is not a forum). In addition, Carol Duncan notes the manner in which the museum is premised on earlier models such as “classical temples, medieval cathedrals, Renaissance palaces,” and in this way represents a multilayered experience revolving around the architecture of the space meant to accommodate the interaction of various items as “secular ritual.”³⁵ I find such thinking intriguing in that it blurs the line between notions of the sacred and secular, and the line between the placement and presentation of things (bodied naming-things and thing-things). Still, this alone does not capture enough. What if we were to think about the gallery space, the exhibit hall, any location consciously arranged in terms of art the way we think about other things? What if we refused a rigid distinction between the gallery as thing and other things—such as the naming-things and thing-things with which it interacts—and instead saw them as interacting and thereby shifting and changing each other? There is something organic about the gallery space (or any space of artistic production or performance—which by function could be said to constitute an intended gallery space) in that it holds connections in terms of substance and cultural codes with the things (e.g., works of art) connected to it and growing in and out of it.

One gets a sense of the interactive quality of things in time and space (and in relationship to the gallery) through a Pope.L exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art (NYC)—*member: Pope.L, 1978–2001*. Meant to highlight the manner

in which multidimensional artist Pope.L uses his body and other mundane things to present and wrestle with a range of sociopolitical and economic questions, the exhibit included some of his more well-known pieces of body art–performance art. However, in addition to *Eating the Wall Street Journal*, for example, the gallery space includes cut-out sections of wall, a play on Pope.L’s “Hole Theory” (as curator comments suggest), exposing the inner workings of space and disrupting a “superficial” gaze by calling attention to multiple dimensions of space and contact—internal and external. With one particular cut-out, next to the hole, is the Sheetrock turned inside out and attached to the wall. On that surface Pope.L has drawn a ghostlike figure (present but not known fully, present but without bodily detail—with one large black eye and another eye, black but smaller), with a thought bubble above it, a bit smudged but asking, “What do art works talk about when you leave the room?” Next to it is another ghostlike figure with similar eyes, and above its head is a thought bubble holding the answer to the question: “Us.” This sentiment—the notion that things “speak,” interact, impact other things—is written elsewhere in the exhibit, also through a ghostlike presence drawn with a thought bubble: “Exhibition.” Above this word and to its right is this saying: “I was standing next to this and it began to speak to me.”³⁶ Art demands something; as Pope.L notes, it resists objectification and instead draws us beyond viewer status. Art observes and queries naming-things; art entails graphic agency. Time and space fail to reify, to fix, content. Things amplify themselves in relationship to other things. As Daniel Miller remarks, “Before we can make things, we are ourselves grown up and matured in the light of things [understood as a collective rather than in terms of individual items]. . . . These unconsciously direct our footsteps and are the landscapes of our imagination, as well as the cultural environment to which we adapt.”³⁷

The gallery enables and restricts. This has to do with content (naming-things and thing-things) but also context as the latter relates to the manner in which the sociopolitical and cultural sensibility of curators and others shape exhibits.³⁸ Limiting focus to what is present while also encouraging thinking and engagement beyond the thinglinesses of the gallery as such, I argue, is what the gallery does. And this is not determined by factors such as the location or the economic resources of the gallery. I am describing the general nature of gallery space when it is space set aside and apart for the work done by art. Seeing naming-things and/or thing-things outside the gallery may spark particular reactions that pull toward or seek to push away from body-thingliness. However, the process of placing these same things—such as a chair, a cut-up magazine image, or the body of a body-thing—in the

spatially conceived particularity of the gallery fosters a different view and an altered connection. Svetlana Alpers's comments regarding Renaissance altarpieces are appropriate in the context of my argument: "When objects like these are severed from the ritual site [or initial space associated with use], the invitation to look attentively remains and in certain respects may even be enhanced."³⁹

Artistic expression—whether paintings, performance, dance, or song—consciously causes attention to the visible and invisible content of time and space in ways that urge introspection. And something about this introspection vis-à-vis art brings to the fore questions of significance.

There is a string of connection or concern between bodied naming-things that produce and arrange, and other things. Both bodied naming-things and things-things push against static and truncated perceptions of circumstances and prompt a sense of space as fluid and boundaries as porous. Forms of art at the "end" of this rethinking of things point out which assumptions concerning the nature and meaning of art are disbanded. Forms of art also spark recognition of the relationship between things with/in naming-things as well as the perception of this porousness. And in the process, they demand a new vocabulary and grammar for such engagement with things. In short, recognition of the thingliness of things points to the manner in which art articulates openness.