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Blikfang

INSTALLATIONS BY SHERIDAN KEITH



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Apparatus to Fashion the Fabric of Art

Foreword

PHILIP CLARKE ~ DIRECTOR

In Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* one of the characters ('a degenerate dago') warns an artist about the dangers of employing charm in his art. For *Blikfang* Sheridan Keith has deliberately employed an arsenal of visual and atmospheric charms including; vulnerability, agedness, grandeur, reflection, languor and reverie, symmetry, character, transcendence and transparency, yearning, form and allure, in order to capture and captivate us. In her Manifesto she talks about her discovery of the word and concept of blikfang or 'eye trap' and her conscious decision to employ this notion in the creation of her compositions which are homages to the materiality of objects and, to a lesser extent, the sentiment we often attach to objects.

Things arrest our eyes, and snap, we are trapped in the blikfang. Like any good seducer Keith wants us to abandon ourselves to the seduction and to relish the "special, thrilling, existence" of the objects she has assembled. As in any seduction the pleasure possibilities are partly informed by our knowledge and experience and whilst held in these blikfangs, meditation upon the lineages of design, possession and place, (in other words the pedigrees of production and consumption), as we understand them, is one of our delicious pleasures. The juxtapositions of objects within Keith's compositions enable us to traverse human material culture across space and time in a way that is akin to the notion of Six Degrees of Separation.

In the moment of entrapment any spectator is constituted – by way of the flow of their unique knowledge and recollections of the production and consumption of particular objects – as an individual in place and time. Will Pollard talks about "subject-object consanguinity" and Ioana Gordon-Smith observes that "there is an equivalence between objects and viewers". A project that, is on one level a conscious enquiry into the experience of looking, is appropriate for any visual arts presenter. *Blikfang* is a particularly appropriate project for Objectspace as an aspect of our remit is to provoke new assessments about the function and functioning of works within the fields of craft and the applied arts and both Ioana Gordon-Smith and Will Pollard offer fresh ideas about the function and functioning of objects with reference to *Blikfang*.

On behalf of Objectspace I extend thanks to the following people for assisting Objectspace to present *Blikfang*; maker Sheridan Keith who has assisted the presentation of the installations in many useful ways, Will Pollard for his engaging essay, writer Shonagh Koea for agreeing to speak at the exhibition's Opening, and my colleagues Ioana Gordon-Smith, Jaqui Knowles and Laura Howard. Objectspace is able to present *Blikfang* and other exhibitions because of the major support of Creative New Zealand and the assistance provided by Auckland Council, the ASB Trust and the Objectspace Donors.

blikfang

SHERIDAN KEITH

In the beginning was a word. It entered my mind about four years ago, a Danish word that I must have read in some article, I can't remember the context. The word, *blikfang*: the meaning, *a trap for the eye*. To start with it was the sound that entranced me. Those two syllables, so deliciously balanced between the flick of the *blik*, and the bang of the *fang*. *Blikfang*. For weeks it used to accompany me as I walked around the streets where I live. Then I discovered that the word *fang* meant a jail, a literal jail, and that sound *fang* became the bang of the door as it locked, while the *blik* was a flick of light entering under the door, fixating the eye.

A thought process began in which I started to question what it was that attracted my eye. What were the qualities my eye 'latched onto'? Why did I want to look at one thing and not something else? As an antique dealer I am something of a global forager, sifting through both time and place for those objects that interest me. There is so much 'stuff' now in the world, an enormous inventory of artefacts swirling through countries, life spans, markets and salerooms, always following economic pressures, the barometer of human needs set against the grasp of ego and wealth. What fed my visual appetites?

My initial training was in zoology, but I wanted to be a writer. My themes were to do with the mystery of being alive, of being sexual, of being young and old, and what our relationships with animals, those creatures that inhabit something of a parallel world, told us about ourselves. The dimension of Time was another powerful investigation. Now I thought about *blikfang* in a scientific sense, knowing that the eye is always drawn to light, and to the flicker of movement. For myself I knew I was also interested in certain materials, glass for instance for its magical transparency and wirework for its ability to provide structure without blocking out light. Certain shapes too drew my attention, and the eye contact of portraits. I loved old toys, honouring the wear and tear that spoke of true devotion. The word *blikfang* stayed with me, and I began to look at art through this focus.

A trap is usually made of two components; an initial lure, hook, enticement, leading to some sort of imprisoning inside the trap itself. In a visual sense the eye is captured by a flicker perhaps, or a colour, a sparkle, something odd or out of place. After this initial grab, containment can follow in which the eye investigates more leisurely; enjoys perhaps or is even repulsed, but becomes committed for a time to that visual situation. Sometimes there is a mystery to unravel (the Mona Lisa's smile, the reflection in the mirror of Velazquez's *La Meninas*). An object (or painting) either grabs our attention or does not interest us. For artists the first task is to get one's work looked at, difficult in a world bombarded with the visual clamour of our cities and media, and the accumulated visual library of past art.

I believe that the triggers that attract the eye are often to do with survival. They are automatic and immediate, the products of millennia of evolution. A bushfire on the horizon is an instant *blikfang*: a tribe that paid no attention to such events would perish. Similarly a sparkle in the distance could signal the sun shining on a body of water, another important survival clue. In our daily lives we monitor our environment continuously, always on the lookout for situations that might imperil us, or gain us some advantage. It is interesting that the three major traditional categories of art; landscape, portraits, still life, all have underlying Darwinian implications. We are drawn to study landscape; important to know the lie of the

land, positions of advantage militarily, rivers that could flood or cliffs that could collapse. The power of portraits relates to the first primal eye contact we make with our mothers; an emotional bond probably more important than food. Later this eye to eye contact is reactivated in the powerful and mysterious circuit that passes between lovers. The requirement to read faces never loses its significance for our wellbeing throughout life. And the still life is an investigation of the life and death of fruit, flowers, with the occasional animal corpse thrown in. Important to pay heed to those flies that are so delicately painted, they carry disease.

Blikfang then began to invite me to make my own art, an art that would utilize and investigate those triggers. But here I must acknowledge another strand that feeds my creative world: my mother, June Black. We can never escape our mothers, and mine was particularly powerful. An artist of unusual talent, her Wellington solo shows in the late 1950's and early 1960's have slipped entirely from the canon of New Zealand art. Her intense involvement in the ideas surrounding the Modern Movement as well as her daily struggles energise the journals she kept throughout her life, now in my possession. Her life's work forms a repository in my world that both unsettles and challenges me; how to pass on something of her essence. Not just in a simple way, but obliquely, even subversively. One of my mother's creations, Madame Noland, has provided a vehicle for me to engage with and develop my ideas.

My father, an engineer, my mother, an artist: both fiercely determined characters within their mental positions. The eternal clash of the classic against the romantic, order against chaos, cold against hot, reason versus emotion, male against female. I watched this battle play out in their ferocious verbal engagements. I saw both their sides, I am an amalgam of them both. Both art and science emerge from the pivot of wonder, wondering at something, and why something should be so.

The ideas I am exploring in my writing and installations are concerned with this wonder; the mystery of life itself and its various enchantments. My love of objects drew me into a role as an antiques dealer, with the subsequent accumulation over many years of items that held my interest. My discovery of the word *blikfang* has acted as a catalyst to amalgamate many of these things into works that explore my particular fascinations: glass, wirework, mirrors, pressed brass, beadwork and soft materials such as tapestry, knitted wool, fabric fragments – those soft materials that are usually thought of as women's domain – but which I consider to be as valid as chiselled wood or cast metal. The passage of time is also an important feature in my installations. The appearance of age has a powerful *blikfang* quality; both people and objects suffer from the same self-incarceration, trapped within substance. The way time fingers things is both poignant and worrying, we are both fascinated and appalled by time's relentless regime.

I like to think of life as a journey for our eyes. In childhood we investigate everything with close attention, marvelling at the world around us, the room where our belongings are kept, the shoes we struggle to lace up, the bed where we sleep. Later we take all this as given, our eyes get caught up in the interface of media so that the image of something becomes more important than the thing itself. Travel and art remain the great eye-openers.

With *blikfang* I want the viewer to be startled and drawn into a new perception of the mystery of things and of life itself: to meditate on the fact that mirrors reflect, that glass shatters and wirework corrodes, that pressed brass cornucopia can impersonate female breasts, that wirework pot scrubbers can simulate the frills of a ballet skirt, that beds can be as curvaceous and eloquent as bodies themselves, that a woman's handwritten journal carries her personality and ideas beyond her own life, that everything longs for an eternity in which to proclaim its special, thrilling, existence.

Occasions of Contingency

WILL POLLARD

AGENCY

...the brilliant Don Martin Decoud, weighted by the bars of San Tome silver, disappeared without a trace, swallowed up in the immense indifference of things.¹

One morning, Joseph Conrad's Decoud rows a little way off shore, shoots himself in the chest, and rolls overboard; he has four bars of silver in his pockets. Although Decoud's suicide is unseen, his erstwhile conspirator Nostromo² assumes it must have taken place. Nostromo is not surprised: even in the absence of any evidence, he is certain of Decoud's death. What perplexes Nostromo, however, is Decoud's decision to carry the silver into the water with him.

"What for?" Nostromo asks.

We know either the gunshot or the silver alone would have sufficed. With both, the act becomes wilfully excessive. Decoud's method seems doubly deliberate given the repeated discussion in Conrad's novel of "material interests". There has been much economic and political capital invested in the San Tome mine.

So Decoud's act is one of sabotage – he negates any value previously attached to the much-coveted silver by throwing it away, taking it overboard. Devoid of its social, economic or aesthetic worth, in the moment of Decoud's death the silver's only *currency* is its physical, material mass. This mass *acts upon* Decoud: he is "weighted by" the bars.

"The treasure was putting forth its latent power."

Decoud is drawn into the "immense indifference of things" by the materiality – the thing-*ness* – of the silver itself. It is a question of agency.

OBJECTS/THINGS

What is a *thing*? The word is employed everywhere, and paradoxically so:

- i. There are ubiquitous, everyday 'things' with which we are too familiar – things-that-do-not-need-names.
- ii. But there are also liminal 'things' at the edge of experience – I am thinking of *The Thing from Another World* – things-for-which-there-are-no-names.
- iii. And there are taboo 'things' – things-which-one-ought-not-to-name.

This is a brief survey; the word is used in many more ways in everyday conversation. In 'thing theory', however, thing-*ness* is more narrowly defined. Things are distinguished from *objects*, although the two are not independent groups of entities – rather, thingness is a latent quality (power) of objects.

For Bill Brown (after Heidegger), objects recede into the background of experience – they are the stuff of our career engagement with the world. Brown says, "we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about us)".³ Objects are indexical – they point us away from themselves. They are things-within-history, and they can be named. Objects are useful.

Things, by comparison, are encountered rather than understood. The thingness

of objects is only revealed by “occasions of contingency” – this is what Brown calls “the chance interruption” when our attention is drawn to the materiality of things, their physicality. Where objects recede, things advance – but only when objects, as components of a referential circuit, are disconnected. Brown writes that “we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us”, although even then, “we only catch a glimpse”.

The thing-object imbroglio vacillates.

NETWORKS

The emergence of thingness – what Brown would call “objects asserting themselves as things” – is a kind of network interruption.

Objects are interrelated – they are understood in reference to things outside of themselves, including other objects (they are distributed). Their meaning is supported on, or suspended in, the weft and warp of these relationships. Let us call this a network – a machine. It is punctuated when attention is drawn to the materiality of things outside of their value to the system.

Moments of network disruption demand bifocal thinking: they draw our attention to the site of disruption – where something is lost from the network – while simultaneously exposing what is more widely at stake. To interrupt a network is to draw attention to the network. A power *outage* will reveal the relationships between the points of a grid (for while there are thousands of kilometres of power lines lacing the city, I only think of them when the lights at my house go out).

*Is a railroad local or global? Neither. It is local at all points, since you always find sleepers and railroad workers [...] it is global, since it takes you from Madrid to Berlin or from Brest to Vladivostok.*⁴

Bridges can be exploded.

ASSEMBLAGE

What are the conditions in which objects slip? Spectators must be employed. Brown notes, “the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation”. That relationship is one of mutual dependence: we make objects of things (who else values the silver?) and we are made subjects of objects.

It would be a mistake to think we are outside our networks (to place too much faith in asymmetry). Bruno Latour – who shows us railroads are vulnerable – sees this tendency to draw artificial ontological distinctions between subjects and objects as an untenable tenet of a failed modernity:

In *blikfang* – a Danish term for ‘eye-catcher’, or a ‘trap for the eye’ – we have a model of subject-object consanguinity. A *blikfang* ensnares its subject: it demands an observer who will pay attention. Both subject and object are reified in this parallel network.

This is Decoud acting on the silver acting on Decoud: the man-silver assemblage. And Conrad’s description of Decoud – “brilliant” – now seems even more useful. It’s as if, by way of transference, Decoud has taken on the brilliance of the silver itself. It has become a shared quality of the assemblage.

1. Conrad, Joseph. *Nostromo: A tale of the sea-board*. London: Penguin Classics, 2007.

2. *Nostromo* and Decoud had organised to smuggle a large shipment of silver out of the country, and Decoud was left alone to guard the silver before his death.

3. Brown, Bill. “Thing Theory”. *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1–22.

4. Latour, Bruno. *We have never been modern*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Occasions of Blikfang

IOANA GORDON-SMITH

A fascination with the magnetism of objects is at the heart of a series of installations by Sheridan Keith, who has chanced upon the concept of *Blikfang* – a Danish term meaning eye-trap. Inspired by the notion of visual entrapment, Keith has designed eleven installations that aim to captivate.

Device to Reflect Upon Reflecting, for example, aggregates the eye-catching qualities of corrosion, transparency and reflection by amassing a magnifying glass, a distressed mirror, beads and other glass ornaments within an 18th century French Portico lantern. The empty chair placed before the lantern evokes the absent viewer who is fixated by this collection of objects. *Madame Nolandy dances for a bear* tempts with different bait, intriguing viewers with a playful cacophony of colour and texture.

Keith's interest in the lure of objects coincides with a recent rise of object-centric approaches in the field of literary studies. Of particular salience is Thing Theory, a relatively new approach to literary criticism that is concerned with the representation of objects in literature. In his catalogue essay *Occasions of Contingency*, Will Pollard has drawn on Thing Theory to discuss the instances when objects assert themselves as physical, material things.

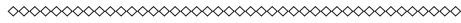
Pollard's essay highlights two key points of parallel between Thing Theory and *Blikfang*. First, both approaches significantly foreground the role of objects in generating viewers. While the variety of material qualities employed by Keith acknowledges the subjectivity of taste, *Blikfang* suggests that the object – specifically its appearance and design – is integral in producing a spectator, enticing the passerby to pause and fulfil the role of observer. In this sense there is an equivalence between objects and viewers: the objects creates the viewer and the viewer attaches meaning. Pollard calls this “a model of subject-object consanguinity”.

Second, in both Thing Theory and *Blikfang*, the moment when we perceive material qualities is brief, soon superseded by the

process of attaching value to objects and placing them conceptually within frames of reference. Thing Theory posits encounters with things as contingent on “the chance interruption”, when objects are stripped of any attached value that makes them useful. Paradoxically, these are the very instances that highlight their relation to other objects and the social, economic or aesthetic relationships between them.

In a similar manner *Blikfang* provides an instance of interruption – a moment of entrapment – that compels the passerby to pause and engage with the relations between objects. Once hooked, he or she becomes a viewer, consumer and producer who reads the interplay of components. Indeed, many of the objects have been assembled by Keith to amplify the personal associations they hold for her, such as foreboding or yearning. In *Madame Nolandy's Bed*, for instance, Keith places three of her mother's works (a painting, a journal, and a ceramic sculpture) alongside objects that are suggestive of intimacy and nostalgia. While these meanings may be particular to Keith, viewers are encouraged to call to mind their own associations that are evoked by the various combinations of objects.

The parallels between Thing Theory and *Blikfang* highlight the fact that objects act upon us. The ability of objects to captivate us creates not only a primary condition for viewing, but also the conditions for engagement. As Pollard describes, the relationship between subjects and objects “is one of mutual dependence”; while objects may rely on us to give them meaning, we depend on them to grab our attention. *Blikfang* makes this reciprocal relationship apparent by presenting installations that rely equally on objects and viewers.



The works



ONE

Blikfang



Apparatus to Test the
Potential for Disaster



FOREBODING

The weight from an antique French clock is suspended over a fragile glass comport. An event occurred; maverick, unexpected. Not the threat perceived, it is the unpredictable that catches us. The fragments lie there, testimony to the vulnerability of all things.



TWO

Blikfang



Artefact to Detect
the Glint of Envy



ASPIRATION

These objects all have pretensions to grandeur. The mirror, the old Louis Vuitton suitcase, the ironwork garden planter that impersonates a table centre-piece, the various candlesticks, worn or worm eaten. Time has changed them all, in their various ways, and the glint of envy that they might once have engendered has faded, as the eyes that beheld them have dimmed. Now they sparkle with a certain irony.



THREE

Blikfang



Device to Reflect
Upon Reflecting



REFLECTION

Within an 18th century sheet-metalwork lantern, various items invite a meditation upon reflection, that word with two meanings; an inward, pensive process, and the outward redirection of light. The flickering of candles impersonates and tames the most overwhelming of *blikfang*: fire.



FOUR

Blikfang



The Wafting Machine



LANGOUR

On top of an old glass vitrine an archaic clockwork fan circulates two paddle-like flippers in a lazy, hypnotic motion. The eye is engaged by the very slowness of their movement, suggestive of reverie and the flow of memories. Within the cabinet a space is available for some item of special significance, perhaps a photograph or an artefact. Or it may remain empty, allowing the viewer to meditate upon nothingness.



FIVE

Blikfang



The Onlookers



DUALITY

The eye is immediately involved in comparing and separating two things superficially the same. But the first grab of the eye comes from the startling revelation that these two cool beauties have shrunk to their t-shirts and are nothing but a fashion statement draped over old sheet metal chairs.



SIX

Blikfang



Madame Nolandy's bed



PERSONA

A shapely bed, a French 18th-century 'lit en bateau', in a highly figured wood, possibly burr elm, gives a glimpse of a private world. Madame Nolandy, depicted in the portrait, was the only woman in the cast of characters who took part in *The Search for the Fabulous Idea*, my mother June Black's 1958 exhibition at Wellington's Architectural Centre Gallery. A minor character, we are told only that she was the secretary for the expedition, and given a hint of her special life as the author of a best-selling novel entitled *The Striptease of a Soul*. I have enlarged on her persona, giving her various belongings that attest to her interest in literature; the entire set of Proust's, *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* (in its famous blue covers), Marcel Duchamp's accompanying text for *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors Even* and one of June Black's journals.

The *blikfang* in this work is to do with how the eye is drawn to things that surround an interesting person, as if the objects themselves take on an aura by association. A bedroom is our most intimate space, it is here that we are most ourselves, and our most vulnerable.



SEVEN

Blikfang



Costume for the Striptease of a Soul



TRANSCENDENCE

For a soul to perform a striptease presents us with a delicious oxymoron, placing something that is the disembodiment of flesh within a provocative, sexual ritual. I have explored the title of Madame Noland's best-seller in this work. Transparency and various glass attachments attract the eye and provide metaphors for the soul's lack of substance. Sexual attributes remain prominent; the breasts rewarded with medals of valour, the sexual delta adorned with a jewel encrusted antique Tibetan purse.



EIGHT

Blikfang



Madame Nolandy Dances
for a Small Bear



YEARNING

A small one eyed toy bear provides a pathetic audience for Madame Nolandy's dance. She seems enormous in comparison, her costume an eye-catching combination of fabric and metal mesh, a clash of materials, referencing the first mixed media sculpture, Degas' *Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans*. That she dances only for a toy bear suggests a lonely life, and the piece of mourning jewellery she wears around her neck points to an absence. The hanging gold compass suspended by the woven hair of a lost loved one symbolises that the wearer's thoughts will always follow the beloved, just as the compass needle will always point north.



NINE

Blikfang



Madame Nolandy
Returns from Africa



FECUNDITY

In this manifestation Madame Nolandy has assumed an extraordinary, eye catching shape; part ostrich perhaps, part high fashion. Dramatic colours, layered with different pile lengths and patterns form an animalistic pelt. The coloration of animals is a hugely complex and exciting subject; flowers use colour as the ultimate bait. Humans are the only animals able to ‘change their stripes’ – and Madame Nolandy is showing just how strong Africa’s influence can be.

Madame Nolandy has not returned from Africa alone; the small frightened bear slung in a bag around her neck is part trophy, part relic.



TEN

Blikfang



Puka Leaf Chandelier



ALLURE

An overhead forest of gently swaying leaves.



ELEVEN

Blikfang



Apparatus to Fashion
the Fabric of Art



WIT

This playful work utilises an old French wine-bottle drying frame to carry out some oversize French knitting. Scale is an important *blikfang*; the eye gauges distance and potential threat from size in relation to known objects. This work references one of Marcel Duchamp's *Readymades*. The endless chain of loops requires the proceeding loop to hold together; art is a similar progression, forever drawing on the past to emerge into new artefacts.





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English honours graduate who works as an online news editor. He has recently written catalogue texts for Window, Ozlyn and The Audio Foundation exhibitions. He says he "once had a really good lunch in Grenoble". willpoll.com

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