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STEPHEN SEVERN

VIBRANT THINGS

Casting Queer, Animate, Human-Object Relations

...still working his fingers in the water, they curled round something hard — a full drop of solid matter — and gradually dislodged a large irregular lump, and brought it to the surface. When the sand coating was wiped off, a green tint appeared. It was a lump of glass, so thick as to be almost opaque; the smoothing of the sea had completely worn off any edge or shape, so that it was impossible to say whether it had been bottle, tumbler or window-pane; it was nothing but glass; it was almost a precious stone.

- “Solid Objects”, Virginia Woolf¹

The root of the word *object* is a compound of the Latin prefix, *ob*, meaning in front of, and *jacere*, meaning to throw. This applies to the word both as a verb: to oppose, I object to [x], and as a noun: a “tangible thing, something perceived with or presented to the senses.”² In both cases, the definition of *object* invokes a *relationship* between ourselves and the thing itself, in our sensing or perception of it. Perhaps because of this, it is easy to infer a human-centred definition in which the object is defined by our perception and exists for us. Physical objects stop us, present *obstacles* for us to manoeuvre around, much like an *objection*: an argument presented in opposition. But what if objects are not obstacles, are not in opposition to us, are not primarily defined by our sensing or perception?

My preference is for the latter half, the thrown-ness, *jacere*, of this etymology; objects present themselves to our senses, they throw (*jacere*) themselves in front of (*ob*) us. This definition accentuates an animacy in materiality, and an energetic lived relationality to all matter — if objects throw themselves in front of us, they arrive at us just as much as we arrive at them. Our senses are constantly being presented with objects, whether we register them or not. John, Virginia Woolf’s character in “Solid Objects,” is presented with objects

(beach glass, broken porcelain, meteorite) that influence the course of his life. My visual art practice engages deeply with objects, and, like John, objects have influenced the course of my life. For this reason, object-theory resonates with me, as do stories like that of Woolf’s character for whom life is, in a sense, a series of object-relations.

In this paper, I formulate a conceptual framework for an ontology of *vibrant things* to explore what I intrinsically already know: all matter is active, fluid, non-hierarchical, and in relation. I describe a shift where I theoretically and physically orientate myself to objects as *vibrant things*, speculate on how this orientation might be queer, and recount how these relations are registered in my art practice and research methodology through the process of casting. Rather than participating in human-centric worldviews in which binary distinctions privilege humans as active and non-humans as material resources to be acted upon, an ontology of *vibrant things* presents the friction of matter surfaces rubbing against (or throwing themselves at) each other as forces that are agential, fluid, and alive with energy.

¹ Virginia Woolf, “Solid Objects,” in *Virginia Woolf: Selected Short Stories*, ed. Sandra Kemp (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2019), 62.

² “Object” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed March 17, 2021, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/object>.

VIBRANT THINGS

A Theory of Vibrant Matter and a Theory of Things

My conceptual framework for an ontology of *vibrant things* is rooted in Jane Bennett’s theory of energetic materiality and in Bill Brown’s thing theory. To start, I want to clarify a distinction between objects and *things* made by Brown, among others. In his 2001 article “Thing Theory,” Brown describes *things* as concrete and yet ambiguous, and as exceeding their materiality and function; the *thing* is in excess of the object.³ His thing theory focuses on human-object interactions; *things*, according to Brown, are objects that present themselves to us through fluid human-object relations.⁴ He describes the fluidity in our relationships with *things* as a shift from object to subject and provides an example of this when a thing’s common function as an object ceases and it becomes “...physically or metaphysically irreducible to an object.”⁵ Brown uses examples of your car or drill breaking down to highlight one kind of changed relationship.⁶ This change in relation, I believe, involves a shift in our perception of how we experience objects, now *things*, in new ways. Rather than based on their conventional role, *things* are more than mere objects, and their excess is in our fluid relationship with them.

In his later writing, Brown disintegrates dichotomous categorizations (subject versus object) by describing our relation

to the world of objects as a “mutual constitution and mutual animation of subject and object...”⁷ This is important because it again highlights the fluidity of our relations with *things*, but also removes hierarchical categorization. He describes thing theory, using support from Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, as a shift to thinking beyond subject–object and human–non-human binaries, adding that he wants to “dislodge the binary” between the animate and the inanimate.⁸ Jane Bennett also invites us to think beyond a binary that divides the animate and the inanimate.⁹ In her aptly titled book *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett reinvokes a history of energetic matter in Western philosophy, while crediting developments in natural sciences and bioengineering as blurring the binary between life and matter and, subsequently, advocates for a politics that includes the agency of non-human participants.¹⁰ Both thinkers offer a non-dichotomous non-hierarchical view of matter.

For Brown and Bennett, it is *thingness*, not objecthood, which registers an energetic materiality.¹¹ What Bennett contributes to my understanding and usage of *vibrant things*, is the idea that all matter is enmeshed in action and process bred from relation. She describes actants (also relying on Latour) as any source of action — human or non-human — and asserts that an actant does not act alone, but in collaboration with other forces, actants, *things*; we are “in a dense network of

relations...in a knotted world of vibrant matter.”¹² She describes this force of action as *thing-power*: “...the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”¹³ Although she includes *human-power* in *thing-power*, her goal is to support neither a hierarchy nor an equality of actants; her goal is a politics that encourages communication between all actants towards a better understanding of our shared participation in world-building.¹⁴ In artmaking, I aim to see what this renewed engagement with things, in a shared practice of artmaking-as-world-building, in Bennett’s sense, can reveal about an ontology of *vibrant things*; or how art can participate in this shift, as a special mode of relation to matter, materiality, and *things*.

Brown and Bennett have not helped me redefine objects as *things* but have helped me to undefine *things* as objects. That is, rather than understanding objects based on my definition of them, I am perceiving the *things* themselves, and my relation to them, as having agency and fluidity. Earlier, I asked: what if objects are not obstacles, are not in opposition to us? An ontology of *vibrant things*, rooted in the conceptual frameworks of vibrant matter and thing theory, provides a theoretical base for humans working with objects that traverse a dynamic world of action, fluidity, and relation outside of hierarchical categorizations and subject–object, animate–inanimate, human–non-human, and living–non-living binaries.

QUEER THINGS

Research-Creation and Queer Phenomenology as Methodology

An ontology of *vibrant things* that views human-object relations as active, fluid, and non-hierarchical requires a methodological framework that supports this animate, energetic, and relational collaboration. A research-creation methodology does just this, and accurately describes a lot of my process.

The roundtable conversation, “The Intimacies of Doing Research-Creation,” conducted by Sarah E. Truman in *Knowings and Knots*, helped in the formation of my methodology and aided in my understanding of the intricacies of this term.¹⁵ The panel consisted of Canada’s leading research-creation scholars (Natalie Loveless, Erin Manning, Natasha Myers, and Stephanie Springgay), who look to define the problems not only in identifying but also theorizing research-creation.¹⁶ Some points of connection between my practice and the methodology include Manning’s description of research-creation as challenging the separation between thinking and making, and Loveless’ description of research-creation as the combination of form and content.¹⁷

Manning and Loveless’ description provides a framework for the application of thing theory, which Brown describes as a relation to the world of objects in “mutual constitution and mutual animation of subject and object...”¹⁸ The fluidity of human-object relations in Brown’s thing theory can be seen in, what Manning

3 Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1, 5.
4 Brown, “Thing Theory,” 4.
5 Kathleen Stewart’s interpretation of Brown’s “Thing Theory,” Kathleen Stewart, “Tactile Compositions,” in *Objects and Materials*, ed. Penny Harvey et al. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 119.
6 Brown, “Thing Theory,” 4.
7 Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 19.
8 Brown, *Other Things*, 5–6.
9 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), vii; Brown, *Other Things*, 5.
10 Bennett, viii, xviii, xix.
11 Brown, *Other Things*, 5; Bennett, xvi.

12 Bennett, 9, 13, 21.
13 Bennett, 6.
14 Bennett, 10, 104
15 Sarah E. Truman, et al., “The Intimacies of Doing Research-Creation,” in *Knowings and Knots: Methodologies and Ecologies in Research-Creation*, ed. Natalie Loveless (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2019) 221–249.
16 Truman, 221.
17 Truman, 228, 230.
18 Brown, *Other Things*, 19.

describes as, the connection between “thinking and making” in research-creation. Research-creation foregrounds action and relation between, what Bennett calls, actants. Prioritizing action, I believe, supports a non-hierarchical model where artists’ materials, objects, *things*, are collaborating in Bennett’s *thing power*, just as much as human thought or human power. Springgay highlights the action of research-creation in her repeated declaration that research-creation is an *event*. Myers’ suggestion that the event leads us to new research questions, has been evident in the trajectory of my research and in my art-making events: those moments of material creation interspersed between long bouts of sitting and thinking with objects.¹⁹

Like John, Virginia Woolf’s character in “Solid Objects,” I sit for hours with my objects, just staring at them and thinking about them. In fact, the bulk of my time spent working on this project was spent looking at and thinking about objects. As with John, this engagement involved a substantial time commitment to the detriment of our professional careers. In Woolf’s story, John gives up a promising political career to gather and contemplate objects, while I, in pivoting my career from a prop stylist in the commercial photography industry to an object-based visual artist practice, have quit my day job arranging objects in order to sit and stare and think about them.²⁰

This contemplation/observation frequently involves disorientation, often questioning

the existence of the object; what is it telling me, what it wants, how can I engage it in a creative practice, and what that might reveal? Sara Ahmed’s theory of queer phenomenology has provided me with an understanding of how these moments of disorientation can contribute to my overall methodology, which (to coin a neologism) might be better described as one of *research-queeration*.

In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed strives to do two things: to queer phenomenology and to incorporate phenomenology into queer theory.²¹ She describes phenomenology as a turn towards objects, or *orientation*, which affects how we inhabit space and what we do.²² Objects, she asserts, allow us to do things.²³ Ahmed uses the concept of *lines* to illustrate how objects direct “what we do, and how we inhabit space.”²⁴ Lines make some things reachable, while putting others out of reach; she argues that, in a heteronormative society, the reachable things allow the body to be extended into spaces and to continue along a straight line, putting some things within reach, and placing others out-of-reach.²⁵ The out-of-reach things fall into the background.²⁶ Ahmed claims that queer subjects deviate in straight culture; they turn away from or do not orientate themselves to objects on the straight line, opting instead for an oblique line where they “reach” objects that are “... not points on the straight line.”²⁷ Queer phenomenology is a productive failure to extend oneself into spaces through objects that favour straight (heteronormative) and/

or white-centred dominant lines of force. It is a turn towards objects that are outside the normative, in the background, or not typically visible; these encounters may be experienced as disorientation, yet have the potential to extend a person’s line in new and unpredictable ways. In the following section, I want/attempt to connect a queer phenomenological lens to a reading of Woolf’s “Solid Objects.”

John, a member of the British Parliament with a promising career in politics, discovers a piece of beach glass while his companion, Charles, is skimming stones. After exhausting the beach’s supply of flat stones, Charles notices John’s discovery but dismisses the beach glass because it is not flat or suited to skimming. John stays with his orientation to the beach glass, questioning its existence, while Charles turns away from the object, returning it to the background of his perception as he reanimates their political debate. At home, John gives the beach glass a function as a paper weight, but his eyes keep returning to the object — he is constantly turning towards it, orientating himself towards it. He starts orientating himself to similar objects in shop windows: “...china, glass, amber, rock, marble...,” and to items on the ground: orientating himself to what would be perceived as garbage, as the background, and overlooked by others. He collects more objects and uses them as paperweights. He finds a broken piece of half-buried china, which is even more obscured from regular view, even more in the background; all the objects he has collected have been hidden from regular view. He starts to frequent places where discarded broken china might be found, places on the fringes of human society like refuse sites, railway lines, and demolished houses; the search for objects and the

objects themselves extend his body into new and strange spaces. The things he discovers are no longer used as paperweights — they do not have a purpose beyond ornament and collection.²⁸

The shift away from the usefulness of his objects mirrors the shift away from his career; he is orientating himself away from a straight line of a normal life and career trajectory. He finds a meteorite, something alien to earth. He becomes obsessed with his search for more objects, and his interest in his political career recedes. Charles visits John and touches the objects “without once noticing their existence”; for Charles, the objects remain in the background. Their conversation is confused when John talks about his pursuit of objects and Charles misunderstands him to be talking about his political career — Charles “...had a *queer sense* that they were talking about different things.”²⁹ Charles experiences disorientation in the presence of John and his objects; he leaves, reorientating himself to the straight line of politics and society, while John remains orientated towards strange objects that extend him into strange spaces.³⁰

In this story, Woolf’s character loses a lot in his pursuit of *things*, and I am not suggesting that a queer phenomenology means abandoning society. John’s sexual orientation is not addressed in the story, so this is not explicitly an example of a queer (read homosexual) body extending itself into queer spaces; but it does show how John’s orientations to objects create an oblique line that diverts from the expectations of his straight life and career path. I am very much interested in the potential of his oblique path, and where it might lead; what a sequel to the story might hold.

19 Truman, “The Intimacies of Doing Research-Creation,” 227, 232, 237, 249.

20 Woolf, “Solid Objects,” 66.

21 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 1.

22 Ahmed, 2, 28, 46.

23 Ahmed, 46.

24 Ahmed, 23, 28, 52, 66.

25 Ahmed, 14-15, 16, 51, 56, 84, 87.

26 Ahmed, 26, 29-32.

27 Ahmed, 71, 92, 161.

28 Woolf, “Solid Objects,” 63-67.

29 Woolf, 66-67; emphasis mine.

30 Woolf, 67.



Figure 1: Beeswax Cast, 2022.

Referencing Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Ahmed states that bodies can reorientate themselves to the strange but suggests that staying with the disorientation creates a different kind of orientation — a queer phenomenological orientation.³¹ It is here, she suggests, that a vitality exists.³² In my art practice, I seek to intersect this vitality with Brown's energetic *things* and Bennett's "dense network" of collaborating vibrant materiality. A research-queeration methodology provides a way for me to extend myself through objects into spaces, where staying with disorientation can transition into research-creation making events that are open to the possibility of new trajectories. In the next section,

I orientate myself to some rather queer objects and vibrant things.

CAST THINGS

Thinking and Making with Vibrant Things

Set at the opposite end of the mantlepiece from the lump of glass that had been dug from the sand, it looked like a creature from another world — freakish and fantastic as a harlequin. It seemed to be pirouetting through space, winking like a fitful star. The contrast between the china so vivid and alert, and the glass

31 Ahmed, 4.
32 Ahmed, 4.



Figure 2: Gypsum Cast, 2022.



Figure 3: Resin Cast, 2022.

so mute and contemplative, fascinated him, and wondering and amazed, he asked himself how the two came to exist in the same world, let alone to stand upon the same narrow strip of marble in the same room. The question remained unanswered.

– “Solid Objects,” Virginia Woolf³³

After sitting with these casts for a time, I experience a similar amazement as Woolf’s character (figures 1-3). I had created moulds of objects and cast them in different materials to see how human-object relations might change via materiality. Like John’s things, mine appear to have their own personalities, despite being cast from the same object. The mould was created from a plaster rattlesnake that I found at an antique market. The burn marks at its centre indicate its previous function as an ashtray, but I have used it as a trinket dish and, on occasion, a still life photography subject.

The beeswax cast is organic matter reformed; it feels natural, of the earth. Its materiality greets you with its waxy texture and a familiar scent that remains on the skin after touch. Although it has hardened to a cool solid, it contains a warmth that seems to remember the apian energy of its creation and the heat of the molten fluidity of its formation.

The gypsum plaster cast also went through a process of heating during formation, but this is not evident in its form. It feels cool and dry and running one’s fingers along the scaly chalky surface creates a high-pitched sound that vibrates through the thing, echoing a hiss. Like the beeswax, the surface stays with you, but unlike the unseen residue of wax, the plaster adheres to fingers as a visible white dust.

The resin cast is smooth and silent. Its

plastic boundary and clinical tactility feel impenetrable. Although it gives less than the other two materials — it does not linger on my skin or in my nose — it reveals itself in its transparency. It has shed its skin, revealing the interior of its mass and form.

These materials are revealing their qualities through my senses and the transformation of material states and shapes. The beeswax must be melted to a liquid state and then hardened again in the mould. The gypsum plaster was formed by combining dry plaster powder with water, increasing in hardness when the crystalline structure of the mineral composition changes. The hardened plastic epoxy resin cast is a result of a chemical reaction between resin and a hardening agent.

These material transformations make me question the fluidity of these objects going forward — how the beeswax, made of honey consumed by bees and secreted as wax, can be formed and reformed (seemingly) endlessly, transitioning through solid and liquid states, while the plastic materiality of a chemical reaction will degrade at an extremely slow rate. This slow rate mirrors Jane Bennett’s assertion (using Manuel De Landa and Vladimir Vernadsky) that humans are walking, talking minerals; viewed through an evolutionary timescale, the mineralization that produced bones has affected the evolution of life, and humans are merely a product — we are agents enabling the mineral processes of the Earth.³⁴ Seeing my human body in this light, how is the mineralization of the gypsum plaster snake so very different from my own evolutionary function on this planet? Is this cast not a relation/collaboration of *vibrant things*, of actants, of thing- and human-power, between mineralization on

an evolutionary timescale (myself) and a mineralization that will set in twenty-five to thirty-five minutes?

Like the fluidity of their material transformations, engaging with these objects has influenced a fluidity of approach in my practice. By staying orientated to these *things* and our relation, new lines of inquiry have emerged. This thinking reinforces Natasha Myers’ suggestion that research-creation making events lead us to new research questions; a research-*queeration* methodology has revealed new avenues of inquiry.³⁵

Are these casts queer? According to Ahmed, queer objects are those that facilitate queer gatherings and queer orientations into spaces.³⁶ The object itself is not queer; queerness is in the relation between queer subject and object and the possibilities this relationship creates.³⁷ I question these objects from the perspective of sexual orientation *and* as objects that diverge, uncomfortably, from the *straight lines* of normative culture. These objects resist easy absorption into narratives of function and recognition, which is not queer as in being an identifiably 2SLGBTQIAP+ “sign,” and yet, they extended my queer body into a queer space when they were exhibited in an art gallery in Toronto’s 2SLGBTQIAP+ community. Here, others may have found familiarity or discomfort, may have orientated themselves towards or away from them, or the objects may have fallen into the background altogether.

Has the original object — the souvenir rattlesnake ashtray — fallen into the background? What has been revealed in this thing? Like the casts, it has also

experienced a transformation in the process of being cast. The silicone mould has removed a patina from its surface and the thing has emerged as more vibrant; the colours of the scales are brighter, and a stronger snakeskin pattern has been revealed. On the underside, a stamp is now evident: “Sullivan Art Studio Rapid City S.D.” Some of the grime removed from the object has transferred itself to the silicone mould and, in turn, transferred itself onto the plaster cast. I like to think, despite these casts and the original being objects in their own right, that traces of matter have been transferred between the objects. There is an interchange and relation between the physical objects.

The material transformations have revealed different characteristics of the casts. Woolf describes the differences in characteristics of John’s gathered objects (mute and contemplative versus freakish, fantastic, and winking); these descriptions could be applied to my casts, although I am averse to using the word ‘mute.’³⁸ Bill Brown, in his book *Other Things*, writes that the character of things is preserved in the way in which art and literature engage with things.³⁹ Have I maintained the character of these things, these casts, in this writing? There is an inherent challenge in describing *things* with words. At the beginning of this paper, I cited Bennett’s statement that her goal is a politics that encourages communication between all actants, a communication, she elaborates, that does not include words.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding the fact that words are required to write this paper, I fear that Woolf’s and my descriptions of the *character of things* are human-

33 Woolf, “Solid Objects,” 64-65.
34 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 10-11.

35 Truman, “The Intimacies of Doing Research-Creation,” 227.
36 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 167, 169.
37 Ahmed, 3, 170-171.
38 Woolf, “Solid Objects,” 64-65.
39 Bill Brown, *Other Things*, 11.
40 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 104.

centric. Bennett alleviates this fear when she writes that “in a vital materialism, an anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances — sounds and sights that echo and bounce far more than would be possible were the universe to have a hierarchical structure.”⁴¹ My humanity is included in my relation to the character of things, and even in my tendency to anthropomorphize them.

John, the character in Woolf’s story, ponders how his objects come to exist together in the world and indeed the same place. His question remains unanswered. I am still sitting with my objects, my little snakes, my *queer vibrant things*. I have described how they have come into being through organic transition, mineral transformation, chemical reaction, and through my making. The disorientation of staying orientated to these objects has revealed new lines of inquiry and fluid relation. They are not obstacles, not in opposition to me, but our relation moves — casting transformation and throwing agency towards queer potential.

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CITATION

41 Bennett, 99.

STEPHEN SEVERN (he/they) is an artist, educator, and scholar whose work attends to material encounters and queer and trans* ways-of-becoming. Through photography, sculpture, sound, and installation, they collaborate with objects, materials, and spaces to explore shared participation in world-building. Their transdisciplinary practice positions aural and spatial modes of perception as emergent sites of queer and trans* futurity. Stephen's work has been exhibited internationally, and their creative research has been supported by the Toronto and Ontario Arts Councils, the Ontario Graduate Scholarship, and by the Canada Graduate Scholarship for their SSHRC-funded MFA in Interdisciplinary Art from OCAD University. Currently, Stephen lectures in art and design history and theory at Toronto Metropolitan University where they are a Ph.D. student in the Media and Design Innovation program.