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Natascha Sadr Haghghian

#04

THE INSURRECTION OF THINGS

The international medical community is divided between those in favour of and against clinical recognition of the syndrome known as 'Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder' (ADHD). There is debate as to its cause, whether it is of genetic origin or not, the possibility of its classification as a mental illness – the word 'disorder' seems to be a new terminology half way between habit, controllable, and madness, incontrollable – and its treatment, and millions of children and adolescents in the Western world take tablets every day to combat their symptoms. But at the same time there is debate over the very concept of the human intelligence which operates in the diagnosis of this new syndrome, this new hysteria. In simple terms, those who conceive the brain as a machine for the detection and solution of problems believe the organ suffers a deficit which causes an imbalance in concentration and, as a result, a serious problem of efficiency and performance. On the other hand, there are those who believe that thought does not establish a direct relationship between problem and solution; rather that in each separate case the process of thinking invents different solutions and widely varying methods of multiplying, indirectly, the means to achieve them. Intelligence, it might be said, works by creating, from the problem, diverging paths which can lead to more than a single solution. These are means which, at first

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sight, do not seem to have anything to do with the original question, but they do, and eventually we end up with potential solutions to the problem. In this way, a lack of attention is not a syndrome but a condition of our mind, a condition which has been explored for centuries in the ways of working of artists who know best what for them is a method of investigation, a chaos necessary for order. What is happening now is perhaps an enormous multiplication of potential questions and possible answers, produced by the system itself and not by massive brain dysfunction on a planetary scale.

The approach of the artist Natascha Sadr Haghghian in the work exhibited in the Capella MACBA can be viewed according to those parameters. Two commonplace objects, in themselves of little eloquence, are used to multiply the ways of interpreting questions such as the development of material culture, the ownership of water or the status of sound in a conception of contemporary art, in which sight and touch are always at the forefront.

Only one piece of hand luggage is allowed, it must not exceed six kilos in weight, it must be within the measurements dictated by the carrier and for each extra piece of luggage checked in, you have to pay. That is the policy of low-cost airlines. On the walkways connecting the airport and the aircraft door, people don't look at each other; instead their attention is focussed on the wheeled suitcases the other passengers are dragging behind them. The concern is always the same: to enter as quickly as possible, stow away the suitcase and take one's seat. An exercise in agility, to avoid having to submit to the dynamic of a group entering a machine very often too narrow to permit fluid movement and overloaded with suitcases which, to save time and money, no one wants to check in. The disembarkation ceremony is similar. Each passenger anticipating the movements required to allow a speedy exit, minimum contact with other people, without clumsiness and avoiding the clumsiness of others. The aeroplane is a mere procedure; the important thing is to save time so that the few days at one's disposal in the chosen city, Barcelona for example, are not blighted by any mishaps so that the only experience which remains in the memory is of the city and the charms it offers.

This ritual also becomes a singular exercise in the observation and analysis of an object-machine: the aeroplane. We notice the distance between the seats and remember that the spacing used to be different. The materials have also changed. The seats are not made of leather, the characteristic headrest coverings (first of a semi-rigid plastic, later of a cellulose-like material – now used for the pillow covers on medium and long-haul flights) and the sides are entirely of plastic, although they do retain a roughness where the arms rest, a feature which recalls a previous time when the material had texture. The colours have also changed. As the

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distance between the seats has decreased, the plastic has adopted lighter tones, and the fabric has abandoned plain colours for flecks, mixtures of greys and blues, which hide the wear and dirt caused by the huge numbers of passengers and also the lack of time available to clean an aircraft which spends the entire day on the move. Once inside, we see everything and we understand, albeit unconsciously, how our decision to spend a long weekend or a few days in a city of a different geographic and cultural latitude is replicated by hundreds, by thousands of decisions identical to ours, identical behaviour, accompanied also by identical objects such as the individual suitcases pulled along by men, women and children.

During a working stay in Berlin, on a reflection on the transformation which began with the reunification of the two Germanys in 1989, Natascha Sadr pointed out that, with the pilgrimage of trolleys from airport to city centre in Barcelona, one has the sensation that we all contribute to the feeding of one system, independently of what has brought us here. Tourists and non-tourists create a curious urban space where cultural construction goes hand in hand with consumption. In particular, her observation was directed at the growing number of 'creative' professionals – musicians, architects, designers, etc. – continually on the move to carry out their work, or the community of artists who take the decision to live in a city where there are no opportunities but which until very recently was one of the most affordable in Europe, and how this fact has created a constant flow of arrival and departure in the city.

Back in Barcelona, the noise of wheeled hand luggage on cobbles and city pavement shares the lead with the water bottle. The two objects are the stars of her installation in the Capella MACBA: a suitcase which moves very slowly, passing over a one and a half litre water bottle. The suitcase appears to have fallen accidentally on the bottle which has avoided being crushed by the weight of the luggage but is trapped by the metal rods of the pull-out handle. In addition to our surprise at the odd sight of such a commonplace in the context of an art exhibition, there is also the sensation that they seem to have no owner; thus they are not objects, but junk which belongs to another world, another context, the immediate environs of the chapel but not this place itself. The slowness with which the suitcase moves removes a dramatic quality from the scene to the point where we realise that it is not the source of the sound heard throughout the space. In fact, suspended over the accident is a microphone which picks up the bottle's plastic crunch, and a computer is employed to broadcast it live through eight-channel sound. The loudspeakers are distributed in the side chapels. They do not all emit sound at the same time, creating an effect of call and response, an echo.

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Detail of *De paso*, 2011

This plastic object, which has seen the incorporation of various systems of closure which condition the very act of drinking in public and more than once have put a check on traditional concepts of decorum, points also to another fact: the privatisation of water. The industrialisation and commercialisation of water originated in the purchase of traditional springs which became the property of conglomerates in the food business. In 1998, our country consumed about eighty litres of bottled water per person per year; now we are approaching what is known as ‘maturity’ in the market, at about 140 litres per head.

This scene should be understood as a suggestion we reflect on the history of the production and consumption of objects, on the importance of this history in that of ideas, of culture, and on the way in which objects represent what we might call little hells in the civilised world. From the very beginning of modernity, of the great relationship – bearing in mind that there have been previous ones, but on a smaller scale – between man and machine, machine and things produced uniformly and unceasingly, one dreams of the insurrection of humans and the insurrection of things.

Material

The first appearance of the term ‘material’, in reference to culture, dates from the nineteenth century. In William H. Prescott’s travel journals, reference is constantly made to the material civilisation of Mexico throughout history. The

study of objects, as well as the distinctions between object, thing, artefact and work of art, is one of the tasks of anthropologists, who since the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries have worked to understand the capability of man to convert a material into a utensil. That notwithstanding it was the art historian (and exceptional disciple of Henri Focillon) George Kubler who, in his studies of pre-Columbine art and especially his book *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (Yale University Press, 1962), coined the term 'material culture' in reference to the common condition shared by objects, whether artistic or not, produced by the hand of man. Here is the beginning of a great ontological and epistemological tension between all the artefacts which surround us, some marked by use and others by perception, and by their exceptional nature in the world of things.

Extraordinary objects, and not the run-of-the-mill, share with art a cultural space. Things capable of surprising the viewer through their execution or qualities are charged with the expansion of the horizons of knowledge, and thus with the introduction of a new world. The introduction of something which had no name, an artefact, a 'that' in the sphere of culture. This move is what we now call culture of objects, material culture.

Objects and things, products of scientific-technical knowledge and the origin of changes in our behaviour: sitting in another way, drinking water differently, or altering the size of an image on a screen just by moving our fingers. All of these actions inhabited the realm of the possible and now, thanks to things, tangible objects, they too have become tangible and real. Thus we witness the appearance of a new vision of the object-products of industry, that great tool of European man, which allows their display in Universal Expositions in the same way as archaeological remains bearing witness to man's 'progress'. In man's ceaseless advance through things, there is more information: about those who, as a group, make certain objects possible. Objects of the bourgeoisie, for example, are exclusive, shaped by a very particular taste and a very special understanding of the relationship between the cost of production and that of consumption. Industrially produced objects, on the other hand, follow a very different logic to more select objects which belong more to a particular group than society. But it is not only novelty which emerges in the field of objects; a wide range of materials also enters the arena. These are materials also associated with taste, and more importantly the immediate experience of what's new, of the future. These are materials, such as plastic, which work as foundational texts for a nation, the United States of America, and as a way of understanding industry and its relationship with civil society, consumers.

The plastic bottle is one of the principal objects of that community. The first bottle which could be said to be ‘made of plastic’ was manufactured in 1947. The development of the carbonated drinks business in the United States drove research into this material and its potential uses in the food industry, and plastic began its inexorable rise in the sector from its gradual introduction in 1960. It wasn’t until 1970 that the first bottle made of polyethylene terephthalate, a polyester, came onto the market. The story of transparent plastic is closely linked to the battle between two big players in the industry to achieve and patent the perfect material, the ideal polymer for the food business, Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) and DuPont. The race began in Europe. ICI was the biggest chemical firm in the British Empire; DuPont a business started in 1802 by a French chemist, Eleuthère Irénée du Pont de Nemours, who fled the French Revolution and founded the company in Delaware. For more than a decade, the reconfigured DuPont (DuPont Teijin Films) has held the patents and is the sole producer of Mylar®, Melinex®, Teijin®, Tetoron®, PET polyester film (the material of all these bottles), Teonex®, PEN polyester film and Cronar®.

Oblivion

The expression ‘environment’ was first used regularly in modern English in the second half of the seventeenth century, but until the middle of the nineteenth it was not used in reference to the circumstances which surround us. Usually, ‘the environment’ is understood to signify the combination of natural, social and cultural values in a given place and moment which influences the life of people and future generations. Thus the concept of environment encompasses not only the physical (surface, water, atmosphere) and the living beings which exist there, but also the interrelationships between them through culture, sociology and economy.

It was not until the 1960s that the term was used to describe our relationship with Earth, in *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967), where the cultural historian Roderick Nash put a name to the transformation produced at the heart of man’s connection to nature. Nash’s book initiated environmental thinking, and this different kind of description of humans’ relationship with their surroundings appeared at the same time as industry’s drive to come up with the perfect chemical formula with which to make plastic containers. One of the most interesting and least studied aspects of Roderick Nash’s work is his source of inspiration to write a book considered a classic in environmental studies: Henry David Thoreau. This US philosopher used the term ‘wilderness’, what there is

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without man and linked to the archetypical character of America, to make the distinction with 'wild', an attribute of the character of an individual or thing. Wilderness is a place, and wild a state of mind. However these two concepts do not, as one might expect, exist in separation; they exist simultaneously. Thanks to the fact that in nature there are landscapes supposedly under the protection of man, endless expanses which leave us facing a scale and naturalness which seem to have entirely forgotten the existence of individuals, we can experience the wild in us. Our condition of defiance, which helps us understand the limits of our social condition, and also the rules which regulate it, depends in turn not on character but the natural fact which this infinity shows. We are one with the natural condition, and this understanding is what powers an alternative subjectivity, radical and capable of disobedience, of not accepting the rules: packaging.

Listen, drink, obey

The expectations one has before seeing a known space, either from previous visits or from its genre, understood without having actually seen it, are held in abeyance on entry. The Capella MACBA is bare and seems untouched by anything except for the sound which permeates throughout the entire space and is not an event in isolation. That it is a totalising presence is clear as soon as one enters; we look at the loudspeakers because they transmit the sound, but they are not themselves the sound. We take a few moments to work out what to do with our gaze; perhaps nothing, perhaps lose ourselves and listen. Sound is a primary frame. Unlike an object, either artistic or not, it does not have an exact form and so is resistant to description, precision and representation. This is the case of the sound amplified, live, in the space.

All material has something to say. The semi-rigid moulded plastic of a bottle produces a very characteristic sound. When pressure is exerted on an empty plastic bottle, the sound is unpleasant, sharp and tense. When the pressure is removed, the object reverts to its original shape as if relieved. The impression is of resistance to changing its shape, always insisting on returning to its manufactured form. It appears to wish to be a bottle for ever and not a piece of waste plastic for recycling. Hence the peculiarly irritated and irritating sound.

Natural sounds, meanwhile, are rarely uncomfortable, and the only reason which explains this is their source, their origin. A natural sound carries with it the information required to decode natural events: the presence of water, the movement of earth, the proximity of the ocean, the approach of a storm and so on. An artificial sound tells a different story. The sound of a machine, of an

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object, is a noise; just noise. It speaks not of nature but its transformation, culture, production and consumption. Noises which deafen us and affect us.

A plastic bottle is not a very loud machine and the viewer is not easily shocked by the unpleasant sound created by an everyday object through multi-channel amplification. There is however something wild, to use one of Thoreau's expressions, in the character of this bottle and something violent in the insistence of the other object, the cabin suitcase, which rolls over the first. Cabin luggage is recent. The first personal wheeled suitcase came onto the market in 1989, and was the idea of a pilot at the US airline Northwest Airlines. Robert Plath had a similar problem to that of Queequeg, the harpooner on the *Pequod* in Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*, who clamoured for wheels on all the crates and barrels so as to be able to move them easily around the whaler's deck. Cabin luggage might deserve a text on its own. It is an adaptation of the kind described by the biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck of the biological change which occurs not in the organs of humans or living beings in general when circumstances change but when objects' and artefacts' size, form or physical qualities are altered and thus bring about a change in human behaviour. The object which mechanically 'runs over' the transparent water bottle is a recent example of the individual suitcase, a suitcase conceived for the aircraft cabin but one which has become, with the introduction of low-cost flights, the symbol of the lightning weekend trip. A suitcase pulled along by an individual and containing all the items required by that person for a few pleasurable days in the chosen destination. Cabin suitcases have wheels which permit more rapid disembarkation of not only the pilots but everybody on board, such that the time between the landing and take-off of an aircraft is reduced to a minimum. Personal objects bring about a different mobility to those which are shared by more than one individual. Each person rushes to grab their own and depart. This sense of an individualisation of objects is also present with the water bottle. They do not belong to the couple or group. Bottles are also, increasingly, individual packagings.

Here the relationship Thoreau spoke of between the landscape (open, unexplored, limitless, wild) and the individual (conditioned, anchored, ever more limited) is again of interest in thinking about our relationship with water, a shared fundamental for life, and the container. In the side chapel – known as the renaissance chapel – the artist has included the image of a fountain with a very special history in the city and which makes reference to an important historical event: the 'liberation' of water in the Civil War.

This is the collectivisation of the *Sociedad General de Aguas de Barcelona*, the Barcelona water company, which took place between 1936 and 1938 and allowed the piping of clean drinking water to the poorest neighbourhoods as

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Detail of *De paso*, 2011

well as its free supply. The picture shows a citizen of Barcelona stocking up on water, freely. It is accompanied by an extract from the classic book by George Orwell *Homage to Catalonia*, in which the author describes a similar scene. It is a simple act, linked to effort; that of the fight for survival in the midst of conflict at a time when the city was under fire from the bombing of the national army. Not far from this picture is an object, a fountain created from an unusual material: a pile of IKEA catalogues. They all look identical and indeed are, except that they are from different countries: Germany, Spain – with the different versions in Catalan and Spanish – France and Britain. Identical, like water bottles, but different, adapted slightly for each state's, each nation's, consumption. IKEA, a Swedish multinational created in 1937 by Ingvar Kamprad and baptised with the initial letters of its founder, followed by the name of the farm where he grew up, Elmtaryd, and finally the village, Agunnaryd: I-ngvar, K-amprad, E-lmtaryd, A-gunnaryd. The company's historic slogan, *Everything beautiful for everyday life* – now turned into *A better everyday life* – indicated the intention not only to produce basic utensils, kitchenware, crockery and furniture, for the biggest possible number of people, but also to ensure these objects were attractive, and fulfilled aesthetic as well as functional criteria. As with water, design should flow, in a democratic society in which class differences might constantly decrease and where the representational codes of objects have the same meaning for everyone. IKEA flows, like bottled water, and represents not only a brand, but also an ideal which has transformed the interiors of Swedish homes and

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those of many other places, a panoptic normality in which we see not an ideal but an economic necessity. A model of rationalisation of objects of basic need, in the same way as the bottling of water does away with the need for public fountains. Much could be said about the democratic models which are almost ingenuously declared by huge supranational companies. If one of the features of democracy is the acceptance of regulatory codes and the approval of decisions, following well-defined and transparent procedures that operate for the whole of a community, then one may question the differences between the big companies who announce their following of very similar social programming software. Nowadays the emphasis is on access, to water, or to items previously only available to others, the regularisation of all consumer goods is underlined and interest is increasingly displayed in mediation, leaving nothing out of the reach of the system; ultimately, the promotion of packaging.

Chus Martínez
Director of Curatorial Office, documenta 13
Associate curator, MACBA

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Natascha Sadr Haghghian, *De paso*, 2011

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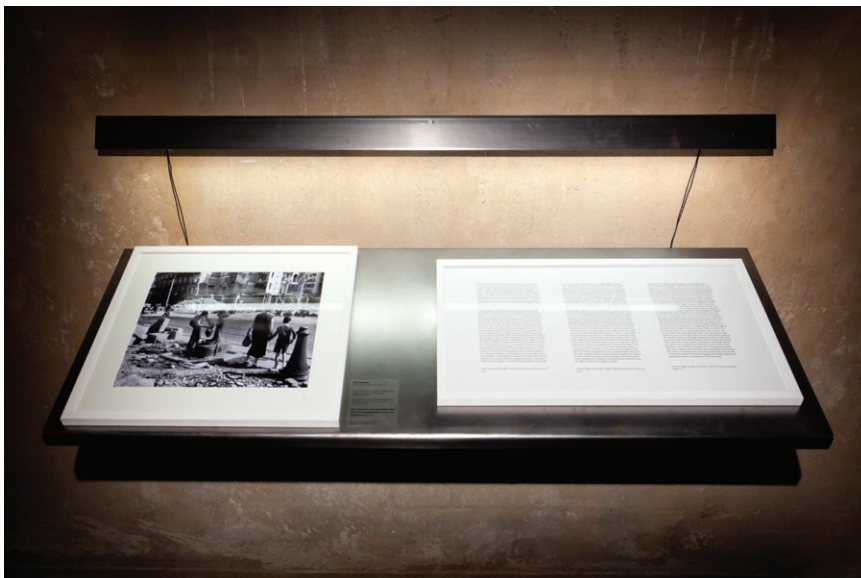
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Video

Interview: Natascha Sadr Haghghian. *De paso*

<http://www.macba.cat/video>

<http://vimeo.com/27234867>

<http://youtu.be/qytQHSDtsY>



Audio

Radio programme: SON[!]A #103 *Interview with Natascha Sadr Haghghian about artistic research, the relationship between art and politics, and artistic practices as a driving force for emancipation*

http://rwm.macba.cat/en/sonia?id_capsula=678

Radio programme: EXTRA: *The making of...* # 04 Natascha Sadr Haghghian.

De paso. The technical aspects behind the sound installation, explained by the artist herself

http://rwm.macba.cat/en/extra/extra_natascha_sadr/capsula



Photographs

Photographs by Rafael Vargas of the installation by Natascha Sadr Haghghian,

De paso, at Capella MACBA

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/macba/sets/72157627536049839/>

(Accessed Septembre 2011)

This bio is borrowed from <http://bioswop.net>

Natascha Sadr Haghghian

Born in Chesterfield, UK 1986; lives and works in London.

Recent Exhibitions

Best in Show

John Jones Project Space, London, 2008

The Steve Guttenberg Galaxy

17 Gallery, London, 2008

Secret Passages

Centro Cultural Sao Paulo, Brazil, 2008

Don't Look Now

Martin Creed's Project Space, London, 2008

Art Since 2008

The Very Good Room, London, 2008

One Night Only

auto-italia south east, London, 2008

The really really easy show.

90b Main Yard, London, 2007

I AM TATE MOSS

Tate Moss, London, 2006

Awards and other activities

1st Class Honours Fine Art, Central St. Martins, London

Core Participant of unitednationsplaza, Mexico DF, 2008

The Chelsea Arts Club Trust Travel Award, 2007

Gallery Education, Opening the Doors II, 2007

De paso, 2011

Sound installation involving a trolley bag and a bottle.

Paper, straw, photograph, text.

Work produced in collaboration with the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and the Han Nefkens Foundation.

Acknowledgments

Angela Anderson

Ashkan Sepahvand

Sèrie Capella MACBA is a collection of publications distributed online free of charge (<http://www.macba.cat/serie-capella>), which compiles the activities of this exhibition space. All the installations share a common denominator: they are all site-specific productions (or works).

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3 July – 12 December, 2011

Exhibition organized by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona and coproduced with the Han Nefkens Foundation.



**Fundació
Han Nefkens**

With the participation of



Exhibition

Curator: Chus Martínez

Responsible of the project: Soledad Gutiérrez

Assistant Curator: Anna Cerdà

Registrar: Marta Badia, Denis Iriarte

Conservation: Lluís Roqué

Audiovisuals: Jordi Martínez, Àlex Ponte

Architecture and general services: Isabel Bachs,

Núria Guarro, Alberto Santos, Miguel Ángel Fernández

Sound programming: Erik Wiegand

Mechanics: Visomat inc. and Uwe Holger

Publication

Coordination and editing: Publications Department of MACBA

Text: Chus Martínez

Translation: Richard Thomson

Design: Nieves and Mario Berenguer Ros

Photographs of the installation: Rafael Vargas

Printing: Grafos

Publisher

Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

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www.lacentral.com

This publication has the support of

EDICIONS DE LA CENTRAL

ISSN: 2013-9926 (online) / 2013-9918 (printed)

DP: B-37.473-2011

