

THESIS

A THING OF THINGS

CRITTER COMFORT

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### A THING OF THINGS

### CRITTER COMFORT

This paper explores physical and theoretical layers behind the thesis show *Critter Comfort* which ultimately aims to immerse and enrapture the viewer in overwhelming giving. Split into four parts, the paper starts with the first two sections give with a more empirical mindset of the installation through exploring the situation of a museum setting, and the art thing(s) on display. Parts three and four deal with the intangible of what goes into creating art with tension, and the quintessential part beauty plays on a surface and metaphysical level. Ultimately this paper is an indulgent explanation of exactly why I made the type of installation I did for my thesis capstone show: to create and share what I find beautiful.

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## **INTRODUCTION [hello]**

I am emphatically thankful for having the high privilege of attending graduate school; in my finishing thesis show *Critter Comfort* I aim to perpetuate that feeling of acceptance and gratitude. This paper outlines the thought process to achieve this goal of reciprocity with an emphasis on the multitude of ceramic forms I've labeled as Critters. The first two sections examine the physical. First of the overarching setting of the museum space and the pedestal in particular. Second in the branches of the installation itself: a thing of things. The third and fourth section go past these initial layers of physicality into the intangible, and explores what I can and cannot control in my installation through connecting my work to theories of philosophy, installation and craft. In our interconnected world of so much, where energies can be directed through seemingly endless avenues, I want to honor anyone's attention spent with my art while rebuking the misconception that beauty is cheap, flat or dismissible. I believe art is a labor of love and language attempting to showcase personal inner worlds of fascination. With *Critter Comfort* I aim to create something that incites and embodies qualities of beauty, engagement and reciprocity because I want my love of creation and personal aesthetic to be similarly seen, felt and welcomed by visitors as a sincere gift to continue beyond the show and myself.

## **THE SETTING [encompass]**

I will start with discussing the setting of a generalized Western art museum, and what importance these spaces carry outside their primary task of storing, caring and stewarding objects of deemed importance. Visiting a museum, one is immediately inundated with the carefully curated imagery shown, but also the environment in which one beholds objects. John H. Falk states (nearly thirty years ago now, but still relevant): "The architecture, objects, atmosphere, sights and sounds [of museums] all differ significantly from those visitors are used to finding in

other settings. This is not necessarily good or bad, but it is important; it means that many visitors may feel intimidated in a museum[.] Museum environments arouse curiosity, but also anxiety.”<sup>i</sup>

There is a curated reverence inherent in museums. The humans who form the nexus of a museum state that our institution has the knowledge and professionalism to show you a chosen selection from the most discerning in their fields of expertise. Ideally in a non-patronizing fashion, museums state that they know what visitors should be spending their attention on. To return to Falk: “Most museums go out of their way to ensure that visitors not only enjoy and learn from their visit, but also leave with an appreciation of the intellectual and aesthetic significance of the things represented in the museum.”<sup>ii</sup> It is only within the last century that Western museums have expanded from private spheres into spaces of education.<sup>iii</sup> But that aspect of expanding visitor’s expectations or views has dramatically increased within the last century, and are understandably still struggling with how to bridge the personal view of the individual visitor with the encompassing vastness of an (often) massive institution. In return for this privilege and elevation to the visitor, Western museums understandably have some relatively universal guidelines: the art is for everyone to view, not for individuals to touch and hence possibly damage. Museums hold great care (albeit sometimes in a misguided, patronizing sense) and empathy in the objects they steward. I do genuinely believe museums (and other spaces focusing on the education through three-dimensional objects) want to preserve items for future humans to experience and possibly altered or influenced by, often for enlightened betterment. Yet this collecting and heightening of certain objects above others creates an attuned, coveted atmosphere.

Artists in the past have explicitly exploited this recognition of what socially curated

spaces can indirectly do; in my opinion Marcel Duchamp did this most shockingly. It was through where and how he displayed his most infamous readymade (a term coined by him that generally connotes an object of manufactured means that has little if any alteration by the artist) piece *Fountain* that created the image; the physical manifestation of a porcelain urinal placed on its side was only part of the piece's structure. If Duchamp placed *Fountain* on even the street corner of the gallery's space, extremely close but still excluded, that presentation would not amount to what is allotted inside the walls. Arturo Schwarz, in a collaborative book edited by Jennifer Mundy readymades, states: "One rule [to differentiating a readymade from any common object] however, was clear: in addition to choosing and signing an ordinary object, it occurred to [Duchamp] that it was also necessary to de-contextualise [the object], that is to say, to divorce it from its usual physical or conceptual surroundings. Displacement from the physical context was achieved by changing the visual angle from which it was usually perceived and by isolating it from its ordinary surroundings."<sup>iv</sup> Despite Duchamp's strict four-rule system of creating a readymade, his items are most known as witty one-liners critiquing museum space. Yet the issue with these seemingly surface-only jokes is they get old quite fast. Once the shock has worn off it does leave the viewer somewhat wanting for a balm from having been made the self aware fool. While *Fountain* is considered antiquated at best with it being created in 1917, I do believe it important to mention Duchamp's (at the time) biting commentary on the radical transformation a pedestal can create without the artist's direct hand.

Personally, I often detest pedestals. The first time I fully fell in love with one was through not acknowledging the pedestal at all from its expert merging with the sculpture body itself. However, unlike Duchamp who spurred countless other artists to critique the (especially white) pedestal, I am in turn embracing it, as I am the museum setting. Because my installation has a



strong level of oddity in physical shape and interactive form, I want there to be comfort and levels of known understanding for the visitor. To return to Falk, there is the danger of too much estrangement of the visitor if inundated with too much unfamiliarity. To help alleviate too much alienation, I agree with this dogma: “Abstract ideas are built upon a solid foundation of concrete understanding. Museums that wish to convey an abstract message should be sure to ground it in the concrete - and the concrete of a novice, not that of an expert.”<sup>v</sup> I would argue it’s basic museum knowledge to recognize that once something is given a pedestal, especially in the discerning atmosphere of a museum space, that item is to be revered.

I do feel museums are increasingly becoming targeted for their possibly antiquated mannerisms and posh demands. It is often quipped art goes to *die* in museums, a living entombment of heavenly, stagnant eternity. Like embalming a body, preserving a thing for relatively pleasant viewing before being politely sorted away. Dave Hickey, in a book exulting the importance of unconventional beauty, viciously shares: “The experience of art within the therapeutic institution, by contrast, is presumed to be an end in itself. Under its auspices, we play a minor role in the master’s narrative—the artist’s tale—and celebrate his autonomous acts even as we are offhandedly victimized by the work’s philosophical power and ruthless authority....Whatever we get, we deserve—and what we get most prominently is ignored, disenfranchised, and instructed. Then we are told that it is ‘good’ for us.”<sup>vi</sup> Here I feel Hickey is fair to criticize a possible euthanasia of art, yet I do not believe museums are unequivocally the tomb most ascribe them to be. There is a plentitude of energy and activity that comes with visitors coming, going and taking the art with them in ways past theft. By this I mean interactions and interpretations, which will be discussed in the third aspect of this paper focusing on interwoven intangibilities, but bears mentioning now. Similar to how art can feed and

metamorphize the physical, the physical can create strict curtailment if viewed from too narrow a sense.

While I knew what surrounding environment my thesis show would be presented in, I was given indulgently open parameters of what, and just as importantly how, I would present said thesis. Similar to taking in the influence of what the space's intangible atmosphere can do, I chewed on what the physical brackets would be to present my art and surprisingly came upon a split of readymades and pedestals borrowed from the museum. It bears repeating that there is something inherently transforming in putting an object atop a pedestal, similar to the environment of a museum. This placement immediately signals importance on an elevated position both literal, as if to meet the viewer, and metaphorical, in that it deserves a space of its own. I do not believe all art must be on pedestals to be given concentrated seriousness, only it is a viable short-cut to alerting a viewer's attention. There is a transfiguration, however overplayed and immaterial to the object's physical manifestation, that happens when elevating a piece to pedestal-status. There is the very real threat of etherization, a frigid chill of disinterest through untouchable higher status. However similar to museums' reputation as glorified graves, I do not believe that this is always the case. There are moments, ranging from Duchamp's influential joke to my ephemeral installation, where that convention is supplanted. Now that I have expressed my strong beliefs in the importance of acknowledging what will surround my thesis in its immediacy, there are the more nuanced facts to explore now in the 'thing' itself. First in a physical sense, and second as a vehicle for theory.

### **THE THING [physical]**

With my art I aim to create an immediately visually gripping claim on viewers; through that initial enticement I hope to coax further time and study. In threat of painstakingly technical

explanation of what I will create, please indulge me in a literal description of the installation. As previously stated, there will be the utilization of readymade furniture borrowing the museum's pedestals and a found couch. This quilt-adorned couch will be facing said pedestals, which will hold four different types of media. First is a pot holding roughly 3,000 daily poetic verses, four sketchbooks that showcase my entire journey through my experience with pottery, lithography printed instructions for the viewer to read to give a literal understanding of the installation (to a degree), and a collected total of 2,222 ceramic figures adoringly labeled Critters. I will be focusing on the Critters primarily in this paper, as they are the vessels offered as gifts, and hold the most theoretical weight despite their readily hand-held size. Each of these Critters will have a glaze combination unique to their own, and will be roughly three by three inches each. Of these interlocking items, all are allowed to be directly touched with by the visitor. This interactive element is quintessential to how I want to express my art with this installation. While I admire museums for the services they provide, that does not necessitate that I need to doggedly follow them if my art can be displayed to my indulgences. I am bucking against conventional museum practice in keeping distance for preservation, yet I find great comfort in Falk's statements on the importance of interaction in museum settings: "Museums are excellent environments for meaningful learning because they offer rich, multi-sensory experiences. The proper presentation of ideas through tangible objects, particularly if they are interactive, is a powerful device for sense-making and, thus, understanding."<sup>vii</sup>

*Critter Comfort*, as described briefly above in its encompassing whole, is what visitors will physically, initially approach. The sheer amount of Critters will create a striking image; furthered by a surreal schism of what might be accustomed to seeing on pedestals. I will readily admit: I am an amateur potter; I have only been working within this medium for just over a year.

However, I do not believe technical finesse is strictly necessary to create visually striking imagery. I do not believe in necessarily needing pedestals to have my creations taken seriously as fine art, but am indulging in what I view as a short-cut to default respect. To return to Falk once again: “Remember the importance of context. Placing an object within an appropriate and comprehensible context will significantly enhance the visitor’s ability to comprehend an object’s use and value.”<sup>viii</sup> Through utilizing a pedestal in a blatant, but still default, way, I am creating a strong signal to the viewer that these items are meant and worthy of attention. I hope this initial impression of nested multiplicity much will create a gravitational pull on the. However, I hope that this wave of first-meeting will result in a mellowing of curiosity, not a drowning of distress.

If they approach, they will see this seemingly writhing pile of abstracted shapes are vaguely animalistic, individual pieces. Similar to questioning the validity of some post-modern ceramics, the viewer might be intrigued as to what use these ‘things’ have. Generally pieces that can readily be intimately held in the hand have a utilitarian purpose, like a bowl to hold food. However, more than wondering what clear purpose these ‘things’ might serve, I believe the complicated abstractness of shape and surface decoration will continue to entrance. It is of implicit importance that each Critter encompasses some sentiment of the mass. To have a trace of the installation’s encompassment in a single node. As seemingly abstract and random as their shape and surface might appear, there will be an element of consistency throughout each note that will echo the Critter’s original resounding community. Let us return to the argument that through utilizing pedestals I’m being insecure, thinking these arguably awkward and lumpy creatures would not be taken seriously without the setting. However I would argue that through simple, repetitive hard work in my labors to create them in collaboration with the materials, and again the visual gratification of so many, these Critters will be given recognition. The

metaphysical importance of beauty will be discussed later, but there does lie importance in the intentionality of creating something strikingly beautiful. This will be countered by each Critter's intimate size, easily held in the hand (be that a child or adult), carried or played with from a human's perspective and scale. Having consistency in their size, and why they reside at that size, is intentional. While the physical make-up of so many might appear flatly encompassing despite the three-dimensionality, I want to again stress my process of thinking in layers of theory, and actions of only partial intentionality. (By this I simply mean the comforting knowledge that I cannot micromanage every minuscule aspect of a creation's physical being through the transformative process of pottery.) I believe creating a striking image doesn't come from unprovoked happenstance or inborn talent. There does need to be at least some intent put into manifesting art. Because while the setting and pedestals are the first layer, the mediums and media the second, there are third and fourth waves of meaning and beauty in my installation. But let us pause, and turn a more critical view on the Critters, to show I am not the only one obsessed with forms of similar representation and size.

Utilizing animalistic figures of intimate hand-held size is far from a starkly original concept. My own style of Critter creation convenient dovetails between two seemingly opposing examples of some of the oldest found ceramics of unknown creator(s) found in Dolní Věstonice archaeological site and the contemporary multi-disciplinary artist Shio Kusaka currently found in multiple and noteworthy exhibitions.<sup>ix</sup> The Dolní Věstonice (furthermore abbreviated to DV) site is found in the Czech Republic, and of the numerous prehistoric artifacts (dated between 27,000 to 20,000 BCE) a notable multitude of small animal forms have been unearthed. These vaguely but distinctly animalistic shapes were fired with seeming intention of fracturing and breaking entire shapes into fragments. This fascinates me, and through a lack of clear evidence, options as

to why this was done abound. Despite not knowing about the DV's animals before I started creating my Critters, I find deep awe and acute humility that shapes I prefer are similar to those created thousands of years ago. I, too, am somewhat intentional in literally fracturing my pieces not only from accidental amputations of limbs, ears and (at times memorably) heads. The physical fragmentation of the entire mass with visitors taking Critters bodily away is also physical, but is enhanced with a theoretical viewpoint of personal propagation of myself and art, and also in the concept of giving. The DV artifacts fascinate me, because they show in their own ways through what surrounded them (animal bones and buried bodies especially) that this location was a site of ceremonial significance. A coveted atmosphere somewhat akin to a modern museum or gallery setting, of which my second example of Shio Kusaka has frequently been featured in.

Similar to the DV artifacts, Kusaka creates small hand-held figures of less amorphous shape with a gorgeous balance of childish charm and artistic prowess. The figures are not as archaic as mine, but still have a hand-made touch that makes my own fingers yearn to touch them. I sometimes feel creating simple items can be the hardest with no place to hide in decorative or technologic embellishment. A part of me delights in being able to follow along without an in-depth knowledge of ceramics or craft when looking at Kusaka's unselfconscious creations; I feel included in the childish parade of animals instead of ostracized. Kusaka's work, has been featured in The Armory's most recent 2023 show and the Whitney Museum of American Art 2014 Bicentennial<sup>x</sup>; the creatures in particular have been featured in solo shows and group exhibitions as currently as 2021.<sup>xi</sup> It is understandable the figures of DV would hold weight in archaeological significance as well as purely aesthetic qualities, but to see similar shapes of my own made in contemporary times and so highly lauded is fantastical.

Because while Kusaka's work could be viewed with vapid childish charm and nothing else, looking at the care each of their animals has been shaped and decorated with creates an echoed joy I feel with creating my own playful shapes. There are many parallels and differences in the triangle of these two bodies of work and my own: the breaking of the body (intentionally through the firing process with the DV figures, Kusaka's animals I have seen thus far always pristine in their wholeness, and my own through somewhat intentional means), the care of surface decoration (intentional carving with the DV figures, extensive simplicity with Kusaka, and mine with multi-glaze experimentations), and general shapes (all with elements of lumpy, clumsy and childish) showcase a connection of interest in certain looks and forms. While the first reaction might be a wilting of ego through someone else already beating me to the punchline, I instead feel pleasantly perplexed as to how I stumbled upon shapes ancient and new. The concept of community, and ageless tradition, has often resounded in pottery; this is a feeling of welcome and kinship I hope to extend from myself to the visitors. Similar to my reaction to the work found at DV from long-dead humans, to still-active Kusaka, I hope strangers will feel similarly engaged with what I'm offering.

If my plan of initial entrancement works, if the ability of physical beauty to ensnare hooks, a viewer's curiosity will get tangled long enough to read the "Playground Rules" posters. They will realize they are allowed to take one (of their own choosing, no less) of my Critters, a direct piece of the installation, home with them. It is my offering and their decision to accept ownership, to reach forward to irrefutably and irrevocably affect the installation and everyone else's ability to view it: now it is time to dwell in the intoxicating realm of the intangibility of this voluntary and empirical action.

### **THE GIFT [non-tangible]**

We have now trodden through the physical connections of the setting of the thesis, and the objects of the thesis; here we move into a culminating weight of the show which resides in the intangible, first through discussing the concept of gift. I have touched upon topics of what the Critter litter aims to accomplish, as well as an enchantment of feeling a trace of this impressive whole in each humble individual. I want to push this network further with the addition of the visitor, and will start with discussing networks in relation to Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (abbreviated to OOO but vocalized as Triple O).<sup>xii</sup> It does admittedly demand something of the reader to find a concise definition of OOO, but I believe my current pivot away from talking strictly of factual echoes: "[O]ne of the pillars of OOO: the deep divide or tension between an object and its qualities."<sup>xiii</sup> Which can be expanded with: "[T]wo real objects in the world make contact not through direct impact, but only by way of the fictional images they present to each other."<sup>xiv</sup> Harman here is discussing a network of connection, of an intangible third element that happens when a human interacts with a non-human, both objects, of whose interaction births a previously unformed *third* object. Harman is explicit that with OOO the label of 'object' must include items that do not make up matter in a strictly scientific way, i.e., can be explained away with empirical evidence. A sunrise is an object, a kiss is an object, and the annoyance felt from the dripping of a faucet is an object. To again reference his own words, in relation to art and not OOO overall: "...art is not the production of knowledge about things, but that it creates new things-in-themselves....esthetics necessarily has a theatrical character....art does not reach the object itself by clearing away its accidental qualities, but that it actively couples the beholder to the aesthetic object so as to produce a new compound object."<sup>xv</sup> I will not belabor the point of explaining every principle of OOO (because there are multiple books and I am here allowed twenty-pages), but it is important to recognize that Harman designates different types of objects.



I do not mean only in a physical or non-physical dichotomy. While he's careful to avoid creating a hierarchical ordering of objects overall, he is critical on whether or not an object can function as a piece of art. It is the same of how a square is a rectangle, but a rectangle is not a square. To accomplish the elevation of object to successful *art* object, there must be a tension between a real object and sensual qualities. To bring in my art, this can be inserted as the actual installation itself and the experience that is then felt by the viewer. Again, to allow Harman to speak for himself: "It is only with the RO-SQ [real object - sensual qualities] tension that we find beauty, which I do not hesitate to insist is the domain of art, even if most artists today want nothing to do with beauty[.]"<sup>xvi</sup> When one is viewing an object, nothing is more antithetical to art than finding it boring, lacking either in literal interest or theoretical intrigue. Yet if there is strength in both those elements, again a third successful object is formed that had not existed before. Elaine Scarry, another staunch supporter of beauty, confers a similar sentiment: "Beauty is, then, a compact, or contract between the beautiful being (a person or thing) and the perceiver. As the beautiful being confers on the perceiver the gift of life, so the perceiver confers on the beautiful being the gift of life."<sup>xvii</sup> When a viewer finds themselves beheld through an art piece that engages, they are gifted and rewarded for their searching.

For me, who is stricken daily with confrontations in what I deem beautiful, I wish to try and impart this common feeling of overwhelming awareness onto other humans, as that is my immediate realm of empathy I have access to. Scarry eloquently phrases it: "What is the felt experience of cognition at the moment one stands in the presence of a beautiful [thing]? It seems to incite, even to require, the act of replication....Beauty brings copies of itself into being. It makes us draw it, take photographs of it, and describe it to other people."<sup>xviii</sup> There is a propulsion, an involuntary reflex in humans to participate, to propagate effervescent emotions in

which beauty blooms. To return to Harman, and how action on the viewer is required for art to be successful: “This means that there is a primordial theatricality to all the arts, since without this theatrical participation of the beholder, the arts would consist of nothing but literal-looking statements and objects.”<sup>xxix</sup> To put more bluntly: “[T]here is no art unless the beholder is interested.”<sup>xxx</sup> I agree with both Scarry and Harman that there needs to be beauty, but I want to personally stress here that beauty takes all shapes and forms. In my thesis show I am showcasing my own personal aesthetic of what beauty entails.

For this installation, I am unsatisfied with the grand but still intangible gift of an experience; it leaves me wanting in not giving enough back. Channeling my often-zero-chill self, I want to push that experience further in letting visitors take a piece of the installation physically with them. I do not do this in a rebellious and vain attempt to dismantle museum etiquette, but to selfishly indulge in what the joy of making beautiful art makes me want to do: reciprocate. That is why, again if the visitor has the ability and inclination for investigation, they will discover they are able to take one of the Critter figures with them. I do not ask anything of the visitor at the moment of their choosing a Critter, nor after they leave; this may seem inherently kind. Yet I want to discuss how this can instead, and rightly so, be interpreted as me exuding privilege and power. Boasting of how readily I’m able to give and shed so many things.

Marcel Mauss’ *The Gift*, while anthropologically centered, questions the concept of a gift and the agency of participants on either side of such an exchange.<sup>xxi</sup> Mauss’ writing is most often related to how cycles of giving can hold insidious intentions of ownership. Despite the length of the passage below, I believe it is important not only in his elevation of cultures seen as ‘lesser’ at the time of the writing (and in some opinions unfortunately still are), but in a harkening for social change from said societies:

However the individual must work. He should be forced to rely upon himself rather than upon others. On the other hand, he must defend his interests, both personally and as a member of a group. Over-generosity, or communism, would be as harmful to himself and to society as the egoism of our contemporaries and the individualism of our laws....This new morality [for our current societies] will surely consist of a good but moderate blend of reality and the ideal. Thus we can and must return to archaic society and to elements in it. We shall find in this reasons for life and action that are still prevalent in certain societies and numerous social classes: the joy of public giving; the pleasure in generous expenditure on the arts, in hospitality, and in the private and public festival.<sup>xxii</sup>

I labored extensively over my installation, and while I acknowledge this is self-inflicted by me creating my proposal and thesis show, I have attempted to create a vastness I feel proud of sharing. As withdrawn and personal as art can be for the creator, I aim to reciprocate the vulnerability a person viewing art can often feel, at how profoundly things created by humans for human viewing can move us. As Hickey expresses: “In any case, this vertiginous bond of trust between the image and the beholder is private, voluntary, and a little scary. And, since the experience is not presumed to be an end in itself, it might, ultimately, have some consequence beyond the encounter.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Here again springs the concept of reciprocity. A vicious cycle of pushing something forward in a seemingly deep, instinctual urge to share. To return to Mauss, who boldly states despite all his critical view of giving: “We must give back more than we have received.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

Now, there is an apparent paradox in this exhibition if I’m allowing visitors to walk off with what is being displayed. The more successful this culminating ‘thing’ is, the less Critters will be on show, possibly diminishing the installation to a dreary state of empty pedestals; only the phantom sketches of each Critter in the sketchbooks will serve as proof they were ever physically there. My biggest concern is instead people will be too hesitant and museum-trained through previous experience, disbelieving that there is no catch to walking off as a welcomed

bandit. Hence the clear posters and the inherent welcoming atmosphere a couch provides in physical comfort and phenomenological familiarity.

Yet I want to be extravagant in my thesis; I want to expand upon a sense of controlled chaos that my graduate journey has generally felt. I take great comfort once more in Hickey's thoughts on expunging my personal aesthetic: "As Baudelaire says, 'the beautiful is always strange,' by which he means, of course, that it is always strangely familiar and vaguely surprising."<sup>xxv</sup>; "Each of us asserted our own brand of beauty as a privilege of citizenship, as an icon of happiness, and we intended to pursue it."<sup>xxvi</sup> I do believe each piece of art is in some way a self-portrait; an artist's body, mind and ability act as conduits for transforming materials, mediums and matters. Each person holds vast inner worlds that can never be fully materialized or shared. I believe we attempt to do such an impossible task when we reach out and offer our art for attention, which will be expanded upon in discussing base concepts within installation and craft.

### **THE INTENT [community]**

I call my messy conglomerate of mediums an installation, so let us first turn towards what that concept in literal terms and contemporary examples before diving into why I've chosen an immersive environment. I would generally agree with Claire Bishop that there is a difference of installing art and an installation of art, and that an installation is much more rigorous and engaging on our senses, thus enticing further involvement.<sup>xxvii</sup> Scarry, Harman and Bishop harmonize of how one feels out of their depth, their body and personal perspective, as Bishop explains there is a *decentred* event that happens with installation, paradoxically gained through direct physical involvement and centering the body in an exhibit:

[T]he correct way in which to view our condition as human subjects is as fragmented, multiple and *decentred* - by unconscious desires and anxieties, by an interdependent and differential

relationship to the world, or by pre-existing social structures. This discourse of decentring has had particular influence on the writing of art critics sympathetic to feminist and postcolonial theory, who argue that fantasies of ‘centering’ perpetuated by dominant ideologies are masculinist, racist and conservative; this is because there is no ‘right’ way of looking at the world, nor any privileged place from which such judgements can be made. As a consequence, installation art’s multiple perspectives are seen to subvert the Renaissance perspective model because they deny the viewer any one ideal place from which to survey the work.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

I do believe an installation’s experience, if one is aware enough, can be transferred from the whole to one, just as I believe grand size isn’t a prerequisite for an installation. I believe if a viewer is engaged and empathetic enough, any art installed can turn into an installation through the experience itself. Through that third, intangible object that wouldn’t have existed without two other objects interacting. Again, beauty can act as a ready vehicle to whisk the visitor away.

I aim in my exhibit to make viewers feel included, welcomed into my domestic island sphere; some contemporary installations offer similar nested experiences. I am not alone in commanding presence through multiplicity, as I feel Antony Gormley does exquisitely well in his five *Field* series.<sup>xxix</sup> Made between 1991 through 2003, while I am just making thousands, the last of the five *Field* creations, *Asian Field*, clocks in at a staggering 210,000. When I create a Critter, base requirements must be met: each must be made from my hands, must be roughly the same size for ready holding (by human hands), must have elements of unique surface composition (despite batches clearly embodying sibling qualities), and must be able to stand upright. Gormley also has base requirements in the physicality of each piece to give a cohesive feel: each needs to be hand-sized, eyes must be deep and close, and body proportions accurate. My forth attribute seems a given for how the similarly abstracted, but still distinctly bipedal/human (in contrast to my generally four-legged/animal) all stand to face the viewer. Gormley required help for the project, relying on a human collective similar to the one eventually put into gallery/museum spaces. Gormley states of this process, in creating a work

about a collective humanity here, and continued responsibility: “That repeated action of taking a hand-sized ball of clay, squeezing it between your hands, stranding it up and giving it consciousness becomes meditative; the repeated action becomes almost like breathing, or a heartbeat.”<sup>xxx</sup> I, too, found great meditation in each Critter formed, trying to listen to the clay without strangle holding it into submission. Clay has a wonderful tactile feel; it remembers what is done to it. Gormley wants viewers to be made aware, with so many figures below looking up at them (as with each *Field* series they all face one way: the viewer), that the audience as much as the objects are active agents. There is an undeniable, fervent force in Gormley’s installations, but similarly irrefutable is the lack of room for viewers to move within and amongst the figures. Gormley is notably gracious and reciprocal to those who helped created each figure, encouraging individuality as long as those three rules of physical form are met, yet offers little room for literal movement for the viewer within these fields.

In my installation, I want there to be direct interaction offered to the viewer. I try to curb ableism, offering Critters to be viewed at different pedestal levels for easier access, and a couch not only for previously mentioned comforts, but also the surreal schism of what’s expected in an MFA show. (Yes, even something as simple as the couch has layers.) Through utilizing such a range, in mediums and technical prowess, my installation is an invitation meant to captivate within a range of a savvy museum goer or a naive child; I hope anyone can find something interesting to experience. To return to Bishop: “The degree of proximity between model subject and literal viewer may therefore provide a criterion of aesthetic judgement for installation art: the closer the ideal model to the literal viewer’s experience, the more compelling the installation.”<sup>xxxi</sup> I do not know if there is anything closer to opening my creative process than offering a couch from my studio, the intimate moments of my daily poetic prose, my obsessive

sketchbooks, and my ugly, beautiful Critter children. If anything, it might be *too much* to take, and that, too, is intentional on my part. I am offering a genuine invitation of who I am, and my constant incapacitation I feel in my privileges. I am stricken with beauty, stricken with wanting to give back, as I have increasingly found through exploring the concept of community in creation, also known as craft.

The world of craft is vast, unknown, turbulent and nurturing as the ocean and I feel I am but a drop, but a drop nonetheless, and want to showcase how my actions echo deep communal currents inherent in craft practice, again focusing on pottery in specific. Glenn Adamson, in the influential *Thinking Through Craft*, I believe is fair to criticize certain pastoral practices tied to craft for their utopian futility of purposeful obscurity and self-inflicted isolation.<sup>xxxii</sup> Yet there is another side of craft that is often about enrichment, and of passing down knowledge through generations by actively doing. Jenni Sorkin gives an extensive and riveting account of three female-identifying artists dealing within clay in her book *Live Form*, where she stresses the warmth of community: “Because of the immediacy and tactility, women ceramists pressed formlessness into service, carefully cultivating the *live form* as a tool for social healing. As a performance of nurturing, teaching itself became a form of making.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> Reading through the three accounts of fellow women potters who overcame so much, through doing so much, I am indeed once more humbled in my position of access and ability.

I created my installation for myself, to pass my MFA requirement; I also created my installation for myself, to offer a chance of interaction and play that I have never personally experienced in the strict structure of a museum. I discuss the pedestal, the importance of a comfortable place to sit, because these readymades are quintessential in my mind of delivering awareness on a theoretical and also practical level. I include sketchbooks to literally show my

time in experiencing pottery, to give something of a skeletal directory in a medium I'm well versed and as confident as I'll ever feel within creating. Yet the centering of my Critters, odd objects in sight and intention, are meant to create a fracture in what's expected of a museum visit both in content and experience. I personally believe each Critter is supported through the seemingly clumsy appearance; it takes guts to create something viewed as technically 'bad' when it would be so much easier to startle with what might be expected. Yet I do not have the skills, nor confidence to offer conventional beauty within my new obsession with pottery; my creations are imperfect and imprecise and through that intentionality are more honest to the resplendent imperfections I find in beautiful, everyday interactions. The welcomed inability to perfectly calibrate exactly what final form each Critter will take: their physical forms and their sketchbook shadows represent what can and cannot be planned. I offer this massive undertaking of love and labor to be held, interpreted and taken away by friends and strangers alike. Because I want to give back to what capacity I have in thanks for seeing my show. In thanks for giving my beloved Critters a second glance, to be held long enough in enchantment to want to know more. In thanks to try and reprieve myself of the guilt I feel in how privileged my abilities and circumstances are. Because through certain people I have met in my program, and attending graduate school where I have often felt excluded, I do feel worthy when I am able to work. To finish with a stirring passage from Storkin, in the conclusion of her own book:

This is one of the things craft is really good at: offering a sense of community. I may be less skilled than the person next to me, but the sense of competition and envy diminishes when the tenor of the room is focused toward learning a skill collectively. There is an unparalleled sense of satisfaction when one makes something tangible in the real world. The art department is increasingly one of the last places on college campuses of directed, hands-on learning. Craft has been a bastion of nonhierarchy in that students and faculty together forge new relationships to materials, through a specificity of technique, skill, and practice, working in a horizontal structure, rather than a top-down, or vertical, model of instructor-dominated thought and implementation.<sup>xxxiv</sup> 248



With my installation, I want anyone to feel included, and that is accomplished through offering different physical layers: Critters to handle, sketchbooks to flip through, poetry to read, a quilt to study, all of which can be viewed at one's leisure on a comfortable. I want those who brave the intimidating environment of a museum to feel welcomed, interested, and then rewarded with something to take home with them for their daring exploit to purposefully search for something engaging. I want to offer my Critters, my beloved children, because I want to give thanks to the community I've sought out for caring when they could so easily not.

### **CONCLUSION [thank you]**

I will now attempt to encapsulate all that was discussed above in a succinct conclusion below. First was the discussion on the importance of the literal stage setting for my thesis, how a museum and pedestal often inherently imbue items with a sense of gravitas. This is not to say this is an irrefutably beneficial thing, as we return once more to Hickey's derision, this time tinged with something bordering on praise: "Anyone who has loaned work to a museum exhibition can tell you that the work in the museum is something other than the work in one's home. Visiting the exhibition can feel like visiting an old friend in jail. The work hangs there among a population of kindred offenders, bereft of its eccentricity, yet somehow, on account of that loss, newly invested with a faintly ominous kind of parochial power."<sup>xxxv</sup> Through this piece being a temporal installation, both through the graduate program and my choice of dispersal, this sentiment is generally negated. Yet through this assigned space of display to prove I'm worthy of being decreed a prestigious Master of Fine Arts pedigree, this nit-picky elitism can be channeled. A possible blending can occur where, as Scarry puts it (more generally than museums specifically, but I feel still holds relevance to my argument): "Beauty always takes place in the particular, and if there are no particulars, the chances of seeing it go down."<sup>xxxvi</sup> Next it was a

discussion of the Critters themselves, whose shapes echo to some of furthest known shards of pottery to the immediate contemporary. Yet this seemingly simple form's dense history is complicated not only within a pottery aesthetic, but their physical weight creates an opportunity once activated by a human viewer to create a third, intangible object at first sight/offering to the viewer. Through the crafty and non-bodied concept of beauty, there is an immediate grip to attention. To quote Scarry once more, in how we can feel untethered in the sense of something ensnaring, as Bishop labels as decentring: "It is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the [beautiful] thing that stands before us."<sup>xxxvii</sup> This awareness of how one finds themselves is created through the interconnectivity of the experience: a network of objects human/non-human/etc that create a web of enchantment.

Art works when it's a challenge to the viewer on multiple layers, inside and outside. It is an artist's role to show up and perform for the audience, who hopefully then feel the need to participate in their own way through giving attention, energy and possible reciprocation in how they're able. I believe it is impossible for an art piece to be fully autonomous; there is an interconnectivity that can be petulantly ignored or graciously expanded. My art, this installation, is selfish. I do want to be extravagant, bordering egotistical, in giving a physical thank-you in reciprocation to visiting the show in a method I have never personally experienced in all the museum and gallery spaces I've visited. It is undeniable this effort was spurred by the pursuit of a degree driven by my individual interests. However, if I must do a thing in a preordained space, I want to do something thoughtful of myself for others; I will demand and receive. I will create what I consider to be beautiful objects, adoringly flaunted, and painstakingly parted from. I truly hope these Critters will be respected and find homes where they are appreciated and elevated in

ways a pedestal in a museum simply cannot. Because this installation, as autonomous as I hope each Critter stands, is a window into my life/art/domestic sphere: the core of my being.

In my thesis show I obsessed over nesting: the items themselves, the theories that spawn from the physical, and how I am situated and privileged to bring to fruition a myriad of objects. I am adamant about not knowing exactly how viewers will interact with my show; I am adamant about what I can control to force involvement. I can create an immersive space that offers a place to sit with multiple things to contemplate. I can create beautiful imagery to touch, furthering my thanks for visitors' willingness to engage in offering Critters for free. To welcome willingly into their own abode of home and collaborate, to spawn time and recollections I do not have the privilege of knowing, just as visitors will never have full awareness of my inner worlds of making. To return to the start, with Falk once more: "The more connections between what happens in the museum and what happens to people in their everyday life, the higher the probability that the information presented will be remembered and used later in the visitor's life."<sup>xxxviii</sup> I do believe a heightened awareness cradled within familiarity can help spread what constitutes as art, with the resurgence of craft and making with intention. There is so much stuff already in the world, and I am guilty of still creating. I hold brand loyalty to a select few things with creating being one of them. If I can help to make others feel included, to feel grateful as I have so often within museum spaces and artists alike, I want to offer because I am able.

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- <sup>i</sup> John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Washington: Whalesback Books, 1992), 87.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Ibid*, 93.
- <sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*; this is discussed throughout the book, but most immediately stated in the introduction: “Whereas museums have historically been oriented primarily toward collections and research, they now are increasingly viewed by the public as institutions for public learning. All museums now place an emphasis on education that they never did in the past.” xiii
- <sup>iv</sup> Jennifer Mundy, *Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia* (London: Tate London, 2008), 125.
- <sup>v</sup> Falk, *Experience*, 139.
- <sup>vi</sup> Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty, Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 66.
- <sup>vii</sup> Falk, *Experience*, 114.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*, 139.
- <sup>ix</sup> Pamela B. Vandiver, Olga Soffer, Bohuslav Klima and Jiri Svoboda, “The Origins of Ceramic Technology at Dolni Věstonice, Czechoslovakia” *New Series*, vol. 246, no. 4933, 1989, pp. 1002-1008.
- <sup>x</sup> <https://paceprints.com/2023/armory-show-2023>; <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/2014-biennial/shio-kusaka>
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://www.meer.com/en/9824-shio-kusaka>; <https://www.contemporaryartlibrary.org/project/yakimono-at-taka-ishii-gallery-tokyo-26226>
- <sup>xii</sup> Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (Great Britain: Pelican Books, 2018); Graham Harman, *Art and Object* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Harman, *OOO*, 75.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid*, 163.
- <sup>xv</sup> *Ibid*, 105.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Harman, *A&O*, 24.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 90.
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid*, 3.
- <sup>xix</sup> Harman, *A&O*, 71.
- <sup>xx</sup> *Ibid*, 64.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990).
- <sup>xxii</sup> Mauss, *The Gift*, 69.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon*, 65.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Mauss, *The Gift*, 65.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon*, 10.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid*, 78.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
- <sup>xxviii</sup> *Ibid*, 13.
- <sup>xxix</sup> <https://publicdelivery.org/antony-gormley-field/>
- <sup>xxx</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Bishop, *Installation Art*, 133.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007).
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Jenni Sorkin, *Live Form: Women, Ceramics and Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 22. <sup>xxxiv</sup> Sorkin, *Live Form*, 248.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon*, 63.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Scarry, *On Beauty*, 18.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> *Ibid*, 112.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Falk, *The Museum Experience*, 154.