

(un)familiar things

by Michaela Rife

*The imminent awakening is poised, like the wooden horse of the Greeks, in the Troy of dreams.*¹

I entered Setareh Yasan's studio for the first time on a grey winter day. The route to the old MFA building took me past the typical UBC sights of construction debris and students clutching coffee cups. At the time, her studio space was closed off from campus views, concealed behind thick cinderblock walls, but the things I encountered inside were eerily similar to those outside: bricks, pallets, and paper cups. Yet somehow these ostensibly familiar items inhabited the space in an unfamiliar way; paper cups were turned upside down on wooden table legs, bricks were supporting wooden pallets. This initial stage of confusion was heightened upon closer inspection of the things themselves, there was something not quite right about the unassuming disposable cups, something too heavy about them, something wrong in the way the light hit them. I could see them and name them, but I could not reach them, anxiety began to creep in. In his 1950 lecture "The Thing", Martin Heidegger presented his philosophy of nearness and our ability to really know a thing (in his case a handmade ceramic jug) not by how it appears to us, but by its real qualities. Ruminating on our distance from a thing he declared: "The terrifying is unsettling; it places everything outside its own nature. What is it that unsettles and thus terrifies? It shows itself and hides itself in a way in which everything presences, namely, in the fact that despite all conquest of distances the nearness of things remains absent."² And yet, despite the initial discomfort of Yasan's studio objects, this terrifying and unsettling feeling could be more appropriately ascribed to the objects outside the studio walls, those disposable cups, those bricks and traffic cones, which we pass without pausing to think about their qualities. Where, for example, did that plastic traffic cone originate? I can say on passing glance that it is orange and plastic, but I cannot speak further.

For Yasan this inability to describe further is symptomatic of the world outside her studio walls. Convolute K of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* has proved useful in her understanding of this outside space. Where Benjamin discusses the collective dream of capitalism, Yasan sees the city's denizens as sleepwalkers, wandering through this dream environment, and yet confronting nothing. Against this surrounding dream (a noun), populated by an onslaught of things difficult to know, her studio becomes a place *to dream*, in this case a verb. Across the studio threshold the artist is able to approach knowing, or better, *dreaming*. Yasan's practice serves to sever matter from the world outside her studio, so that something like a plastic cup can no longer rest unassuming in

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 392.

² Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *The Craft Reader*, ed. Glenn Adamson (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 405.

the hand of a passerby, or lie discarded on the ground. Instead a deeper consideration is forced. Why is it here? Where did it come from? What, really, is its material?

In a 2013 issue of *e-flux*, Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis examine the ontology of oil, through the “bad eternity of plastic,” a material that can only efface its origins. Oil, a substance that pumps the lifeblood of capitalism, has every interest in hiding behind something like a plastic cup, which “feels infinite because it sheds every trace of particularity, every index of a located space and time...perfect yet utter rubbish...”³ This is the stuff of the UBC campus vernacular: perfect and yet rubbish cups, perfect and yet rubbish traffic cones, perfect and yet rubbish bricks. The critical task of excavating plastic and the material of capital to their roots in oil is nicely paralleled by Yasan’s practice, wherein she refuses to tacitly accept the shapes and objects she encounters outside of her studio, refuses to accept the anxiety ushered in by a lack of knowing. As such, those quotidian cups that I thought I knew were actually the plaster constructions of the artist, cast from a mold fashioned of the original object.

The moment you realize that all of the objects in Yasan’s practice have passed through her hands is the moment that the environment begins to open up. The plaster cup leads to a wooden table leg, not salvaged as I initially assumed, but turned by the artist on a lathe machine. Yasan’s practice depends on her working *everything* by her own hand, in part as a method for knowing. Where she may be able to name a “brick” outside her studio walls, within them she can approach knowing it, can come nearer to it. In a separate text, Heidegger distinguishes technology and art through their respective relationships to the earth. So where technology utilizes the earth as a reserve, art (or *poesis*) is a way of approaching truth and living upon (rather than within) the earth.⁴ Yasan takes this potential as a way to exit the dream (noun) and begin dreaming. The objects of her studio can then, particularly in the gallery context, behave like Benjamin’s Trojan horse. Where they function in her studio as a means for the artist to actively dream against the sleeping world, in this liminal gallery space their initially uncomfortable materiality serves as a quiet call for nearness against the loud dream of capitalism.

³ Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis, “Visions of Eternity: Plastic and the Ontology of Oil”, *e-flux Journal* 47 (September 2013).

⁴ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” in *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 33-35.