

“The Limit of the Object”
Contemporary Art and Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Dublin, 9th March 2013

First of all I would like to welcome you all to this event, which is the first organised by the *Irish Circle of the Lacanian Orientation* in collaboration with the *Masters of Arts in the Contemporary World* at the *National College of Art and Design*. I would like to thank especially **Vincent Dachy** for coming over to Dublin to be with us today, and also **Declan Long** and **Suzanne Walsh** from NCAD for their enthusiastic response when we began to think about creating a forum where to articulate and explore the interphase between Contemporary Art and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Finally I want to thank **Alan Rowan, Claire Hawkes, Lorna Kernan, Medb Ruane** and **Rik Loose** for their participation today.

This is the second of a series of Open Seminars that were conceived, a couple of years ago, under the general title of *‘Lacan and the arts’*, and through which ICLO aims to develop an on-going dialogue with culture, academia and society, which we consider essential for the development and the transmission of Lacanian psychoanalysis, its discourse and its praxis. The fundamental Freudian and Lacanian idea behind it is that the artist always precedes the psychoanalyst in the invention of novel ways to explore, to conceptualise and to treat the malaise that affects the subject in civilization.

By way of introduction I will comment on the title of today’s event and I will then make a few very brief points which revolve around my own questions about the relationship between art and psychoanalysis. They are just some threads which hopefully will resonate somehow with what we see, listen to and experience here today, and may thus become interwoven in the discussion with all of you.

We have a title and a subtitle. The main title plays, of course, on the fruitful equivocation between the subjective and the objective genitive: *“The Limit of the Object”*: on the one hand, what is it that constitutes the limit of the object, what is there beyond the object. On

the other hand “*The Limit of the Object* “: in what sense and how can the object itself be posed as a limit? And a limit to what?

The subtitle introduces two qualifying adjectives to define and make more precise the fact that we will not be speaking of art and psychoanalysis in general, but we shall focus on two of their existing versions among others: *Contemporary* and *Lacanian*, which somehow intuitively seem to form a good pair.

Since defining the topic with the organising committee, I had in mind a quote by Lacan, which I thought I would use in the introduction. Of course when I went looking for it, I couldn't find it. We can say that this is *one* of the dimensions of the object: we call it its metonymic dimension: the object eludes us, it is never where we look for it, it vanishes, it escapes us and makes us wonder did it even ever exist?

In fact, this missing quote by Lacan referred to the idea that art is always about a knowing-how to do with a void. Differently, but also similarly, the experience of psychoanalysis as understood from Lacan's teaching, and when led to its very end, is about inventing a new way, a less encumbering way, to deal with the void that constitutes us as human. The experiences of anguish and anxiety, according to Lacan, are the ones which tell us something about what happens when the object emerges there where we it 'shouldn't be'; they indicate that the object has been met, crashed into, encountered, or maybe that the object was too close, or not sufficiently veiled. They point towards a void that has been occupied by the object.

In the interphase between 'contemporary art' and 'Lacanian psychoanalysis', two apparently obvious principles pertaining to common sense are explicitly questioned: the idea that art is there to represent and that speech is there to communicate. My idea is that, if there is a subversion introduced by both of them, it is in relation to this, and that this has profound consequences at a theoretical, epistemological, clinical and political levels.

What interests me of this interphase, this intersection, is to go beyond the study of psychoanalysis and of art conceived as mere applications of technique. In both fields there are trends which are reduced to that.

We call this an effort to capture or to reach or to operate at the level of the Real. To put it differently, if psychoanalysis and art have a role in civilization, it has to do with the idea of waking (something) up. Both art as representation and psychoanalysis as talking therapy structurally function to put the subject to sleep. Art as a process of representation and therapy as a meaning making process are driven by the prejudice of a coincidence between perception and the Thing, of a relation between language and the world that would be harmonious and without remainder, without a rest. They both aim either at the Beautiful or at the Good. This is not without connection with the notion of the Useful, with utilitarianism, central in our contemporary culture defined and dominated by the combination of the discourses of science and capitalism.

I propose that in the antipodes of this, the Lacanian orientation and Contemporary Art aim at the Real. And, in our terms, the way through which we can access something of the Real *is* via the object, via something that Lacan called the object *a*. He called it thus precisely to reduce to its minimum the attribution of a meaning, of a concept, of sense. One of the oppositions that Lacan introduced to draw a line between the fields of psychoanalysis and other fields (especially that of science) is that of *objectality* vs objectivity. You find it precisely in his *Seminar 10, on Anxiety*.

To go very quickly, this object we deal with is not a substantial, material object and is never a complete or total object. It is a fragment, it is a little bit of something that is lost, detached, linked to nothing. The English language has a wonderful expression: 'bits and pieces'. This emphasizes that, beyond the Imaginary value of the object as Agalma, beyond its Symbolic value as gift, there is the Real value of the object which is linked to its fallen character, to its nature of residue, of waste.

One of Lacan's main contributions in relation to the object was to add, to the Freudian series which you may already know (oral, anal, phallic), two other objects, which are crucial

in human experience and also in the constitution of subjectivity as such: they are the gaze and the voice. He proposed that the *scopic* and the *invocatory* drives have a fundamental role in the structuring of desire for the speaking being, and of its body. They are also the objects that will be at the centre of our artists' presentations today.

Unlike animals, in the human world, a world that is human because it is made of words, in this world, for us to be able to see and to listen, something must not be there. These objects may emerge in a contingent encounter via trauma, or when a device makes it possible to strip the veils of meaning, sense and beauty.

The gaze is not visible, but it is precisely what allows visibility. The voice in its aphonic dimension is hidden behind the blablabla of speech.

The void in which these immaterial objects are lodged can be filled in by routine or by invention. It seems to me that in our contemporary world which is one of a tyranny of transparency, the *work of art* and the *experience of an analysis* are very much concerned with the creation, the liberation and the preservation of these holes and the *opaqueness* that inhabit them. This can only be done one by one, allowing for the exploration of the limit that one is to oneself, and that we call the unconscious.

Florencia F.C. Shanahan
Chair ICLO-NLS

References:

- Jacques-Alain Miller, "A Real for the 21st Century", in www.wapol.org
Marie-Hélène Brousse, "Strange Objects, Immaterial Objects. Why does Lacan include the voice and the gaze in the series of Freudian objects?" in International Lacanian Review
Marie-Hélène Brousse, "Art, the Avant Garde and Psychoanalysis", in Lacanian Compass 11
Guillermo Belaga, "El síntoma como una metáfora del arte", in Virtualia 20
Gérard Wajcman, "The Universal Eye and the Limitless World", in Lacanian Ink, 35