PHANTOM OBJECTIVITY

Even in the most subordinated work of art there is a hidden ‘it should be otherwise.’ When a work is merely itself and no other thing, as in a pseudo-scientific construction, it becomes that art-literally pre-artistic. The moment of true valuation, however, is mediated through nothing other than the form of the work itself, whose crystallizability becomes an analogy of that other condition which should be. An emergently constructed and produced objects, works of art—point to a practice from which they obtain the creation of a just life.

—Theodor W. Adorno1

It might sound overly conservative to estrain an audience to take something at face value those days to focus on how a work of art functions rather than on how it is intended to appear in function. It is far easier to just agree that a work must be about something, a priori, and that this something should serve as the truth of the piece. How that same work—its material makeup, installation, and execution—might offer to be directly described or critiqued, but it is rarely isolated from the actual ‘context’ of a work of contemporary art. Jacques Derrida’s ubiquitous assertion that “the moment that a process or relation is generalized into an abstraction, and thereby turned into a ‘thing’—a process in which ‘thing-hood’ becomes the standard of objective reality, the ‘given world,’ is, in other words, taken to be the truth of the world,” and thus generates a form of ‘phantom objectivity.’ But differently, the externalization of the work’s content renders the Puffin Hunter a ‘thing’ or an illustration of a political program that does not directly emerge from the work itself. If anything, we are confronted with a work of art that seems to suggest any possibility for ‘emptiness of light of cultural political politics.’

The Puffin Hunter thus confronts us with a “phantom objectivity” concerning the relationship between animals and artifice which Morgan hopes to allude to something altogether.


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The Essential Frankfurt School Reader

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