



The titles of these works are lengthier than most. If the typical work of art possesses a title between one and five words long, the titles enclosed are roughly one thousand to five thousand times longer, with word counts of 5030, 4913, 4804 and 5130. Quantitatively, at least, these titles depart from the norm: a title short in length, harbouring authored meaning.

For viewers accustomed to modern and contemporary art, the authorial weight of a title appears self-evident. Interpretation frequently hinges on a title's meaning, and critical emphases are duly apportioned, from analyses of the cryptic demands of abstract titles to assessments of that signature minimalist intervention: the signification of the absence of extrinsic titular content within the title itself. The conventions of the authored title, however, emerged relatively recently. Though often retroactively attributed to past works, emphatically meaningful titles were not commonplace until the nineteenth century. The authored title evolved as a concomitant of mass viewership. With the rise of the printed reproduction and the growth of the popular exhibition, artworks gained their names, as it were; first as caption, then as art. As distance increased between artwork, maker and spectator, the need for titles was established. Thus, the earliest approximations of modern titles are to be found in exhibition catalogues and print collections, describing and differentiating works so as to cement their meaning and affirm individuality. To comport to logistical demands, names grew ever shorter over time.

Today, artworks' titles operate somewhere between a caption, an advertisement and a barcode, identifying the work across the sites of its, potentially far-ranging, distribution. One of a title's chief roles, it would seem, is administrative; in the studio, on display, in shipping and at auction, the title persists, preserving the unity of the work against possible fragmentation. Private property plays a significant role in the process of maintenance too. But titles remain, ever-present along the twisting paths commodities might wander.

The engorged titles of these works – subaltern yet resolute – stand awkwardly witness to such movement. Among those phrases participant, readers might recognise passages, quoted, montaged and diverted. Titles, as names, stick. Intransigently, they persist as that immobile space in which, at the level of specificity and generality, *the paradox of the work of art is recapitulated and condensed.*

30.01.2017



Front



Back

Morning had elapsed in crisp, hibernal conditions with neither event nor incident to speak of, and it appeared as though afternoon would unfold likewise, in the steady crunch of productivity; though, that day, at some time around noon, a seldom heard bell was struck and the shopfloor was plunged into a dark and uneasy quietude, such that the workers stopped talking or assembling or transporting components and the machinery was immobilised, leaving a heavy silence, punctured only by the occasional distant clink and the steady dripping of a rivulet of condensation, which made its way from the ceiling onto a girder, and rolled, before falling at Hú's bench, on which a shallow grey puddle had begun to form, depressing the surface, such that it would warp and creak and disintegrate over the coming months, bending and flaking into soft, sodden chunks, whose early formation Hú felt as he placed his hand on the bench and cast his eyes around the room, to where there was little movement and where the younger employees had begun to anxiously ricochet glances off one another, visibly bewildered by this strange cessation in the working day, to which they were unaccustomed and which induced in them an excitable, almost febrile state; though Hú, who had acquired prior experience of such recesses, was comparatively placid, certain the pause was on account of the procedure to shut down upon accident; and so, motionless in the hush, Hú found himself speculating as to what

harm had befallen his colleague, concocting violent fantasies, in which, in visions of horror and gore, workshop equipment proved injurious, buckling ribcages and tearing arteries, impaling limbs and abrading faces, and delivering fatality: a scenario Hú had yet to witness, such that, in the continued silence, his mind wandered through those people presently absent, who may or may not have been killed, thinking of how he would react upon hearing of their death, whether he would be genuinely saddened or would simply feign upset, though eventually the stillness abated and word circulated that the maimed party had not died but had been wounded, with the casualty Yán, a man who at forty-five years of age was among the oldest and strongest members of the workforce and who had, it transpired, ran his hand into a table saw whilst feeding lengths of timber to be thinned or dadoed, such that the spinning blade had bitten into the soft flesh between thumb and forefinger and torn through until the digit was all but severed, attached only by a wristward splint of bone and sinew, and thus Yán, who worked on the other side of the factory floor, had been ushered outside clutching his lower arm, trailed by a splatter of bloody tissue, dotted on the floor and on his machine, to be bleached and cleansed before another operative might replace him, which Hú suspected would prove difficult because Yán was semi-skilled and worked especially speedily and efficiently at the table

saw, having hitherto his incident maintained a high output by remaining remarkably injury free, which considering the various guards that had been removed to quicken production was no simple feat, and it was in thinking of this that Hú contemplated whether the decision to remove the safety guards in the workshop had in fact improved productivity at all, since the number of casualties in the factory had deprived the company of at least one trained worker and a day's worth of machine use every few months, with mechanical faults that took weeks to fix, and this was obviously less than beneficial; but, he supposed, the business had surely accounted for such damages and had weighed up the cost of delays against those hours gained through guardless machines and, seemingly, they had deemed near-amputations like Yán's an acceptable cost for tight deadlines, compensating for such impairments with quicker production facilities, with more machinery and fewer precautions, and, moreover, Hú supposed, it was likely felt that high staff turnover was preferable too, for this weakened the costly bonds of solidarity germinant on the shopfloor, preventing worker organisation; and, in this regard, Yán's incapacitation now testified to the omniscience of the corporation, because in recent weeks Yán had attempted to organise a non-union action over pay, but now on account of his hospitalisation he would not, it being unclear as to whether he would ever return to the factory – since if his thumb

could not be reattached and rendered serviceable, it was certain he would lose his job – and it was therefore ambiguous as to whether the proposed wildcat action would take place, though Hú presumed it would not; and hence, by damaging its labour force, the company had unwittingly saved themselves money and time and had increased output, and they could accordingly view such incidents as an effect of the perennial gale of creative destruction, which could not be understood on the hypothesis that there was a perennial lull: the business was required to break its assets and labour in order to rebuild on stronger, sturdier footing, and they continually faced the necessity for restructuring the production process, not only to reduce unit costs and to elude recessions, but even more compellingly to retain their hold over the class struggle, and, thus, in Yán's absence the opportunity to reorganise the shopfloor would be seized and the factory would be transformed and remoulded to the boon of profit, and Hú thought of this as the call sounded to return to work, upon which he immediately resumed assembling the furniture before him, putting together bits and pieces around him to form the semblance of a whole, which today was a coffee table that required the slotting in and screwing together of three separate component parts, which he did repeatedly, professionally and competently, because, as tedious as the work was, it was preferable to any of the machine jobs in which the chances of

injury were high and in which Hú felt he was likely to befall some period of worklessness; so he ploughed through monotony of his appointed task, handling and fastening with good technique, item after item, as he laboured sufficiently well to avoid earmarking for restationing; though it gradually dawned on Hú that however adept he became at assembly, however consummate his hand grew, any objects fabricated would inevitably deny the identifiable trace of his touch or competencies; indeed, the better he got at his job, the less evident his labour would be: the finished object would appear as spontaneous, as though no human hand had graced it before, and it thus struck him that he was in some regards – unit by unit – eradicating his personality, constructing empty, soulless products, entirely alienable from his personhood, such that he could at some point be replaced by another proficient employee or a machine and thus the emptiness of the pieces of furniture he made, which were by and large straight lines and plain surfaces, in plastics and veneers, chipboards and bracing, could be expressed by saying that they had a minimal personal content: in that either they were to an extreme degree undifferentiated in themselves and therefore possessed very low content of any kind, or else the differentiation that they did exhibit, which was in some cases very considerable, came not from the worker but from a non-personal source like the management's requests or a demand-responsive algorithm, and so

he felt that there was no room for signature skill or a material trace of his abilities in work, leaving him anxious, since he knew that it signalled his eventual replacement by automation or by youth, but thankfully the lunch bell swiftly sounded, and Hú was prompted to forget his worries, rising from his station to wander to the factory's outside area, where with his stresses temporarily assuaged he would not eat lunch but would smoke, substituting food for hot and restorative nicotine, which would be savoured with rounded mouthfuls of cool fresh air, and so Hú was thankful for a cigarette habit, because in light of the factory's health and safety regulations he was now obliged to venture outside the building to smoke, and this meant that on winter days, when night outstripped day, he was guaranteed sunlight, which was a pleasure few of his co-workers appeared to value, most of them preferring to englut their lunch and chatter in the canteen until break elapsed, seemingly satisfied with the dappled half-daylight that permeated frosted windows at the apex of the ceiling and mingled with cheap fluorescent tubes, tumbling onto the factory floor as an unsightly hybrid; but Hu, who believed this insufficient, remained eager to escape the building and walked with alacrity until he reached the designated smoking area, whereupon having done so he saw that there was little sunshine to speak of and that today had become a cold, blustery day with snow descending rapidly and wind whipping his hands and face,

which he strove to ignore as he lit his first cigarette and inhaled, heavy snowflakes waiting on his shoulders for a second or two before vanishing, flakes not of a spherical and flocculent sort, as portrayed in children's books, but thin spicular crystals that stung as they fell, and thus, for all of Hú's excitement to leave the door, he looked forward to returning to the factory, to where it was warmer and drier and where his face could relax, though, nevertheless, he remained outside for the length of his break, stoically looking to the sky as he chain-smoked and attempted to recall a dream from the previous night, in which he had imagined himself to have woken on a breezy summers day to discover that his wife and child had disappeared, without trace, and in which, unable to locate them, he had found himself rushing into a street that appeared empty apart from a single car on whose bonnet was perched one of the factory bosses, who had beckoned him over and had told him he would help find his family, but, first, the executive had said, he would need to conduct a few errands, and thus Hú had climbed into the car and the pair of them had sped into the city, driving in tense silence until they reached a restaurant, where, as they sat, the boss ordered a meal and excused himself for the toilet, leaving Hú alone for an inordinately long time, until, unoccupied, Hú had decided to check that the man had not left and so had walked down the corridor labelled "toilet" to check on the boss,

but then upon opening the door he had discovered that there was no bathroom whatsoever, rather there was a room full of people, engaged in what he could only describe as total pandemonium: the people around him were shouting, laughing and gesticulating; and the replies were sighs of love, volleys of hiccups, poems, moos, and meowing of medieval Brutists; one man in front of him was wiggling his behind like the belly of an Oriental dancer, another was playing an invisible violin and bowing and scraping, a woman, with a Madonna face, was doing the splits, and there was someone banging away nonstop on the great drum, with a man accompanying him on the piano, pale as a chalky ghost, and this continued for several minutes before it climaxed and disintegrated, the figures vanishing, gradually, one by one, until none were left and Hú awoke and the dream ended, and now, transfixed in the cold, he was uncertain as to what to make of it; so, with such fantasies and strangeness ensconced in his thoughts, he returned to work, aware that lunch was nearly over and that he ought to be at his station, which he approached quickly to commence the afternoon shift, casting aside chimerical visions to focus strictly on the task at hand, for the shopfloor was a place where dream and feeling were dispensed with and where workers undertook onerous, banausic labour, discouraged from thinking by management, who had taken all the important decisions and planning which vitally affect the

output of the shop out of the hands of the workmen, and centralised them in a few men, each of whom was especially trained in the art of making those decisions and in seeing that they were carried out, each man having his own particular function in which he was supreme, and not interfering with the functions of other men, these few men designated thinkers, supervisors, who prowled from workstation to workstation, phlegmatically ensuring the dispassion of the staff, and thus, conscious of their surveillance, Hú returned to his appointed assemblage, building table after table and stacking products at a steady rate to avoid reprimand and punishment, of docked wages or dismissal or even of a stern talking to, which would only render his six-hour stint of mindlessness more worrisome than desired, and so he proceeded into unthinking function, unsure as to whether a more intellectually demanding role was even preferable, since the division between mental and manual labour here developed at least enabled him to consider topics other than work: at times, when he had been given a simple assembly job and had established a steady, mechanical rhythm, his mind was able to wander to thoughts of retirement, to his family and to what he might do with the modicum of free time his income afforded, though typically Hú struggled to think or fantasise about anything in great detail, since the work remained sufficiently taxing that he was unable to ponder his own thoughts or feelings, of

values or morality, for too long, and, indeed, it struck Hú that most of the work now was involved with a denial of any kind of absolute morality, or general morality; rather, the work strove for a condition of immanence that begged little question of its form or substance, self-perpetuating only as wordless doxa, and he saw little to commend this condition or his job in general: it was gruelling and tedious and consumed familial life, tendering little pleasure in return for his discomforts, and while several of his colleagues had before spoken of the pleasure gleaned from industrious activity – of the satisfaction gained when registering a panoply of freshly finished products – Hú had rarely felt this; rather, he thought that the world was full of objects, more or less interesting; he did not wish to add any more; he would have preferred, simply, to state the existence of things in terms of time and place, because he cared little for the work he produced at the factory, and, in fact, thought the wood better before the workshop cut it, than after; they did not improve it in any way, rather the uncrafted materials, clean and replete with bristling potentiality, retained a magic that disappeared upon transformation, such that, Hú speculated, the factory would do well to retain some of this sense of possibility within its commodities: they would be good makers if they could only keep the paint as good as it is in the can or the timber as bold as when it arrived, which they did not; instead, they created products that

Hú disliked, in conditions he abhorred, and he thought of his hatred of work as he proceeded to perform it, though, later, he would swing to an affirmative register to consider alternatives, in the assorted ways in which his job might be improved, reflecting on the measures that might render each tortuously long working day more congenial and more joyful than presently felt, and he concluded that, if permitted, he would introduce greater variety into his daily labour, meaning each shift would be structured around a number of different tasks, such that a few hours would be spent on assembly, several on transportation and some on manufacture, and thus he would be less prone to repetitive strain and would be alleviated the crushing tedium of his daily rhythm; he even thought that subsequent to this reform he might greet portions of the day with enthusiasm too, and so, with his shift differentiated and fragmented, time would pass pleasurably and hastily and the pain of boredom and sameness would abate; but Hú would not stop there in his amendments, rather, he would implement further changes: he would immediately address the way in which decisions were reached for the shopfloor, such that instead of instruction arriving from management above, decisions would be made collectively and discursively by employees who understood the physical praxis of industrial furniture production and its entailments and so could so better refine safer working conditions

from a position of lived expertise rather than one of imagined outcome, and the process of debate and consensus between workers would itself establish a sense of community and care and togetherness, which he thought virtuous and would enable him to depart for work free of any grating sense of confinement, allowing him to arrive feeling welcome and desired in all of his personhood, not merely as a lump of living labour time; and thus, surveying the room, in which workers proceeded in typical fashion, visibly untroubled by the monotony of repetition, steely-eyed and automaton-like in their function, Hú found himself wondering whether similar thoughts reverberated in their minds too: whether they dreamt of or expected any improvement in their daily routine, or whether they accepted their lot for what it was, and he thought that although they seldom made mention of it they possibly did feel similarly: perhaps all workers were alike: they dreamt of doing something more social, more collaborative, more real than their job, something in which they were neither distant nor removed from their task, where workers oversaw production, distribution and consumption and obtained a perfect comprehension of the work and enjoyment of their products, and, indeed, Hú felt that access to greater information was yet another measure that could improve his job too, for he had always been troubled by his ignorance of the ultimate recipients of the furniture, because, much

as he toiled diligently, each working day, on similar products whose construction he could recount flawlessly – from timber to rivet to bolt – he, nevertheless, had yet to receive an explication of his work's place within the wider world of goods, of how it was lived with and by whom, and so Hu, who was otherwise familiar with every aspect of the factory's commodities, struggled to envision the sort of consumer who might purchase and use the result of his labour; and while he had of course seen pictures of the rooms in which such furniture would ideally reside, with domestic pictures now ubiquitous throughout the company's literature, he personally knew of no one that had bought such a coffee table or chair or sofa themselves: he had only recently gathered that the furniture was intended for export to Europe, presumably for bodies more affluent and salubrious than his own, which left Hú handling a heightened sense of alienation; though, still, he found solace in the idea that his job brought pleasure somewhere for someone, because the alternative – that work was nugatory and senseless – threatened to render the day less bearable than it was, such that Hú now found and kept a single photograph of each of the products he had worked on to remind himself of his work's utility, tearing prints from boxes and collecting creased papers from the floor, such that he had over the years amassed a bulging scrapbook of pictures of the company's products, some documented against a white and alien infinity

screen and others in strange, contrived *mise en scène* displays, with each image serving as a prompt to recall the value of his job and to recall that the pain in his shoulders and the crick in his wrist and the mind numbing boredom he endured was not on account of nothing, that he did not toil over pointless tasks, on objects that were incinerated for the dark pleasures of some slave-owning master, but, rather, his labour remained in the world and improved somebody's life, wherever it was that such things were purchased, and so if Hú was licensed to change yet another aspect of his job, he thought, he would somehow close that distance between maker and user, meaning that both were appreciable to one another and he concluded that this would improve the situation of he and his colleagues; but, abruptly, his mood then shifted, as if flicked by a switch, from a state of optimism to melancholy, as he considered the notion of improvement and advancement, and supposed that even these changes might not beget greater happiness, for as much as workers might dream of improvement, he conjectured, the gains made in working conditions would inevitably fall from appreciation at some point: the ecstasy of victory would slowly be overcome by routine and repetition – by the deadening effect of daily praxis – that would inexorably render collective achievement invisible and banal, and thus work would come to feel much as it ever did, defined by compulsion and drudgery and remote from its ideal,

and that which seemed good would seem foul and he would only desire more as triumph was consumed by an unrelenting thirst for betterness, of which Hú remained unsure, because, while such desire did, on the one hand, ensure the continual progress of all things, increasing ambition and appetite in struggle, it evaded satisfaction and denouement, on the other, requiring ever further energy to continue its advance, regardless of perceived contentment, and so in this moment Hú thought it might be better to simply abandon his dreams of improving work and to reconcile himself to the established standard, accepting his role for what it was, such that he could cope with work and pursue fulfilment as an internal personal goal, such that, with this in mind, Hú began to wonder why his aspirations were so constrained to his workplace to begin with: why it was that he seldom dreamt of another life entirely, without factory or boredom or scarcity, in which his life would be lived spontaneously and where there remained the possibility to do this today and that tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, to go fishing in the afternoon, to do cattle breeding in the evening, or to criticise after dinner, and it occurred to him that the reason he so infrequently considered a life of pure leisure was because work had come to structure his understanding of the world and of value so completely that he now struggled to think beyond it at all; his idea of home was even understood in relation to work, as its negative and

unconstrained other and this he surmised was the company's intention: workers were to have life restructured according to the strictures of labour, absorbed, as if by osmosis, in the values of commerce: the course of development was work as form, work as structure, work as place, meaning that life was afterwards unimaginable without the spectre of remunerated employment, or, for that matter, without the values of work, of efficiency and industry, which presided over all involved, for once efficiency was universally accepted as a rule, it became an inner compulsion and weighed like a sense of sin, simply because no one could ever be efficient enough, just as no one could ever be virtuous enough; and this new sense of sin only contributed further to the enervation of leisure, encroaching on his sense of fun, such that his time at home too was contorted to the conditions of work, which he could not help but think of as he continued to fix coffee table parts together, taking surface after surface and screwing sides into it, quickly and firmly, doing so repetitively for hours with sufficient concentration to avoid error though with a degree of detachment that saw thoughts momentarily wander among disparate ideas, which he could not help but feel were only ever half-concluded before work again reclaimed his concentration, and thus, whilst his hands laboured, Hú reflected on his condition: his mind was only permitted to contemplate issues incompletely, tethered to the onus

of work, to the crushing pragmatism of the day, and he attempted to recount whether this had always been so, as he recalled a moment from life hitherto his work's procurement, in his adolescence when on a warm day he had returned from the factory to inform his mother and father of his new job, and his mother had embraced him as visibly proud as Hú could remember her, though his father, typically more reticent, had displayed little satisfaction, informing Hú that he ought to be thankful for the opportunity and ought not to squander it through tardiness or ill behaviour, which Hú thought was as close to a congratulation as his father was likely to bestow, for memories of his father were neither fond nor tender, with his final memory particularly centred on argument, when his father, reclining at home and crapulent in his senescence, had insulted Hú and his mother over several hours, delivered his slurred and hateful obloquy in such a way as to have implied Hú and his mother were reducible to the failure of his dreams, his ambitions of comfort and dignity that had been denied, and upon hearing this Hú had departed to leave the elderly man alone, to his fate of loneliness and death, the memory of which left Hú saddened and ashamed, yet in spite of this he remembered his childhood as a time of happiness, harbouring a nostalgia for school and his early years, images thereof before him now, rushing quickly and stochastically, like marbles dropped from a bag, such that he struggled to focus

on a particular recollection, and so, overwhelmed by memory, Hú speculated that this was the form historical experience took: the true picture of the past whizzed by; only as a picture, which flashes its final farewell in the moment of its recognisability, is the past to be held fast; so that, glancing to his sides, Hú wondered whether those at neighbouring stations harboured similar histories and recollections too – whether images of the past flashed before them – such that their brains frothed rich in reminiscence, with spectres of the past fulgurant like lightening within even as their exteriors remained stolid, labouring with fantasy veiled by a robotic façade that suggested workplace devotion and not the immanent weight of the past that Hú believed to be upon him now, rattling inside as his hands obeyed factory protocol; and, with the feeling palpable in his afternoon shift, Hú considered the disjuncture of mental and manual labour once more, and he wondered what became of such restless conceptual activity, since in the face of the confinement and compulsions of remunerated labour it was ambiguous to him as to whether it ever took root in the physical world or whether it brought anything of substantive value at all, such that Hú pondered what it might take to render thought and its requisite energy collective and social and real and material, though he soon ceased reflecting thereupon and returned to mute labour, handling components and assembling until his load was complete and he

was obliged to gesture for more parts, which took only a minute or two for delivery, workers arriving with bracing and panels on trolleys and forklifts, unloading them hastily so as to allow Hú to re-establish his rhythm and continue, which he did quickly, slotting in and fixing segments at a steady rate of one unit every ninety seconds, which was a pace that was both high and sustainable, elevating him above the younger employees stationed in assembly who struggled to maintain an output of one unit in two minutes, their bodies either over eager or unused to the demands of the job, and so Hú, relatively confident that he was not the least proficient worker on the shopfloor, continued to produce coffee tables, enduring the fatigue and boredom in such a way as to bridle the typical nagging thoughts that occurred to him, for he knew better than to count down the hours or to consider their remuneration: in his experience, it was total acceptance of the task at hand that was crucial to sustaining a constant speed, such that he continued in this vain, indomitably churning through components for hours more without cogitation until his shift drew to a close, whereupon he stretched and relaxed his shoulders and inspected his work, tidying his area before concluding that all was ordered and that he could depart for home, turning to make for the exit, relieved as he walked briskly through the creaking hanger space, whose walls were decaying and whose floor was sticky, and whose air – whether

on account of the machinery or the chemicals – was thin and waterless, meaning that Hú left work that day with an itchy dryness desiccating his skin, from which light flakes rose as he scratched his brow, with snowy particles hovering before they fell to ground, where they met and mixed with sawdust and filings and the stale residue of other bodies – in skin and saliva – which had been ground to powder and swirled in the untidy excess of industrial production, such that the difference between labour and commodity and capital and nature had here evaporated at molecular level, carpeting the shopfloor with dust to be kicked up in weeks to come, lifting in large and fluffy clouds that floated and spiralled over those beneath, like spores in a gale, threatening to land in pockets of otherness or difference, but mostly returning to the crunching, unthinking belly of the here and the now, where time dug in and refused its surrender.

Mirror, wood, lamp base, lamp shade, cup, saucer, biscuits
95 x 60 x 60cm
2017



Front



Back

Customer service employees were required to respond to external enquiries within forty eight hours; a single non-observance constituted grounds for discipline, consistent failure a basis for dismissal, and thus, when Sophie noticed an emboldened email slumped midway down her inbox homepage, she felt the necessity of drafting a full and immediate response, which if the received message bore only a standard question – as thankfully it did – would occupy her for no more than five minutes, leaving her free to enjoy her break unfettered by worries of work undone, though, if any esoteric request had been lodged, obliging her to defer to her line manager, to telephone Julie, or, worse, head office – from where a swift answer would not be forthcoming – the task would inevitably infringe upon lunch, pilfering precious moments of non-labour from an otherwise tiresome day, in a regard that would never be recouped and never remunerated, and so it was with relief that Sophie found the email to be a typical query regarding delivery information – a complaint bemoaning the delayed arrival of a bedside table, or similar – to which she wrote a polite and speedy response, opening her correspondence with the company's customary salutations before copying a paragraph from the protocol document, smoothly skipping between two open windows as she pasted a reply to her email and concluded with an invitation for further questions and a courteous goodbye, which she perused

only once to ensure it was error-free and then sent without further consideration, for she no longer fretted over formal decisions and no longer gave heed to the style or tone, the voice or pacing, in her writing, instead she placed her faith solely in the protocol, because some weeks earlier she had realised that unoriginal reproduced communications were preferred by the management, who believed them to reflect their intentions best, arriving direct and devoid of mediation, though Sophie knew that if pressed her bosses would prove unable to explain their steady investment in the company's prose, rather they would most likely invoke some idea of "ethos" or "identity", ignorant of the reason undergirding the protocol's aesthetic; indeed, Sophie thought, and it was here verified, aesthetics was to bosses what ornithology is to birds: mercantile success was no concomitant of introspection but was developed in embodied form as a know-how that arose, like art, from a kind of experimental condition in which one experiments with living, advancing by trial and error to a comportment more apt than its predecessors, the clunky and awkward jettisoned, such that Sophie now thought of the multitude postures that had been abandoned and sentences rewritten as she collected her possessions: her keys, a purse, and a taffeta bag, propped against the side of her computer and rested on the worn veneer of the MDF counter, which was fabricated from material akin to that which the company sold, though constructed

to office rather than domestic dimensions, being too slim for a dinner table and too long for a study desk, with space for two swivel chairs plonked beneath, both of which sat motionless and over which Sophie had slung her coat: a navy worsted jacket with turn down collar that she put on as she left the building, gripping her pockets as she strode to the door, eager to be alone, such that – loath to engage her colleagues – she modestly smiled and marched, nodding and raising her eyebrows at each employee passed but accelerating so as to resist the pull of casual, catch-up dialogue, walking with sufficient purpose to suggest that she was either shy or costive or simply sufficiently busy that she could not talk even if so inclined, and she did this until exiting, whereupon she slowed and exhaled and checked her phone, seeing she had neither missed calls nor unopened messages, which was both a relief – sparing her the burden of response – and disappointment – reminding her of her solitude – but this was insignificant, Sophie concluded, and she would not brood on it today, instead she strolled onto the high street and contemplated lunch, turning towards an old neoclassical stone building ornamented with columned upper levels and grand windows and curlicue ledges but with a ground floor that appeared unoccupied – a faded rental sign and grey metallic shutters mantling its fusty insides – prompting her to recall what had previously sat within: an outlet of a large music-cum-video retailer long

bankrupted but from which she had once bought films, when the building hummed with commerce, offering customers distraction and escape, identity and solace, though its husk, now boarded in steel, exuded little but its minatory mood of decline, a portent for fellow buildings, who, standing feebly by, awaited a similar fate, confronting a “when” and not an “if” as they anticipated the implacable spread of decay that had folded into precinct pockets, thought of as Sophie dwelt on the idea of degeneration and wandered aside a further parade of shops, beyond Clintons and a frozen food retailer, and a beauty salon that advertised cheap and various depilations, administered by regiments of manicured women garbed in plain white, who proposed unctions and sprays and other cosmetic treatments, which Sophie would never herself purchase but which she would not be averse to receiving, because, she speculated, the beautification process would relax, and an hour of personalised scrutiny would not only assuage her stress – weighted like a nightmare – but would proffer validation of the effort exerted in oversight each day: of the labour that ensured she was dressed appropriately, that she was healthy and sedulous and gave a kindly impression to others, and, she supposed, if someone else were to engage in handling her looks, were they to focus exclusively on her, diligently and meticulously, she thought, it might enable her to construe self-care as somehow better founded

and more justified than an act of mere personal preference, though she remained unsure of this urge to affirmation since she suspected it might only bolster her resented tendency to self-discipline, and, moreover, she knew, it was only elicited by commerce and would inevitably feel hollow, and so, as her eyes roamed athwart the high street, Sophie felt herself encircled by a panoply of prospects to intensify her self-relation through money: to improve her home's interior, to enhance her body with health foods, to exercise at a gym, to attire herself in newer, brighter clothing, and to procure a mortgage, with the litany of products unfolding further, such that she was provoked to consider just how the world had been structured to accommodate an overwhelming preoccupation with the individual on every petty level to the extent that it seemed absurd for her to brook its demands, though Sophie knew her personal investment – her tacit approval of its regimen – was more than mere choice, for were she to cease to manicure herself and to decorate her house, to refuse to regulate her image of competency, she would suffer, socially and financially, as friends and job prospects dissolved, such that she concluded that the margin for alterity, where one might differ from the norm, was microscopically fine, leaving life lived otherwise to appear as practically impossible, and it was at times like these – when the restrictions of social structure seemed more vivid than the everyday – that Sophie found herself

preoccupied by the sheer grotesquery of the city, of its routines and its high street, their garish vista and bogus promise, even if it still felt most like home, even if, in spite of its ugliness, Sophie felt that she preferred the centre's thrum to its suburbs, where the outskirts slumped sadder and blander and lifeless by comparison, submissive to the onward march of the replicable, identical estates now typical of almost anywhere, and, indeed, she reflected, large-scale, tract housing developments constituted the new city; they were located everywhere; they were not particularly bound to existing communities, they failed to develop either regional characteristics or separate identity, and, Sophie thought, they were the architecture of her time, cloned and modular, and, as she considered this, she remembered that they were not new but were more than fifty years old, much as time had failed to render them antique: they felt remarkably contemporary in fact, which suggested that what Sophie thought of as her time had long been present, mired in its well worn tracks, as though progress had retired its task to the dull mind of habit, so that Sophie held to this thought whilst traversing high street, trudging for several yards until she stopped motionless before a shop window that had arranged within it an assortment of furniture uncannily similar to her office's products, arranged to suggest the domestic interior of some fictive family with crockery assembled in four places, as though dinner were ready begin, yet

mealtime was to be perpetually postponed, its commodities replaced in months, and cognisance of this prompted Sophie to linger on the peculiarity of shop front display – that immediate advert for involvement within – which she considered as she approached another store, whose window had been more aggressively designed, with myriad stickers and signs obscuring the sight of moderately priced clothes, alongside which were barbed wire and chipboard prints, composed to suggest the garments' citified nonchalance, so that here, whilst transfixed on its spectacle, Sophie was struck by the thought that objects of every sort are materials for the new window display: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousands other things, that had been discovered by the present generation of visual merchandisers; not only did these designers show people, as if for the first time, the world they have always had about them but ignored, but they disclosed entirely unheard-of happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies; seen in other store windows and on the streets; and sensed in dreams and horrible accidents: they offered countless visual delights and curious forms, happy to distract from the miserable turn of the world, reliably offering a semblance of originality – ever new and always the same – as they luxuriated like swine in the ever-enticing muck of profit, their decisions disclosed only to patient study, and so,

Sophie decided, she would scrutinise the next window she passed in such a regard that those choices withdrawn and opaque to most would egress from beneath its gaudy veneer, such that, as she drew close to a second clothes outlet, she slowed to absorb its entire design, which had placed porcelain white mannequins atop mirrored plinths, each one outfitted in different muted ashen and chalky tones, spotted with the occasional burgundy or olive wool and perched in front of a large minimal design, whose outline was that of a black rectangle sufficiently sized so as to frame the commodities, so chosen because a rectangle was a shape itself; it was obviously the whole shape; it determined and limited the arrangement of whatever was on or inside of it, and with the window rectangular too, the clothes and plinths and mannequins appeared as though doubly framed: first by the commercial architecture and then by the printed form, which was perhaps attractive to some, though Sophie wished not to indulge pulchritude but to overcome it: it was said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it; that was the intention of her thought, for Sophie loathed the fashion industry and the encumbrance it thrust upon her, which arrived not as a command but as a putative gift sprung from transcendence to promise transcendence, meaning that clothes and shops and adverts spoke of personal freedom – of autonomy and escape – though fashion asked more than she could give: to care for

and to regulate her appearance, to spend continuously on obsolescent distractions and to change at the behest of design; so Sophie decided she would settle for nothing less than the concrete analysis of concrete situations leading to concrete actions; silence is assent, she thought, and she wished to perform detailed critiques and analyses on a regular public basis, denuding style, which in fashion, whatever its miraculous, self-defining nature, was the equivalent of etiquette in society: a constant grace that established a sense of place and was thus essential to the social order, and so Sophie, who hated such order, pondered the limitations of style as she walked toward the shop's doorway, where speakers blared a rendition of a mid-twentieth century soul single, recorded by the winner of a televised singing contest, which had been released to moderate success, and which had been competently produced – in that, the correct notes had been hit and sections arranged proficiently – yet Sophie questioned why fifty year old popular music was here rehashed today, and why it resounded from a clothes shop too; and thus she questioned the choice of the track and concluded that it had never really been decided on at all; of course, the playlist had been selected by professionals and marketers, and the producers had picked a song to perform, but ultimately their hands had been forced by the weight of market habits, since the range of acceptable pleasures in such contexts was finite, she supposed: they were

obliged to be reliable, inoffensive and profitable, and, with respect to the music that accompanied shopping, this required that its pleasure must not demand any effort and therefore moved rigorously in the worn grooves of association, bulldozing silence, which today criticized society by merely existing; and thus, longing for hush, Sophie wandered on beyond the shop with an empty clenching feeling prickling her stomach, reminding her that she had yet to eat and she should enter the nearby supermarket to buy lunch: ordinarily the outlet's advertised "meal deal", which afforded a sandwich, drink and snack for three pounds, and which she prepared to buy, greeting a warm waft of thick air upon entry as she eased toward the refrigerated to-go section of the shop, selecting a tuna roll with lemonade and chocolate before hurrying to the self-scan to pay, where she thudded fingertips into a touch screen and elected to use her debit card, reluctant to weight her pockets with change and eager to leave, which she did quickly, pacing along the pavement to a square where she found the bench at which she ordinarily perched and there ate, enacting the ritual customary of her lunch, sitting and chomping through inexpensive food whilst imagining something else entirely, though midway through this undertaking she found herself beset with melancholy, saddened and overcome, endowed with an acute sense of degradation at the thought that her life in all its tedious procedure – that had

budded with neither thought nor nurture – was entirely fruitless: she had never desired her routine, not its loneliness, and not her environment, neither the mass-produced food nor its tepid flavourlessness, yet somehow she performed its motions with unflinching regularity, seldom considering its repetitions, half-expecting forthcoming years to render their chronic banality forgotten, because Sophie could not consider her protocol and her job and her current friends legitimate defining facts of her person; rather, she felt herself above them, as if her present life was somehow illusory and contrived, as if a sort of makeshift reality to endure until true life – smiling and lurking nearby – would rear its head to envelope her in a year or two, once she had fallen into a career or a family or had found some sense of purpose to which to be nailed, where gravid with meaning and liveliness she would amass friends and acquaintances and people with whom she could converse and flourish, whom were absent from life as it stood, in her world of vapid muddling that at moments like this struck her as somehow implausible: how could it be, she wondered, that there could be so little to her adult existence, so few possibilities for engagement or betterment, and how could this continue indefinitely, for she had left education stirred and animated by the possibilities of independence and the world at large and had been eager to establish a lively social routine that would see her wake each morning with

buoyancy and with hope, but satisfaction had failed to emerge; rather, Sophie had postponed its arrival, believing that passing years would bequeath an efflorescent sociality of their own: a life replete with conversation and intrigue, though time had refused to, and her sense of morale had withered, replaced by a perpetual stasis, rendering Sophie alert to the crushing heft of futility that rested upon her, positioned as though the future would present only endurance and monotony and as though the labours of constructing an enjoyable existence were so completely insurmountable that it was foolish even to try, and thus she sat overwhelmed, harbouring a desperate sense of the necessity of change and a pessimism that denied its likelihood, which centred on her job, where existence unfolded in the customer service department of a tawdry online retailer, whose employees neither knew nor valued her, and whose office was arranged to the rigid strictures of hierarchy, with endless managers erected above her to remind her of her place, and of her dispensability and her role, which was to answer questions with pre-programmed responses that she selected as if incapable of independent thought, since were she to demonstrate her capabilities – her facility to write with originality and sensitivity – she knew she could expect to be disciplined and cautioned and demeaned and threatened with poverty, like any precarious worker whose tongue wriggled unbitten,

and so Sophie was forced to submit to the governance of the company's leaders, resentful of their power, for she felt that to be governed was to be watched, inspected, spied upon, directed, law-driven, numbered, regulated, enrolled, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, checked, estimated, valued, censured, commanded, by creatures who have neither the right nor the wisdom nor the virtue to do so; to be governed was to be at every operation, at every transaction noted, registered, counted, taxed, stamped, measured, numbered, assessed, licensed, authorized, admonished, prevented, forbidden, reformed, corrected, punished; it was, under pretext of utility, and in the name of business interest, to be placed under contribution, drilled, fleeced, exploited, monopolized, extorted from, squeezed, hoaxed, robbed; then, at the slightest resistance, the first word of complaint, to be repressed, fined, vilified, harassed, hunted down, abused, clubbed, disarmed, bound, choked, imprisoned, judged, condemned, shot, deported, sacrificed, sold, betrayed; and to crown all, mocked, ridiculed, derided, outraged, dishonoured; that was government; that was its justice; that was its morality, and Sophie loathed it, though upon consideration it was ultimately the precise character of her labour she disliked most of all, the work being such that she was compelled to undertake tedious, meaningless activity without deviation and without end, her job offering little room for expression or personality, typified

by its compulsions and absent fulfilment, the recollection of which impelled Sophie to ponder the very idea of work, a concept which struck her as stretched between two poles: one defined by its onerousness and another by its ludicness, such that in performing supposedly similar things, jobs, she felt that there existed a spectrum that permitted every affect from optimism to boredom to dread, with Sophie stationed unfalteringly at its negative terminus, as one who hated her labour, with neither the power to engender transformation nor any hopes thereof, for opportunities were scarce and her CV – her potential passage from tedium – did little but advertise a capacity for repetition, rendering her unable to befall desirable employ; instead, she was helplessly confined to her putrid office where she poked her keyboard each day, lubricating the sale of purportedly modern furniture, responding to customers whose only knowledge of the products came from a digital image and from a short paragraph of descriptive text, which had, at best, been supplemented by a correspondence with her, in an email that doubtlessly prevaricated to leave a comment covering the company from legal action, such that Sophie knew her work eluded any sense of public interest; rather, she worked in the interest of business, unaligned with the desires of ordinary buyers, with almost every aspect of her work orchestrated to alienate her from clients – in the quotas she was obliged to hit and the time pressures imposed thereupon – such that Sophie struggled to imagine any purpose to her job, to even picture a living client or a concrete commodity,

and so, in an attempt to amend her ignorance, she there attempted to envisage the altogether alien moment when, weeks after purchase, a three dimensional hunk of stuff arrived, emptied from transit, to displace or replace whatever had hitherto sat in the customer's home, as what was previously neutral became actual, while what was previously an image became a thing, material and dumb; though no more mute, she supposed, than the light and colour and lines parsed in promotional materials, such that Sophie felt obliged to then consider the role played by photographs in her job too, as one of the few links between customers and herself, between her desk and consumers, who browsed and chose furniture from the knowledge garnered from images and contacted her with further enquiries – of details undepicted and colours misleadingly lit – before they made their purchase and waited for a delivery, which would or would not fulfil expectations, meaning that Sophie felt these images not only connected clients and traders but also bridged present and future too, spawning a vision of tomorrow, so that, distilled within rectangular jpegs, within petty leaves of paper, unmoved and dead to the sweep of history, there trickled a sense of anticipation and of time to come, drawing Sophie to reflect further on the strangeness of pictures, on their bizarre and abstract spatiality, because, much as images appeared contained, bounded and quadrilateral when shown, they were of course spread across

innumerable times and places, taking flight from camera and computer, in a studio, and blossoming into countless different forms, printed in magazines and on company correspondences, uploaded onto websites and downloaded by thousands, projected onto innumerable monitors and smart phones, in the street and at work, on adverts, in hotel lobbies and through Google searches, where they were seen in urban and rural locales and learnt in the minds of people, who, whilst bored and whilst occupied, conversed with loved ones to impart further images too, as words, like pixels, accreted into pictures, ready for dialogue with screens and catalogues, whereupon their instantiation they would elicit disappointment or excitement or nothing, educating a host of affects as myriad as the photograph itself, whose multiplicity had led Sophie to question just how pictures could remain singular and static in spite of the variances of their realisation, which, though manifold, she thought, were annihilated in the concept of the self-same image, which erased all but the illusion of a single photograph in such a regard as to promise hope and tragedy, constructing a common object, so as to anticipate a shared world whilst erasing individuality in the process, such that the images could be regarded with both warmth and fear in theory, depending on the context they were thought in, for theories were made only to die in the war of time, with ambivalences that would only resolve with the passing

of history, such that upon social or mental revolution future persons would look back and laugh at the folly of her age, at the quaintness and parochialism of its ideas, so that Sophie felt an acute sense of reason's insufficiency, there thinking that today's reason was little but bumbling in the shadow of some looming breakthrough, as if only fruitless pondering before enlightenment dawned, and so, again trammelled by despondency and impuissance, Sophie looked to her watch and realised that lunch was nearly over, prompting her to rise from her bench to leave, and thus, after disposing of her lunch's waste, placed in a rusted, sooty litter bin, she set off walking towards work, feeling the hard, greasy snuffle of pavement underfoot as she trod forcefully and ground fissile grit on her sole, trailing a minute destruction as she strode past the same shops and estate agents and salons as before until she halted, there uninterested in the crowd of nameless faces that had amassed aside her at a pedestrian crossing whose lights were slow to change, and which left her stranded in a milieu of desperate workers and waylaid shoppers, her body pressed next to that of a particularly distressed-looking rotund and bespectacled man, half a foot taller than herself, who whilst standing with two orange carrier bags stared downwards and discharged a series of visceral and quaking esophageal sounds, though the man, who was at this point scratching his nose, seemed himself oblivious to his emissions and seconds later wobbled across

the road, as if to signal to Sophie to do likewise, which she did, semi-envious of the man's terminus, which would not be hers and could not be less desirable than the office desk at which she was soon to be inundated with senseless messages, and thus, thinking of work, Sophie envisaged the customers with whom she was to correspond – who conceivably lurked nearby – and with whom she had found herself increasingly choleric and frustrated, aggravated by the obstinacy of complainants, who rarely relented, and at times appeared to her as if a single subject, intransigent and petulant, never sated by the supposedly soothing words of the protocol document and who always – in collusion with management – conspired to pressure her further, or at least it appeared that way, though Sophie knew this was ultimately untrue and knew that individual customers were much like herself; indeed, were she to buy a coffee table or a chair or such from the company she would almost certainly bear some grievance too and would complain as others had done and would find herself regarded in much the same manner as any anonymous consumer, the bosses welcoming her money without consideration of her daily occupations, happy to absorb her as cash bearer into the common melange of the market, and this, she speculated, was likely the defining feature of the economic order, for what precisely distinguished capitalism from the master-servant relation was that the worker confronted the

boss as consumer and possessor of exchange values, and that in the form of the possessor of money, she became a centre of circulation, one of its infinitely many centres, in which her specificity as worker was extinguished, such that reprieve from class relations was tolerated only in the field of shopping, where she was no longer merely a hunk of fungible labour time, subject to the constraints of the boss, but appeared as an equal of anyone, even if she was not, so that Sophie came to contemplate the nature of this deception, which operated as both fetish and progressive potency, and she ruminated on its pitfalls and promise, until she realised that she was at her office door and had to focus on the afternoon's tasks and to disengage from her train of thought, which dissolved hastily as she marched upstairs past her colleagues and beyond various reception desks to trudge to her station, whereupon arrival she felt an overwhelming sense of desperation supervene, such that she removed her coat and dropped her bag and, then, miming to those within eye line, gestured to excuse herself, hurrying to the bathroom, where she flung open the door and entered an empty cubicle, sequestering herself to sit and gasp and sob, into her hands, with tears tumbling downward as her facial muscles clenched and eyes fell sodden, short and shaking mouthfuls spluttering forth as she tried to keep quiet, determined to preserve control of her sadness whilst moisture spilled from her nose and saliva bejewelled her lips,

shaking as she bit down, so completely beset with unhappiness – at the world, and at what it was and would continue to be – that she could only cry and cry more, as she would do again, every week of the year and every year of her life, washing her face repeatedly, eager to uphold the image of adequacy when deficiency reigned, dominant over the dumb spectre of hope, which had leapfrogged the present to sleep in the past, where it remained safe and at home, quietened and unable to redeem today; meanwhile, outside, it snowed.

Mirror, wood, lamp base, lamp shade, cup, saucer, biscuits
95 x 60 x 60cm
2017



Front



Back

One cool Autumn evening, upon the end of an unremarkable working day, Joseph Hughes lumbered to his usual bus shelter and leant against a cold, crimson advertisement, where, drowsy and stiff, he noticed that five yards or so from his feet lay the bloodied and limp carcass of a cat, which he supposed had been wounded by a car and had shambled to the edge of the thoroughfare and had died, such that it now sat slumped – outstretched and parallel to the kerb – several inches from a steady stream of traffic that pressed past the filthy creature, whose fur had grown greasy and ringletted with an amalgam of blood and muck and fat, and whose abdomen exhibited a finger length perforation, opening the pinkish jelly and carmine scabs of its laceration to the dusky air, releasing clods of viscera to slop and nestle between the tarmac and the animal's soft, ivory belly, on which the hair was overgrown and thick, or was so relative to that on its hind legs, which had thinned and been dirtied with a mixture of sticky burgundy and chestnut gore and was dotted with a business of plump flies, attracted to the stench of the corpse; though Joseph, from his present distance, could not smell it but could only discern the insects' movements, watching as they jumped and fizzed with the vibrations of freight in the leftmost lane, insistent until one particularly heavy automobile scattered them, sending the flies apart and upwards, signalling that the bus that was to collect Joseph had arrived and that he was to be ferried

from this public realm of foulness and labour to a private realm of home, where he could forget his job and would be free to do whatsoever he pleased, and so he stepped aboard the bus and took one last glance at the fetid animal, which failed to return his gaze, its flaccid neck twisted skyward, above and away from Joseph and the road and the world of mediocrity and habit, which he too believed to be turning from as he prised open his wallet and retrieved a FirstWeek travel ticket, which he brandished level with the blank countenance of the driver, who, saying nothing, waited several seconds and waved him on, prompting Joseph to march inside and shuffle his frame through a huddle of elderly bodies congregated in the middle, after which he stepped above the rear wheels and swiftly took the first available aisle space, noticing before he did that the seat had been somehow blackened by a spillage or a burn or by vandalism, which while less than desirable was scant deterrent to Joseph, who was eager to be off his feet and did not especially mind a less than pristine chair for fifteen minutes; so he took the seat and quickly confirmed that it had indeed been soiled, this much evident as he ran his fingers through its fibres, its texture proffering a distinct contrast between coagulated and solid bristles inside his legs and lush, smooth fabric by his side, running contiguous with the leg of a teenage boy – next to Joseph – whose profile was studded with acne and whose hooded jacket was sprayed

with flecks of dandruff and whose earphones emitted an audible rattle, the tinny clicking of which was sufficiently irritating for Joseph to begin directing his attention to the boy's least attractive features – his doggyish odour and crooked teeth – until, attempting to stay calm, he decided to look elsewhere and turned towards the centre of the bus, whereupon having done so he saw that, seemingly staring back at him, was a heavy woman, stood up, who was somewhere in her mid-sixties and had straggled mousy hair and was wearing an unwashed beige coat and a pair of thick-lensed circular glasses, endowed with the unfortunate effect of making her eyeballs appear abnormally withdrawn, pushing her pupils back deep into the doughy recesses of her aging face, such that the force of her importunate glare was concentrated on Joseph, meaning he could no longer face ahead lest he want to risk confronting the woman; so he was compelled to look out of the window, believing this would reduce the chance of their eyes meeting and would alleviate the anxiety induced by the grotesque person, who had inexplicably elected to put their limited sight to use gawking at him; and thus, he turned and looked past the earphoned teenager into a window rendered almost entirely opaque with fatty second-hand air having condensed the glass to leave the sides of bus lined with frosty white panels, which were in no way relaxing to look at and which offered little sense of the outside world, rendering the

journey a claustrophobic headache-inducing affair that was thick and stuffy to the extent that Joseph felt he could not look at the windows at all but could only focus on his hands, whose sight enabled him to partially forget his context, permitting him to stew in his own cogitation, wherein he reflected on the intricacies of his palms and fingers and nails and considered every fold and crease before he concluded that his hands were decidedly less attractive than remembered, having grown wrinkled and scabrous at work, where procuring boxes in the warehouse they routinely garnered nicks and grazes and swelled, such that they were now aged and calloused, when once they had been models of slender elegance, of a sort he surmised to have been relished by former lovers, though few would pretend to enjoy his hands' caress now, he supposed, and while nobody would be obligated to feign such pleasure – for Joseph was alone – he, nevertheless, resented the warehouse for this violation of his self-image: he knew his employment had disfigured him and knew that it would continue to do so, unerringly, as the demands of managers and customers sought to sculpt his flesh into a form increscently devoid of sexual appeal, with each day of toil also one of ineluctable transmogrification, which Joseph was acutely aware of, even if his co-workers were not, most of the workers oblivious to the ways in which waged work altered their physical form, most grateful for remuneration regardless of cost; though it

could disfigure and it did, Joseph thought, and, hence, what some might in this sense have regarded as their most patently unalterable property, shape, did not remain constant, but waned with the whims of habit and capital and power, and Joseph despised this condition but was resigned thereto, and, as he considered this resignation, he realised that the bus was stopping and that he ought to alight; so he rushed from the vehicle and stumbled into the evening's gloom, where once he had done so he felt the atmosphere palpably crisper and thinner than the bodily fog that had engulfed him moments ago, such that he filled his chest with refreshing cold and began the short walk to his flat, snaking through the night and along orange lamp lit streets where as he walked he sensed the gentle brush of leaves and litter underfoot, the detritus barely registering against his shoes, scarcely creasing or bending the leather, such that Joseph saw rather than touched the cans and bags on the floor, and so, should he have wanted to, he could have had himself believe that he here floated ten feet above the ground, and that he had nothing to do with the historical situation out of which he had grown: he could have presumed himself to be an entity all to itself, and, indeed, he would have liked to have done so, yet, his mind was at this point returning to images of his former wife, Rebecca, who had entered his thoughts and rested there as an intransigent reminder of how he was not an entity to himself but was emphatically

mired in the world as it was, lost and sad and angry at her who had left him and immiserated him and against whom he desired some form of redress, wanting to voice his anger at his predicament – which he had never done – and to tell her how completely mean and selfish and cowardly and filthy she was, which Joseph suspected would devastate her, because, like most, she could not abide the idea that anyone deemed them truly wretched, which at times he did, though more often than not Joseph did not; rather, he longed for her to contact him and to tell him that the past two years were awful mistakes, that she loved him and that they ought to rewind to whence they were both happier, yet he suspected this conversation would not occur; though, then, before he was able to retrogress to a state of tears and rage, he noticed he was nearly home and so he took the final left turn to the bottom of the block and retrieved his keys and unlocked the door, silently stepping inside the magnolia vestibule, wherein there was always the danger of encountering his neighbours – with whom he did not want to converse, but to whom he did not want to appear rude either – so, hastily, he pressed the elevator button to wait for its arrival, which thankfully did not take long, such that he entered swiftly and begun the ascent to the fifth floor, there staring into a full length image of himself reflected in the mirrored wall, assessing his appearance and judging himself to be fractionally more tired-looking than usual, though not

particularly different, which prompted Joseph to consider the ways in which he had slowly changed, physically and mentally, in the years since moving to the building and since looking into a full-length mirror twice a day, concluding that, on account of the mirror, he had set about correcting his posture and had groomed his hair more meticulously than before and – because of his new familiarity with his full-length appearance – he had also started to think about himself differently: as someone more aware of their physical form and coordination than others, and at a higher order, as someone able to consider the transformation taken place in the subject once they assume an image; and this latter thought threw Joseph into a further spiral of meditation, in which he contemplated the myriad ways that familiarity with his image had fed back into the way he handled himself – how he looked – and, then, how the alterations he had consequently made to his appearance had affected the way in which he thought of his self-constitution, and, then, how that knowledge of himself had also affected his appearance, and, then, how that had affected his self-regard, and, then, how that had affected his appearance and how that had affected his self-regard; and it was like a hall of mirrors, bottomless yet sealed, and unclear as to how difference might intrude, so that Joseph thought it exhausting to consider, and was relieved to hear the bell chime for his floor, whereupon he turned from his image and trudged

through the corridor to his apartment to open the door, entering and, after halting for a moment, there allowing a wave of blood to surge to his face, overwhelming him as he let out a burst of warm, exasperated breaths and sobs, clenching his chest as he thought of Rebecca, who was gone and who had been replaced by a biting sense of helplessness, which Joseph invariably felt and expressed each day upon arriving home, crying in a manner that was both painful and pleasurable, such that this spluttering condition now defined his free time; the qualities of publicness or privateness are imposed on things, Joseph thought, and so he gestated a fraught emotional state throughout the day, maintaining a stolid disposition at work and releasing his desperation all the more intensely in private evenings, doing so with such regularity that he now thought of his flat as a lachrymal, miserable space, and had found himself oddly thankful for work, for the job's otherness and analgesia: for the fact that at work the sorrow and loss of his failed relationship was made to temporarily dissipate, the unceasing pressure of his managers' requests such that for at least eight hours a day he was compelled to forget his loneliness, forced to labour swiftly and efficiently, ignoring the sadness elicited by thoughts of Rebecca, so that he overlooked his current sense of directionlessness and evaded thought of the bleakness of his future, not erupting into his now familiar paroxysms of fear and weeping, and thus his job had

assumed a new kind of comfort, permitting him to tender melancholy for a form of compulsive automatism, preferable to the crippling depression of home; although, it had previously been the warehouse routine that he had loathed above all else, hating it to the extent that he had only confirmed he loved Rebecca whilst in the job, devoting himself to her in the face of his devastating alienation, because romance had offered some reprieve from the exhausting boredom of daily routine, in which he retrieved commodities from shelves for people he would never know and who would never know him; and in this sense the relation between labour and romance vacillated, he despised the warehouse then needed it and then abhorred it again; he moved from repulsion to gratitude, from attention to distraction, and then back again: it spiralled, such that there was nothing there to exhaust, it was endless the way a road might be, so that work followed him after hours, journeying home and carried by its absence, to leave labour present, now, as he walked through the hallway to his bathroom and sat and defecated, anticipating and then enjoying the subsequent din of his micturition, which prompted him to recline for ten minutes afterwards, narcotised in a state of satisfying emptiness, his thoughts winding through fragments of pop songs and television programmes, baking and holidays, until gradually they refocused on work, which Joseph – whose legs ached and whose ankles throbbed – did not

wish to attend but which he thought could be worse, and, indeed, he supposed, previous jobs had been worse: at least at the warehouse he was not obliged to engage his emotions or to lie, as was previously asked of him, and, when he thought on, his job, working in such a vast building for a truly global organisation, had much to commend it: the work had the feel and look of openness, extendibility, accessibility, publicness, repeatability, equanimity, directness, immediacy, and it had been formed by clear decision rather than groping craft and this was appreciable, he thought, as he moved into the living room and collapsed on the couch, where he surveyed the sparsely furnished apartment, rendered minimal because Rebecca had owned and taken most of the characterful things in the flat, and because he had not sought replacements: Rebecca had taken a large, inherited grandfather clock, several framed paintings and a vast array of decorative knick-knacks and souvenirs: in short, she had reclaimed everything that could be posited on a continuum between the monument and the ornament, and thus there was little to distinguish this flat from any of the building's others; the remaining furniture, which Joseph now sat amongst, had been included in the rental of the apartment and displayed a sort of impersonal and generic wipe-down shininess chosen by the landlord: a collocation of laminated, mirrored and plastic objects that all signified some sense of modernity, but which were, Joseph

assumed, designed to be as inoffensive and as market-friendly and as empty as possible, exhibiting an apparent soullessness, which, at this juncture in his life, he found strangely comforting, feeling that their form offered a modicum of solace from his relationship difficulties, for, when placed in the context of his life with Rebecca – in a world that had been structured around years of intimacy, of daily conversation and emotional involvement – which had then painfully collapsed, the furniture, in all its anonymity, felt closer to being his than any of the more meaningful objects that previously surrounded him: that is, the landlord's furniture, permanently divested of personality, was not of Rebecca, and so unlike the other decorations and objects he co-owned – which obeyed a deeply planted traditionalism with respect to their meaning – these things were not constructed around any notion of personal intention that might point directly inward: to the privacy of his or her mental space, instead, the flat's furniture made meaning a function of surface, of the external, the public, or a space that was in no way a signifier of the a priori, or of the privacy of intention: in this flat, what you saw was what you saw and that was not the ghost of Rebecca, and, on a practical level, this was what was necessary for Joseph to live, for him to come home and to wash his clothes and to cook his mediocre dinner of tinned foods and toast, which he would consume later, and in preparation for which he went to the

kitchen, there opening a cupboard and retrieving two slices of white bread and a tin of pre-cooked pasta shapes, which Joseph resolved to eat in a hour or so, but, first, he decided he would drink a coffee, so Joseph grasped a jar of Nescafe and boiled the kettle to make a drink; and, while the coffee cooled and its froth bubbled, its foam sliding on a velvety blackness, he thumbed through the pages of a free magazine, shifting his vision between a woman in a full page photograph and the spiralling liquid in his cup, pondering, as he did, just where the truth of such images actually resided: whether it was in their full-face shots, or in profile, but first, he thought, it was worth considering what such an object was: perhaps, he thought, it was a link that enabled people to pass from one subject to another and therefore live together, but, then, since social relations were always ambiguous, since his thought divided as much as it united, and since his words united or isolated by what they expressed or omitted, since an immense gulf separated his subjective awareness of himself from the objective truth he represented for others, since he constantly wound up guilty, though he felt innocent, since every event transformed his daily life, since he constantly failed to communicate, to understand, to love and be loved, and every failure deepened his solitude, since he could not escape the objectivity crushing him or subjectivity expelling him, since he could not rise to a state of being, or collapse into nothingness, he

must, he thought, must look around more than ever; the world, his fellow creature, his brother, the world alone, when revolutions were impossible and war loomed, when capitalism was unsure of its rights and the working class was in retreat, when the lightning progress of science made future centuries hauntingly present, when the future was more present than the present, when the distant galaxies were at his door: the relentless content of the world overwhelmed, and was exhausted and all felt too much for Joseph, its expanse stretching beyond comprehension at the end of work, when Joseph was weary and his head was heavy and a dull throbbing rolled around his eyes, so that he he leant against his chair and attempted to relax, closing his eyes and thinking of his evening meal, which he would soon eat and which he regarded as sustenance rather than pleasure, electing to cook the same simple meal tonight as he did most nights, and, as he sat immured in contemplation, he looked across the kitchen and noticed that the units had begun to tarnish and discolour and that a greasy outline had formed around the cutlery drawer, such that he speculated that were this his property, were he the legal owner, such ugliness would have long since been remedied: he would have maintained the flat better, and would have repaired and replaced that which required restoration with diligence and investment, taking pride in the upkeep of his personal space; though, the flat's slight decay was of little concern

to Joseph, for there had been damages even when he had first inhabited the apartment: a thumb-sized piece of veneer had splintered from the kitchen worktop, four tiles had fallen from the wall, and several of the cupboard hinges had been half-broken, such that their doors hung angled, leaving dark triangular windows when closed, regarded by Joseph as vaguely sinister and disliked, and whilst he had wanted to complain of such defects he had not done so, fearing that his objections would have sounded more intolerant than they were and that he would be alienated from the landlord, so he had held his tongue and had waited for the dull weight of practice to assuage his complaints instead, and, indeed, daily praxis had eventually filed down the extremity of his disposition, so that he now regarded the kitchen's existence as one of pure utility rather than sullied decoration, which was remarkable, since Joseph had previously held high standards of cleanliness and appearance, and, thus, he considered just how his tolerance for the room – for its tattiness and decrepitude – had been fashioned from circumstance, born of a mixture of property rights and timorousness: he had been too diffident to register his dissatisfaction with the condition of the apartment and had consequently reconciled himself to living in a visibly deteriorating flat, which was deteriorating only on account of the landlord's whims, for much as Joseph may have used the flat, much as he may have felt and lived

through it, it was not by law his and thus he could never implement substantive change to the property without prior written consent – even ungranted – such that he was unable to retile or repaint, even though the work was needed and desired by Joseph, who alone dwelt in the flat, deciding each day how it ought to be used and practiced; instead, the contract stipulated that the flat was to remain unaltered and was to be left in a condition comparable to that in which it had first been rented, so that future tenants might rent it as Joseph had, clean and clear and devoid of human residue, permitting them to believe they had stumbled into some magically new and ghostless abode, where the remnants of life had been expunged or strained below the surface, so that the months and weeks of Joseph's life in the apartment would evanesce, with his life in all its material remainder legally bound for erasure, as use without memory, a tenancy as apparition; yet, then, upon consideration of this predicament, Joseph concluded that the procedure was far more complicated, because, if the owner had wanted to maintain the apartment's spotlessness, they would have had to have conducted the minor repairs Joseph wanted, since these left undone betrayed its use; and, besides, Joseph had left so many miniscule traces of his life in this building that it could never be cleansed completely: his footsteps had thinned the floorboards in the hall, his bedframe had grazed, scratchily, against the wallpaper,

and his cooking had deposited fatty splodges, dotted across the kitchen's eggshell paintwork; and the litany of blemishes continued, to the extent that Joseph failed to see how he could ever be disentangled from the flat, whether by landlord or by other and so he thought that it was a madness to attempt such dislocation, even if those involved involved in the next lease or sale of the flat would inevitably pretend to do so, for everyone – buyers, sellers, lawmakers, and even he himself – was a mystic rather than a rationalist now, and they believed that their powers extended back into history, into the death mask of the past, where they could force the flat, as commodity, to begin its life afresh with the ring of a cash register whenever they saw fit; though, ultimately, they could not: the sediment lingered, and the materiality of the building divulged that which had gone before, whispering and wearing the dead labours of yesterday, such that Joseph now thought any pretence of newness bizarre, yet he supposed there must have been a time when this had not been the norm, when it had been accepted that others would live alongside that which was not theirs and that things would be blended with persons, moving in and out of lives in motions and diversions, in a swerve that people merely responded to, as citizens accommodated the strange changing of things and of history with propriety and honesty, such that, then, staring, he considered the kitchen table at which he had sat hundreds of times before and

upon which he had eaten and cried and laughed, and he wondered what would become of it once it was not his, when it was rented or sold, thinking of how it was to be traded without remembrance of him, as new and treated as if it was something entirely different to that which it was before, acquiring an amnesia in exchange much the same as when it first left the factory, whereupon, it stood on its head, and there then evolved out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it had begun to dance of its own free will: ideas of independence and power, of constancy and selfhood, which Joseph felt had somehow stuck upon the world and were now lodged in the bowels of consumer and consumed alike, and he thought of this as he looked at the kitchen and surveyed its walls and its floor and its ceiling, which though largely white and cream felt somehow claustrophobic and close at this moment, seeming to press inwards in a constriction that left him unusually absorbed in context, the room collapsing to render Joseph almost indistinguishable from his environment: it was as though he could touch every inch of his kitchen at once, his body co-extensive with the dimensions of the room, but, then, as his experience of closeness approached its climax, as the room's volume approached nothingness, a rumble of hunger rose from his belly and the walls halted and receded, and that gap that had closed – between subject and setting, which was the normal state of things – was reinstated,

such that he felt small and alone, so that he looked to the bread and pasta on the work surface and decided to start cooking, and thus without fuss Joseph, who was long accustomed to eating alone, prepared his evening meal, toasting bread for several minutes while pasta warmed on the hob, and he ate it hastily, barely tasting the food as he emptied his plate into his stomach, shovelling until he was full and sated, after which he stood and washed his crockery and saucepan and made himself a cup of tea, which he carried to the living room and reclined with to watch the television, flicking between a novelty game show and a documentary on current affairs or economics or something similar, until owing to fatigue, he decided to just watch the game show, its rhythm deemed to be an altogether more mindless metre that required less of his thought and focus and meant that he could disengage from the endless rumination that had plagued him since work: his thoughts of self-reproach, of objectivity, of the function of design, of the commodity form, of work and its material consequences: it all diminished, quietened, as Joseph basked in the blue light of the television and permitted himself to be overcome by waves of vicarious experience and feigned sensations, giggles and gasps washing over him and painlessly eroding the hours before work, ensuring that he thought about nothing but the show at hand; so he settled and watched until his worries were forgotten, stopping only because he was

simply too tired to view any more: his eyelids had begun to droop and his face was weighted down, and a nascent headache – a buzzing sensation that had lurked under forehead throughout the evening – had developed to the point where Joseph believed the only possible remedy to be sleep, and so he rose from the sofa and walked to the bathroom and hurriedly brushed his teeth and undressed, folding his clothes and plugging in his phone before putting on his nightclothes and preparing for slumber, such that Joseph, overcome by lassitude, cleared his head of all ideas – of difficulty and of struggle and of what the week ahead might hold – and he rolled his eyes around the heavy blackness of his skull, stretching his arms before finally removing his watch to lie and sleep a dreamless sleep, in his soft, clean bed, where some months later he would wake and end his life, hanging with windows thrown open, sunlight tickling the floorboards and whispers on the breeze, speaking, “welcome, Joseph: here is home and tomorrow is over.”

Mirror, wood, lamp base, lamp shade, cup, saucer, biscuits
95 x 60 x 60cm
2017



Front



Back

Layla, who would in future acquire employment in advertising, awoke one weekday morning to find herself late for college, and though under such circumstances she would ordinarily rush to the bathroom, her bladder bloated and sagging, today she wallowed torpidly below duvet for fifteen minutes, drowsing until the second alarm sounded, whereupon, she rolled over and begrudgingly opened her eyes to greet a striated pattern of streaked sunlight filtered through the blinds, coruscant on the coarse paint of her bedroom wall, leaving slim regular oblongs of silver wriggling in the breeze, which she observed, as if somehow other than vapid and humdrum, before rising from bed and dressing into an outfit of unwashed, though neither creased nor dirty clothes: a pair of tight fitting charcoal jeans, a beige marl vest and a navy blue cardigan, to which she would later add grey socks and tattered plimsolls, and so stirring and largely, clothed she meandered to the toilet and urinated before walking downstairs, to where the draughty hard of the floorboards licked her feet as she tiptoed across the living room, beyond her sleeping stepfather, to step into the kitchen, there preparing a breakfast of unbranded cornflakes topped with granulated sugar and milk, which she chumbled slowly and methodically until only a puddle of pale pumpkin tinged liquid remained, left to sit, dreggy and stale, as she proceeded to boil the kettle for warm tea, though, quickly, she decided otherwise, fearing

that the whirr would perturb her stepfather – and aware that a hot drink would render her late for her college – so she grabbed a glass, translucent in the absence of soap, with pallid smears seemingly etched its inside, and she hurriedly filled it with frigid tap water, imbibing in long steady gulps until she felt full and refreshed and ready to make her way to the bathroom, where she brushed her teeth and washed her face, running a saturated flannel over soft glabrous skin as she prepared for her familiar routine of concealer and eyeliner and mascara and lipstick, undertook unthinkingly, as she automatically crafted a countenance that struck a happy balance between nature and artifice, for Layla aspired to an insouciant sort of attractiveness and hence an understated look had been refined, crafted in the belief that appearance generally degenerated as it approached the condition of theatre, in the belief that to look noticeably made up would suggest insecurity; so Layla knew exactly what she desired and could now somnabulate into her cosmetic routine, fluently performing every flick and gesture of the daily ritual, habituated so, having always sported make up in public, with such consistency that she felt unease at the mere thought of socialising without cosmetics, with face flat and lifeless, because it would be evident that she was different to that which she was before and attention would be drawn to the effort previously expended on her appearance, forcing her fiction of nonchalance to

unravel, so that whilst contemplating such ramifications she began to consider the amount of time and labour and money she had bestowed on her looks, simply for maintenance – so that she might return to her peers each day to find the self-same identity intact – and this toil, this effort, demanded by regularity, she supposed, would only expand: the hours would swell as age gripped hold and the difficulties in clinging to a stable form would mount, her bevy of beauty products would be augmented by anti-ageing, anti-wrinkle fluids and she would have to think all the more to reproduce herself, as herself, on a daily basis, without sneers or jibes, and, ultimately, it was this and not her face that she felt she was forging: the reactions of others, such that the mirror in front of her was in some regards only a substitute, a proxy, for that larger and infinitely richer mirror of her friends and her teachers, of strangers in the street and on buses, who fed her identity back to her and informed her of her function and, though she often longed to be free of such reflections and to be free of their manifold anxieties and concerns, she thought that ultimately their feedback brought clarity and goodness, because had she grown up, in some solitary place, without any communication with anyone, she could no more think of her own character, of the propriety or demerit of her own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of her own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of her own face: all of

these were objects which she could not easily see, which naturally she could not look at, and with regard to which there was no mirror which could present them to her view, but when she was brought into society, she was provided with the mirror she wanted; it was placed in the countenance and behaviour of those she lived with, which always marked when they entered into, and when they disapproved of her sentiments; and it is there that she viewed the propriety and impropriety of her passions, the beauty and deformity of her own mind, which she pondered as she finished her make up and put on her footwear, stowing her bag with paper and pens as she left, quietly closing the door before bounding off to college, walking briskly in the sun as she considered the day's classes: psychology, form period and media studies, though, upon seeing, the time she realised she would most likely arrive too late for psychology, which was first, and, irritatingly, was enjoyable, constituting her favourite class; although she found none of her subjects unenjoyable and did not regard any of her work as less worthy than anything else; rather, she maintained that her work need only be interesting, and that if work intimated a bigger idea – of selfhood or of communication or of language – then that was sufficient to maintain her enthusiasm, for Layla appreciated work in which the idea was paramount and the material form was secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious: she

showed little interest in grand projects of art or design, and instead desired only to lose herself in contemplation, which she did now as she ruminated on friends and on family and the future, such that she was deep in thought by the time she arrived at college, at nine thirty five, which, she concluded, was too late to attend the lesson, so she strolled, truant and sedate, into the building, past classrooms of students studying in unison, whose appearance pleased – because, she supposed, she had always admired the ways in which education denied the ego and individual personality, evoking, it would seem, a semihypnotic state of blank unconsciousness – such that she remained cheerful as she walked to the cafeteria, there discovering it hushed and devoid of students, so that she bought herself a slice of buttered toast and ate alone, whilst perched on a blue plastic chair, awaiting her next lesson, form period, which was almost half an hour away, and thus, with time to fritter, she perused a scuffed and faded catalogue unearthed from beneath her table, reading for some five minutes until she found herself overwhelmed by the sheer volume of stuff strewn across its pages, objects that to her seemed endless and whose origin was unexplained and whose functions were essentially uniform: there were countless pages of tables and chairs, of appliances and crockery, all of which felt fundamentally interchangeable but none of which Layla recognised from her home, such that, by the absence of her family's possessions,

she concluded that elsewhere there must be further, additional catalogues too, filled with untold numbers of other commensurate products, whose dimensions and colours and materials differed slightly but which had been amassed to fulfil kindred domestic roles; and hence, surveying this ostensibly infinite market, Layla for the first time felt the wealth of society present itself to her as an immense accumulation of commodities, its unit being a single commodity, available for trade and exchange, such that, should she accrue the requisite funds, she could acquire these objects of immeasurable variety, prompting her to imagine the purchases she might make when older and furnishing her own home, thinking of the possessions she would prefer given different levels of future income: the most tasteful decorations for her rich, poor and middle-income self, in the manifold lifestyles she might live surrounded with such things; though, much as she recognised the products on display, she thought, these were ultimately products of which she had little if any direct knowledge, and so she had no little sense of the sort of world they might beget, and thus she felt that what really lay in front of her was not a multitude of commodities, useable and tangible, but only a conglomeration of images: she was looking at paper, laden with ink, replete with full colour photographs captured from lustrously lit studios, where filters had been applied and images manipulated too, by someone somewhere, such that

the pictures were orchestrated to convince her of a world better and bolder than felt, beyond or before her lived experience, so that Layla wondered whether it had always been that images arrived prior to an object's use or whether there had been a point at which life had changed – perhaps with the introduction of catalogues or photography – for it seemed to her that the whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevailed presented itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles, meaning that all that was once directly lived had been diverted into representation, and these spectacles, she conjectured, were not just pictures either: they were sets of social relations among people, mediated by images: the appearance of the catalogue items had been conceived to elicit affect, fear and desire in their viewers, and they established a link between observer and image-maker, between the buyer and seller and between the powerless and powerful too, and it was within this web of relations that Layla remained as the school bell chimed, declaring that a new period had begun and that it was time to move; and so she rose and ambled towards her scheduled lesson, deciding that although the classroom lay on the other side of the campus she would walk slowly, hoping to avoid excessive interactions with classmates, whom Layla thought of without fondness as she wandered through fluorescent lit corridors, shining and redolent of industry, until she came to an outside area,

over which she strolled before reaching another building to locate the room in which she was due, which was stuffed with chattering voices and liveliness and had desks arranged in a horseshoe formation, as was standard throughout the college, for it seemed that staff had at some point agreed that such a design was most conducive to student attainment – which was here paramount – and had accordingly positioned the tables in a U-shape around the centre of the space, in a formation that was generally regarded as a marvellous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produced homogeneous effects of power, allowing for easy discipline and communication, and meaning that if one was tardy, as today Layla was, everyone would see, and thus Layla, whose seat lay on the other side of the classroom, felt compelled to scurry across in full view of her fellow students, in front of the whiteboard and over a ridged brown carpet, festooned with polkadots of blackened gum, to arrive at a desk whose surface was adorned with a small calligraphic graffito biroed onto the polished MDF, and whose veneer had begun to peel, and at which, after sitting, she retrieved her pen and sketchbook for the lesson, though upon seeing that none of her peers had done likewise she pushed them aside and faced forward to observe her form tutor, a young man with a trimmed auburn beard, who was stood in conversation with a police officer, whom Layla reasoned would be introduced to the

group to discuss drugs or the ideal of community or the prospects of a life in the force or some other nonsense that she did not want to hear, distrusting the police from her prior experience, such that she scrutinised the officer in front of her, who stood confidently and proudly, wearing heavy blue trousers and a meticulously pressed white shirt with short sleeves and dark epaulettes, distinguished from his torso and from the sickly pallor of his face, topped as it was with a hoary blanket of greased hair; and so, as the officer was introduced and addressed the room, in the dull tones of institutional exordium, Layla reached for her pen and paper and began to doodle, scribbling with such concentration that she remained oblivious to any noise, for she refused to imbibe a word that this pudgy, uniformed oaf disgorged, knowing it would only contain lies and deceit, such that she merely drew, constructing an intricate, inky pattern of abstract shapes on her notepad whilst the rest of the room listened intently, and though she could barely hear the man, she could, nevertheless, discern that he was elaborating the public suspicion of the police and the unacknowledged virtues of the force, in response to which she almost guffawed, there tempted to stand and repudiate, point by point, the lies expounded; though she did not, because, she thought, it would only be dismissed as querulous or callow, as the rant of one unfamiliar with the workings of the world, from a young woman who cavilled only for

the sake of chaos, so she remained silent in the hope she would be picked on to answer a question, on the police or as to why they were so loathed, to which she would gladly respond, enumerating the countless, profound reasons, more reasons than could easily be pulled from memory, so that she would say that it was because of racial profiling and because of murders in custody, it was because accounts of rape and assault that had been disbelieved and because vulnerable women had been humiliated, forced to relive their own brutalization through the medium of brutality; it was because the police revelled in unwarranted aggression, and it was because they were torturous and violent, which was wrong itself but was worsened by the punishment of those whose whiteness remained in doubt; it was because they were corrupt, it was because of the certainty of favouritism whenever called to account; it was because of Stephen Lawrence and because of Blair Peach and because of Ricky Reel and because of the masses of bodies that had been blamed for their own deaths to save the skin of careerist men who devised fictions as real bodies screamed and bled and died; and it was because kind migrants and refugees had been detained and threatened in front of their families, and because starving men were imprisoned for taking from the greedy and it was because strikes by decent people for decent demands had been undermined; it was because of Jean Charles de Menezes and because of Rocky Bennett and because of

James Ashley, and because of Kinglsey Burrell and because of Mark Nunes and because of Richard O'Brien and because of Leon Briggs and because of Ricky Bishop and because of Mark Duggan, and because of Joy Gardner and because of Harry Stanley and because of Seni Lewis and because of Christopher Alder, and because of Sheku Ahmed and because of Michael Brown and because of Smiley Culture and because of Ian Tomlinson, and because of Michael Powell and because of Simon Murden and because of Sean Rigg and because of Cherry Groce, and because of Aston Mclean and because of Adrian Thompson and because there were too many more names on top of these that Layla could not summon to mind, though all were too real, and it was because she hated herself for her inability to memorialise lives that had been stolen – with impunity – from friends and from families that grieved in agony, never to be granted justice; and it was because there had been more than five hundred people killed in police custody and not one person convicted; it was because of Orgreave; it was because of people caged in prisons, it was because of protestors who fighting for truth or for fairness had been beaten and mocked and treated like cattle; it was because of undercover detectives that lied and ruined honest lives; it was because of Hillsborough, and because of CS gas, and because of rubber bullets and because the Independent Police Complaints Commission was in no way independent; and it

was because of stop and search and because of the assumption of an automatic right to her biological data, because, in the name of security, they could and would suspend their law; it was because they had no respect for privacy and because they resolutely refused to countenance the psychological stresses of constant surveillance; it was because the police divulged private information to rapacious media corporations and because they kept the homeless from claiming shelter in empty dwellings; it was because they cared more about the consumption of recreational drugs than the mass expropriation of wealth; and it was because, ultimately, the police were the unwavering foot soldiers of a tepid mediocrity, who defended a miserable status-quo, and this would never change, and the only positive claim she could, if pushed, make for the police was that they were feebler than generally presumed: of course, they possessed inordinate physical force, but they had no mechanism by which to protect against widespread desires, for justice or fairness, and, in Layla's mind, it was this, desire that would one day topple the police, for every position of desire, no matter how small, was capable of calling into question the established order of a society: not that desire was asocial, on the contrary; but it was explosive; there was no desiring-machine capable of being assembled without demolishing entire social sectors, and the police were but one sector that would be destroyed, and Layla thought about this and

thought of saying it aloud to the class but she knew that the police officer and the room would most likely contend that she had confused reality with imagery: they would say that, on the ground, life was much different to the common pictures of constraint and authoritarianism evoked, though Layla knew it was not, that it was filthier and dirtier, and moreover she knew it was the police who in fact traded in metaphor, arousing ideas of order and health and of the overcoming evil to buttress against popular will, and so Layla decided that she was in some sense out to rip out the metaphors, especially those that had to do with “up”, as well as every other whiff of transcendence, for she wanted to amend the terms of debate and expose to others just what exactly the police were, materially and immanently, in the world as it stood; but she kept her thoughts to herself and sat noiselessly as the lesson – which consisted of the policeman’s speech, a question and answer session, and a series of small group exercises – elapsed, pondering the things she would say were she pushed into debate, such that by the time the class had finished she had refined watertight articulate retorts to the hypothetical statements her interlocutors might make, though they made none, and Layla too said nothing until the end of period bell, upon which she stood and quickly made her way to the door and departed into a fine and clement day, aware that break had begun and that to avoid interacting with her friends,

with whom she did not particularly wish to engage, she ought to leave the college site, which she did, striding beyond the charcoal gates and toward the cornershop, where she passed an unfranchised and cheap fried chicken outlet and a dilapidated Victorian terrace whose buildings stood in various states of disrepair, with some showing boarded windows and others overgrown gardens, which she speculated would soon be scoured and renovated as the burgeoning buy-to-let market devoured the properties and spewed them out, fragmented, as beige and laminate flats, which, Layla concluded, she would not actually mind inhabiting herself, despite her qualms: they were preferable to her mother's house, they were private and adult and, because of their location, they would allow her to wander into town at a moments notice, to bars and shops, and they were situated opposite a newsagents, and that alone rendered them more convenient than her present abode, which, it seemed, was isolated and sequestered from anything she might want, such that she dwelt on its seclusion as she approached the door of the store and placed her hand on the glaucous metal frame to swing it open, acknowledging the shop's familiar bleep as she trudged towards the long lines of soft drinks assembled in the fridge, there perusing an almost exhaustive array of carbonated beverages, skimming her eyes over coke and sparkling water and cherryade and cream soda, and loud tropical cans and dark malt

drinks in glass bottles too, stood next to white pints of milk and emerald aloe vera infused liquids that she concluded she did not want, eventually deciding upon a grapefruit-flavoured beverage, which was inexpensive and which she took to the front of the store to purchase, handing two twenty pence pieces to the shopkeeper as she caught a waft of the day old samosas perched on the counter, thanking the attendant before softly exiting to the road, where, with quarter of an hour until class began, she put in earphones to wile away time, browsing music downloaded to her phone before settling on an album of ambient electronic music for the circuitous route to campus, such that with heavy white-noise laden sounds pulsating in her ears Layla meandered close to college, absorbing nearby sights of garish billboards and litter-speckled bushes, calibrating the music and her pacing with images passed, as if directing a film, so that, for a brief period, she heard with her eyes and saw with her ears, transforming her journey into a strange cinematic realm, undeniably other to the absolute space of her regular journey, for her ears, which normally informed her of the world behind her and beyond her eye line, had been diverted from their usual function, as the music cocooned her, positing Layla at the centre of an altogether different place where she saw the world as flatter, as a screen, with only one side and where, without knowledge of its reverse, she achieved distance from her habitual

environment, rested in an altered, monadic stretch, and she thought about the ways in which this allowed her to see the world anew and removed her from it, contemplating whether she had stumbled upon something radical or retreative: whether the exit from regular life constituted a form of escapism, a wilful ignorance of the faults of the world, or whether it offered a position from which to grasp the ugly truth of reality and to effect change, and thus her mind there projected countless possibilities, considering the division here posited between inside and outside and the manner in which this new internal space, proffered by her earphones, was, only graspable as internality from the knowledge of its outside, and how that outside too was only intelligible from another position of distance; and so the constitution of this bubble, her sonic cocoon, struck her as a complex and contradictory affair, and she continued to reflect thereupon as she placed her empty can in a litter bin and wandered through the college gates, into the building where break had finished and where a handful of students remained, loitering and chatting in the corridors, speaking of pleasures and of nothingness, as Layla passed to head for the library, in which, she decided, she would use her free period to catch up on outstanding homework, arriving to find that it too was almost deserted with no more than ten students at work, listening to music as they wrote at square wooden tables, arranged so that roughly six people might sit,

secluded and surrounded by shoulder-height book shelves, which Layla passed before securing an empty desk, there opening her frayed media studies file to examine her homework: “preparation for major project”, which was on this occasion a music video and which was work that her teacher had failed to delineate clearly, having never articulated exactly what was required of the class by next lesson, so that Layla pondered what she ought to do, quickly concluding that she would simply write a description of the piece she had imagined, her task being ambiguous in the absence of definite instruction, though, ultimately, she reasoned, almost anything would suffice: she may construct the piece, the piece may be fabricated, or the piece need not be built; it really mattered little in this instance, for her teacher, a nearly glamorous woman approaching retirement, was ostensibly uninterested in her students achievement and would not mind if Layla arrived with no work at all; but that was unlikely since Layla generally acquiesced with college demands, and was in some regards a model pupil, rarely questioning and always striving for high marks, and she did this in large part because she loathed the experience of castigation – from her parents or from teachers or from anyone – to the extent that, to escape such reproof, she had resolved to work as hard as possible on her studies, rendering herself immune from criticism and discipline; however, in so doing, Layla realised, she had not evaded

discipline at all, but had incorporated its logic, internalising obedience, such that now, without any semblant threat of blame or sanction, she felt a creeping sense of angst at the thought of unfinished or poorly executed work, and in this sense, she realised, she had adopted the chastisement of authority, such that she self-monitored and self-disciplined as a responsible discrete individual, accountable for successes and failures, her pleasures and sufferings, such that she dwelt upon the construction of this individualism as she sat at her table, staring at her work and gazing at the bookshelves enclosing her, there finding herself again overwhelmed by the sheer volume of stuff; there must be thousands of books, she thought, as her eyes roamed, with millions of sentences and perceptions printed and bound on paper, encircling her now, leaving her unable to imagine any sort of outside-text, which was far from a negative condition, for the library appeared to her as a world of possibilities, with each book a destination or a potential journey beyond the weary repetitions of convention, inviting her to imagine the myriad expeditions in which students, as argonauts, had clambered deep into caves of alterity and otherness; though, quickly, she then concluded, this was likely a foolish romanticism, for only a fraction of these books had ever been read or loaned: those which were set as texts for exams, or which came with direct recommendations from staff, like the psychology literature she had borrowed herself,

so that she came to contemplate how, given the range of possibilities – given the fantastical mixings of books and ideas that might ignite revolutionary fire – the reality was predictable and student life was comparably drab, its thoughts formulaic and compulsive, such that education appeared to her now as little but an enormous machine of intellectual conformity: a cast or mould into which flesh was injected only to be discharged as homogenous; though, flip-flopping, she then supposed, this was perhaps mere conjecture too: she had no idea what thoughts had been dreamt in this room or what fantasies had been triggered, for much as the same books were digested, with little deviation, they were digested in innumerable different ways: no two readers are identical, she thought, and, when they read, the intentions are different, the results are different, so is the experience, and, thus, she felt, that even those things that appeared most standardised, most uniform in their outward appearance, in fact harboured a capacity for otherness and estrangement, with their insides cloaked from plain view, such that Layla completed her homework with a positive disposition, enthused at the prospect of a world replete with total strangeness, undertaking her assignment with care and alacrity until the bell chimed again, whereupon she packed her things and left the library, removing her earphones as she walked buoyantly through the college to the cafeteria in which she greeted her friends and ate her

lunch of homemade cheese sandwiches and crisps, which she enjoyed and which sated her hunger as she smiled and chatted, adjusting her volume to match that of the resonant clangour of the hall, where Layla and her company remained for an hour or so, in spite of the noise, straining to hear one another in a jocund mood, allaying their anxieties and speaking only of happy things, of entertainment and of travel, of the days and weeks that lay ahead, which would arrive later, in silence and in blindness, on hot days and in fog, unravelling like yarn until one day they did not.

Mirror, wood, lamp base, lamp shade, cup, saucer, biscuits
95 x 60 x 60cm
2017

