



*What follows is an extract from a conversation between Claire Decomps and the artist Ben Jack Nash which took place at his studio in Strasbourg in April 2018.*

*Claire Decomps is based at the MAHJ museum in Paris. She is principle curator and analyst for Jewish culture and heritage in France (a national department specifically set up under André Malraux) and for several years she worked for the Eastern French region (Le Grand Est). She is officially the only person in France with this specific expertise. Her focus covers both architectural and object based heritage, in public and private spheres covering all historical periods.*

*Ben Jack Nash is a British installation artist based in Strasbourg. The conversation was recorded for publication in the exhibition catalogue in advance of his most ambitious project to date 'Les Résidus du vide' (Leftover from the void') which takes place in an abandoned synagogue in Reichshoffen in rural Alsace.*

*In particular they discuss how objects, artefacts and architecture whilst at the core of both their work is seen and used by them from two very distinctive viewpoints.*

*A full version complete with images is available in the exhibition catalogue.*

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**Claire Decomps:** The idea of what is 'heritage' is one which has greatly developed over the years, even since I have been working in this department. For example, when I started my job we were already interested in rural situated architecture and heritage but only up to 1850. Today, our research covers everything up to the present day. We also introduced new fields such as industrial and material heritage. My field has significantly evolved and continues to do so.

**Ben Jack Nash:** Its not only a building which forms part of heritage but also the objects which are found within them. For me one informs the other - space and objects are physically connected on the one hand and symbolically on the other but equally through their connection with memory. How, in your work do you distinguish between what is defined as architecture and what is defined as object?

**CD:** The object/architecture distinction is not always obvious. In a synagogue for example, an ark of the covenant made from stone is embedded into the architecture. Are the foundation stones architecture or

object? This distinction is not fundamental in what I do. It is important from a legal point of view - for the purpose of conservation. In general it is considered that if it's attached to a building/ edifice then it is part of the architecture. But for a study, it is not fundamental. When we do a [site] study, we don't separate out architecture and objects as in other countries but we study the objects according to their context. For example is a succah an object, or is this architecture?

It's a temporary shelter for the festival of tabernacles, what's important is the roof, the idea that you must be able to see the stars and not be protected from the rain. In theory it's really a construction but which has a lot of modification. There are examples of lofts which have been modified and branches put in place of the actual roof for the period of the festival. In this case, its semi-permanent and it is an architectural solution. What is important in the succah is that people must build the shelter themselves, a very temporary shelter, and you appreciate the difficulty with living without protection.

**BJN:** The nineteenth century was the museums' golden age and a symbol of state power. Many site specific artworks were removed from their intended place and put into museums. None of these works were conceived for the museum space and often the artist knew their artwork's destination before making it. We see this in particular with religious paintings. As such these art museums can be seen as artifices. Nowadays, it is far more common to find contemporary works of art commissioned for the museum space. Often we remember the space in which we've seen a work as well as the work itself. In 'Les Résidus du Vide', we see the opposite. Instead of changing our impression of the work by putting it in an alternative space, it changes our impression of the space through the work. If you take it elsewhere it loses its meaning. It is an architectural intervention which means that the artwork / the art object has a very direct even inseparable relationship even from its environment. For the synagogue, it is a most authentic product whereby its authenticity lies in its uncertainties. Its more natural to think about the object and space not as two separate entities nor as one single entity

but as a spectrum of entities as with colour. Its more a series of overlaps. And this spectrum contains everything which influences our perception of the building from the architecture to the sunlight to the objects. These exchanges and influences in the space are not limited to the architectural borders.

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**CD:** For us one of the main interests is the study of objects. In museums you don't necessarily know the origin off an object. We essentially study objects that have a connection with the building where they're found. How did it get there and why? In relation to Jewish heritage many objects are extremely mobile. Its people have moved around a lot with many upheavals throughout history. Many buildings were destroyed and their objects were randomly dispersed. For example in Thionville the harmonium was made in Vermont USA which is somewhat unexpected. I often find [in France] objects that come from North Africa, Poland, the Hungarian Empire and of course Germany - there's something from everywhere. What's interesting is how these objects ended up where they did. There is a whole range of analytical factors, including artistic and the more you know about an object the more important this can be.

**BJN:** I see your role as a 'materialiser' of objects. You carry out a study to determine their influence, role and importance for heritage. Effectively, before your analysis, the object may exist only in the abstract as something mysterious whereby its origins and functions are little known. You are there to bring them to light and make them understandable vis-à-vis science, logic or witnesses to fill in the voids. I see the artist's role more the opposite. I also want to in a way make the world more visible but by reinstating an abstract dimension of the object which creates a universe of imagination and mystery through its void. Once the provenance of an object is explained, it becomes difficult to think about it any other way.

**CD:** When talking about objects there is a very subjective side. My work attempts to provide coherence

where there is mystery. There is very little contact with the public in my work, but when I have the opportunity to meet them, they teach me something about the object. For example, I met some people who make the bundles for Torahs; I have an historical approach, through standards etc... but they can tell me what meaning it has for them, knowing that this meaning may have changed. Normally, these bundles are made by scribes or calligraphers but here they were made by women for their families. It was an (Ashkenazi) tradition in the Rhine region but these women were Sephardi, where children from a different culture fabricated them. This knowledge around objects is still evolving.

**BJN:** I have never created a work which has a practical function. It's more the form, relationship with light, limits of the material and aura which I undertake to communicate. The practical function of the object has very little value for me.

**CD:** In Jewish culture, function takes precedence over form. It is a culture of books and the written word but which carries little importance regarding form and material. Every time, it is an adaptation according to the conditions of the location. What will define an object as Jewish is its use. But the same object could well be used differently in another context. We see this in the synagogue in Reichshoffen - the basin which was part of a bain-marie or the candelabre which was partly made from the bases of sewing machines. The question I always ask myself is what is the object's purpose. For example, a cup could have a number of different functions. Fortunately, there is often a biblical inscription or a document from the donator to understand it's function. If there is nothing to go on, I will try to understand how it was used. Many Jewish objects, in synagogues, were donated within the community... If I see an object outside of its context, I don't study it. But I have seen Christian chalices used as a kiddush cup.

**BJN:** In contemporary art, the usual things which help define an object as an 'artwork' have become more interchangeable and harder to separate out. Namely,

the maker, its environment, the subject, the process, the material, the curator the spectator and the exhibition space. These overlaps make the artwork less visible and identifiable from its time and space compared to more traditional distinctions. The work can be the sum total of multiple objects. The art object then requires more context and indications, such as those contained in your studies, in order for it to be defined as an artwork. I think that archaeologists will find it harder in the future to identify today's artworks!

**CD:** Objects move around and this is complicated. In the case of Reichshoffen, certain objects by themselves would not carry much interest but it is its totality which makes it coherent. What really moved me, as it is very illuminating on 19th century Jewish Alsace, is all the homemade DIY objects. These recycling of objects are characteristic of the Jewish world. Here, we find many objects from the De Dietrich foundry. This is most interesting and unexpected which shows this relationship with the object which is very different to what you find in a church.

The object has a presence which imposes itself on you, even if it is disturbing and you do not wish to find it there. The object will be far stronger than archive documents or discussion. Often the objects we work on are under valued even looked down on. It's rarely the case in Jewish heritage that there is an affective attachment to an object. We try to find this interest in objects for their owner. Here you could say we have an educational role.

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**BJN:** For me the loss in certainty of an artwork corresponds to the loss of certainties in society and of our perceptions of space and time. Their limitations over the last hundred years have moved faster than in any other period of human history. Identity loses its familiarity which provides us with comfort and security. Sociologically, the same goes for people as it does for objects. We are seeing the political consequences of this now. We are being moved towards more extremism to reinforce a less visible centre. The uncertainty surrounding this building's function

as a synagogue is one of the things which struck me on my first visit, it was if you like a confused identity. You have to pay greater attention to the detail to avoid being fooled by its chapel like outline. It also carries a presence of permanence whilst being discreet and fragile...

**CD:** The synagogue is oriented towards Jerusalem and this creates a problem with regards its visibility. We see the lateral facade, the compass determines the positioning of the synagogue. It is a large synagogue with great quality. It is lucky not to have been destroyed and burnt down during the second world war. It is in good condition. Early synagogues closely resembles churches or temples. Here, it is noticeably discreet. This is an Alsatian trend which you don't see in Lorraine or Champagne-Ardennes. It is open yet discreet, a half-way house.

**BJN:** This is a phenomenon which also exists in relation to the objects. Either their function is not at all evident, or they are mixed up with other materials, shapes or uses. It is clearly constructed during a moment of transition for the jewish community. The building carries a sense of permanence whilst its uncertainties are also very present.

**CD:** This solidity also speaks to something else. The synagogue is too big in relation to the size of the village. The period it was constructed was in the golden age for rural Jewish communities. They were planning for a larger community but many in fact moved away to the city or abroad. They foresaw a future which never happened. In 1850, it is an intermediary stage, where the Jewish community is still perceived as other on its way to being accepted. The larger and more visible the building, the greater the community has become accepted.

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*For more information on the artist and the exhibition please visit [www.benjacknash.com](http://www.benjacknash.com)*

*For more information on the work of the MAHJ please visit [www.mahj.org](http://www.mahj.org)*