Avoiding objects

curated by Alice Suits

“Animals are divided into: a) belonging to the emperor; b) embalmed; c) tame, d) sucking pigs, e) sires, f) fabulous, g) stray dogs, h) included in the present classification, i) frenzied, j) innumerable, k) drawn with a very fine camel hair; l) ectopera, m) having just broken the water pitcher, n) that from a long way off look like flies.”

In his enquiry into the basic principles of Western thinking, Michel Foucault tells how he roared with laughter on reading these words of Borges: it is a laugh that has shaken the foundations of our knowledge since. This is because Borges’s Chinese encyclopedia, while striking us as absurd, only is so if we judge it according to the rules we have drawn up for arranging the things that surround us. But every classification system, whether based on reason or intuition, is equally valuable in deciphering the order of things that will never betray its secret. When Alice entered the world behind the looking-glass, she often thought that the things she encountered there were irrational, because they didn’t tally with how she had been taught things should be. But a looking-glass world where cause and result are reversed, so that the queen’s finger bleeds before she is pricked and the mountain becomes more distant the more you run towards it, is no longer absurd if we accept it on its own terms.

The poet Lautremont, pseudonym of Isidore Ducasse, gave us the image of “the fortuitous encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.” It prompted Man Ray to make a sculpture he called the Enigma of Isidore Ducasse. It consists of a sewing machine wrapped in a piece of cloth tied with a string. On it is a card on which is written in three languages, “Do not disturb!” But what is it we are not supposed to disturb? What is the secret that lurks beneath this cloth? Jacques Lacan discovered the answer one day when he went fishing and suddenly noticed a can of sandines gazining at him from under the sea. The danger here is not Medusa’s turning us to stone; no, it is Humpty Dumpty we see reflected, broken into hundreds of pieces that cannot be put together again. For centuries people have endeavored to avert this danger by silencing the gaze of things, in a gradual process of disenchantment to rid the world of all mystery. The material world has become framed in a window through which one can view it as lord and master from a safe distance. Man had proclaimed himself the measure of things. But when night falls and windows turn into mirrors, we become aware that the thousands of things that surround us are watching us. These are glances we only felt when we were children, when chairs could pounce on us from behind at any moment, when a boiling kettle bewitched the soup ladle with its whistling and when crossing a carpet was a perilous journey, as it was for the boy in Roald Dahl’s story.

“Juli Kooiwegh
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Photo credits: Stan Rosi, David Tudor, Jeffrey Sturges, Man Ray and Liebaek Knud-M现实 Roosen.
“Avoiding Objects” are flirtatious and seductive. They want to be seen, to be caressed and listened to. What they avoid is the way we only see them as a means to a human end. These objects are in revolt against the shallowness of human significance, they refuse to be incorporated in our rational system of classification. They are more at home in Borges’s encyclopedia or in the world behind the looking-glass where Alice has her adventures. To escape our clutches, these objects cloak themselves in new guises that we might call their poetic power. Man Ray for instance could only reveal the mystery hidden in an object by concealing it.

A work by Merijn Bolink consists of a fan and a cabinet, called Reciprocal Adultery. At first sight there is nothing strange going on. But what is it supposed to be, this betrayal perpetrated in the relation between a fan and a cabinet? And then we see just how intimate this relationship is, when we discover that they have taken over each other’s materials. A confusion of identities has occurred, because what is it that decides the essence of a fan and a cabinet—function or material? In a glass case there is a glove that Ann Hamilton has embroidered with the words of a poem by Susan Stewart. A glove is an artificial skin placed between our bodies and the things we touch. Just as we use language to keep the world at bay. The glove tells of gruesome murders committed by reason; the victim is our direct contact with the world. This is why Mary Carlson’s chair rejects our measurements, but this only makes it more seductive. And high above it hangs an object, very literally making its voice heard. This object is part of David Tudor’s project Rainforest IV, a sonic and visual environment in which everyday objects produce sounds due to the resonant qualities of the material of the object itself. Floors and walls too can vibrate in sympathy with the resonance of lived presence.

Ann Messner lends them an internal quality with her installation consisting of casts of the inside of her mouth. These negative spaces—passages between inside and outside, between speech and muteness—are inserted at various points in the wall. Among these artists, Donald Lipski is the supreme ‘bricoleur’. He is the collector Walter Benjamin wrote about, who picks up things on the streets and in flea markets, ordering them in unexpected combinations so that they take on new meanings. Freudian Abstracts by Cornelia Parker are photograms, the negative of feathers from the couch of Freud. Parker restores the unconscious of objects, the stories and memories that things preserve in themselves such as the heroic history of Pillow Cut by a King’s Sword, and Poet’s Crown, a gold dental crown once owned by a poet, but which set in its cushion, dreams it is meant for a king’s head. Like Proust’s madeleine—or, still more so, Freud’s couch—these objects are a doorway to a past that until that moment was closed to us. Maria Rosen’s black pupil on the wall mirrors this company of curious objects. In the same way as Jan van Eyck authorized his presence in the Arnolfini portrait, so this eye, that gives back to the world around it its own image, is a signature that these objects have been here.

All that poetic objects want is simply to be there and their presence can be disturbing. But we have to ask whether they really can do that. The fact that they are art works in a gallery means that even the most disturbing object becomes coded under the category of art. Everything that might rebuff our gaze is thus immediately made transparent again. Whether or not the material world has become a real thing in our modern age that is ever more speed-driven and immaterial in its pursuit of a technological and rational logic. In a world in which our relation to objects is dominated by a commodity economy and our experiences mediated by media imagery, direct experience is declared fiction. We do not feel the gaze of things as they stare at us, nor do we hear their voices. But Man Ray’s wooden box sees it all. Enough Rope means that humans employ their freedom only for their own destruction. This box offers us a ready-made suicide kit. But a better alternative is, with Borges, to convert our perplexity into an attitude towards the world, remaining open for the irrational and the unexpected. Job Koelwijn’s tombstone of baby powder is thus not only a monument to death, the coffin-lid at the end of every road, but at the same time that of a rebirth. This soft sweet-smelling substance arouses our more intimate senses of touch and smell, reminding us of our first encounters with the world. The resistance of “Avoiding Objects” to the world of human codes does not mean any return to an older notion of art as a transcendent object that gives access to a hidden truth. The title of Jan Fabre’s work, The earth of the ascending angels (better one fish on the dry then 10 in the sky), says it all. Fabre’s angels take the form of a mermaid, half fish, half human, her skin is made of butterflies. It is an ascent, but it remains earthbound. The material of dead beetles, metaphor for metamorphosis, creatures living off putrescence, hits up against the limits of representation. They are guardian angels of poetic space, which Fabre calls “the blue hour”, the moment of stillness between day and night when two worlds meet and things take on a mysterious, evocative power. They dwell in another world than ours, but are constantly trying to lure us. Writing of the childish terror an old man can feel when night falls, W.B. Yeats understood the disturbing presence of things:

“Fifteen apparitions I have seen
The worst a coat on a coat-hanger”

A coat-hanger? Hmm....

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Translated from the Dutch by Donald Gardner