


That Obscure (Surrealist) Object of Desire

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Where does the story begin?

With the "savage objects" collected from Africa and Oceania by Paul Eluard?

With the metronome exhibited at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York in 1932, to which Man Ray affixed a photo of Lee Miller's eye?

With Dali's first *assemblages*?

With Dada, which, before Dali, set out to capture the poetry that came, not from words, but from the refuse of the world?

With Morand? Yes, Paul Morand, whose *Clarisse*, in "*Clarisse ou l'amitié*," collects nails and knobs that remind her of "the stupid paintings" from Arthur Rimbaud's "A Season in Hell"?

French museum curator Emmanuel Guigon and writer Georges Sebbag, in a new book entitled *Sur l'objet surréaliste* (The Surrealist Object), recently published in Paris (Les Presses du Réel, November 2013), are careful not to take a position.

But, from the new reign of the object that arose in the 20 years marked by the babbling of the first Surrealists, and then by the triumph of their revolution, the authors do draw several conclusions -- perplexing, decisive -- that deserve to be pondered in this time when merchandise, and the counter-revolution that accompanies it, holds the reins.

Objects are useful, in the thinking of merchandising. It has an accepted value within the bounds of which its purpose and its essence begin and end. Not so, say the inventors of the "table-screen" and the "long-view pen holder." Some objects have no use at all. Or if they do, that use is an obscure one, one neither set nor spoken of. These are hijacked objects. Mad or ghost objects. Deeply paradoxical objects at the bottom of which lies a precious core, not of darkness but of irrationality. It is the role of the poet to find that core and bring it forth.

Objects are sparse and spare, according to the same current understanding. Man is diverse, changeable, profuse, showing infinite variation in his shapes and patterns, whereas the object is supposedly flat, boring, awkward. In such a world, there would be fewer objects than subjects -- fewer singularities in the first, monotonous universe than in the second, far-richer one. Nothing could be less certain, insist the designers of the "staircase of love" and the "aphrodisiac jacket." And perhaps there is more freedom, more multiplicity, in a landscape of objects in which one can sign snowballs with the names of Nadja, Picasso, Arp, or Tanguy than in the catalogue raisonné of the signatories themselves. Perhaps man has shown more imagination in producing objects than God showed in the creation and allocation of man's faces. Mind-blowing.

Objects are space, continues the thinking that doesn't think. The essential characteristic of their being is to have a location and to be no more than that. Heavens no! reply the discoverers of that dark continent that is the continent of savage objects. For, consistent with the principle of Marcel Jean's "Specter of the Gardenia," for example, there is an idea, a reverie, from which springs an act. Now, from dream to action, and then from action to object, there is less movement through space than there is a long and difficult journey through time. That is why, of these enigmatic and unstable objects, from De Chirico's "automations" to the star-shaped cookie reverently preserved by Raymond Roussel, it is fair to say that they have more to do with time than extent, that they are knit from the fibers of which events are made rather than those used to weave an interval or a distance. Light from live stars!

On the one hand, life (the preserve of subjects)? On the other, death -- or silence, at any rate (the fate of objects)? Well, no. Because there are so many mute lives, in which nothing happens. And so many objects which, because they are the fruit, the unveiling, of an authentic and powerful desire, carry within them the vibration, the trembling, the palpitation, of that original desire. Objects don't speak, of course. This has nothing to do with the romantic cliché of "inanimate objects endowed with a soul." But it has everything to do with mask and movement, ruses and slips of the tongue, whether they are emitters of signs, whether they make love as in René Crevel, or whether they are imbued with the sacred like the pre-Columbian black stone ax heads that fascinated André Breton -- in short, it has to do with whether there is not only a physics of objects but also a psychology. Therein lies, according to this book, another discovery of Surrealism.

What is a thing, traditional philosophy asks? Are objects, like things, "poor in world"? Of course not, answer, in unison, Tristan Tzara, Bellmer, Kurt Seligmann, and, following after them, Guigon and Sebbag. They set the spirit in motion. They charm it. They have a presence and an aura not usually possessed by things. They are another continent, truly, where the divided parts from which we thought our world was composed (matter and memory; nature and language ...) are reassembled and where blocks of meaning that, conversely, we believed to be indivisible are broken down. (An object is not a body -- unless it is a relic of a dismembered body.)

From a reading of this fascinating book, which provides an indispensable counterpoint to two exhibitions on the same theme at the Pompidou Center in Paris and the Lyon Museum of Fine Arts, one leaves with the renewed certainty that the surrealist revolution was one of mind rather than of art. Yes, it was modern art, of course. Yes, it was the starting gun for one of the greatest aesthetic upheavals of all time -- but it also redefined familiar points of reference, disoriented our imagination and our way of seeing, and produced a metaphysical shift that, as people used to say, changed man at the deepest level.

Translated by Steven B. Kennedy