

The secret life of things / Erwin Jans

Some reflections

Nothing seems to be more familiar to us than 'things'. We are surrounded by objects. They are with us always, everywhere, in all kinds of forms, sizes, colours, functions,... Some of them we need to exist and survive as individuals and as a species, others are there just for our fun and pleasure. Some objects we use often, others only once. There are objects we value highly, others have no value at all. We are submerged by objects. Modern urban civilisation has increased and accelerated the production, the consumption and the transformation of objects. Compared to the dynamics in which objects are caught, the human species seems to be almost unchanging and stable!

We have many relationships with objects. They order our world. They define our space. They give us a sense of belonging. They are our daily co-ordinates. Our GPS. We produce them, we use them, we value them, we transform them, we exchange them, we collect them, we destroy them, we recycle them,... The world is the collection of all these objects and our relationship towards them. Our whole economic system is built on the life and death cycle of objects, on the desire to possess them and on their unequal distribution among people (*the haves and the have nots!*)... Is it an exaggeration to call the world a "hell of things"? Although a certain discourse would have us believe the exact opposite: with every advertisement we are promised heaven, or at least an easier and happier life if we possess this or that object. Objects draw us into the world of desire, seduction, passion, jealousy, hatred and violence. As much as we need them to build our world, they have an alienating and destructive potential.

Tell me what you possess and I'll tell you who you are! We are defined by our possessions, socially and individually. We identify with them: house, car, furniture, clothes, jewels, art work, decorative objects,... These objects are part of the identity construction we call 'I' and 'self'. We cling to objects as to our own lives. Does this mean that we have 'more' identity or a 'stronger' identity when we possess more objects?

Objects can be read as a public diary. They tell about our status, our financial situation, our cultural taste, our place in society, but also about our desires, our fantasies, our traumas. And what does waste tell about us? Tell me what you waste and I'll tell you who you are!

When we lose an object that belonged to us, do we lose a part of ourselves? How much of ourselves do we invest in an object? Does the object take something away from us? Does something of us stick to the object? A part of our history, our identity? And why not get rid of parts of our history? Like objects, history and memory can take too much space and become an obstacle, a dead weight.

Are objects not always to a certain extent haunted, in a positive or a negative way, by their previous owners? An object that belonged to a deceased loved one, has a value for us that goes far beyond its objective value. A stolen object keeps making us feel uncomfortable as if it tells us: "I belong to another".

And what happens when we move and leave objects behind? What we call migration is the movement from one set of objects to another set of objects. What happens if our world of familiar objects is replaced by a strange world of unfamiliar objects? How many objects have to change before one starts feeling uncomfortable and a stranger? What is the object that is crucial in the shift from familiar to strange? Would that be the most important object in our life?

The exhibition of performances curated by Anat Stainberg is called 'Things' not 'Objects'. Is a 'thing' the same as an 'object'? An object is an instrument, something we can define, use and control. A thing seems to be more anonymous, more undefined and therefore more mysterious and more threatening. An object can become a thing when it loses its familiarity, when it withdraws from the daily context in which we were used to it. Things can cast a shadow. They can even disappear and still cast their shadow over our lives. They belong to a shadow world, a parallel universe of traumas and obsessions. They lose their daily function completely and are only a symbol or a symptom.

And we, human beings, can we become an object or a thing ourselves, to ourselves, to others? And if so, what does it mean, to be a Thing?

It is not by chance that Anat Stainberg chose Carla Mittersteig for her exhibition of performances. A shop full of objects that already have a history, a past. Objects that were once connected to a unique constellation of people and other objects. Now they are here, piled up and lined up, disconnected from their first environment and exposed again to the desire of new buyers and consumers, unaware of their past.

This space filled with thousands of forgotten stories hidden in these silent objects – a mortuary of THINGS – becomes the scene of performances. For a short time this shop will also be a museum, a gallery, a stage. These objects are no longer exposed just for sale, but also for contemplation. For a moment they are taken out of the infernal cycle of desire and consumption and handed over to the inner eye. We are asked to listen to their 'secret stories' which are our stories, but often the one's we forget, repress or just consider to be unimportant.