Still Life and the Economy of Things
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For a number of years, we have been working on the relationship human – object. We deal with everyday life, with the media and the economy. At the center of it lies the idea of reusing things in an artistic context: we are using them for another purpose after use.

We scan objects against a black background. In still life painting of the 17th and 18th centuries, the objects often lie on a table in a room, and the painted light falls through an often-invisible window. In our work, the light emanates from the scanner, there is no environment, meaning is solely created by the constellation of the objects. For us, the special thing about working with the scanner is that it forms a firm, physical connection with the objects: it is light, stage, floor, and recording device all in one.

When we look at the scans, we sense the end of a narrative: the economy of things, with the focus on the product that is being traded, no longer works. This narrative has no future.
In our project we work with used everyday objects, from which we are bidding farewell by reusing them. Because in a near future, a new narrative will have taken hold in which the environment will be more important than the thing itself. People will have learned to think in terms of the environment.

Many still lifes, or natura morta, have a evocative character portraying the ephemeral such as withered plants or a skull. Their message is: be aware of mortality. Our scans, too, have an evocative meaning, indicating: be aware of the limits of growth. As long as we continue to be surrounded by a myriad of things and the narrative of growth is still operative, we do exercises in empathy.

We scan smaller everyday objects, sometimes visible, sometimes hidden, lying around in our apartment, in the studio. They have not been removed yet, even though they no longer have an identifiable use for us.

They are functional and dysfunctional, useless, not worth much, quirky, original, and funny. We call them junk, stuff, clutter, jumble. They tell of a past in which we worked and lived for these things.

Our project works with old and state-of the-art technology, is a kind of empathy training with things and supports letting go of things, forgetting the narrative of growth.

Non-things (Un-Dinge) by Byung-Chul Han

According to Byung-Chul-Han, things gradually disappear, are displaced by non-things, by information. The "information noise" swallows the silence, which is inherent to the world of things. What remains is (digital) "information and communication garbage" that destroys "the discrete language of things."

"Associations" undertakes the attempt to rediscover the tangible of things and its core after its transformation in the digital world. A scanner transforms things, objects from the analog world into digital information packets, which become visible on the computer display as colored motifs against black.

The process of dematerialization – according to Byung-Chul-Han – a digital "counter-figure" whose expression in turn lacks "an indefinite fever, a delirium, an intensity, an urge, and desire that cannot be articulated." ,,We switch over to artistic practice and look at the "counter-figure" on the monitor and are touched, amazed. The arrangement of scanned garlic peels shows itself as something that can trigger a "deep attention" that Byung-Chul-Han considers possible only in the context of analog things and is quite capable of holding this significant tension in the viewer's optical perception.

The digital image as a non-thing has lost its physical body, but at the same time is able to maintain its inner nature as a virtual essence with special properties. These, conditioned by a special preparation and setting of the scanner, enable a remarkable optical enhancement of the selected objects: The spot effect in front of deep black makes things appear more valuable, as this increases the subjectively perceived color and brightness contrast and is thus able to emphasize the special characteristics of the objects (color range, surface structure, variety of shapes...).

Moreover, this impression is reinforced by an enlarged image compared to the originals.
The disappearance of the things has produced new existences here, which allow a divergent "silent" life of their own in the digital: namely as virtual counterparts, which in a special way, made possible by the current monitors with backlighting, both refer to their physical origin and are themselves the origin for subsequent processing back into "the world of things", e.g., for printouts on the most diverse materials. The scanning process as an artistic practice allows "Associations" to reach out for things and, after their disappearance, to allow them to continue to exist under other conditions (Bedingungen) – in this case digital ones. In this context, the digital image shows itself to be disembodied and at the same time thing-like in its expressive power. Bits and bytes serve, but do not dominate here.

The Revolt of Things

Cultural science and advertising support a certain perspective on the thing or object. Mostly it is emphasized in its value or function. Even the everyday handling of the object seems to be complex and contradictory. To master the objects is difficult. This mastery costs people an enormous effort. The revolt of things is one possible reaction. Spoons, cars, bridges gain a life of their own independent of man and threaten his existence. This scenario can be seen in science fiction movies when robots or clones take on a life of their own. These stories tell of our fear of things, of being dominated by them. Whether we understand our relationship to the object as competitive or combative also depends on our perception. Not solely on what we know about the object, whether we know how it works and what it means. The philosopher Bruno Latour thinks about the relationship with the objects like an archaeologist or ethnologist. He tries to let them have their say. Latour, when asked if the ball is an object, would answer, "No, an actor!"

ANT by Bruno Latour

Actor-network-work theory is a theory of science developed in the 1980s: Its subject matter is scientific research practices, the connections between technology, the social, and political processes. Bruno Latour asks how natural scientists generate knowledge. An important book is The Hope of Pandora from 1999/2000, in which Latour describes his material – for example, his field notes on pedological investigations in South America or the research of the microbiologist Louis Pasteur – in great detail. He emphasizes detail, close reading, because reality as a legible world is unstable. The bond between reality and us is fragile and fleeting, it breaks quickly. One possible way of describing this bond between man and the world is association in the form of lists. The bond is stabilized by technology. Technical actants are more stable than human ones because they are black boxes. Translation processes harden in them. If you open the black box, new associations, new translation chains emerge. We find Latour's conception of technology unusual: Here, technology has a cultural function. It shapes the social. Other theories see the bond between people as determined by tradition (folklore), culture (ethnology) or habitus (Bourdieu). With Latour, non-human actors get special attention. He turns our notion of being a subject on its head when he says that agency is distributed, that the object also acts. Latour invites environmental thinking.

Biography of Things by Sergei Tretyakov

Recently we came across the anthology On Things. The volume gathers texts by the Russian Avangardists, who in the 1920s and 1930s dealt with our everyday life between things. It seems self-evident at first that we live between things. Based on this fact, editor Anke Hennig raises questions: Can things be recognized, and if so, how? What role do the senses play in the perception of things? Why do they seem so mysterious to us, even though we made them ourselves? Why is the number of things constantly increasing, even though the individual no longer has any control over them? How did it come about that man finds himself in a world filled with things by which he is obsessed, although he cannot recognize himself in them? Anke Hennig gathers answers from artists, photographers, and writers. Sergei Tretyakov's text "The Bag" is part of the anthology About Things. In a letter published in a magazine, Tretyakov invites readers to empty their own pockets and describe the things inside. In doing so, he calls for a factographic literature. He sees himself as a producer of reportage novels and distances himself on the one hand from psychological on the other hand from bourgeois literature, the center of which is the life of the novel's hero. In its place should be the biography of things. The lives of things mirror the lives of people. People stand to the left and right of the assembly lines. Their social position is revealed by describing the path of a thing from raw material to finished product. The texts collected by Tretyakov speak about the way of the thing and the man. They are reports, letters, lists. They are documentary texts, which carry stories and fictions, but do not formulate them. They are texts of use.

Talk to me like brothers do – Biographies of Objects

For "Associations" we would like to attempt two experiments with text production. First, we would like to be alone with an object for a while in the room we presented above. There we will have an audio recorder as well as paper, pencil, and felt-tip pen at our disposal. We will record all associations. We will do research on open questions. Afterwards we would like to invite people into the room. These can be people who have a special connection to the object due to their profession or life story and who bring special knowledge with them; they can also be people who know nothing or hardly anything about "Associations". In the room will be individual objects, the audio recorder, as well as paper, pencil, and felt-tip pen. Within a predefined period of time, which is also agreed with the guest, she or he will make contact with the object. The guest can speak, write, and draw. All associations are recorded with the audio recorder or with paper and pencil. The resulting recordings will be transcribed and transformed into a continuous text based on written language. We record the text. It can be assembled with the video recordings. This situation does not simulate a laboratory-like setting, does not try to imitate a quasi-disturbance-free observation situation. We do not want to play natural science. The dark room is a black cube. We associate a working space where you can concentrate.
 An archive. A room where you store things. For the king, a burial chamber. For the child, the inside of a cardboard box. Life descriptions of the objects are created, Biographies of objects.

I don't want to speak about, just nearby by Trinh T. Minh-ha

Object biographies are written by ethnologists. They do research on provenance and clarify how an object has come from one place to another. Sometimes the path of an object - at least from the present perspective - is unjust or illegal.

Without wanting to repeat colonial encroachments, "Associations" could be used to work in other places. There, people could bring objects to a workspace on site. Or they could invite "Associations" to selected spaces where there are objects that can be scanned.

This travel activity could be thoughtfully accompanied by works of filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha. Minh-ha explores how Western concepts of culture operate, interacting with conceptions of 'other cultures.' In her reflections, she combines a postcolonial and a feminist perspective, literary and academic writing.

Like Bruno Latour, Minh-ha in one of her essay films also formulates that the bond between man and the world is fragile. In Reassemblage she declares: "Reality is delicate" and she substitutes a "Circle of Looks" for a subjective self-reflexive camera view.

We consider it important that she deconstructs both the distanced gaze of Western men on the other culture and the partisan gaze of the filmmaker who wants to produce "for ordinary people." She fundamentally problematizes the camera/gaze and film/theory: she shows that preconscious ideas and desires accumulate and proliferate in everyday as well as critical or theoretical modes of thought.

Minh-ha avoids talking about people and things: "I don't want to speak about, just nearby."