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The Clever Object
Session II: Introduction

When we began our session in March 2009, it seemed instructive to offer a few candidates for inclusion for and exclusion from “clever object” participation. Now a sprawling gallery of artifacts and texts lies before us. Thus, I thought it might be helpful to offer a few lines of introduction guided by some key words to reach backwards and forwards in our readings, to bring our individual thinking back into collaborative dialogue. My three pairs of keywords are these: polydextrous/polysinister; Ur-legend/black legend; and fragility and power.

In his *Absorption and Theatricality*, art historian Michael Fried analyzes an especially nimble piece of handiwork: Chardin’s *The House of Cards* from around 1735, now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington. As we look upon the painting, both of the boy’s hands are visible to us as he carefully stands the cards in a tremulous triangle. His rapt attention in this seemingly trivial game of make-believe, Fried argues, mirrors that which we as beholders will assume before it. We will emulate the engrossment unfolding before us. Indeed, in a bravura touch, Chardin has left a signature of this structure of his art directly before our eyes in the opened drawer at lower center. So Fried claims:

By virtue of fronting the beholder and ... opening toward him, the drawer serves to enforce a distinction between the beholder’s point of view and perception of the scenes as a whole and the quite different point of view and limited, exclusive focus of the youth balancing the cards. There is even a sense in which the contrast between the two cards—one facing the beholder, the other blankly turned away from him—may be seen as an epitome of the contrast between the surface of the painting, which of course faces the beholder, and the absorption of the youth in his delicate undertaking, a state of mind that is essentially inward, concentrated, closed (Fried 1980, 48-9).

Such sleights of hand—the ability of clever objects to perform such seemingly contradictory acts as showing engrossment and theatrically advertizing it simultaneously—might encourage us to thematize their *ambidextrous* nature.

After all, so Peter Galison had claimed in our readings of last year, Charles Wilson’s cloud chamber was rewarding to historical analysis precisely because it stands as a hybrid condensation of the two major and opposing traditions in modern particle physics. It unites a “mimetic” tradition of experiment whereby the scientist aims to recreate natural phenomena in the laboratory with the opposing tradition of “logic” or quantitative analysis. Equally, as Diana Donald and Jan Eric Olsén urge in our reading for this session, painters like Bruno Liljefors and Abbott Thayer should be seen as making images engaged both with Darwinian theories of concealing color and the struggle for survival and pictorial concerns (figure/ground relations, the liberation of “pure color”) informed by later nineteenth century avant-garde art. And even as John Fowles’ narrator breaks the fourth wall, stepping out from behind his metaphorical curtain to expose the contrivance of his artifice, his characters in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* nonetheless resist his omniscience, persisting in their own unsettling autonomy. The trick, we might say, is to parse out the science and the art or the fiction and the reality in which work has a hand.

Yet, our clever own objects seem to be consistently underhanded—maybe more *ambi-sinister* than *ambidextrous*. Byron Hamman’s *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, for example, spins a spell, weaving the imperial beholder into its web. Katie Scott’s Rococo screen materializes and liquifies space, alluring with illusion and entrapping in decoration even as it set up conditions of beholding that completely negate the inward/outward binary of Chardin’s playing cards. Thus, given this proliferation of chiropractices, I wonder if we might think less with Chardin’s engrossed and engrossing painted boy than with something more obviously haptic.

Both protector and destroyer, Shiva is the lord of dance in this eleventh century sculpture now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Poised in fluid motion, his numerous, flying hands condense into the flaming mandorla surrounding him. Rather than legerdemain or ambidexterity, we seem to want to think of our clever objects as similarly polydextrous (or polysinister). If our clever objects need a totem—a brother and beast that goes before us—perhaps this is it.

So, is there a legend—or perhaps an Ur-legend—of the clever object? Or, slightly less ridiculously, how do clever objects create or transform legends? As we saw in our last session, part of the cleverness of Cellini's *Perseus* by Michael Cole's account lies in its ability to warp the semantic and somatic fields surrounding it by activating legendary tales. In the force-field of this brilliant bronze incarnation, marble masterpieces by Michelangelo and Bandinelli are unmoored, unified and petrified as victims of Cellini's poetic art. That this myth-making lives on into the present was made palpable for us by Jeff Wall's improbable, but utterly compelling, genealogy of photography's archaic "wet" origins and its dry, digital future.

But, as Caroline Arscott's *Picus* tapestry shows most explicitly, clever objects can provide their own legends. Morris makes a legend literally visible to us as the scrolling captions that frame the vertical borders of the object. This legend (from Latin *legere*, to read) signals not only what we cannot hear of the woodpecker's call or hammering, but gestures to the legendary, prophetic dimension of the medium of tapestry being reclaimed by Morris.

Of course, the relations of legend as word and legend as broader world occupied by the clever object are precisely the kinds of issues to which Kendall Walton draws our attention. Representation, Walton claims, has its core in improvised games of make-believe—declarations that, say, all stumps are bears—and the rules and generative imaginings that quickly follow from them. Works of literary or visual art, Walton argues, should be seen as special categories of object insofar as they are designed to be generators of authorized games of make-believe. As "props," they direct our pretending and produce what Walton calls fictional truths. These representations allows us to collectively explore and make meaningful statements about King Lear, Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, the frictionless planes of classical mechanics, or the models of rational consumer behavior used in economic simulations even though these are all fictions.

What constrains these games of make-believe? How are the rules they generate enforced or changed? Like the cards in Chardin's castle, when and how does the metaphorical deck of rules governing fictions get re-shuffled? Is this what we see, say, in the transformations of found objects examined by Rachel Wells and Christiane Rekade? And what is the role of language—be they scrolled prophecies or comical titles—to the unfolding production of poetic object-legend?

Finally, in reading through our papers, one of the most striking features is a strange mixture of frailty and potency—fragility and power—of the objects we have chosen. In our last session, we discussed Susana Soares' *Face Object*, a delicate, intimate object filled with bees and used to deliver precise and extremely charged personal diagnoses to the user. Fragility and power are important concerns to Francesco Lucchini's object. Through the supernatural agency of its patron saint, the highly delicate glass encased by the reliquary miraculously withstood a test to its integrity at one specific moment in the past. But, does the glass still possess this resilience? The object's power surely derives in part from pressing this question to us—by offering the magical artifact to our ongoing testing, not concealing it from us.

In a different way, as Christiane Rekade suggests, Ian Kiaer works with wisps of discarded materials and ruptured fragments of utopian dreams to make a clue-like art that we crouch

down to meet. Like giants above them, our act of genuflecting nonetheless reveals the miniature model as a world below us: “the plastic box is a house, the sheet is a landscape with a lake.” By contrast, Rachel Wells argues, Fischli and Weiss make an art where the precarious balance of extremely mundane objects powerfully discloses those forces—whether gravity, acceleration, and inertia, or qualitative over quantitative perception and post-modern nihilism—that govern our own apprehending of them. And at the most extreme, Byron Hamann’s object can exist only in simulation as a digital reconstruction of lithographs based on a paper copy of a lost original.

How do we reconcile these fragilities of our objects with the kinds of subversive powers and trap-like agencies that we want to assign to them? In our last session, we had asked after the politics of the clever object—whether it is on the side of “the establishment” (whatever that might mean in our various historical contexts) or against it. But, I wonder if we might use this fragility as a guiding tool to unpack relations to power. Do clever objects take the available refuse of hegemonic culture and perform variations upon the Situationists’ *detournement* with them? Or might we not think of the nexus of fragility and power embodied by our objects as being like the taboo body of the Absolutist prince—sheathed in layers of protective coating because too dangerous to approach directly?

Works Cited

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