

The ABC of touch Reloaded

Postscript 2010

The following are the persistently mumbling thoughts and after-effects occasioned by the *various small objects*. Rather than a revision or a palimpsest this is a repetition; a 2. half; a final twist.

1. Happy plastic bag

Faces are surfaces and holes. We invest the holes with affective energies (fear, passion, etc.). These are the dark regions where meaning is plumbed and we become who we are. The signs, however, are projected onto the surface whence they spring back and are brought back into play.

This formal system of surfaces and holes is what underlies Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *facialité*. With this they reject the aura, charm, authority and unity attributed to the face of Christ, to the lord or to the beloved. It is a critique of the face as an image of the recognizable and the mental habits associated with it. The two thinkers emphasize examples from art and literature, which have already laid open the face. Like Dreyer's close-ups exploding the visage of the actor in strange landscapes and details. What in fact does the bony cavity of the nose have to do with the spherical jelly of the eye or the irritable leather of the lips? Thus the face is not unique for being the site of the soul or for allowing us to identify someone. It is singular since its disorder has no precedent.

The various small objects encounter a similarly abstract polemic. Some of them are associated with mouths or eyes; or with a mask presenting itself in all its happy inanity. Others simply *insist* on being themselves - as faces will - or they are eager to be understood - in any way at all - *come on* how hard can it be? Each individual part of *Touch* constitutes its own hermeneutic pole, whose faciality is enigmatically clear. At the same time the very wall on which they hang resists understanding (Deleuze and Guattari offer the mute surface of the white wall as an example of the rejection of signification).

2. Nuisances

Various Small Objects: what are these things? Their materiality is a splintered and downsized Lutheran scepticism. They are severe and impoverished rather than driven by desire. Yet at the same time their sobriety is clearly deceptive or results in barren stylistic exercises.

In one of his essays Giorgio Agamben discusses the circumstance that objects representing opaque relations of scale imply an anthropologically temporality. In miniatures and in toys everyday life and the ritual encounter examples of that which belonged "once, no longer - to the realm of the sacred or of the practical-economic."^[i] Toys and games contain remains of rituals from ceremonies or divinations;

such as when football players chase the ball in the same ways as the gods used to battle for possession of the sun. The practico-economic side of toys and miniatures lies in their reference to objects pertaining to practical everyday life (a toy truck or gun, kitchen utensils etc.)

The toy is a materialization of the historicity contained in objects, extracting it by means of a particular manipulation. While the value and meaning of the antique object and the document are functions of their age – that is, of their making present and rendering tangible a relatively remote past – the toy, dismembering and distorting the past or miniaturizing the present – playing as much on diachrony as on synchrony – makes present and renders tangible human temporality in itself, the pure differential margin between the 'once' and 'no longer.' [ii]

Yet this status of historical ciphers held by the various small objects is somehow ambiguous. As toys they cannot be cute or naughty. Instead they are a nuisance: like bedbugs - or weeds - their defiance and unglamorous appearance matched only by the modesty of their size. Nor do they claim status of objects that were "once - no longer", rather they are - or constitute - a kind of time-pocket. Their synchronicity lies in their way of tilting or reloading logic and recognisability: the interstice surrounding their indeterminate constructivism.

The primary effects of their diachronicity is linguistic, emanating from their pre-codedness, their distracted immanence. They push a new language in front of them. As Proust writes, it is necessary to create a new language within our own, a language to be spoken by a people who do not yet exist.

3. *The Return of the Cat*

The Cheshire cat withdraws or diverts itself. Sometimes he is entirely visible to Alice, at other times all she can see is his head. As Deleuze writes he is "an object of the heights".[iii] So although he constitutes a vanishing point, from his treetop perch he still manages to incarnate an idol - the voice from above - or even "the good penis". In other words he is a superego to be treated respectfully. He looks kind but as Alice remarks, he has "very long claws and a great many teeth". Yet he is still easier to identify with than the mad hatter or the playing cards populating the Queen's garden.[iv] However, the Cheshire cat might turn out to be a mere fantasy, like heavenly bodies and other exalted manifestations who tend to withdraw leaving behind a mere negative imprint of their authority.

The Cheshire cat, then, is a semi-erased patriarch, an untouchable figure. He is not the object of our *Touch*. Nor are the various small objects. Although they too tremble between absence and presence they are not good voices to guide us, nor are they capable of being our role models or our friends (leaving aside their general taciturnity, some of them are outright unfriendly.)

So what is the status of touch in *Touch*? Clearly the various small objects are not subordinated to the tactile sense as prescribed by Vladimir Tatlin in 1913: "The eye should be put under the control of touch..." [v] The Dadaists emphasized the tactility of the work via its ballistic character; it was to impact the observer like a bullet. However, the tactic of the various small objects is not the antagonism of the meaningless: It is more like the little shock observed by Walter Benjamin in the "optic unconscious" of the photograph: the intensity of the photographed object caused by the photograph's superiority to the naked eye in its ability to register and provide new knowledge of the object. Thus the visual dissolves in thickness and density, revealing "physiomic aspects of visual worlds which dwell in the smallest things"; *something closer than small*, to paraphrase another of Høy's titles. [vi] An aspect opening to what Benjamin identified as a secular magic (the photograph as a "waking dream") and to the cuts and shifts of montage. Yet it is difficult to sense any form of magical sensuality in the dry intent of the various small objects; conversely a montage-oriented approach would appear to provide richer hunting grounds since their impossible reason (or unreasonable possibilities) consists of irritated margins, sudden transitions and dialectic unities between different materials, between object and wall, between sign and trace or between geometry and material. Thus their afterlife was initially secured in a publication where they assumed each their separate page - photographed individually. This was not a form of reproduction, which contributed an optic unconscious in the sense of secrets unrevealed prior to the photographic moment; instead new undersides and sequences underpinned a certain legibility situated somehow in extension of photographic logic.

Infinity comes into this world barefoot, as proclaimed by the Dadaist Hans Arp in his definition of original touch. Similarly, considering their suspect intentions, it is a significant paradox that the scepticism of the various small objects underlies their unprotected deliverance.

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[i] Giorgio Agamben: 'In Playland. Reflections on History and Play', in *Infancy and History. On the Destruction of Experience*. Verso, London 2007 (1978), p.54.

[ii] Op.cit, p.80.

[iii] Gilles Deleuze: *Logic of Sense*, s.271. Continuum, London 2001 (1969).

[iv] Op.cit., p.275.

[v] Quoted in Michael Taussig: 'Tactility and Distraction', i *The Nervous System*. Routledge, New York 1992, p.190.

[vi] Op.cit., p.144.