

FIVE OBJECT(ION)S *from which to begin.*

One

I clear my mind to walk into an empty room; a triumph of austerity.

Carefully hung photographs line the shiny walls. Each frame is carefully positioned in relation to its neighbour, gracefully distanced. The glass atop the paper does not disrupt.

Landscapes in soft, though oddly brilliant, colours.

A cluster of images depicting a nude man on his bed.

On the far wall, however, is a series of tightly composed shots, every one of them a glove. A brown glove, a blue glove, a grey one. To the right is a tall, transparent box filled with the actual garments – a troubling accumulation of fabric.

And the thought occurs to me, To hell with Plato and his Pomo revisers, I'd rather look at the photographs. A glove, after all, is just a glove. The torn, somewhat dirty examples collected here don't mean anything.

But a photograph is not a glove. Where a glove becomes a thing (and I don't mean to deride the usefulness of things), a photograph can become a document – an object, if you will.

Two

I mean "object" in the broadest possible understanding – indeed, in all possible understandings.

OBJECT: *something material, perceptible to the senses; something that when viewed stirs feeling; something mental or physical toward which thought is directed; the goal or end of an activity; a noun or noun equivalent denoting the result of the action of a verb.*

Sidestepping a semantic trap, I want only to underline that I mean more by "object" than simple mass and density, more than a synonym for "thing." I want to invoke a denotation that is both material and implicated in process and activity. An object that is, but also takes part in action. An object that is not simply looked at, but is read.

Of course, it should be unnecessary to add at this juncture that not all objects are pictures, and that even among those that are, there is a significant variety. Pictorial representation has long since left any debate about illusory space or "fourth walls" in its wake and I will not touch on such particular formal considerations here, my project being more general. Besides which, there are whole categories of object (music, novels, some performances among them) whose pleasures are not, or are not merely, visual. More and more evidence accumulates

Peter Dubé is a Montreal-based writer. He has a collection of prose poems forthcoming next year and a novel manuscript that is looking for a good home with a publishing company.

suggesting that the joys of the gaze may simply be the medium for another, more primordial delight, the pleasure of the encounter.

Three

And every object is a possible meeting. Argue as we might, the inescapable transience of the human lends each lingering presence that value. All that remains of our movement through the world and the world's language are such objects. They are created deliberately to mark our passage, and in doing so become simultaneously artifact and process. They are a recorded specificity of time and place and a part of the movement through time and place.

Wedding photographs. Hilliard's "Ermine Portrait" of Elizabeth I. Personal journals. *Henry V*. The gaps between them are not so vast, but the places that they occupy are different. One holds on to the private, the other marks out the public. An arbitrary division, I admit, but one that adds to the pleasure of a host of encounters.

Nor does the lingering presence that I'm proposing depend on a binary opposition to some *vita brevis*. No object is eternal, a fixed, unmoving sovereign device. Constantly caught in the process of reading and reinscription within culture's mutations, objects – textual and image based – are simultaneously ephemeral and enduring. One need only look at the snapshots from one's adolescence to make that determination. How much more reinscribable might Caravaggio's religious commissions be, encrusted with the tumult of warring churches? How likely would a reading such as Bersani and Dutoit's have been before our own day?

Unlike criticism, unlike much theory, the principal goals of which are explicatory and androgical in nature, objects are unstable signifiers, and this may be precisely their greatest value. They remain works in progress – floating, tentative, always new in the moment when we come across them.

Four

For some years the art object spun round in an unforeseeably new process; it was "dematerialized." It vanished in a cloud of theorizing; dazzling, efficient, and, in the space of decade, recuperated – the major practitioners canonized.

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