

The hidden life of things

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Ainsi le symbole se manifeste d'abord comme meurtre de la chose, et cette mort constitue dans le sujet l'éternisation de son désir

Jacques Lacan

Human existence is a contradictory thing. We are conscious beings: we attempt to know ourselves and the world that we are thrown into. But the instrument through which we attempt to do so, language, forestalls this knowledge rather than facilitating it. 'Things', 'objects', 'artefacts', 'concepts', they are merely words. Here, philosophy finds itself in a deadlock position. Pointing to, naming or representing replaces experiencing, allowing or bringing into contact. It 'immediately' abolishes the immediate, makes it into something mediated. How can we perceive of any human attempt to diagnose our forlorn state and open up the window to the real as anything but futile?

This exhibition lends its name from a notorious phrase of the philosopher Edmund Husserl; 'zu den Sachen selbst' is notorious because for those who follow him, his phenomenological ideas seem to imply a reduction of knowledge of things to knowledge of appearances. Both philosophy and art investigate the relation between us, our perception of the world and that world itself. And as such, they struggle with similar ambiguities. Here, I would like to write about the hidden concreteness of things.

Meurtre de la chose

In our attempts to grasp the world of things, we name them. We find concepts for them, referred to through symbols. This ability to name things is deeply intertwined with our ability to be a self: to demonstrate the faculty of personhood. Naming the world is where we start being a 'me'; here, we

start being able to say 'I am I'. Whilst our cat may venture into the garden, come back with a mouse, and show pride, and a dog may have nibbled the corner of my ancient Persian rug, and show guilt, neither can show an awareness of themselves as themselves, of themselves as a self in its being in this world. They may have wanted to catch the mouse or destroy the carpet, but they cannot name it, nor can they name themselves in their desire to catch and destroy. This remains momentary.

Words are the death of things. In naming the world, we are able to name ourselves. By naming things, they become ours. They are frozen in the mind's gaze, and in their name, they become fixed. This fixation is a manifestation of our desire to make the world of things ours. But what is 'real', the world of concrete and living things gets to be postponed. It veils itself. Becoming aware of ourselves as a self by naming the world amounts to a murder of the real, in favour of the conceptual, the reference, the image: that which poses as real but merely replaces it.

Irreducibles

Self-knowledge is supposed to open one's mind to the world. But for some, self-knowledge, understood as investigating the nature of our ways, may as much close it off. In both art and philosophy there has been a tendency to lock us into discourse, and this unfortunately robs us of the ability to experience 'thingly' nature.

With 'thing', I do not mean any specific object. I do not mean a table, or a chair, or a stone, nor to the elements we presume they are composed of. I do not refer to atoms, molecules, and although similarly evasive, it is not the Higgs-Boson particle I refer to either. Nor do I mean planets or moons. These are all constructions that are in one way or another functional to us. I do not mean to refer to objects as we know them, I mean to refer to their backside: that of which we do have experience, but have not yet named. The 'object' is, literally, what is already thrown before us. The 'thing' is more viscous and resists such passive states. It does not have qualities, it is quality itself.

Both philosophy and art have increasingly concentrated on the medium of expression, rather than on what is expressed. Both have concentrated on the shape of the instrument of representation, rather than on its thingly nature, or the thingly nature of what it attempts to represent. As a result, no reality is acknowledged outside of the structures of language, society, culture etc: in these views, all is 'linguistically determined', 'socially determined', or 'culturally determined' (with, of course, an exception of the school of thought in question). This has led to a philosophy on philosophy and an art on art.

Words on words on how to avoid words on words is the pitfall for both art and philosophy. They are part of a sad, postmodern stance: its ponderings are merely a symptom of an unjustified mentality without hope that masks itself as irony. The relativist turn implies that we can never gain a

position outside of the structures that govern our ways of experiencing and knowing the world. We can't even know the nature of our ignorance, the limitations defined by these structures.

As soon as one tries to gain access to the world of things, one gets caught up in the shapes of our experience and the conventions of our ways of knowing things. As soon as we attempt to grasp them with our mind's eye, things tend to hide from our senses. This means that there is a paradox of presence that makes itself absent in what constitutes the life of things. We can only be touched by this world of things when we allow them to reveal themselves, rather than imposing ourselves on them. Otherwise, the thing itself retreats to the background.

Zu den Sachen selbst?

Art bears a similarity to philosophy in that it attempts to undress the dressed-up codifications of the ways in which we perceive the world. This necessitates self-research. Ἐν ᾧ θι σεαυτὸν (gnothi seauton) - know thyself, is in a sense, the source for both. As such, investigating the medium has always been at the core of both fields: where early modern philosophy investigated the role of 'the room of consciousness' in our place and perspective on the world, art investigated the potential of perspective; where the philosophers of the enlightenment investigated the nature of our senses in their relation to knowledge, the impressionist movement investigated the nature of visual perception in its construction of our experience of the world; where the

linguistic philosophy of the 20th century investigated the influence of the structure of language on our world, pop art investigated the role of cultural clichés on our worldviews. And in all these cases, investigating the nature of human existence and the nature of the world has always implied an investigation of the medium. But then, what is ‘medium’? Is language a medium? Are images a medium? Is paint a medium? Is the alphabet a medium? Are our senses a medium? Is our mind a medium? In a sense, they are not. They all call into existence dichotomies that are not truly there: the mind does not mediate between impressions and knowledge; our senses do not mediate between a world of things and a world of awareness; the alphabet does not mediate between a world of concepts and a world of words; paint does not mediate between what is imaged and what is represented; and images do not mediate between what is ‘there’ and what is ‘viewed’. This means that any investigation that solely investigates the medium is doomed to erode into a self-reflexive solipsism. We must direct our gaze elsewhere.

A turning ‘back to the affairs themselves’ seems to echo the notion of things upon themselves, and as such, this seems to contradict Husserl’s original reduction of all to appearance. Husserl’s adage ‘Zu den Sachen Selbst’ is thus often interpreted not a turn to the world of things - in the jargon of the field, not as an ontological reorientation. Husserl’s philosophy holds an ambiguous relation to the object. As he puts it: “[O]ne must not let oneself be deceived by speaking of the physical thing as transcending consciousness or

as ‘existing in itself.’ [...] An object existing in itself is never one with which consciousness or the Ego pertaining to consciousness has nothing to do” (Husserl 1982, 106).

Thus, we must agree that we need to read Husserl’s call a call to move away from a philosophy of interpretation, a philosophy that deals with philosophy. And indeed, in that day and age, many philosophers had descended into an abstract study of concepts: a philosophy of philosophy; a mere citationist historiography of philosophical positions and counterpositions. In this view, Husserl’s contribution to philosophy was his assertion that it is impossible to step through the veil of the world’s appearances. In the view of most Husserl scholars, we cannot step into the reality of things, and should no longer speculate over the nature of the world outside of how it appears to us: a phenomenological approach (after *phaenomenon* – Greek for ‘appearance’) necessitates that we put ‘reality’ between brackets – at least in so far as we take our access to it for granted.

Whilst we aspire to know things in the world as they are, we can only know them in how they appears to us: there is no ‘world-in-itself-to-us’, to use Arthur Schopenhauer’s words. How it ‘is’ escapes. Things therefore necessarily appear as nothing more than phenomena: appearances that are negotiated through our experience and, after this phase, discursive interpretations thereof. Researching them demands a step inwards, not a naïve belief in the outwards gaze. But, if Husserl does not believe in a ‘realism of things’, it is almost implied that we

should be satisfied with remaining in Plato's grotto. How then can we fit this position with the adage to return 'zu den Sachen selbst'?

I would not like to 'do battle with' the schools of thought that deal with this issue here, but I need to. If I need to adhere to the view that 'zu den Sachen selbst' means nothing more than a 'cleansing of our mind from mistaken conventions', whilst still being a prisoner of the chamber of consciousness, I cannot go along with Husserlian thought. But, knowing Husserl's preoccupation with Descartes' problematic dualist philosophy (I doubt, I think, I am, thus there is a me, thus there is a world, thus there is a separation between me and world, thus I know there are things etc.) I cannot imagine him as a philosopher choosing for a solipsist cage of the individual mind.

The mind is relative. One might say: 'I think therefore I am not'. And it is in the abolishment of thinking that we can be aware of more than our conventions. For the average Husserlian and posthusserlian philosopher, 'reality' is a term stemming from a defunct, obsolete metaphysics. For them, there is only the world as it appears to us, through the limitations of our senses and the conventions of our interpretative schemata. Reality then is a naïve assumption of a more primitive type of philosopher. However, some deem this interpretation of phenomenology to be mistaken.

In his 'Ideen', Husserl posits: "It is [...] fundamentally erroneous to believe that perception (and, after its own fashion, any other kind of

intuition of a physical thing) does not reach the physical thing itself" (Ideen 1, § 43). Consciousness does reach the physical things. And as such, these physical things themselves also reach us. This assertion however does endanger the eidetic reduction – the reduction of all possible valid knowledge to an honest assessment of what appears to us - if understood from a realist's perspective. But the appearance is not a moment of solipsistic world-interpretation, it is a meeting with the real.

Husserl wanted to avoid a philosophy that would revert to mere self-referential conundrum. The past decades, art has suffered from a similar self-referentiality as philosophy in Husserl's time, and a similar impotence to step out of this self-referentiality. In the latter period of the 20th century art mostly concentrated on producing work that stresses the texture of context, the discursive arena in which art emerges and receives its meaning. It has taken a path of dematerialization of its practices (Joshua Simon), aiming at an exchange of ideas rather than a showing of objects; research on the level of interpretation and meaning rather than on the level of matter. With this objective, it is closely wed to postmodern schools of thought that emerged in the slipstream of structuralism in linguistic philosophy, such as (de)constructivism, (post)structuralism and (post)semiotics. We might also call such art 'hypothetical art'. Hypothetical art is art that only produces: half-mades for possible artefacts. In such art, the conceptual experiment behind and after these is the true work of art.

In stressing the textu(r)al nature of our reality, and analyzing the underlying structures of our understanding of reality as more fundamental than that reality itself, the above schools of thought tend to reduce things to contextu(r)ality, thus robbing us of the ability to experience their 'thingly' nature. As such, they echoed the death of metaphysics (as the philosophy of being) and its replacement by the discursive, something already premeditated by Ludwig Feuerbach. As early as 1848, he stated that his age held 'a preference for the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, fancy to reality, the appearance to the essence' (from: 'The Essence of Christianity', foreword to the second print).

The stressing of copy, the image and the reproducible had an enormous impact on society. The invention of photography seemed to obliterate the mimetic *raison d'être* for art. Art needed to establish another dominant motive. For the impressionists this would be direct visual experience, for the expressionist, self-expression. Both necessitated a stern and critical self-investigation. And both inevitably led to an investigation of how that self is shaped by preexisting conventions.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, reality is increasingly pushed to the background by the increasing focus on our ways of producing perceptions, reproducing objects and interpreting experience. Still, both in art and in philosophy, a discomfort with this 'teriarisation' of the real has continuously led to attempts to acknowledge some place for it at the fringes of its systems. Thus Duchamp shows us objects robbed of their

original function, rendering them back their thingly nature, whilst Magritte deconstructed the image by stressing its ambiguous character. In philosophy, similar views can be found: Husserl's unexpected admission that things can indeed be intuited mirrors the ideas of other philosophers of the early 20th century such as Henri Bergson (his 'essay on the immediate givenness to conscience' is a key publication on the topic). But from another perspective, it is naive to take it for granted that our perceptions are not mediated by social, historical, cultural and linguistic conventions. Acknowledging and articulating this naivety triggered the linguistic turn in philosophy. And as such, it may have become self-centered and infertile.

Where many interprets of Husserl insists that to direct ourselves to the affairs themselves will always mean to direct our gaze inwards, Husserl himself, specifically in his later work asks us to direct our gaze outwards again. This is also at stake for speculative realist or neomaterialist approaches in art.

The image and the real

Real things, or 'the thingly real', cannot be conceptualised. It can only be met in direct sensory experience. The prioritisation of the image over the real in art deceives us: we blinded ourselves to the real. It is in the nature of things to resist the conventions of perception and interpretation. The thing's presence is anti-present, and therefore ambiguous in its impenetrable materiality. But the thing, as it stands upon itself, was never absent. It is

merely so that both in philosophy and in conceptual art we have been led to disregard the absolute encounter of the immediate sense.

Several mainstreams in contemporary art are taking a step away from the conceptual, the virtual and the ideal. In other words, they take up a practice that reinvestigates the nature of the real. In art, a renewed focus on the material versus the conceptual is taking place. This represents an ontological move away from conceptual art. It is ontological since it focuses on the being of beings, rather than on ideas, concepts and images; it investigates the thingly nature of objects, rather than the way they mask themselves in their signification to something else. It is an attempt to negotiate a place for the object, the thing, in its substantial nature. As such, art is increasingly liberated from its discursive cage, in which the only sensible art appeared to be art about art about art - a citationist reductionism ad absurdum that loses all sensitivity to the real. The ontological move away from postmodernism and poststructuralism is a new form of materialism. It is typified by an attempt to negotiate a place for the object, the thing, in its substantial ambiguity.

The hidden life of things

Husserl's adage 'Zu den Sachen selbst' echoes the 'Ding an sich' that haunted modern epistemology after having been first delimited by Immanuel Kant. Kant proposed that our ways of knowing and experiencing the world will always be mediated by our senses, our necessary experience of the world

in terms of space and time and our ways of knowing: thus reality upon itself, after Kant, remains forever beyond the boundaries of our pre-structured ways of perceiving, experiencing and knowing the world. Husserl follows Kant in this line of thought. But for Kant, in his move to the transcendental conditions of knowledge, the world as it is upon itself remains closed off to our knowledge. Husserl refuses this one weakness of Kant's epistemology: to conceptualise the inconceivable. Kant should not have given it a term at all. This would preclude a possibility of knowing them, and at the same time puts it beyond our experiential horizon. And although Husserl's project is aimed at establishing an epistemology of knowledge, in this sense, it is still truly an ontology of things.

The mind should make use of its essential possibility to modestly dissolve itself in the face of a universe that consists solely of 'unknowable unknowns'. Here we need to acknowledge our basic nature as, in the words of Rabinadrath Tagore 'being in community with all things': mortal, perishable, dust. Only then, experience can be opened up to what hides in plain sight. But '[t]he whole weight of the universe cannot crush out this individuality of mine. I maintain it in spite of the tremendous gravitation of all things. It is small in appearance but great in reality. For it holds its own against the forces that would rob it of its distinction and make it one with the dust'. In naming, first the world, then the others, then ourselves, we conceptualise that amorphous 'dust'. But as a result, it escapes us. Reflection

does not mediate access to reality, it bars it.

An encounter with the real, an identification of the self with the sensible, substantial world, cannot take place within a mode of consciousness that seeks a symbolic relation. It is elusive and only exists in its direct, momentary symbiosis with our experience. It cannot be poured into words, symbols or significations.

Art has the ability to tread where reflection cannot. It can reinvestigate what 'things' are, in their material presence or denial thereof. And as such, things, whatever their nature proper, may still hold a voice in themselves that supercedes our solipsistic tendencies. This nature is ambiguous, in its robust resistance to the conventions of perception and

interpretation. It consists of an impenetrable material presence, as real things that cannot be conceptualised and only be met in direct sensory experience. This involves liberating the viewer from his conceptual cage by liberating the artwork itself from the interpretative frames and conventions of both artist and viewer.

The hidden life of things is never available to the 'known'. But we are continuously touched by the nature of things. Their life cannot be experienced through the dressed-up codifications by either philosophy or art. Instead, it is us that need to undress, and stand naked in the face of the world of things, without preconception.

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