

The Thing Itself

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Profusion

The idea of objects having a social life is a conceit I coined in 1986 in a collection of essays titled *The Social Life of Things*. Since then, I have continued to be engaged with the idea that persons and things are not radically distinct categories, and that the transactions that surround things are invested with the properties of social relations. Thus, today's gift is tomorrow's commodity. Yesterday's commodity is tomorrow's found art object. Today's art object is tomorrow's junk. And yesterday's junk is tomorrow's heirloom.

Furthermore, any and all things can make the journey from commodity to singularity and back. Slaves, once sold as chattel, can become gradually humanized, personified, and reenchanting by the investiture of humanity. But they can also be recommoditized, turned once again into mere bodies or tools, put back in the marketplace, available for a price, dumped into the world of mere things.

In some way, all things are congealed moments in a longer social trajectory. All things are brief deposits of this or that property, photographs that conceal the reality of the motion from which their objecthood is a momentary respite. Consider the objects of traditional plastic art, such as paintings, drawings, sculptures, buildings, or monuments. Despite their aspiration to the illusion of permanence, they are only momentary aggregations of material, such as paint, bricks, glass, acrylic, cloth, steel, or canvas. These underlying materials are ever volatile, which is why museums always insist that we "do not touch." What is at risk is not just aura or authenticity but the fragility of objecthood itself.

Furthermore, it is not just the materials from which art objects are composed that threaten to break through the illusion of permanence. It is the very action

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of the artists, the craftsmen, the builders, and the framers that is always waiting to show its hand. The tear in the canvas, the crack in the glass, the chip in the wood, the flaw in the steel are not just signs of *homo faber*, but of the activity that art both conceals and celebrates. That activity is what allows for the subsequent activity of restoration or conservation to occur. In this sense, restoration and conservation are about more than preservation. They are a testimony to the fact that the very objecthood of art objects requires action in order to resist the historical processes that turn one kind of thing into another kind of thing unless one is committed to the project of maintaining the work of art as such—a permanent object and a repository of permanence. The corrosion of history only supports and intensifies the inherent tendency of things to move on to some new state in their social lives. And this is as true of art objects as it is of things in general.

It may be objected that this approach to art objects is suited only to an older world of art—plastic, representational, material, and bounded (by frames, structures, occasions, and tactile reality). What about the many traditions of action art, performance art, installation art, body art, and so on in which the lines between the object and the event, the event and its technological representation, the representation and its context are all deliberately blurred to produce effects that are calculated to deny the illusion of permanence?

In my view, these instances, which characterize the last three decades or so of artwork worldwide, constitute a rediscovery of the world of activity that much plastic art is at pains to conceal or transcend. These newer forms seek to exploit the vulnerability of objects to change, to take advantage of the corrosive effects of history and context, and to incorporate the mortality of the artist and the body into the fabric of the artwork itself. They are therefore fully consistent with the idea that all art is a momentary assemblage of mobile persons and things and that art objects, assemblages, events, and performances vary only in the intensity of their interest in denying or celebrating the social trajectory to which all things are subject.

Let us return then to the theme of profusion and place it in the context of India. Much has been said about the teeming multitudes of India, especially of its cities, and the issue of population has become a scientific field in its own right under the name of demography. But the profusion of things in Indian social life has been less fully remarked. Of course, a short time spent in any one of India's upscale bookstores will show that artists, journalists, and photographers (some great, some less so) have long discovered the promiscuous endlessness of India's world of things, from pots and huts to dhurries and ivories, from textiles and pal-

aces to saris and jewelry, from floor paintings and tikkas to advertisements and frescoes. Consider the work of a great photographer like Raghubhir Singh: his brilliant compositions are as much about things as they are about people. And his photographed things are endlessly reflected and refracted, until they form an endless chain of material effects that link the hand and cloth, steel and paint, mud and color. In Raghubhir Singh's photographs it is not possible to say that the extraordinary human faces are any more or less expressive than the profusion of things by which they are surrounded. In his work, and in the work of some other masters of the coffee-table-book form, what is always evident is that art objects in India are part of a living continuum in which the objects of everyday life and the faces of everyday people are part of the sheer crowding of the Indian world of things.

This sense of the luxuriance of objects and of their comfortable place in the order of things is everywhere in Indian life. Indian society is a panorama of piles, stacks, bunches, bundles, baskets, bags among which people appear, as laborers, as shopkeepers, as vendors, as housewives, and as pedestrians, making their way through an endless landscape of things, ranging from the most precious to the most ugly and filthy. Things meld into bodies, especially in Indian society, where objects provide the material for people to sleep on, to live in, to rest on, to buy, to sell, to store, to repair, to trade, to scavenge, and to display. In this endless profusion of things, two important features may be pointed out. There is hardly any interest in minimalism, any more with things than with people. In regard to both things and people, what is sought and desired is the warmth of profusion and the enchantment of multiplicity. Thus even the most forceful contemporary Indian art has little to do with standard European minimalist traditions, and when it does, it takes its force from its shock value in a context where crowding is a source of delight.

The second important feature of this profusion is that it recognizes no sharp line between people and things. And in this regard, India exemplifies the deepest insights of both Marcel Mauss and Karl Marx. In Mauss's sense, things in India never lose some of the magic of their human makers, owners, or handlers, and following Marx, both things and humans share the mystery of the commodity and the underlying metric of labor. Finally, the sheer profusion of things in India makes it impossible to set art apart from its wider context and makes it difficult to distinguish art clearly from the objects of everyday life. This last feature has been seen as part of the dialogue between *desa* and *marga* impulses in Indian civilization, and between high and popular art traditions. There is some truth to these views. But more important is the fact that the very profusion of forms, materials,

and styles in Indian social life makes the segregation of different kinds of objects according to aesthetic criteria virtually impossible. The logic of profusion leads one to inquire about a closely related property of things, namely their relationship to abstraction.

Abstraction

My references to India and Indian society in the previous section could be taken to be quaintly anthropological, even Orientalist, in the sense that they appear to exceptionalize India as a kind of bazaar of thingness, as a civilization enamored of the Borgesian endlessness of its own object world. So let me suggest that I speak about India because I know a bit more about the luxuriance of objects in India. Of course, there are many societies, both contemporary and historical, which may be characterized in this manner, and the comparative question is an open one. In other words, when I say “India” I do not mean “only India.”

But there is a trickier issue here: the issue of abstraction. The sort of profusion of objects that I have tried to describe as characterizing societies like India (to stress my reference to a category of places rather than to an Indian essence of some sort) is often seen as relentlessly closed to abstraction. The relevant oppositions here have a venerable history in Western philosophy, from Plato to Martin Heidegger, in which the relationship of materiality to abstraction has been chewed to pieces. I do not wish to add a footnote to this venerable scholastic history. What I prefer to do is to ask how materiality and abstraction may inhabit one another in societies like India, in which the social life of things is both rich and undisciplined enough to allow a fuller analysis of their relationship.

India, in spite of a growing and status-hungry middle class, is not yet a “consumer society” in the Western sense. Thus, the materiality of objects in India is not yet completely penetrated by the logic of the market. That is to say, objects are not yet seen primarily as material repositories of monetary or exchange value. In the most advanced industrial economies, of which the United States is still in many ways the leader, objects have become fairly thoroughly colonized by the market. Everything has a price, including blood, fame, information, body parts, athletes, and gene codes. Of course, the ideology of the marketplace in the United States struggles mightily against this reality, seeking constantly to provide “personal” touches to objects, “singular” features to what are obviously commodities, and magical aspects to what are fully marketized experiences or commodities. Still, the tide has long ago turned and the pursuit of wealth as such has in every way outstripped the lust for the objects that it can buy. All Americans now under-

stand that increasing one's liquid assets is the first law of life (through the stock market, pension plans, gambling, theft, or real-estate speculation). What money can buy is, of course, important, and the lifestyles of the rich and famous are constantly on display. But nothing in the United States trumps the number of zeros that defines your personal wealth. The rest is keeping score and signaling in smaller fields of competition. Bill Gates is certainly respected for his geeky intelligence and extraordinary business vision, but his multi-billion-dollar personal bank balance is the key to his magical standing.

In this sense, the fact that the United States is the ultimate consumer, market, affluent, or image society (depending on the adjective one prefers) should not distract us from the fact that a peculiar veil of abstraction governs over the material life of societies like the United States. Abstraction in this context has several dimensions. The first is that no object or thing in this type of society is fully enjoyed for its sheer materiality. It is always a means to some other end, however obscure that end might be. A house could be your retirement. A car could be your insurance against isolation. A vacation home is a hedge against inflation. And all objects that are visible parts of American domestic life are, especially among the middle and upper classes, badges of lifestyle, not of life as such. Martha Stewart is a heroine because she brought high-end style to the middle classes, bringing gourmet cooking, gardening, house furnishings, and decorations within reach of the middlebrow consumer and allowing middle-class homeowners the fantasy of domestic good taste. The second aspect of abstraction is convertibility. No object is truly priceless, and indeed pricing the apparently priceless continues to be a deep American obsession. An old television show like *The Price Is Right* is an early example of the national preoccupation not just with things but with their precise prices. Today's live shopping channels play on the same preoccupation, as do a variety of other popular magazines like *Money*. This is a familiar point about an intensely commoditized society, and it is closely tied to the drive in the United States and other advanced market societies to seek new instruments and contexts for speculation. The third dimension of abstraction is the deep tension between the singularity and the commodity, a tension my colleagues and I first addressed in 1986 in *The Social Life of Things*. Let me here describe a specific example of this tension, which is the paradoxical relationship between the gift economy and the commodity economy in the United States today.

How does gift giving work in a capitalist, market-driven society? On the face of it, the gift is the exact opposite of a fundamental unit of the marketplace, the commodity. In abstract, general form, the commodity is standard. Each is inher-

ently identical to the others. Available to anybody, it has nothing to do with who has given it to whom, and its value is determined in no way by the context of who did the buying and who did the receiving. The thing has its price.

In contrast, the gift is highly personal. The gift is very special. The gift is even magical. As the great anthropologist Marcel Mauss first showed, the gift contains both the quality of the giver and of the receiver, and though it may have another life as a commodity, the givers don't mind if it comes mass-produced. What is crucial is the identity between each gift and the particular relationship it solidifies. Even when a gift-giving society has rules about what types of gifts one must give—say, for example, the only allowable gifts are blankets and coins—those “standard” objects quickly become *my* gift, the thing you gave me, and so on. Again, we can recognize this in the contemporary United States. It is a little more complicated, when the gift arrives in the receiver's mail in a package mailed from Land's End, to say, “It's my gift,” but we manage to make the leap.

The closer one looks, however, the harder it becomes to sort things out. Gifts and commodities don't have an apples-and-oranges relationship. Rather, a gift and a commodity are often one and the same thing: if I catch it here, it's a gift. If I catch it one week later, when someone's having a garage sale, it's on the road to Commodity Land. It's hard to think of any substance in the world that is singular—outside the commodity system—forever and ever. In the same way, a commodity can be many things, but it is not a singularity. One thing cannot be a commodity, for once it is a commodity, something is lost about its singularity. The minute you put a thing—be it a piece of clothing or food, a tool, a person, anything—on the market, you have to believe there could be others of its kind.

Consider the great paintings that command incredible prices at Christie's or Sotheby's. Of a single painting on the auction block, you might be tempted to say that it commands such a huge price because it is unique. But if it is a real singularity, what makes it marketable? Are you, for example, buying a Picasso? A piece of Picasso? A piece of that set which is all of Picasso's paintings, but a piece we can buy because it's on the market? As these questions imply, something that appears totally singular—*one-of-a-kind*—is also totally a commodity—*one of a set*. Picasso himself is part of a set: the set of “great painters who are very expensive to buy.” The painting on the block is general in a hundred ways. Its singularity has been eroded.

And so gift giving in highly commoditized societies, like the United States, exemplifies a fundamental problem: how to create human relations in a world where all things are potentially in the market or on the market.

Let us return to India, which is a society whose material life is in the throes of deep change. On the one hand, I have characterized a segment of Indian life in which the sheer materiality, the undisciplined profusion, and the promiscuous presence of things may be seen as a victory of materiality over abstraction, as a refusal to concede entirely to the empire of the commodity, and as a victory for the virtues of the social life of things, in which every thing can become any thing, since the market is not yet the strict controller of abstraction and equivalence.

Yet no one can deny that “art” in India is increasingly separate from the rest of its material context, and furthermore that the world of art is increasingly tied to the related worlds of collection, criticism, auction, appraisal, and commodification. And nor is this necessarily a sign of degeneration, especially in a global world where artists are more or less able to benefit from a global market that values some sites of abstraction more than others. As some parts of India’s art world enter, however tentatively, into the empire of the exhibit, the collection, and the commodity, there is a healthy countervailing tendency in the wider social world of things in India, which is the world of the “thing itself.”

The idea of the thing itself is a way to capture the stubbornness of the materiality of things, which is also connected to their profusion, their resistance to strict measures of equivalence, and to strict distinctions between the maker and the made, the gift and the commodity, the work of art and the objects of everyday life. In India, and in societies where the rule of the market is as yet incomplete, there is a certain chaotic materiality in the world of things that resists the global tendency to make all things instruments of representation, and thus of abstraction and commodification. The challenge for India’s artists and critics is to find pathways through the global market without losing entirely the magic of materiality and the unruliness of the world of things. This unruliness thrives on the ephemerality of the artwork, the plenitude of material life, the multiple forms and futures that the social life of things can take, and the hazy borders between things and the persons whose social life they enrich and complicate. This tension between the rule of the commodity and the unruliness of the thing itself marks the space where Indian art and its makers can find a possible space of redemption, in which abstraction can remain the servant of materiality rather than its master.

