

In the Car, at the Hair Salon, After Art

The *Objet* series by Matthias Gabi

What happens if a three-dimensional object becomes a flat image? Is it possible to see both the image and the object at the same time? And again and again: What (kind of an) image is that? These are some of the questions raised by Matthias Gabi with his series, titled *Objet*. In search of answers, we step into the car with Roland Barthes:

If I am in a car and I look at the scenery through the window, I can at will focus on the scenery or on the window-pane. At one moment I grasp the presence of the glass and the distance of the landscape; at another, on the contrary, the transparency of the glass and the depth of the landscape; But the result of this alternation is constant: the glass is at once present and empty to me, and the landscape unreal and full.¹

The landscape and the glass – or the object and the image. Either I see the actual stencil, the broken tiles, and the plastic bag “behind” the image. Or I can see the image of the stencil, of the broken tiles, and of the plastic bag. Initially, one shifts constantly back and forth between these two levels. Matthias Gabi’s *objets* are flip pictures. And layered pictures. For if you take a closer look, you’ll find dozens more layers within them: plastic foil and other packaging, pictures-in-the picture, shadows, a newspaper page, a cloth, or a mirrored surface. But also the glass in front of the image, as well as the wall behind it – strictly speaking, an image that hangs on a wall is not two-dimensional. The layers multiply like the mirror images in Mani Matter’s chanson “Bim Coiffeur” [Eng.: “At the Hair Salon”] (1973):

Bim Coiffeur bin i gsässe vor em Spiegel, luege dry
Und gseh dert drinn e Spiegel wo ar Wand isch vis-à-vis
Und dert drin spieglest sech dr Spiegel da vor mir
Und i däm Spiegel widerum dr Spiegel hinfür
...
Es metaphysischs Grusle het mi packt im Coiffeurstüel

[Sitting at the hair salon before the mirror I looked in the mirror
And in it I see the mirror on the opposite wall
And in that was reflected the mirror before me
And in that mirror, in turn, I see the one opposite
...
A metaphysical shudder gripped me on the hairdresser's chair]

Yet the shudder we feel in response to the *Objet* series is not existential or metaphysical, but derived from an uncertainty of allocation. What's the point? When we look at images, our initial reflex is to classify them according to what we already know, to compare them with familiar images, to subdue our agitation as we confront the undefined. So what are these *objets*? Are they a kind of photographic commentary on the status of objects in art, on the three-dimensional object in the exhibition space, or on the threshold of the museum, which can transform an everyday object into art? Are they photographic objects or objective photographs? Is it, perhaps, an artistic, ironic approach to the product photographs we find in mail-order catalogues and design magazines? Or a statement on capitalism and its fixation with consumption and products? Or is it merely a tongue-in-cheek artistic demonstration of photographic skill? Perhaps it's a bit of all of this, and yet none of it entirely. The apparently slick images have bumps that cause us to stumble with any of these interpretations. Tiny shifts are incorporated into these photographs at every level, just as the French word *objet* is also a slight displacement of the German *Objekt*, or the English "object." The shadows in these images fall atypically; the selection and presentation of the photographed objects stand in contradiction to simplistic critiques of capitalism or of the role of objects in art. The intentional revealing of decisions, along with unexpected combinations, refute a simple notion of objectivity. Another interpretation technique for overcoming uncertainty would have us construct series, seeking a narrative that might hold together the enigmatic images and subjects. This inevitably leads us back to the photographed objects: the crumpled flower-print plastic bag, the wrapping paper still in its wrapping,

the ball bearings, the shattered tiles, match boxes, the small travel-sized Mastermind game, the glossy glass eyes of teddy bears lying on a crimped, cream-colored cloth. And yet, apart from a consistent photographic technique and presentation, no more than two of these things have a common denominator, or allow themselves to be woven into a coherent, meaningful story – no matter how they are arranged on a wall or in a portfolio or book, they don't fit together to form a narrative whole. Instead, each *objet* is a mysterious node of proposals and refusals of meaning. A convergence and a concentration. A poem, not a story. Each individual image challenges perceptions, rules, and attempts at interpretation, pushing them to their limits and beyond. Or as David Joselit said in his essay on the situation of images in the new millennium: we find ourselves today in a state of “after the art,”² – which naturally does not mean that the art is over. Images have become scattered migrants, who must regroup in new networks, clusters, and rules. Old systems of order and patterns of “sedation” have failed. Explanations are deceptive. The prevailing guiding metaphors are reproduction, dislocation, and circulation instead of uniqueness, coherence, and localization.

What remains are intellectual challenges, yearnings, and shimmering beauty. Matthias Gabi rescues the capitalist thing that has been lost in the crowd, redeeming it as an individual *objet* – by liberating it from its functionality into the agile photographic image. The profane flips over into the beautiful. The product into the sign. Surfeit into reduction. It could be said that this is the meaning of these images. Or, to return to Roland Barthes: no hackneyed, hardened myths can arise from these unusual *objets*. When we view them, for a moment all those aforementioned layers overlap to reveal a perfect, harmonious image. But in the next moment, our gaze again starts to shift and flip – between object and image, between insubstantiality and presence, between near and far.

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¹ Roland Barthes, *Myth Today*, in *Mythologies* (1957), trans. Annette Lavers, Hill and Wang, New York, 1984.

² David Joselit, *After Art*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2013.