

Régis Durand, *The Ceremony of Objects*, Actes Sud (coll. CCF (HSBC) Foundation for Photography), Arles, 2000.

The Ceremony of Objects

At first (Cahors, 1995), what I mainly saw in Valérie Belin's photographs were the uncertainties and intermittences of a vision, a seeing curiously detached from its object. The feeling had not to do with the artist's project and its realization, which seemed to have been perfectly mastered from the outset, but rather with the place occupied in it by sensation, or the "block of sensations" which is the very essence of the work of art.¹ In the work of that time (black-and-white photographs of crystalline or metal objects, untitled, 1993-1995), I was struck by the way the plunge to the heart of a mass of objects, the saturation of the frame, the play of reflections, of transparencies, of layered transitions, the work on light and on the whole range of densities between black and white, gave rise to a world which was effectively uncertain. The uncertainty stemmed, I thought, from the fact that it was no longer the world of the objects themselves, nor evidently of the photographer or the viewer. Not that of the objects, for no description was intended – at most, certain qualities came to the fore (transparency, brilliance), becoming in a way independent of the objects themselves. Not that of the photographer, because one could not immediately locate any subjective position or intervention. Nor that of the viewer, for we were not invited to project ourselves into these images.

Yet there was nothing cold about this work. On the contrary, it vibrated with energy, oscillating around the position described above (the position of uncertainty, formed not of hesitation or incompleteness, but of what one sensed was strict calculation). Intermittences, oscillations: added to the very nature of the material photographed (transparency, reflection), these qualities swiftly made one think of a form of contemporary baroque. And indeed, superficially at least the space created by these photographs had something of that art of textures, that art of the "fold that runs to infinity."² But this term is most often used to designate, quite vaguely, something proliferating and exuberant in appearances themselves; whereas

¹ I refer to the admirable pages by Deleuze and Guattari in *What is philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), particularly Chapter 7, "Percept, Affect and Concept." It is not my intention to give a "Deleuzian" reading of the work of Valérie Belin, but to explore it by means of a few notions at once simple and complex, such as sensation, material, perception and so forth. Let us recall that Gilles Deleuze is the author of a book on Francis Bacon entitled *Logique de la sensation* (Éditions de la Différence, 1981). In this book he marks a constant opposition between painting and photography; the latter "tends to crush sensation onto a single level, and remains powerless to imbue sensation with the constitutive difference of level" (*Logique*, p. 59). Here Deleuze follows Bacon's own problematic relation to photography. But it remains that he never truly "sensed" photography, which he did not know well, and yet in which he might have seen a remarkable form of the minor mode, with the meaning he gave to the term, in all its complexity.

² On the baroque as well, one can refer to the book by Gilles Deleuze, *Le pli – Leibniz et le baroque* (Éditions de Minuit, 1988).

it is rather a matter of a principle, of a *power*, the power to convert presence into illusion and illusion into presence, which is also a power of unlimited extension. And indeed, it seemed to me that such a power of extension was present in those photographs, as the work's shift to other objects would clearly demonstrate.

The photographs of crystalline animals (Gennevilliers, 1996) immediately banish this superficial "baroque". Smaller in format (65 cm x 45 cm), no longer showing proliferations but singular objects, they confront us directly with the nature of what is represented – the being or essence of these animals which thereby become allegories, if by allegory one understands not that which points to a frozen meaning, but that which seems to develop a capacity for extension, exceeding its own limits.³

Of course one must ask the question of the intrinsic meanings of the objects photographed: dresses, crashed cars, sides of meat, still more dresses, bodybuilders, robots' heads, flowers, etc. If you add the mirrors, the crystal and the metal of the early days, it is difficult to find anything in common. Except perhaps this: though they are hardly noble objects, but habitual objects bordering sometimes on kitsch, they nonetheless allow themselves to be charged with all kinds of associations, and particularly with a form of the evocation of absence. This is why some critics have spoken of *memento mori* or *vanitas*: all these objects indicate a certain unreality, a void at the heart of all things. It is the spectral world of dresses artificially propped up, or laid out in their boxes like supplicants or tomb sculptures; of smashed cars which, like the sides of meat, designate a dismembered corpse; of the monstrous bodies of the weightlifters, with the color and sheen of metal; or again, of the robot faces, simulacra of an absent or mechanical humanity.

What is represented in Valérie Belin's work is always strongly present, through the closeness of the camera and the absence of depth which concentrates our attention on the frontal motif. We are confronted with it, there is no escape for the gaze. And though we retain our full freedom of interpretation or association (there is no aggressivity here), still it comes only after this tense face-off. The same holds for the objects charged with an intrinsic violence (the smashed cars, the body-builders) as for those which, in principle, are more serene. The flowers, for example, here seem somber, uncanny creatures: you would expect to find something of Blossfeldt's elegant, suggestive traceries, but these are actually closer to burnt organs than to vaguely Art Deco motifs. Nor is it the commonplace of the intensely sexualized flower that predominates, but the feeling of a mutant identity. It is as though Valerie Belin's objects had undergone an irradiation which, while preserving their general appearance, irremediably transformed them, charging them with baleful energy on the very threshold of their teratological mutations.

³ I am thinking of various texts which offer an excellent approach to these questions in the work of Valérie Belin, in particular: Christine Buci-Glucksmann, "Les allégories animalières de cristal", exhib. cat. *Valérie Belin*, Galerie municipale Édouard Manet, Gennevilliers, 1996; Charlotte Coupaye, exhib. cat. *État des choses, état des lieux*, Musée des beaux-arts et de la dentelle, Calais, 1997; Pierre Wat, "Memento Mori", exhib. cat. *Valérie Belin*, Centre d'art contemporain de Vassivière en Limousin and others, 1999.

The paradox, then, is the following: these objects, more essence than phenomenon as it has been suggested above, nonetheless do not seem to exist in the absolute. They are all immersed in a particular “liquid” which profoundly modifies their appearance and even substance. As we are dealing with photographs here, this “liquid” is light. Let us take this term in the broadest sense, that is, not only what bathes the object and defines its colors and appearance, but what emanates from it. Photography is but the fixation on a sensitive surface of light reflected by certain bodies; and as in all truly strong works, there is in the photography of Valérie Belin an exceptional encounter between the objects she selects and the logic of the medium.

Indeed, this encounter is what constitutes, strictly speaking, the sensation discussed above. To remain within the domain of photography, let us take for example two admirable photographs by Stieglitz.⁴ In the foreground of *Spring Showers, New York* (1902), we see the street shimmering with rain, the finely sketched branches of a tree occupying the full upper reach of the frame; in the distance, increasingly less distinct in a vaporous halo, are carriages, figures, a few buildings. There is something like a visual haiku in this image, intangible yet at the same time precise, which coaxes us beyond simple perception (the spring rain), beyond what historical erudition could tell us (Barthes’ *studium*), until we approach pure sensation. And it is light in the broadest sense, the light resulting from the layering of grays, from the play of the sharp and the veiled, that materializes this sensation.

Icy Night, New York (1898) shows an alley of leafless trees, snowy ground, and in the distance, streetlamps and the lights of a few buildings. Completely without anecdote, it is the sensation of intense cold, but also of the city’s implacable solitude, that is produced here by the encounter between a trivial circumstance (a winter in New York) and the materials of photography (the careful distinction of the kinds of light, for example: indirect in the foreground, emanating from an invisible source on the left, then visible light sources haloed in the “depth” of the background). This is what “bathes” the image, and makes it so strongly condense our sensation of cold.

If I have lingered over these two images, it is because they help me understand what is happening in the photographs of Valérie Belin. When she says she is “in the center of the images”, she seems to confirm this presence-absence of the body, not only in the motifs she photographs, but in the very act of representing them (and therefore of perceiving them). Presence in the closest proximity to objects, in their very profusion; but also presence in the continuity between the various series of objects, identifying a constancy of the gaze, a common measure. The matte objects lead to the car wrecks, the robot masks to the bodybuilders, the dresses to the wedding portraits (on which she is currently working). It is as though Valérie Belin were pursuing an inquiry through choices of specific objects, following the line of a visual thinking whose twists and turns are only known to her.

⁴ These two photographs, held in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of New York, were in the exhibition *1900* at the Grand Palais in Paris, March 17-June 26, 2000.

Though linked, the objects are neither interchangeable nor indifferent. Each time, they result from a patient process of selection. How is a given car wreck going to take the light? How will the body of a particular weightlifter, rather than another, fit into the plane of the image, as though advancing slightly toward us, moving outside the frame? What kind of contrast will give life to the openwork patterns of a lace dress? Through her research into light, into the appropriate “color” and form, Valérie Belin seeks to capture as perfectly as possible the particular life of each object, the energy it conceals and withholds even in excess, despite the state in which it may be found. Look at those bodies swollen with muscles, the result of thousands of hours of exercise, of calorie calculations and the ingestion of diverse substances. Look at those car wrecks where kinetic energy appears to be concentrated in the dazzling instant of catastrophe. Look at those dresses which seem to be infused with a double life, that of the bodies which have slipped out of them, but also of the hands which have put them together (there again at the cost of immense energy, but this time slow and laborious); or look at those robots, whose faces betray what appears as a stupid and uncanny will to come to life. Thus a frozen movement or ruin conveys a “blank” energy, without destination or object, but still at work, functioning. No story unfolds, but something is transmitted to us directly.

And this no doubt is what accounts for the force of Valérie Belin’s photographs. Nothing in it is superfluous, everything is stripped down to the essential, without useless adjuncts. As I think about her work I recall a marvelous text by Francis Ponge on a landscape in the south of France, one of his finest attempts to cut somehow to the bone of this experience, and in the same blow to found a veritable ethics of artistic activity: “The important thing is to clarify exactly that, to cast light on it, to draw out the reasons (for my emotion) and the law (of this landscape), to make this landscape *useful* for something other than an aesthetic shudder, to make it become a moral, logical tool, so as to bring the mind, in its regard, a step forward.”⁵

⁵ Francis Ponge, “La Mounine”, *Œuvres complètes* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), p. 424.