



The Silence of the Lamps — The Autism of the Recent Works of Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys

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Jos de Gruyter
and Harald Thys,
Die Fregatte
(*The Frigate*), 2008,
colour video, 19min,
stills

The Silence of the Lamps –
The Autism of the Recent Works
of Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys
– Joshua Simon

The work of Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys confronts us with the fact that we are no longer able to understand the world we inhabit. For the past twenty years, the two Belgian artists have collaborated in video work, performance and mime plays populated by a cast of non-professional actors whom they condemn to enacting eventless stagings in gloomy and bleak interiors. Together with their artists' books, installations and drawings, these works tour a weird, troublingly dark universe, inhabited by a variety of peculiar objects, stone-faced women and wig-wearing men – an idiosyncratic and misanthropic theatre of the absurd characterised by a ghoulish and sometimes sinister humour: a sort of *noir* surrealism, perhaps typically 'Belgian'.¹

Their video *Die Fregatte* (*The Frigate*, 2008), first shown at the 5th Berlin Biennial in 2008, is a 20-minute, speechless depiction of a world almost completely lacking in movement. The cast is made of several characters and objects (in order of appearance): a peeping Tom videotaping from behind a bush, a young man, a candelabrum, a woman, three other men, a black couch, a brick wall, a man with a fake red beard and a black frigate model on a pedestal. They all interact, humans and objects alike, accompanied by a soundtrack of abrupt, dramatic organ music. The camera lingers on details of the frigate – sails, ropes, cannons – and registers from a fixed position the men, who observe the frigate and the woman, and who then circle them both, even touching the woman, who appears sitting on the couch in different poses. The peeping Tom tapes this, looking into the viewfinder with one eye, and at us with the other. Similar scenes follow, until, towards the end of the video, the men surround the woman, still seated on the couch, grab her head and hold up their fists.

Strange, still and claustrophobic, the situations captured by these images suggest that we humans are no longer the subject of history, either as individuals or as a race. We dwell, rather, in some other entity's world – the world of objects. As was already evident in their earlier works – such as *The Bomb* (1995), in which an elderly man explodes plastic toys inside a toy tank, or *The Experiment* (1995), in which a doll taped to the end of a pole outside a car's window fights the wind as the car accelerates – de Gruyter and Thys populate their videos first with objects, and then with humans so still and mute that they almost become objects themselves. Their silence is perhaps due to the fact that neither the objects nor the humans perform the function they were originally supposed to: the humans, by not being able to interact with each other through speech or meaningful action; the objects, by no longer being of any specific use. This loss of original function is not surprising for objects, which typically live longer than the humans who produce and use them, so that throughout their lives they change their character. While they are normally subordinate to the use intended for them by their makers, in an early stage they may become different things – through improvised use (old binoculars might become weights, for example), through decay (garbage, piled as landscape) or by transforming themselves into more 'toxic' forms of decayed waste.

1 See Dieter Roelstraete, 'The Teaches of the Speechless: Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys' Radical Silence', *Mousse Magazine*, issue 16, December 2008 – January 2009, pp.18–20. Roelstraete associates Belgian humour with weird, often gloomy, 'grand-guignol-styled' humor that is funny in a deeply troubling way. He finds this to be a quality present in de Gruyter and Thys's work, along with flares of the sinister counter-tradition of *noir* Surrealism which addressed the latent psychic and political forces of terror, paranoia and social dissolution in 1930s Europe.

But in order to properly understand objects in our prefabricated civilisation, it is not enough to be aware of these possible transformations – we need to know that, first of all, objects are commodities.

In ‘The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof’, the chapter from *Capital* (1867) dedicated to the commodity-form, Karl Marx demonstrates that commodity fetishism is the mechanism meant to conceal labour (i.e. social relations) through an objective-symbol known as money-value. In the market, the maker, despite the fact that his or her labour is the source of the value of the commodities, thinks of them as a consumer would – as an object to be bought and traded. The commodity, in many ways, echoes the workers’ silence.

In our dealings with objects, we ascribe to them human characteristics, be it via animation, psychological projections or individual predilection (a practice that can also be found from totem poles and Polynesian mana to Roman Catholic transubstantiation and sexual fetishism). As Marx describes it, the commodity needs to have human labour invested in it. But although the commodity-form is the result of a social relation, and actually reflects it, the commodity fetishises itself and presents itself as a relation between objects through the equivalence of money-value, kicking men out of the equation, so to speak. In this process the commodity operates with a conciseness of its own – as Marx himself puts it, in describing a table: ‘... so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than “table-turning” [a séance] ever was.’²

In some of the plans of the 1920s for a Soviet utopia there was an attempt to rethink our relations with objects beyond their being commodities, to offer harmony and camaraderie between people and things in a world of harmony and camaraderie among people.³ In this world beyond commodities, things would only have sentimental value. In the present world, meanwhile, de Gruyter and Thys’s work confronts the reign of total alienation in which objects and goods are all commodities – alien entities we can no longer understand.

In an art context, the commodity, this omnipresent ‘other-entity’ with which we are engaged in a network of intimacies (we eat it, we drink it, we wear it, we sit, touch, sleep in it), has been of central interest to several movements, from Dada and Surrealism to Pop art. Investigations of the commodity on both linguistic and conceptual grounds had already begun with the shift from Picasso’s *objets trouvés*, which he incorporated in his paintings and sculptures, to Duchamp’s untouched – or almost untouched – readymades. The examination of the relationships between humans in the world of commodities has likewise been focused upon in cinema – for example in romantic comedies, in which humans struggle to couple through different rituals of consumption.⁴ As contemporary capitalism hails the interaction of people with commodities over that of people with people, we see a shift in the site of activity (at least in European and North American cities) from production to consumption (tourism, shopping and entertainment, especially watching TV), a change in the price element in many sectors – instead of depicting the relation between commodities (supply and demand) it has become an immanent characteristic of the commodity (‘it’s expensive because it’s expensive’) – and a transformation of the behaviour of symbols into that typical of materials (so brands can be ‘real’ or ‘fake’). Part of this history, Thys and de Gruyter’s oeuvre attempts to understand how humans operate within this world of commodities, and introduces what might be called a neo-materialistic sensibility of the world.

In a booklet produced for their show at Kaleidoscope in Milan in 2009, Thys discusses this interaction in terms of immobilisation, highlighting the quality of stillness the characters in their films exhibit:

2 See Karl Marx, ‘The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof’, *Capital* (1867), available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4> (last accessed on 29 June 2009).

3 See Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2005, pp.41–89.

4 Unlike the ‘simple’ truth television advertisements present us with by making commodities their main character (notice the screen time humans receive versus objects in TV advertisements), contemporary romantic comedies focus on humans’ attempt to mate in a world of commodities, as courting has transformed into a ritual of consumption structured by dating, status symbols and lifestyle accessories.





Jos de Gruyter
and Harald Thys,
Der Schlamm von Branst
(*The Clay from Branst*),
2008, colour video,
20min, stills

*You can see this occur in animals who are confronted with some bizarre opponent, another (bigger) animal, a human or a combination of both. Humans also have this capacity. The same mechanism is applicable for the relation between objects and humans or animals. Sometimes objects can provoke the same immobilisation but objects can also undergo the same consternation. They can suffer an eternal shock when they are confronted with some weird character and become silent witnesses of perverted or strange actions, or the behaviour of humans and animals...*⁵

Stillness is just one aspect of their investigations into the human-commodity interface. Another is artificiality. In the exhibition in Milan, in addition to the videos and a small glazed ceramic cast of wristwatches titled *Orlogio di masturbazione* (*Masturbation Clock*, 2009), de Gruyter and Thys included a series of black-and-white photographs, *Untitled No. 1–9* (2009), which show makeshift metal frames that imitate a human physique, dressed in costumes and wearing various accessories: two figures sport hats and straggly beards; a figure with glasses sits under a parasol with a glass of wine in its hand; another sits on a chair, inexplicably holding a smaller chair. While the interviewers call them ‘dummies’, ‘puppets’ and ‘mannequins’, I would suggest they are scarecrows. A scarecrow imitates a human with only the most minimal of transformations, for it only needs to fool birds. Looking at the photographs, the fakeness of the fake beard makes the scarecrow real – the accessory brings the dummy to life in its function as scarecrow.

De Gruyter exalts these scarecrows (naming them simply ‘creatures’) as the most fit beings to inhabit this world, specifically in contrast to humankind: ‘I personally think society has become far too complex for human beings [...] In a way, the creatures in the photographic series seem to know it all. They know the meaning of life, especially the figure who sits under the umbrella with the big glasses.’⁶ This might read as tongue-in-cheek, but behind its apparent absurdity there is a tragic revelation: the photographs of scarecrows, by conflating two genres – portraiture and still life – suggest that only objects can be portrayed, and that humans can only be portrayed as still lifes. We might extend this to a further supposition: that humans are no longer qualified to understand this world of commodities – that objects, whether in humanoid form or not, are the only ones who might be able to do so.

As in *Die Fregatte*, in *Der Schlamm von Branst* (*The Clay from Branst*, 2008), first shown at Manifesta 7 in Trentino-South Tyrol in 2008, human characters stand silently around objects. This time, the video is set in a clay-sculpting workshop, where matter (clay) is being brought to life through figuration (here, into the shape of a horse’s head).⁷ The film is constructed of the motionless poses of entry and exit and of gatherings of different ridiculous characters – two men with blond wigs, a bearded man wearing a green bathrobe, a brown-eyed man, a pale man, a black man with a lazy eye, an old lady murmuring and holding a chunk of clay – all circling a clay horse. The horse’s head is also a character, appearing periodically in close-up. In the workshop the camera lingers on objects (a brush, an attempted sculpture, a bucket, some shredded clay). Sometimes the film editing suggests interactions or exchanges not only between humans and objects, but between objects themselves, which function as humans both in the video’s ‘plot’ and its visual language: the clay head is looked at by various lumps of clay, including the clay horse. The objects seem to exist by themselves, and become, rather than the humans, the subjects of the video.

In an earlier film, *Ten Weyngaert* (2005), named after a Brussels community centre, seven men and a woman are engaged in what seems like static occupational therapy, turning into objects in a reverse voodoo-like mechanics through, again, a series of paused

5 Email conversation between de Gruyter and Thys and Katia Anguelova and Andrea Wiarda, published in the booklet accompanying ‘Suitcase Illuminated #6: Tunnel Effect – Part 1: Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys’, curated by Katia Anguelova, Alessandra Poggianti and Andrea Wiarda, who form the collective DCM (Dipartimento Curatoriale Mobile), for Kaleidoscope, Milan, 27 May – 30 June 2009. *Suitcase Illuminated #6: Tunnel Effect – Part 1: Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys*, Milan: Kaleidoscope, 2009, n.p.

6 ‘Suitcase Illuminated #6’, *op. cit.*

7 Branst is a Flemish village known for producing clay. In relation to this use of clay, Roelstraete mentions the Jewish myth of the golem – a living humanoid figure sculpted from clay – as one of the pair’s fundamental references. See D. Roelstraete, ‘The Teaches of the Speechless’, *op. cit.*

stagings. The scenes take place in two different rooms: one fluorescent-lit and furnished with tables and chairs, organised like a community centre, and the other a darkened green studio decorated with bushes and trees, perhaps symbolising the underworld. The video opens with the group facing a wall, their backs to the camera. One by one they collapse as if shot. In the next scenes we see several men, engaged in different activities (sitting, smiling, fighting, playing magic, wearing make-up, strangling each other). This time, instead of organ music, a voice-over tells the story of a man who was convicted of pinching mice to death in the pocket of his trousers for sexual enjoyment, followed by disturbing laughter and a high-pitched noise. The video ends showing the room once more, now without people, the tables and chairs thrown in a mess on the floor. Like in *Die Fregatte* and in *Der Schlamm von Branst*, the actions of these humans appear random, and neither we as viewers nor the characters themselves seem able to understand the causes of their actions. They just occupy the space, like scarecrows, set in a specific position but without any awareness of their role or willingness to step out of it.

De Gruyter and Thys have developed a stillness that goes beyond that of the *tableau vivant*. Their actors are asked to stand, sit, look or stretch their limbs while keeping still. They pose in pause. These pauses that structure the videos – also present in earlier works such as *Mime in the Studio* (1998), *The Curse* (1999), *Parallelogram* (2002) and *The Yellow of Ghent* (2005) – emulate a filmed storyboard or an eventless comic strip. In that sense they recall the films of Aki Kaurismäki, but while Kaurismäki is preoccupied with the portrait of a place (a motive that enables him to look for some kind of solace for his characters), de Gruyter and Thys are, as we have seen, concerned with the breakdown of communication between humans – and they offer no solace. By contrast, the static nature of the dramatic scene, the clear image of an unclear meaning, the strangely normal setting of archetypal interiors, the permanent irresolution and the building of tension in what seems like mechanistic activities also bring to mind the work of René Magritte, whose paintings are tinged with more overt violence. In the painting *L'Assassin menacé* (*The Menaced Assassin*, 1927), a naked woman, blood trickling from her mouth, lies on a chaise longue, while in the foreground a man – presumably her assassin – listens to a gramophone, and two other men, armed with a club and a net, wait in the foyer to ambush him. Three more men watch from behind a balcony, their gaze directed at the viewer. Without generalising too much on the dourness of the northern European soul, I would argue that the standstill that is so characteristic of de Gruyter and Thys's work relates also to both Magritte and Kaurismäki – it operates as a kind of a mental X-ray of gestures of a sombre existence. De Gruyter himself has described the world their characters inhabit as an over-regulated universe, and one in which humans are redundant: 'In well-structured, well-organised worlds, in which depressions are so powerful that they become enjoyable. Quite similar to the world in which we live. For example in cities like Leuven, Zoetermeer, Ghent, Antwerp, Hove and many many more cities from which we get our inspiration.'⁸

In his book on the films of Jacques Tati, Michel Chion discusses the differences in the way cinema treats objects and human faces, and points out that 'in the English language a distinction is made between a close image of a face (close-up) and the detail of an object or a part of a body (insert). This distinction does not exist in French; both concepts merge in a single word'⁹ – *gros plan*. Following the French example, de Gruyter and Thys refuse to differentiate between the two. In *Der Schlamm von Branst*, each character, be it object or human, gets the same screen time and is shown in close-up. The film ends with a shot of a bearded doll's head watching from a shelf, its eyes looking at us – an image that suggests the pair's movement towards an almost ontological equality between humans and objects. We cannot determine who carries a more 'evolved' consciousness, and the artists do not seem to have a preference concerning either of them.

'We exclude for the time being man as an object of filming because of his inability to control his own movements,' wrote Dziga Vertov in his 1922 manifesto 'We', in which he proposed a new set of relations between humans and objects in the form

Jos de Gruyter
and Harald Thys,
The Curse, 1999,
colour video, 20min,
stills

8 'Suitcase Illuminated #6', *op. cit.*

9 See Michel Chion, *The Films of Jacques Tati* (trans. Antonio D'Alfonso), Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2003, p.81.



of the Kino-Eye.¹⁰ In 'We', Vertov extols the love of the peasant for his tractor, and claims that in the communist world, a world beyond commodities, the camera will allow for the appearance of 'seen facts' in the form of an international language, enabling the creation of an optic link between the workers and the world. Vertov offered a communist visual language of movement which would not only influence its viewers, as images do, but also help create a new social organisation. In contrast to Vertov's rapid visual and linguistic montage, the extreme stillness of de Gruyter and Thys's videos highlights the impossibility of communication between humans in this world of commodities. Instead, the absence of dialogue in their films gives way to another language beyond that of humans: the language of things.

In a letter from 1916, published as 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', Walter Benjamin says:

*Language communicates the linguistic being of things. The clearest manifestation of this being, however, is language itself. The answer to the question 'What does language communicate?' is therefore 'All language communicates itself.' [...] in language the situation is this: the linguistic being of all things is their language.*¹¹

For Benjamin, the language of things is not the language that names things, categorises and identifies them – that is the language of man.¹² The language of the things is that of God, the language of potential – of what can be done with things. Its interest is the extension of what things have to say – this is 'the language of the practice'. But we do not understand the language of the lamp, as it doesn't try to communicate to us – it is, unlike human language, soundless. Through its defined usage of stillness and muteness, de Gruyter and Thys's work translates the language of objects into images. Thys links the stillness of the scarecrows to their lack of communication, a symptom of a larger malaise – 'the final stage in the evolution-decline of Western civilisation. The physical expansion has made place for digital expansion, and leads to a slow and gigantic implosion, a massive stand still, an epidemic attack of autism.'¹³

10 Dziga Vertov, 'We: A Version of a Manifesto', *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896–1939* (ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie), London and New York: Routledge, 1994, pp.69–72.

11 Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz), New York: Schocken Books, 2007, p.316.

12 See Hito Steyerl, 'The Language of Things', June 2006, available at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0606/steyerl/en> (last accessed on 29 June 2009).

13 'Suitcase Illuminated #6', *op. cit.*