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# THING

Heike Gfrereis

Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach

«I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.»

—Albert Einstein

Wikiquote traces Albert Einstein's famous turn of phrase, uttered in an interview with Alfred Werner for the magazine *Liberal Judaism*, back to an article published by Walter Winchell in the *Wisconsin State Journal* in September 1946: «Joe Laitin reports that reporters at Bikini were questioning an army lieutenant about what weapons would be used in the next war. 'I dunno,' he said, 'but in the war after the next war, sure as Hell, they'll be using spears!」 We seem able to imagine the ineluctable consequences of the next war, waged from a degree of radical distance with monstrous atomic violence, only as a relapse back to the hand-to-hand combat of the Stone Age. The obliteration of culture mainly occurs not through spears or bombs, but through immaterial weapons, the war of images and words waged from an aesthetic distance; and it is in museums that objects become useful once again, and distance turns into proximity, or at least visibility.

The digital revolution has set a similar dialectic in motion to that of the atomic revolution. Never before has the dominance of things and the decline of culture been so often feared, nor

the loss of education and aesthetic distance so often lamented, as at the present time—when we can speak with one another across enormous distances in one and the same moment via Skype and can move things, even «sticks and stones,» with just words and images. Never before has there been so much talk of phenomena connected to things: of materiality, of closeness and reality, of body and soul, of conservation and tradition, and also of extinction. In the distance, we see up close how things are destroyed and humans killed.

This means that to the extent that our lives take place in virtual worlds, the real world and the words and images that describe it become more and more object-based. Never before have we been so close to things, so able to look at them deeply and (simply and easily) arrange, gather, polish, disassemble, estrange, animate, emotionalize, anthropomorphize, collect, and possess them as we do now. It is as though a magical, mythical world has returned, in which words and images can actually create realities. It is as though André Malraux's *musée imaginaire* has become a reality and Aby Warburg's principle of the «good neighbor» in the archive has become a model for knowing the world. For the Internet, everything is cloud and archive at once, heavenly signs and landfill, augury, a cabinet of wonders, and a flea market. We are again prepared

to ascribe a soul to things, not only (and perhaps not at all) because they can communicate with each other on the «Internet of things,» but because we can animate them again with our imagination. It is as though this were a child's game, like that described for us by Astrid Lindgren in *Pippi Longstocking*:

«What do we want to do now?» asked Thomas. «Whatever you want to do—I don't know,» said Pippi. «But I myself won't be lazing around. I'm a thing-finder, and so I never have a spare moment.» «What did you say you were?» asked Annika. «A thing-finder.» «What is that?» asked Thomas. «Someone who finds things—you know. What else would it be?» said Pippi, sweeping all the flour into a small heap. «The entire world is full of things, and it's very necessary that someone find them. And that's exactly what thing-finders do.» «What kind of things are they?» asked Annika. «Oh, anything imaginable,» said Pippi. «Gold nuggets and ostrich feathers and dead rats and firecrackers and little screws and all those kinds of things.»

There are webpages that collect photos of things that appear to have a face, and photos that show things that do not exist in the world that we have seen: apparitions. It is no longer by any means necessary for us to be on the spot to discover things. In theory at least, everything that we see online is there for us. Museum exhibits as well as bathtubs and cars, things with stories and a history as well as brand new things. Genuine goods are often hidden behind the photos. With the click of a button they come to the buyer, who will be spared the journey, but will then often be unexpectedly confronted with an object of enormous dimensions. Things lose their individual form when they are translated into the gestures of their purchasers, who describe them with their hands in the format of a mobile «terminal device.» The online store Zalando plays with this frequently in its advertising: the person who receives a parcel cries out with joy, while the

other person cries out in despair because their home is already filled with shoes, clothes, and sports equipment. An Internet thing is different from a real thing. The experience of immateriality is juxtaposed immediately to the experience of materiality and physical presence. Virtuality is thus not the destruction of things but rather their intensification. Precisely because they are so easily available, things become more foreign, solid, and resistant.

For museums, this means that originals are becoming increasingly important. Often you can see originals better online than in the museum, but they challenge us because we cannot control them. Friedrich Hölderlin expressed this paradox in his elegy «Brod und Wein» (Bread and wine): «So ist der Mensch; wenn da ist das Gut, und es sorget mit Gaben / Selber ein Gott für ihn, kennet und sieht er es nicht. / Tragen muß er, zuvor» 'Such is man: when wealth is there and even a god / provides him with gifts, he neither knows nor sees it. / First he must bear it.' It is precisely the real things that demand an idealism, as Friedrich Schiller explains to Wilhelm von Humboldt in 1805: «In the end, both of us are idealists, and we would be ashamed to have it said of us that things formed us rather than that we formed things.»

The rebellion of the things in the museum happens when we set them in motion in our heads and they do the same to us—when we recognize them as things, completely comprehensible. Vertigo by flatware. For instance, Gustav Sack sent a piece of straw from his sleeping quarters to his wife, Paula, from the French front around the start of the year 1915. He had bent it three times, so that it had two sides and a pronounced curvature beneath: a horseshoe, which keeps good luck from falling out. W.G. Sebald used a piece of copy paper, a kind of magic writing pad, in order to practice the script with which Ambros Adelwarth writes, «Gone to Ithaca» on a visiting card in *Die Ausgewanderten* (The emigrants). Only one word was typed,



black on white: «sigh.» Or the zigzag lines with which Franz Kafka erased a passage in the manuscript of *Der Bau* (The burrow): «About every hundred meters,» records the animal in the manuscript, «I widened the passages to small, rounded areas, where I can comfortably curl up, warm myself, and rest. I recall the days of my childhood and early manhood, when I dreamed of such a burrow [...] But I must have always had a vocation to be an architect—even as a child I sketched out zigzags and labyrinth designs in the sand and hurried along in spirit on soft paws up the beautiful, silent paths of many lines.»

Not all the things in a museum possess, on the plane of materiality, that which Roland Barthes described as the *punctum* of a photo, «the element of chance that it has, that which pricks me (and also wounds me, affects me).» But there is also the *punctum* of the readable, which then releases its magic when one no longer sees something as a thing with stains and gaps, but rather knows its history and can fill in all of its holes and incisions. Every real thing contains within it a gateway to the invisible world.

The museum, even an imaginary one, thrives on things always being both goods and art, immaterial and hard, weight and atmosphere, frames and windows, used and unused, words and «sticks and stones»—close-combat weapons, at least in theory. «Sticks and Stones,» incidentally, was the title of David Chipperfield's 2014 architectural intervention in Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. As a prologue to his eventual renovation of the gallery, Chipperfield used floor-to-ceiling spruce trunks to transform the columnless, immaterial entrance hall into a dense series of pathways and lines of sight. Because in order to see something as an object, we must place it opposite us. Proximity through distance. Distance through proximity. In this case, however, Chipperfield's title comes not from Einstein's turn of phrase but rather from an old English nursery rhyme: «Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.»

Translated from the german by Nicholas Fenech