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> Le sujet naît de l'objet.
>
> —Michel Serres

Is there something perverse, if not archly insistent, about complicating things with theory? Do we really need anything like thing theory the way we need narrative theory or cultural theory, queer theory or discourse theory? Why not let things alone? Let them rest somewhere else—in the balmy elsewhere beyond theory. From there, they might offer us dry ground above those swirling accounts of the subject, some place of origin unmediated by the sign, some stable alternative to the instabilities and uncertainties, the ambiguities and anxieties, forever fetishized by theory. Something warm, then, that relieves us from the chill of dogged ideation, something concrete that relieves us from unnecessary abstraction.

The longing for just such relief is described by A. S. Byatt at the outset of *The Biographer's Tale* (2000). Fed up with Lacan as with deconstructions of the Wolf-Man, a doctoral student looks up at a filthy window and epiphanically thinks, "I must have *things*." He relinquishes theory to relish

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Graciela Sacco. From the series *Bocanada. Instalación: 100 cucharas colgando*, Bassel, 2000. From *Graciela Sacco* (Buenos Aires, 2001).

the world at hand: "A real, very dirty window, shutting out the sun. A *thing*."[1]

In the last century, this longing became an especially familiar refrain. "Ideas," Francis Ponge wrote, shortly after World War II, "give me a queasy feeling, nausea," whereas "objects in the external world, on the other hand, delight me."[2] If, more recently, some delight has been taken in historicism's "desire to make contact with the 'real,'" in the emergence of material culture studies and the vitality of material history, in accounts of everyday life and the material *habitus*, as in the "return of the real" in contemporary art, this is inseparable, surely, from the very pleasure taken in "objects of the external world," however problematic that external world may be—however phantasmatic the externality of that world may be theorized to be.[3] These days, you can read books on the pencil, the zipper, the toilet, the banana, the chair, the potato, the bowler hat.[4] These days, history can unabashedly begin with things and with the senses by which we apprehend them; like a modernist poem, it begins in the street, with the smell "of frying oil, shag tobacco and unwashed beer glasses."[5]

1. A. S. Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale* (New York, 2001), p. 2.

2. Francis Ponge, "My Creative Method," *The Voice of Things*, trans. and ed. Beth Archer (New York, 1972), p. 93. In contrast, it was the confrontation with the materiality of matter—"below all explanation"—that occasioned a very different nausea, not Ponge's but Roquentin's (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander [New York, 1964], p. 129). For the canonical expression of the thing/theory binary in American poetry, see Robert Haas, "Meditation at Lagunitas," *Praise* (Hopewell, N.J., 1979), pp. 4–5.

3. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago, 2000), p. 54. For a brief account of the emergence of material culture studies (institutionally marked by the *Journal of Material Culture*), see *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*, ed. Daniel Miller (Chicago, 1998); and for the U.S. tradition, see *Learning from Things: Method and Theory of Material Culture Studies*, ed. David Kingery (Washington, D.C., 1995). On contemporary art, see Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996). On the concept of exteriority, see esp. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1978), p. 64, and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993), p. 30.

4. See Henry Petroski, *The Pencil: A History of Design and Circumstance* (New York, 1989); Robert Friedel, *Zipper: An Exploration in Novelty* (New York, 1994); Julie L. Horan, *The Porcelain God: A Social History of the Toilet* (New York, 1997); Virginia Scott Jenkins, *Bananas: An American History* (Washington, D.C., 2000); Galen Cranz, *The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body, and Design* (New York, 2000); Larry Zuckerman, *The Potato: How the Humble Spud Rescued the Western World* (San Francisco, 1999); and Fred Miller Robinson, *The Man in the Bowler Hat: His History and Iconography* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993).

5. Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York, 1987), p. 15.

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Can't we learn from this materialism instead of taking the trouble to trouble it? Can't we remain content with the "real, very dirty window"—a "thing"—as the answer to what ails us without turning it into an ailment of its own?

Fat chance. For even the most coarse and commonsensical things, mere things, perpetually pose a problem because of the specific unspecificity that "things" denotes. Mind you, for Ponge, objects may seem substitutable for things, and by "siding with things" *(le parti pris des choses)* he meant to take the part of specified objects—doorknobs, figs, crates, blackberries, stoves, water.[6] But the very semantic *reducibility* of *things* to *objects*, coupled with the semantic *irreducibility* of *things* to *objects*, would seem to mark one way of recognizing how, although objects typically arrest a poet's attention, and although the object was what was asked to join the dance in philosophy, things may still lurk in the shadows of the ballroom and continue to lurk there after the subject and object have done their thing, long after the party is over. When it comes to Ponge, in fact, the matter isn't so simple as it seems. Michael Riffaterre has argued that the poems, growing solely out of a "word-kernel" *(mot-noyau)*, defy referentiality;[7] Jacques Derrida has argued that, throughout the poet's effort "to make the thing sign," the "thing is not an object [and] cannot become one."[8] Taking the side of things hardly puts a stop to that thing called theory.

"Things are what we encounter, ideas are what we project." That's how Leo Stein schematically put it.[9] Although the experience of an encounter depends, of course, on the projection of an idea (the idea of encounter), Stein's scheme helps to explain the suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power: you cut your finger on a sheet of paper, you trip over some toy, you get bopped on the head by a

6. His "delight" in these objects was prompted not by any familiarity, but by the suddenly recognized peculiarity of the everyday, the fact that water "lies flat on its stomach" in a "hysterical urge to submit to gravity," for instance, sacrificing "all sense of decency to this *idée fixe*, this pathological scruple" ("ce scrupule maladif") (Ponge, "Of Water," trans. C. K. Williams, *Selected Poems*, trans. Williams, John Montague, and Margaret Guiton, ed. Guiton [Winston-Salem, N.C., 1994], pp. 57, 58; *Le Parti pris des choses* is the title of the volume of poetry in which "Of Water" first appeared).

7. Michael Riffaterre, "Ponge tautologique, ou le fonctionnement du texte," *Ponge inventeur et classique*, ed. Philippe Bonnefis and Pierre Oster (Paris, 1977), p. 66. See also Riffaterre, "The Primacy of Words: Francis Ponge's Reification," *Figuring Things: Char, Ponge, and Poetry in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Charles D. Minahen (Lexington, Ky., 1994), pp. 27–38.

8. Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, trans. Richard Rand (New York, 1984), pp. 126, 14.

9. Leo Stein, *The A-B-C of Aesthetics* (New York, 1927), p. 44.

falling nut. These are occasions outside the scene of phenomenological attention that nonetheless teach you that you're "caught up in things" and that the "body is a thing among things."[10] They are occasions of contingency—the chance interruption—that disclose a physicality of things. In Byatt's novel, the interruption of the habit of looking *through* windows as transparencies enables the protagonist to look *at* a window itself in its opacity. As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things.[11] We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.

And, yet, the word *things* holds within it a more audacious ambiguity. It denotes a massive generality as well as particularities, even your particularly prized possessions: "'Things' were of course the sum of the world; only, for Mrs. Gereth, the sum of the world was rare French furniture and oriental china."[12] The word designates the concrete yet ambiguous within the everyday: "Put it by that green thing in the hall." It functions to overcome the loss of other words or as a place holder for some future specifying operation: "I need that thing you use to get at things between your teeth." It designates an amorphous characteristic or a frankly irresolvable enigma: "There's a thing about that poem that I'll never get." For Byatt's protagonist, the quest for things may be a quest for a kind of certainty, but *things* is a word that tends, especially at its most banal, to

10. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, trans. James M. Edie et al., ed. Edie (Evanston, Ill., 1964), p. 163.

11. The window scene in Byatt's novel should be read in relation to Nabokov's point about how things become multiply transparent and read in the context of a dialectic of *looking through* and *looking at:* "When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object" (Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things* [New York, 1972], p. 1). We don't apprehend things except partially or obliquely (as what's beyond our apprehension). In fact, by looking *at* things we render them objects.

12. Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896; New York, 1987), p. 49. In his preface for the New York edition of the novel (reprinted in this Penguin edition, pp. 23–33), James plays with a full range of the word's denotations (for example: "The thing is to lodge somewhere, at the heart of one's complexity an irrepressible *appreciation*" [p. 31]).

index a certain limit or liminality, to hover over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable: Dr. Seuss's Thing One and Thing Two.[13]

On the one hand, then, the thing baldly encountered. On the other, some thing not quite apprehended. Could you clarify this matter of things by starting again and imagining them, first, as the amorphousness out of which objects are materialized by the (ap)perceiving subject, the anterior physicality of the physical world emerging, perhaps, as an aftereffect of the mutual constitution of subject and object, a retroprojection? You could imagine things, second, as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems. Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects). But this temporality obscures the all-at-onceness, the simultaneity, of the object/thing dialectic and the fact that, all at once, *the thing seems to name the object just as it is even as it names some thing else.*

If thing theory sounds like an oxymoron, then, it may not be because things reside in some balmy elsewhere beyond theory but because they lie both at hand and somewhere outside the theoretical field, beyond a certain limit, as a recognizable yet illegible remainder or as the entifiable that is unspecifiable. Things lie beyond the grid of intelligibility the way mere things lie outside the grid of museal exhibition, outside the order of objects. If this is why things appear in the name of relief from ideas (what's encountered as opposed to what's thought), it is also why the Thing becomes the most compelling name for that enigma that can only be encircled and which the object (by its presence) necessarily negates.[14] In Lacan, the Thing is and it isn't. It exists, but in no phenomenal form.

13. By hastily tracking some of the ways we use *things* to both mark and manage uncertainty, I am specifically not deploying an etymological inquiry to delimit and vivify the meaning of things. But see, most famously, Marcel Mauss, who finds in the "best" etymology of *res* a means of claiming that *res* "need not have been the crude, merely tangible thing, the simple, passive object of transaction that it has become" (Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls [1950; New York, 1990], p. 50); and Martin Heidegger, who finds in the Old German *dinc* the denotation of a gathering of people that enables him to concentrate on how "thinging" gathers; see Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971), pp. 174–82. I should add that Heidegger believes that it is the English word *thing* that has preserved the "semantic power" of the original Roman word *res*, which is to say its capacity to designate a case, an affair, an event (p. 175). In turn, Michel Serres complains that such etymology—wherein objects exist "only according to assembly debates"—shows how "language wishes the whole world to derive from language" (Michel Serres, *Statues: Le Second Livre des fondations* [Paris, 1987], p. 111).

14. See Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, volume 7 of *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, trans. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York, 1992), p. 139. The

The real, of course, is no more phenomenal in physics than it is in psychoanalysis—or, as in psychoanalysis, it is phenomenal only in its effects. Somewhere beyond or beneath the phenomena we see and touch there lurks some other life and law of things, the swarm of electrons. Nonetheless, even objects squarely within the field of phenomenality are often less clear (that is, less opaque) the closer you look. As Georg Simmel said of telescopic and microscopic technology, "coming closer to things often only shows us how far away they still are from us."[15] Sidney Nagel brings the form of the drop into optical consciousness (pp. 23–39) and thus demonstrates (like Ponge) how the most familiar forms, once we look, seem unpredictable and inexplicable, to poets and physicists both. If, as Daniel Tiffany argues (pp. 72–98), humanistic criticism should assert its explanatory power when it comes to the problem of matter, this is because the problem can't be sequestered from the tropes that make matter make sense.[16]

Only by turning away from the problem of matter, and away from the object/thing dialectic, have historians, sociologists, and anthropologists been able to turn their attention to things (to the "social life of things" or the "sex of things" or the "evolution of things"). As Arjun Appadurai has put it, such work depends on a certain "methodological fetishism" that refuses to begin with a formal "truth" that cannot, despite its truth, "illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things." In *The Social Life of Things,* he argues that "even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context."[17] Such methodological fetishism—what Appadurai calls the effort to "follow the things themselves"—disavows, no less, the tropological work, the psychological work, and the phenomenological

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Thing can only be "represented by emptiness, precisely because it cannot be represented by anything else" (p. 129). For a useful commentary, see Slavoj Žižek, "Much Ado about a Thing," *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London, 1991), pp. 229–78. Doctrinaire Lacanians may tell you that the Thing names only one thing in Lacan, but in fact it has different meanings and different valences in different texts and within single texts.

15. Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money,* trans. Tom Bottomore, David Frisby, and Kaethe Mengelberg, 2d ed. (1907; New York, 1990), p. 475.

16. For a further elaboration of this point, see Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkeley, 2000), and *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory,* ed. Tom Cohen et al. (Minneapolis, 2001).

17. Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective,* ed. Appadurai (Cambridge, 1986), p. 5.

work entailed in the human production of materiality as such. It does so, however, in the name of *avowing* the force of questions that have been too readily foreclosed by more familiar fetishizations: the fetishization of the subject, the image, the word. These are questions that ask less about the material effects of ideas and ideology than about the ideological and ideational effects of the material world and of transformations of it. They are questions that ask not whether things are but what work they perform—questions, in fact, not about things themselves but about the subject-object relation in particular temporal and spatial contexts. These may be the first questions, if only the first, that precipitate a new materialism that takes objects for granted only in order to grant them their potency—to show how they organize our private and public affection.[18]

Methodological fetishism, then, is not an error so much as it is a condition for thought, new thoughts about how inanimate objects constitute human subjects, how they move them, how they threaten them, how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects. What are the conditions, Jonathan Lamb asks (pp. 133–66), for sympathizing with animals and artifacts, and how does such sympathy threaten Locke's "thinking thing," the self? Why, Michael Taussig asks as he reads Sylvia Plath's last poems (pp. 305–16), does death have the capacity both to turn people into things and to bring inanimate objects to life? How is it, Rey Chow asks (pp. 286–304), that an individual's collecting passion threatens the state? (And what, we might ask these days, as the Taliban obsessively obliterates figures of Buddha, does the state think it destroys when it destroys such objects?) These are questions that hardly abandon the subject, even when they do not begin there. When it comes to the Subject as such—that Cartesian subject which becomes the abstract subject of democracy and psychoanalysis—Matthew Jones points to its emergence within the spiritual exercise of concrete work, work with rulers and compasses.[19] He shows how "a simple mathematical instrument [the proportional compass] became the model and exemplar of Descartes's new subject," the subject "supposedly so removed from the material" (pp. 40–71).

What habits have prevented readers of Descartes from recognizing this material complication? What habits have prevented us—prevented you—from thinking about objects, let alone things? Or, more precisely, perhaps: what habits have prevented you from sharing your thoughts? In one of his neglected, slightly mad manifestos, Jean Baudrillard sanely

18. The most influential books to introduce such questions have undoubtedly been Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston, 1969), and Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore, 1984). For the most thorough recent representation of how objects organize human life, see the costarring role of the volleyball, Wilson, in *Castaway*, dir. Robert Zemeckis, prod. DreamWorks/Image Movers/Playtone, 2000.

19. On the Cartesian subject within democracy and psychoanalysis, see Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), pp. 141–62.

declares that "we have always lived off the splendor of the subject and the poverty of the object." "It is the subject," he goes on to write, "that makes history, it's the subject that totalizes the world," whereas the object "is shamed, obscene, passive." The object has been intelligible only as the "alienated, accursed part of the subject"—the "individual subject or collective subject, the subject of consciousness or the unconscious." "The fate of the object," to Baudrillard's knowledge, "has been claimed by no one."[20] And, yet, the very grandiosity of Baudrillard's claim about *the* object (and the "potency of the object") threatens the subject no more than it threatens (by absorbing) both objects and things.[21]

In a response both to perceptual phenomenology and to the ontological quest for being, Cornelius Castoriadis pronounced the need to abandon our image of representation as "a projection screen which, unfortunately, separates the 'subject' and the 'thing.'"[22] Representation does not provide "impoverished 'images' of things"; rather, "certain segments" of representation "take on the weight of an 'index of reality' and become 'stabilized', as well as they might, without this stabilization ever being assured once and for all, as 'perceptions of things'" (*I*, pp. 331, 332). The argument shares the more recent emphasis on understanding materiality as a materiality-effect,[23] but it most pointedly seeks to recast thing-

20. Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, trans. Philip Beitchman and W. G. J. Niesluchowski, ed. Jim Fleming (New York, 1990), p. 111. For a more sober account of this history, see Serres, *Statues*, pp. 208–12. For Baudrillard's own account of his manifesto in the context of his earlier thoughts about objects (under the spell, as it were, of Mauss and Bataille), see Baudrillard, "From the System to the Destiny of Objects," *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard and Caroline Schutze, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York, 1988), pp. 77–95 and "Revenge of the Crystal: An Interview by Guy Bellavance," *Revenge of the Crystal: Selected Writings on the Modern Object and Its Destiny, 1968–1983*, trans. and ed. Paul Foss and Julian Pefanis (London, 1990), pp. 15–34.

21. I've made this point at greater length in Bill Brown, "The Secret Life of Things: Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism," *Modernism and Modernity* 6 (Apr. 1999): 1–28.

22. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (1975; Cambridge, Mass., 1987), p. 329; hereafter abbreviated *I*. Castoriadis is a theorist of plentitude and thus complains about desire being defined by the lack of a desired object, when in fact the object must be present to the psyche as desirable, which means that the psyche has in fact already fashioned it; see *I*, pp. 288–90. Still, there is what you might call a dialectic of insufficiency that proves more troubling; crudely put, deconstruction teaches that the word is never as good as the referent, but pychoanalysis teaches that the actual object is never as good as the sign.

23. Thus, for instance, Judith Butler writes, in a footnote emphasizing the "temporality of matter," and thinking through Marx's first thesis on Feuerbach, "if materialism were to take account of praxis as that which constitutes the very matter of objects, and praxis is

ness and its apprehension within, and as, the domain of the social: the "'thing' and the 'individual', the individual as 'thing' and as the one for whom there are indubitably 'things' are [all], to begin with . . . dimensions of the institution of society" (*I*, p. 332). By means of a particular "socialization of the psyche," then, "each society" imposes itself on the subject's senses, on the *"corporeal imagination"* by which materiality as such is apprehended (*I*, p. 334).

Though he is willing to grant (grudgingly) that there is some "transcultural pole of the institution of the things," one that "leans on the natural stratum," Castoriadis maintains, quite rightly, that this "still says nothing about *what* a thing is and what things are for a given society" (*I*, p. 334). The "perception of things" for an individual from one society, for instance, will be the perception of things "inhabited" and "animated"; for an individual from another society things will instead be "inert instruments, objects of possession" (*I*, pp. 334–35). This discrepancy between percepts (and thus not just the meaning but the very being of objects) has been a central topic of anthropology at least since the work of Marcel Mauss: however materially stable objects may seem, they are, let us say, different things in different scenes.[24] But when you ask "what things are for a given society" (noticing, by the way, how societies have taken the place of things as the given), surely the inquiry should include attention to those artistic and philosophical texts that would become sources, then, for discovering not epistemological or phenomenological truth but the truth about what force things or the question of things might have in each society. Indeed, such attention would help to preclude the homogenization of each society in its insular eachness. For, on the one hand, differences *between* societies can be overdrawn; as Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones make clear (pp. 114–32), the Western Renaissance may have witnessed "fetishism" elsewhere, but it was saturated by a fetishism of its own. On the other, differences *within* each society can be overlooked: to call a woman in Soweto a "'slave of things'" is to charge her with being "'a white black woman.'"[25]

The question is less about "what things are for a given society than about what claims on your attention and on your action are made on behalf of things. If society seems to impose itself on the "corporeal imagi-

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understood as socially transformative activity, then such activity is understood as constitutive of materiality itself" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 250).

24. Thus Nicholas Thomas writes: "As socially and culturally salient entities, objects change in defiance of their material stability. The category to which a thing belongs, the emotion and judgment it prompts, and narrative it recalls, are all historically refigured" (Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* [Cambridge, Mass., 1991], p. 125). See also, for instance, *The Social Life of Things*, and *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Places*, ed. Patricia Spyer (New York, 1998).

25. Njabulo S. Ndebele, "The Music of the Violin," in *"Fools" and Other Stories* (Johannesburg, 1983), p. 146.

nation," when and how does that imagination struggle against the imposition, and what role do things, physically or conceptually, play in the struggle? How does the effort to rethink things become an effort to *re*institute society? To declare that the character of things as things has been extinguished, or that objects have been struck dumb, or that the idea of respecting things no longer makes sense because they are vanishing—this is to find in the fate of things a symptom of a pathological condition most familiarly known as modernity.[26] In "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing" (1925), for instance, Boris Arvatov recognized that the revolution had yet to effect a fundamental change in the most quotidian interactions with the physical object world, the step of overcoming the "rupture between Things and people that characterized bourgeois society," the step of achieving a newly "active contact" with the things in Soviet society. If achieving that change meant both encouraging the "psyche" to become "more thinglike" and "dynamiz[ing]" the thing into something "connected like a co-worker with human practice," then Arvatov was imagining a novel reification of people and a new personification of things that did not result (as it does in the Marxian script) from society's saturation with the commodity form.[27] Constructivist materialism sought to recognize objects as participants in the reshaping of the world: "Our things in our hands," Aleksandr Rodchenko claimed, "must be equals, comrades."[28] The women of the Constructivist movement, designing and manufacturing postrevolutionary clothes, came as close as anyone, Christina Kiaer argues (pp. 185–243), to integrating "socialist objects" within the world of consumable goods. In the Italian "romance" that Jeffrey Schnapp reconstructs (pp. 244–69), this politicization of things is inverted into the materialization of politics, the effort to fuse national and physical form. The call to "organize aluminum" on behalf of the fascist state accompanies the declaration that aluminum is the "autarchic metal of choice," the "Italian metal" par excellence. Materialism, these days, may appear in the name of—or *as* the name of—politics, but these cases exhibit a more intense effort to deploy material goods on behalf of a political agenda.

Beyond the boundaries of Soviet Russia, the conscious effort to

26. See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 92; Siegfried Kracauer, "Farewell to the Linden Arcade," *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), p. 342; and Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Nature of Things and the Language of Things," *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley, 1976), p. 71.

27. Boris Arvatov, "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)," trans. Christina Kiaer, *October*, no. 81 (Summer 1997): 121, 124, 126. See Kiaer's important introduction to the piece, "Boris Arvatov's Socialist Objects," *October*, no. 81 (Summer 1997): 105–18.

28. Quoted in Kiaer, "Rodchenko in Paris," *October*, no. 75 (Winter 1996): 3. I want to thank Susan Buck-Morss for drawing my attention to this essay.

achieve greater intimacy with things, and to exert a different determination for them, took place, most famously and at times comically, within the surrealist avant-garde. Among the various experimental "novelties" that would unify "thought with the object" through some "*direct* contact with the object," Salvador Dali "dream[ed] of a mysterious manuscript written in white ink and completely covering the strange, firm surfaces of a brand-new Roll-Royce."[29] Although words and things have long been considered deadly rivals, as Peter Schwenger details (pp. 99–113), Dali had faith that they could be fused and that "everyone" would "be able to read from things."[30] When André Breton first dreamed up surrealism, he did so by trying to make good on a dream. He dreamed of finding a book at a flea market, a book with a wooden statue of an Assyrian gnome as its spine, and with pages made of black wool. "I hastened to acquire it," he writes, "and when I woke up I regretted not finding it near me." Still, he hoped "to put a few objects like this in circulation."[31]

By transforming the bricolage of the dreamwork into the practice of everyday life, the surrealists registered their refusal to occupy the world as it was. Walter Benjamin claimed they were "less on the trail of the psyche than on the track of things," acting less as psychoanalysts than as anthropologists. In "Dream Kitsch," he fuses the surrealist invigoration of cultural debris with the movement's own invigoration from "tribal artifacts." He describes them seeking "the totemic tree of objects within the thicket of primal history. The very last, the topmost face on the totem pole, is that of kitsch." Though this image visualizes the animation projected on to or into the "outlived world of things," the essay concludes by describing the process in reverse, describing how "in kitsch, the world of things advances on the human being" and "ultimately fashions its figures in his interior."[32] Subjects may constitute objects, but within Benjamin's materialism things have already installed themselves in the human psyche.

29. Salvador Dali, "The Object as Revealed in Surrealist Experiment" (1931), in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley, 1968), p. 424.

30. Ibid.

31. André Breton, *Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité* (1927), which he quotes (dating it 1924, the year of his originating surrealist manifesto), in "Surrealist Situation of the Object" (1935), *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1972), p. 277.

32. Walter Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch" (1927), trans. Howard Eiland, *Selected Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingston et al., ed. Michael Jennings, Eiland, and Gary Smith, 2 vols. to date (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 2:4. In "Several Points on Folk Art," he writes that "art teaches us to see into things. Folk art and kitsch allow us to look out through things." But this act of looking *though* things depends on the human application of them as though they were a mask fused to the sensorium (Benjamin, "Einiges zur Volkskunst," *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Herman Schweppenhäuser, 7 in 14 vols. [Frankfurt am Main, 1972–89], 6:187; trans. Darren Ilett). See also Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," trans. Edmund Jephcott, *Selected Writings*, 2:207–21. In all these essays, Benjamin is developing an image of "innervation," a term he uses to describe

"Formal truths" about how things are part and parcel of society's institution hardly help to explain the ways that things have been recast in the effort to achieve some confrontation with, and transformation of, society. Because Benjamin devoted himself to such explanations he assumes particular authority in the following pages. Among the other writers invoked in this special issue, Bruno Latour exerts no less influence; he has forcefully and repeatedly insisted that "things do not exist without being full of people" and that considering humans necessarily involves the consideration of things. The subject/object dialectic itself (with which he simply has no truck) has obscured patterns of circulation, transference, translation, and displacement.[33] Latour has argued that modernity artificially made an ontological distinction between inanimate objects and human subjects, whereas in fact the world is full of "quasi-objects" and "quasi-subjects," terms he borrows from Michel Serres.[34] Benjamin makes it clear that the avant-garde worked to make that fact known; modernism's resistance to modernity is its effort to deny the distinction between subjects and objects, people and things. Yet modernism's own "discourse of things," as John Frow calls it (pp. 270–85), is far from consistent in what it reveals as the source of their animation.

If modernism, when struggling to integrate the animate and the inanimate, humans and things, always knew that we have never been modern, this hardly means that you should accept such knowledge as a *fait accompli*. Indeed, Theodor Adorno, arguing against epistemology's and phenomenology's subordination of the object and the somatic moment to a fact of consciousness, understood the alterity of things as an essentially ethical fact. Most simply put, his point is that accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such.[35]

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the mimetic internalization of the physical world—eventually the internalization of technological apparatuses. See Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Winter 1999): 306–43.

33. Bruno Latour, "The Berlin Key or How to Do Words with Things," trans. Lydia Davis, in *Matter, Materiality, and Modern Culture*, ed. P. M. Graves-Brown (London, 2000), pp. 10, 20.

34. See Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), pp. 10–11. For a history outside the realm of sociology, see Miguel Tamen, *Friends of Interpretable Objects* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), and Tiffany, *Toy Medium*.

35. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York, 1997), pp. 189–94; see also p. 16. Unlikely as it seems, it would be possible to relate this claim to the way that, for Lacan, the Thing proves to be the center around which the drive achieves its ethical force.

When, shortly after the millennium turned, I told an art historian that I was working on things and editing a special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, she responded by saying: "Ah, well: it's the topic of the 1990s the way it was of 1920s, isn't it?"[36] This first felt like an unwitting accusation of belatedness (in the year 2000), and it did so because the academic psyche has internalized the fashion system (a system meant to accelerate the obsolescence of *things*). Still, if Benjamin was able to outstep the avant-garde in the 1920s by conceptualizing the "revolutionary energies" of surrealism's materialist bricolage,[37] this was in part because of the sociological ground cleared by Simmel's earlier account of the gap between the "culture of things" and modernity's human subject, and because of his insistence that the subject's desire, and not productive labor, is the source of an object's value.[38] Benjamin recognized that the gap between the function of objects and the desires congealed there became clear only when those objects became outmoded. "Things" seems like a topic of the nineties as it was of the twenties because the outmoded insights of the twenties (insights of Benjamin, of Bataille, of O'Keefe, among others) were reinvigorated.[39] Among those insights, we learn that history is exactly the currency that things trade in and that obsolescence as an accusation, whenever it represses its own history, is utterly passé. "Things" seems like a topic of the 1990s no less because, as the twentieth century drew to a close, it became clear that certain objects—Duchamp's *Fountain*, Man Ray's *Object to Be Destroyed*, Jospeh Beuys's *Fat Chair*—kept achieving new novelty and that some modes of artistic production that foreground object culture more than image culture (mixed-media collage, the readymade, the *objet trouvé*) would persevere, however updated.[40]

But what decade of the century didn't have its own thing about things? Given Heidegger's lecture on "Das Ding" in 1950 and Lacan's

36. Although things may seem to have achieved a new prominence, I want to point out that *Modern Starts: People, Places, Things*, ed. John Elderfield et al. (exhibition catalog, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 7 Oct. 1999–14 Mar. 2000) symptomatically diminished things in relation to place and to people. In the exhibition catalogue, things receive only 58 (of 360) pages of attention.

37. Benjamin, "Surrealism," 2:210.

38. Simmel, "The Future of Our Culture" (1909), *Simmel on Culture*, trans. Mark Ritter and Frisby, ed. Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London, 1997), p. 101. By complicating the ideas he formulated in the 1890s, Simmel's best students—Lukács, Bloch, Benjamin, and Kracauer—achieved insights about the "culture of things" that continue to inspire some of today's most ambitious cultural analysis.

39. See, for instance, Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York, 1993), pp. 232–33; Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997); and Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935* (Berkeley, 1999).

40. See, for instance, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's account of Arman's work of the 1950s in relation to the paradigm of the readymade, *Neo-Avant-garde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), pp. 269–79.

location of the Thing *at* and *as* the absent center of the real in 1959; given Frank O'Hara's declaration that "the eagerness of objects to / be what we are afraid to do / cannot help but move us" in 1951,[41] Robert Rauschenberg's interruption of abstract expressionism, and the *chosisme* of the decade's *nouveau roman,* the postwar era looks like an era both overwhelmed by the proliferation of things and singularly attentive to them. Only belatedly, in the 1980s, did Baudrillard declare that just as modernity was the historical scene of the subject's emergence, so postmodernity is the scene of the object's preponderance. If a genealogy of things has yet to be written, there's still a patent conceptual geology where simple elements appear in multiple layers—the scandal of the surrealist veneration of detritus reasserted in Claes Oldenburg's claim that a "refuse lot in the city is worth all the art stores in the world," and the scandal of the readymade resurfacing as the very different scandal of pop art in work like Oldenburg's best-known oversized and understuffed everyday objects: the mixer, the cheeseburger, the light bulb, the ice cream cone, the telephone, the wall switch.[42]

Since his exhibition at the Green Gallery in New York, 1962, through which he transformed himself from a dramaturg of happenings to the most noteworthy pop sculptor (as the stage sets for the happenings were disassembled into distinct works), Oldenberg has re-created, with relentless consistency, the iconic objects of everyday life. Donald Judd called Oldenburg's objects "grossly anthropomorphized."[43] Indeed, they are invariably and teasingly mammary, ocular, phallic, facial, scrotal. But the very "blatancy," as Judd went on to argue, seems to ridicule anthropomorphism as such.[44] In the same way, the grossly mimetic character of the work draws attention to the discrepancy between objectivity and materiality, perception and sensation, objective presence (a fan, a Fudgsicle, a sink) and material presence (the canvas, the plaster of paris, the vinyl), as though to theatricalize the point that all objects (not things) are, first off, iconic signs. (A sink looks like a sink.)

Despite the enormousness and enormity of objective culture in Oldenburg's world, it has somehow lost its potency. In the presence of his monumentally flaccid objects, it is difficult not to suffer some vague feel-

41. Frank O'Hara, "Interior (With Jane)," *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara,* ed. Donald Allen (New York, 1971), ll. 1–3, p. 55. For the material context of such attention in postwar France—that is, the sudden proliferation of American objects—see Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996). Georges Perec's *Les Choses: Une Histoire des années soixante* (Paris, 1965) may have restored a Balzacian mise-en-scène to the novel, but décor became the scene of depletion, an arrangement of empty signs, which is why the arrangement was such an inspiration for Baudrillard's *System of Objects,* trans. James Benedict (1968; New York, 1996).

42. Quoted by Barbara Rose, *Claes Oldenburg* (New York, 1970), p. 46.

43. Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" (1965), *Complete Writings, 1959–1975* (New York, 1975), p. 189.

44. Ibid.

ing of loss, as though they were half-deflated balloons, lingering in the ballroom two days after the party, hovering at eye level, now, and rather worn out. Finally allowed to relax, to just be themselves, objects sink into themselves, weary of form; they consider sinking into an amorphous heap, submitting to the *idée fixe* of gravity. Oldenburg's work may be melodramatic and sentimental, as Michael Fried declared in 1962, but it is also *about* melodrama and sentiment, meant to pose some question about, by physically manifesting the affective investment Americans have in the hamburger, the ice cream cone, chocolate cake.[45] Why have we turned the cheeseburger into a totemic food, a veritable member of the family, a symbol of the national clan? Though art may seem to be, most fundamentally, "a projection of our mental images upon the world of things," this is art that instead shows how weary that world has become of all our projections.[46] If these objects are tired, they are tired of our perpetual reconstitution of them as objects of our desire and of our affection. They are tired of our longing. They are tired of us.

But a recent work of Oldenburg's, his *Typewriter Eraser,* gleams in the new sculpture garden outside the National Gallery in Washington D.C. Unlike his myriad soft objects, the eraser is pert, it is rigid, it is full of life and stands at attention, if slightly askew, its chrome as bright as the typical typewriter eraser was always dirty and dull. The pleasure of looking at the people looking at the *Typewriter Eraser,* amused by its monumentality, is inseparable from the pleasure of listening to the child who, befuddled by an anachronistic object she never knew, pleads: "What is that thing supposed to be?" What is this disk with the brush sticking out of it? What was a typewriter? How did that form ever function? The plea expresses the power of this particular work to dramatize a generational divide and to stage (to melodramatize, even) the question of obsolescence. While the "timeless" objects in the Oldenburg canon (fans and sinks) have gone limp, this abandoned object attains a new stature precisely because it has no life outside the boundary of art—no life, that is, within our everyday lives. Released from the bond of being equipment, sustained outside the irreversibility of technological history, the object becomes something else.[47]

If, to the student of Oldenburg, the eraser ironically comments on the artist's own obsession with typewriters, it more simply transforms a

45. See Michael Fried, "New York Letter," in *Pop Art: A Critical History,* ed. Steven Henry Madoff (Berkeley, 1997), p. 216; Oldenburg's aggressive consciousness of his sentimentality is suggested by the "nougat" in the following statement from his manifesto: "I am for the art of rust and mold. I am for the art of hearts, funeral hearts or sweetheart hearts, full of nougat. I am for the art of worn meathooks, and singing barrels of red, white, blue and yellow meat" (Claes Oldenburg, "Statement" [1961], in *Pop Art,* p. 215).

46. Rudolf Arnheim, "Art among the Objects," *Critical Inquiry* 13 (Summer 1987): 679.

47. Heidegger taxonomizes things into mere things (such as pebbles), equipment, and work (such as art). Much of pop art, of course, works to elide such distinctions. See Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought,* pp. 15–88.

dead commodity into a living work and thus shows how inanimate objects organize the temporality of the animate world. W. J. T. Mitchell makes it clear (pp. 167–84) that the discovery of a new kind of object in the eighteenth century, the fossil, enabled romanticism to recognize and to refigure its relation to the mortal limits of the natural world. In the case of the Oldenburg eraser, the present, which is the future that turned this object into a thing of the past, is the discourse network 2000, where the typewriter eraser has disappeared, not just into the self-correcting Selectric, but into the delete function. How, Oldenburg's objects seem to ask, will the future of your present ever understand our rhetoric of inscription, erasure, and the trace?[48]

As a souvenir from the museum of twentieth-century history, the *Typewriter Eraser* reminds us that if the topic of things attained a new urgency in the closing decades of that century, this may have been a response to the digitization of our world—just as, perhaps, the urgency in the 1920s was a response to film. But in the twenties the cinema provided a projection screen that didn't separate people and things but brought them closer, granting props the status of individuals, enabling neglected objects to assume their rightful value.[49] As Lesley Stern puts it (pp. 317–54), things can grab our attention on film; and they do so because they have become not just objects but actions. New media—perspectival painting, printing, telegraphy—each in its way newly mediates the relation between people and objects, each precipitates distance *and* proximity.

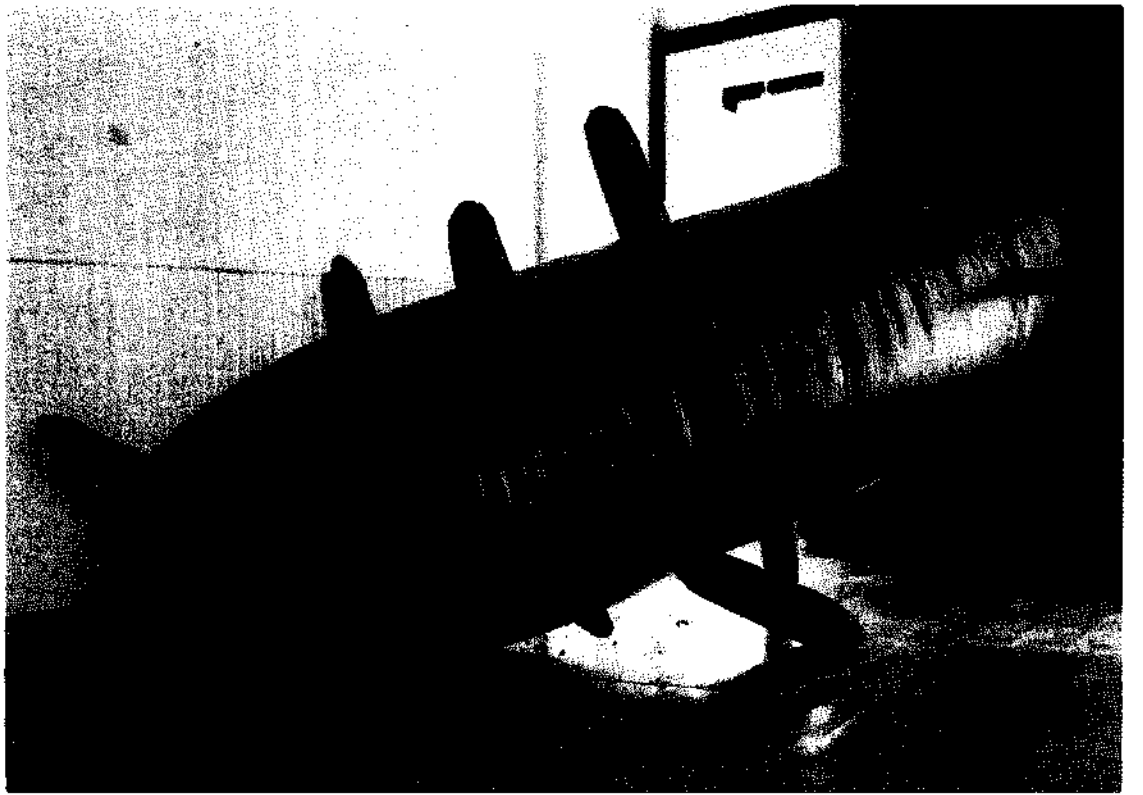
You could say that today's children were born too late to understand this memorial to another mode of writing, or you could say that Oldenburg (cleverly) re-created the object too late for it to be generally understood. It is an object that helps to dramatize a basic disjunction, a human condition in which things inevitably seem too late—belated, in fact, because we want things to come before ideas, before theory, before the word, whereas they seem to persist in coming after: as the alternative to ideas, the limit to theory, victims of the word. If thinking the thing, to borrow Heidegger's phrase, feels like an exercise in belatedness, the feeling is provoked by our very capacity to imagine that thinking and thingness are distinct.

48. On the new tropes provided by new media, see the closing chapter of Eric Jager, *The Book of the Heart* (Chicago, 2000).

49. See Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969), pp. 217–51; Jean Epstein, "*Bonjour Cinéma* and Other Writings by Jean Epstein," trans. Tom Milne, *Afterimage* 10 (Autumn 1981): 19; and Fernand Léger, *Functions of Painting*, trans. Alexandra Anderson (New York, 1965), p. 50. For an account of how assessments of early cinema obsess about the new magical powers bestowed on objects, see Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham, N.C., 2000).

Kyle Huffman, *Mask I*, 1996. Wood, gauze, shellac, corn starch. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

Yin Xiuzhen, *Yin Xiuzhen*, 1998. Mixed media. Reprinted from Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago, 2000).



Irina Nakhova, *Big Red,* 1998. Installation, Galerie Eboran, Salzburg.

Claes Oldenburg, *Typewriter Eraser,* 1999. Washington, D.C. Photo: Kandice Chuh.

cravats
crayons
crazy straws
credenzas
credit cards
credits
crewneck sweaters
cribbage boards
cribs
crochet hooks
crockery
crockpots
croquet sets
crosses
crossword puzzles
crowbars
crowns
crucifixes
cruise control
cruise ships
crutches
cryostats
crystal
crystal balls
cubicles
cuckoo clocks
cuff links
cuffs
culottes
cummerbunds
cup holders
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cups
curbs
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curlers
curling irons
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cushions
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dolls
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donut shops
donuts
door knockers
door stops
doorbells
doorknobs
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downspouts
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exercise machines
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exhaust pipes
exhibitions
experiments
explosives
extension cords
extensions
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fire hydrants
fireplaces
fireworks
firing ranges
first aid kits
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fish tanks
fishing hooks
fishing lures
fishing rods
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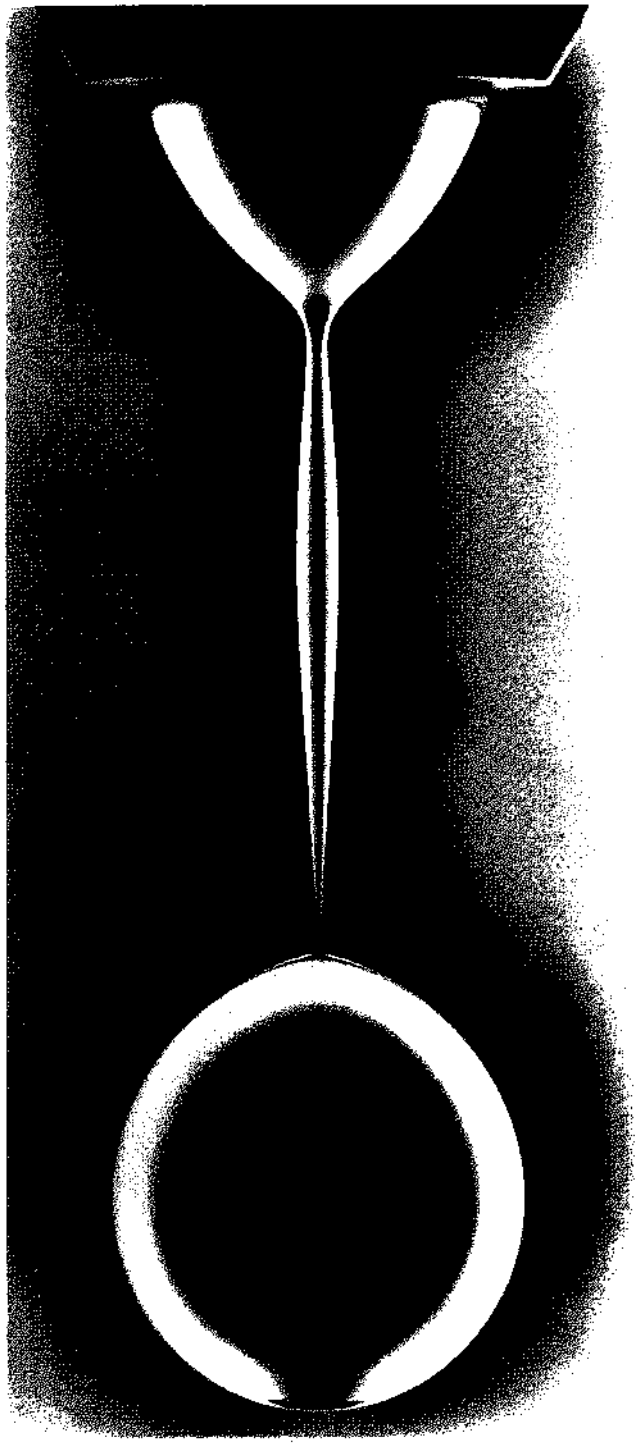
From *Voices* (exhibition catalog, AIGA National Design Conference, 23–26 Sept. 2001, Washington, D.C.), p. 3.



COVER PHOTO—A drop of glycerol (a liquid with a viscosity one thousand times greater than that of water) breaking apart inside another fluid, PDMS, of the same viscosity as the glycerol. Photo: Sidney R. Nagel and Itai Cohen.