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On “*Objects and Lenses – Reclaimed Focus*”, an exhibition of works by Geneviève Maquinay documented in photos by Isabelle Armand, Monica Ruzansky, and Thatcher Keats

Living in New York City – one of the world’s leading distributors of industrial goods – Genevieve Maquinay is often confronted with the fate of things that have ceased to be worth buying or selling, things that have fallen out of the cycle of production, distribution, and consumption. Useless objects such as:

- Tangled wire,
- a salty lump of driftwood,
- pieces of tissue, and
- chrome-plated tubular metal,

which tend to lie around in abandoned buildings, on fallow land and on forgotten dumping grounds, have attracted her attention. Over the years she has collected many such pieces and assembled them in a series of micro-installations – each fitting on a table-board. *Haim Chanin Fine Arts* is now presenting *Objects and Lenses – Reclaimed Focus*, and invites our curious gazes to ponder over these micro-installations.

Found Objects

As beholders we are immediately drawn to the found objects. Each of them motivates us to search for its identity, think of its normal context, and reconstruct its fate. In many cases this is not difficult since we have to do with fragments of artifacts that were once manufactured for a certain purpose; conceived in this way, the materials and forms tell us about their former utilization.

However, some of the pieces have been out of use for a considerable time and have become modified in their post-artifact phase of existence:

- The wire has been bent and broken,
- the wood fissured by the surf,
- the tissue has been torn to shreds,
- the handle broken off, and

- the chrome-plated tube distorted.

Not all such modifications were deformative; on the contrary, some of the pieces have gained new qualities in their post-artifact life:

- There is a metal plate which has received parallel incisions, making it look like a nine-fingered glove,
- there is a bundle of rags that has become a bag which now contains metal blocks and wooden staffs, and
- there is a pruned tree trunk which stands upright on its cut face with a compact body like that of a bear.

In looking at these pieces – deformed as well as remodeled ones – we become witnesses of a process which all post-artifact objects seem to undergo: Having lost their industrial *raison d'être*, they slowly acquire new functions.

Maquinay focuses on this process by adding fragments of plants and animals:

- Twigs,
- feathers,
- bones,
- pieces of mother of pearl, and
- wind-dried stalks of grain.

These pieces have also lost their original functions and are in the process of acquiring new ones. However, they have kept some of the architectonic elegance which characterizes organic nature even when it has ceased to live. Being brought into contact with post-artifact objects, they transfer their elegance onto them so that one takes:

- The wire for a withered blossom,
- the fissured wood for a bird's wing,
- the shreds of white tissue on the tree trunk for patches of snow on the bear,
- the green handle for a sprouting herb in a flower pot, and
- the chrome-plated tube for the tendril of a climbing plant.

Maquinay does not leave it at that, she also presents inanimate matter as part of her installations:

- Field stones,
- pieces of rock,

- an iron wedge, and
- primordial petrifications.

Such objects do not decay and they are not in need of acquiring a function or developing a cultural identity. On the contrary, they have from time immemorial been what they are and do not have to serve any other purpose. This gives them dignity and perfection, and when they enter one of Maquinay's installations, these are the qualities transferred to adjacent post-artifacts as well as to parts of plants and animals.

In this context, manufactured fragments from the industrial world and grown pieces from organic nature both become as dignified and perfect as untouched nature has always been. They are inevitably what they are and are taken seriously as such.

These effects are the result of a two-step operation performed by Maquinay's installations: They naturalize industrial culture and they primordialize living nature. Much of the initial fascination which the found objects in the installations exert on the beholder is due to these processes.

Parallel worlds

At this point the creative activity of the artist must be taken into account. Maquinay has evidently left her objects exactly as they were when she found them. Nothing has been cut or carved or colored by her, all she did was clean the objects and assemble them on separate table-boards. In other words, she took them out of their marginalized contexts and set up new contexts for them, each consisting only of other found objects. In this way she created parallel worlds which can be perceived by the beholders as independent from their own.

Doing seemingly little, she has accomplished much. On exhibit in a gallery, each micro-installation enters into competition with the space of the gallery exhibiting it. The beholders are torn between the complex intimacy of these microcosms and the aseptic macro-atmosphere of the surrounding gallery. They can either make themselves small and come down to eye level with each microcosm – thereby mimicking co-existence with the observed configuration of found objects –, or imagine this configuration enlarged into one of the familiar configurations which surround us in our gardens and our parks; pieces of inanimate nature – of *nature morte*, of still-life –, which seem to live only when one moves around them.

Indeed, Maquinay's micro-installations are still – they do not produce any sounds; and they seem dead – they are not alive in their own right. However,

they motivate us to project sounds onto them and they enable us to perceive life in them. They are pieces of inanimate nature which have the power to make us animate them; they are pieces of still-life which have the power to make us imagine them producing sounds.

What kind of power is this? How does it function? Whom does it affect and whom does it leave unaffected?

These are questions which are as old as art itself. Nowadays the concept of “atmosphere” is often used in this context. Each of Maquinay’s micro-installations has an atmosphere of its own, it is said. But how did Maquinay produce this atmosphere and how does one perceive it?

A fruitful way of answering these questions is to consider the very structure of each installation: Which pieces were selected to become part of it and how were they combined? By recreating this structure for ourselves we become able to experience it.

It is interesting to note that some object types recur in several installations:

- Stones, and twigs sticking in them,
- twigs, and items hanging on them such as a clam shell, a conch spiral, and fruit peelings,
- cords and wires, and items fastened by them such as feathers, a wooden sail, and woven fabric,
- containers such as pots, and content such as a metal rod, a plastic handle, and a field stone, and
- boards, and items lying on them such as an egg, a snail shell, pieces of mother of pearl, and a wooden racket

In addition to these constructive devices, gestural connections occur between objects, notwithstanding whether they touch each other or not:

- The lump of fissured driftwood seems to gaze at an egg which is lying near it,
- the clam shell hanging on a wooden stick appears to embrace it, and
- the metal plate with finger-shaped extremities seems to grasp the chrome-plated tube.

By constructing paradigms and syntagms such as these, the beholder can start making sense of what is going on in these microcosms. However, when trying to do justice to each microcosm as a whole, one is once again confronted with the problems of perspective and orientation. Each installation is a three

dimensional structure consisting of several found objects, and each of them occupies a certain position in relation to the others. In describing this position one must use formulations such as: It is located below or above the others, to the left or to the right of them, and in front or in back of them. However, only some objects have an intrinsic orientation such as a pot sitting on its base and opening towards the space above it, and a head looking at the space in front of it and thereby determining what is left and what is right. For all other cases the beholder must decide on an extrinsic orientation, which will determine the side from which he or she approaches the microcosm.

In part this will depend on the prevailing intrinsic orientations of the found objects, as in the case of below and above. But in cases of left versus right and front versus back, the beholder has to choose an anchor piece, find the side from which its essence is best recognizable, and use this perspective for the whole installation.

A staircase, for instance, is best recognized as such when seen from the side. In Maquinay's staircase installation we then have the choice of positioning ourselves either so that the staircase goes down to the left or down to the right and, accordingly, the wooden ricket on it will either crawl up or slide down on it (assuming that the predominant direction of movement in Western cultures is from left to right).

A face is most easily recognized as such when one looks at it from the front or from the side, and the eyes usually attract the greatest attention. One of Maquinay's found objects is a wooden block with several protrusions that could be interpreted as eye, nose, and mouth on only one of its sides. Thereby this side is extrinsically characterized as the front side of the whole installation although, considered with respect to the block's intrinsic orientation, this is not its front, but rather its right-hand side.

Maquinay's installations are mostly composed in such a way that the side from which the anchor piece is best visible as such is also the side from which the other pieces are best recognizable.

Usually, the anchor piece not only determines the preferred perspective, it also provides a scenario which allows one to interpret the installation as a whole. Maquinay's egg installation can serve as an example. In it, a white egg lying on a board is surrounded by two braided grain stalks and a fissured lump of wood. The orientation of the whole is given by the board that carries everything and is so much longer than it is wide, that it can only be regarded from one of its long sides. The egg is the anchor piece, and it suggests birds in its proximity. This is what lets the wood lump and the grain stalks appear to be birds. Their bodies all end in a part which is leaning towards the egg. This seems to be their head,

and their body posture is such that they all appear to gaze at the egg, although one does not see any eyes. The fact that the head of the lump is very near to a fissured part which looks like its wings makes it appear to be a predatory bird, whereas the two braided stalks look more like plucked chickens. The egg being relatively big compared with the birds makes them keep some distance from it and lets them seem to gaze in astonishment.

This turns out to be a well structured scene of three animals interacting. Having made sense of this installation in this way, we feel encouraged to use the same approach for the other installations. The procedures to be applied are not unlike what happens in the process of metaphorization: There is a source domain which in our case contains a constellation of foreign objects and their original functions which determine their identity, and a target domain which is constructed by the beholder relying on conceptual frames, scenarios, and scripts taken from everyday life. These ingredients are amalgamated so that they form a consistent scene, which can then serve as a basis for a rich story leading to further considerations. Trying to do what is necessary to arrive at this stage is an aesthetic experience which pleases the beholder, irrespective of the content of the scene, and the story.

Making sense of Maquinay's micro-installations should, however, not be confused with the reading of literary texts. We do not have to do with written texts but with object constellations conferring new roles onto their elements. If reading takes place here at all, it is restricted to the initial process of recognizing the original functions of the various found objects and the thereby establishing their identity. What comes in addition is context-driven reasoning which has the power to transform the found objects into symbols of everyday life.

If we now consider the content of these symbols, we encounter scenes such as the following:

- Root wood standing on a series of thorns and sprawling itself out like a clumsily moving millipede,
- branches of wood washed smooth by the surf, which makes them look like naked arms embracing each other,
- a nine-fingered metal glove wrapped around a meandering chrome-plated tube, thus suggesting a bishop's hand grasping a shepherd's crook,
- a frayed stick equipped with a clam shell hung around it, thus turning it into a high-tech vacuum cleaner,
- a thin grey board which is slightly curved, as if swollen by the wind, and fastened with a cord to a rusted upright chassis, thus creating the

impression of a container ship using wind power to sail across the ocean,
and

- a lamp post carrying a snail shell with a summit which looks like a staring eye, together giving the impression of a surveillance camera monitoring the surroundings.

These are human bodily experiences combined with reminiscences of animal life and caricatures of the technologically contaminated world which surrounds us. Thus, the way in which we tend to animate Maquinay's micro-installations does not lead us outside the confines of contemporary everyday life. On the contrary, it reproduces it in a peculiar way. Depending on the person looking at these little worlds, they either appear as *Biedermeier* scenes, animal farms, or as post-industrial nightmares.

It is remarkable to what degree we find our own condition expressed by the things we have thrown away. The marginalized objects brought into focus by Maquinay's micro-installations paradoxically bring our attention back to the culture that has marginalized them.