

I.

*Dieses Baums Blatt, der von Osten
Meinem Garten anvertraut,
Giebt geheimen Sinn zu kosten,
Wie's den Wissenden erbaut.*

*Ist es ein lebendig Wesen,
Das sich in sich selbst getrennt,
Sind es zwei, die sich erlesen,
Dass man sie als eines kennt.*

*Solche Frage zu erwiedern
Fand ich wohl den rechten Sinn:
Fühlst du nicht an meinen Liedern
Dass ich Eins und doppelt bin?*

—“Ginkgo biloba” (1815)
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe¹

In 2014 at Galerie Buchholz in Berlin, art historian, critic, and activist Douglas Crimp presented an exhibition reprise of *Pictures*, his influential 1977 exhibition at Artist's Space in New York. Crimp's essay on the former show affirmed the influence of both minimalism and dadaist acts of appropriation on the exhibiting artists, both performatively applied to acknowledge the conditions of context and to question the staging and ontological categories of art.² The exhibition of 1977 has since become significant in identifying the postmodern turn, especially within an American-centric history of conceptual art. Crimp, importantly, was also a persistent voice during the AIDS crisis and arguably shaped the development of activist-artistic practices as well as queer studies.

The invitation card for the Berlin exhibition of *Pictures, Before and After* presents an archival photograph from 1971 of a Daniel Buren painting-sculpture framing the central spiral staircase of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Buren's minimalism, a conceptual painting practice, was particular: submitting his signature stripe to ever-changing contexts, he chose to deemphasize the importance of the art object per se and focused instead on the narratives by which the art system affirms art as valuable, such as the label “avant-garde.” Art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, who succeeded Crimp as editor of *October* journal in 1990, wrote of Buren as an example of a self-aware European artist who thoughtfully engaged in a critical review of the legacy of Duchamp's negation of painting. Buren's central argument, via Buchloh, was that it was the very institutional and discursive framing conditions of painting which allowed the readymade to generate its shifts in the assigned meaning and experience of the art object in the first place—Buren was attempting to find another model of objecthood. As Buchloh writes, Buren used “a multiplicity of locations and forms of display that continuously played on the dialectic of interior and exterior, thereby oscillating within the contradictions of sculpture and painting and foregrounding all those hidden and manifest framing devices that structure both traditions within the discourse of the museum and the studio.”³ Furthermore, by enacting his critique of artistic labor through the frame, Buren claimed not only that mediums are equivalent and interchangeable but that the viewer registers visual signs similarly to the artist.

Remember that for Michael Fried, known for his Greenbergian dismissal of minimalism's theatricality (and who Crimp critiques from the very first line of his “Pictures” essay), the true, authentic experience of art is an experience of the work as representation, as that which is beheld immediately and bounded in its entirety. For it is the frame that marks the limit of significance and the boundary of aesthetic consideration, which for a poet and performance theorist like Fred Moten is a paradoxical inauthenticity in its very attempt to be authentic: “It's important to note that this inauthenticity is a violation not just of contingent, presently needful formulation of the essence of painting, but of a more general and transhistorical formulation regarding the possibility of discerning beauty as such.”⁴

The art object, then, is to be seen as being in a generative struggle with not so much the support (of the art system) that it cannot do without, which is the frame that ensures it is not *merely* an object, but with the actual outside that co-operates in the artwork's very making—quite literally, quite simply, the actual raw paint, or the lagoon's water that weathers the canvas. This recognized tension is different again to how Duchamp's object has generally been written about as enacting a singular conceptual acuity—reason for Buren to consider that the art-historical reading of Duchamp has rendered it spectacle (different to theatrical), and reason as well for him to emphasize the *act* of framing and the contingencies of context. For the object-made-art is much more modest; it appears as such because of its exhibition, and it will just as easily withhold again.

¹ Douglas Crimp quoted Goethe's poem in his keynote address at the symposium accompanying the exhibition *Pictures, Before and After—An Exhibition for Douglas Crimp*, staged to celebrate Crimp's memoir *Before Pictures*, Galerie Buchholz, Berlin, August 28–November 8, 2014.

² The exhibition *Pictures* at Artist's Space, New York ran from September 24–October 29, 1977. Crimp's essay “Pictures” first appeared in *October*, no. 8 (Spring 1979): 78–88.

³ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October*, no. 55 (Winter 1990): 137–39.

⁴ Fred Moten, “Resistance of the Object,” in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 246.

II.

*La foglia di quest'albero
Affidata dall'est al mio giardino
Ci fa assaporare il senso segreto
Che eleva il sapiente.*

*È un essere vivente
In se stesso diviso?
Sono due che si sono scelti
Cosicché lì si ritiene uno solo?*

*Per replicare a queste domande
Ho trovato forse il giusto modo:
Non senti dalle mie canzoni
Che io sono uno e doppio?*

A constant warm, dusty, yellow light and a bright ginkgo tree dated to 2014 frame this present exhibition by artist Constantin Thun, who is also questioning the object, its recognizability as art, listening to its active states and its potential activism, as well as allowing the queerness of things that are always more complex (simultaneously more simple) than what they seem. These rooms are lined with the paintings of alternating Venetian reds found beside the lagoon. There is also a diptych of cool-tinted photographs in tribute to American artist Robert Gober and his making ambiguous of familiar objects, and a book sequencing the rhythms of interior life. Another object on display is possibly cherry wood, potentially table-like.

Cherry wood is a popular hardwood in the West, commonly used for making furniture, especially related to dining and sleeping rooms, and it is readily found. The Ginkgo tree, however, is considered a living fossil of the East, the only remaining member of a group of trees that once grew worldwide 250 million years ago. It is a hardy, drought resistant tree, yet little is known about its actual properties. Its leaf inspired Goethe's poem on the queer binary of things found in nature: the metamorphosis of plants, for example, as well its distinct forms to be made meaningful, lyrical.

This leads to yet another object in this show, made of language—with awareness that it is language that has historically reduced the object down to external, authentic, categorical differences and called on them to appear as such. If, however, the focus placed on the object is in its framed performance, for how it is acting (its verb rather than noun state), then from there it becomes a multiplicity and an interrelation of potential forms and functions and desires. Instead of reading the icon, the readymade, which offers fixity and discontinuity, language can be worked into acknowledging the object as an intermediary, characterized by continuity and activism—extending to what is needed, a transhistorical, nonobjective, plural possibility of beauty.

III.

*The leaf of this Eastern tree
Which has been entrusted to my
garden
Offers a feast of secret significance,
For the edification of the initiate.*

*Is it one living thing
That has become divided within itself?
Are these two who have chosen each
other,
So that we know them as one?*

*I think I have found the right answer
To these questions;
Do my songs not make you feel
That I am both one and twain?*

Also in 2014, just after the *Pictures* redux, while journeying from south to north, east to west, back to Berlin, there was an object on display in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art of such memory it cannot be explained; it performed on some other level of beauty as carrier of knowledge and somehow managed to do so even within the constraints of the colonial institution. The object was of two. They were made in Tibet during the seventeenth century; they could possibly be seen as a pair of earrings, gold, curved in semicircle shape and inlaid with stones, some bright with blue, some turquoise, reds, and the fixtures wrapped around, folded in, to hold them in place, for a while. They were not for human ears but made for the gods. Gods who were imagined as having ears, without exactly knowing what form they may take, or where. What is known is that the object of two was carried across the Himalayan mountains on pilgrimages to temples and not worn but presented as an offering on arrival. It could be said that they became emblems of transition. And although made of matter, their purpose was to adorn, and so to frame, the sacred space of listening.

IV.

—As does the light on the threshold of this space, and the tree that flickers its doubling leaves in the spring–summer outside, and the banners that unfurl through the weave of their canvas cloth in relation to gravity; they are not made for us, essentially, but they lend their time so we may listen to the generative ambiguity and interconnected beauty of things. Thun has framed the object differently again to those days of *Pictures*, *Before and After*, modifying and redistributing expectations. The update could be seen as the object given a momentary application of value, via the language of art and its systems of economy, but with respect to its active, unknown purpose that goes beyond conceptual description and art definition; possibly like an emblem of transition, that it has a before and an after beyond this current exhibition frame. Imaginably, it is art, and it is object, and it is both, and it just is, and