

Currency of signs

In the past, it has been told, the vacation-goers of the Club Med – never having taken part in the institution, I did not witness the thing directly – had, during their stays, bead necklaces with which to pay small purchases of drinks or groceries through a playful currency, as though washed of the enslavement of what we call money. The intention (of pretending to free the individuals from the distinctions of wealth) was odious, but the procedure ingenious: it attested to real knowledge of the history of humanity that long used shells, beads, feathers and necklaces for purposes that were still not called commerce.

When I discovered the surprising objects of Silvana Mc Nulty — we can be nothing but admiring of the itinerary of this young artist, who was able, in barely four years, to constitute her own, extremely singular universe, and to create in a certain way a signature – I first looked at them with my familiar references, those that are related to the art of assemblage and the figure of Kurt Schwitters, who formulated as no one else has done the way in which the collage imposed itself on him at the end of World War I: “One can very well,” he said, “create with scraps, and that is what I did by gluing them together, by nailing them. I gave these objects the name of *Merz*, and it was my own prayer to celebrate the victorious end of the war, since victory, once again, amounted to peace. In any event, everything was destroyed and it was a matter of building something new with debris.” The idea of symbolic repair seemed to be to rather well suit the incongruous adjustment of all things by the link, sewing, weaving and remodeling with which Silvana Mc Nulty started to engage in almost compulsively around 2019: Nurse Penelope of the world of bits and pieces, she certainly had not known the war – did she sense that war was soon going to break out on the threshold of Europe? – but in France one of the worst social crises in decades, that is now called the “yellow vest movement,” and an epidemic such as hadn’t been seen in nearly a century, that would shut in an entire population in for months. Everything had to be put back in shape, wounds sutured, a society of the object in total decay mended, the artist focused on what was accessible to her, that of the metaphor: we often see in her compositions triangles and protractors ending in festooned hems that suggest the urgent need to change our measurement systems, if it is true that they only succeeded in building the wobbly world in which we live. The readjustment of the things to each other erases too, or overflows, their sometimes sharp and cutting edges, as though to soften their contact. Schwitters nailed: rather than this proven but expeditive method, Silvana Mc Nulty preferred that of the women artists who made an impression on her, and who used thread, cords or plaiting: Eva Hesse, Zoe Leonard with her *Strange Fruit*, or the extraordinary Hessie, who used embroidery as a construction tool. Who cared what a bygone world condescendingly called “ladies work”: it is not a simple matter to link, and the thread is worth as much as the screw of nail in terms of efficacy. In Latin, the *religiones*, from which comes the word “religions,” was, Marcel Mauss and Roger Caillois tell us, *the links that assembled the beams of bridges from one bank of a river to the other* (this infrastructure was so important that the highest ranked in the hierarchy of Roman priests was the *pontifex*, the bridge-maker – which is why in the Catholic Church, the pope is called the Sovereign Pontif...).

There is more, however: what strikes us immediately in these transformed objects is their character of toys, jewels, talismans or amulets. They rarely exceed the dimension of the

offering, the gift, and are comprised of equal parts of elements in our daily life, plastic rulers, pairs of scissors, strainers or sink plugs, and materials that were traditionally used as the famous archaic currencies that one day an accountant at the Club Med remembered: beads, shells, shiny metals, small bones, plants. It is through convenience that we speak of *archaic currencies* concerning the extraordinary objects, scarcely intelligible to us, used in North America or Oceania before colonization; the exact function of the Iroquois' wampum, the *tevau* of the Solomon Islands is still disputed. They were exchanged, of course, but most of the time in a ritual setting that went largely beyond that of a simple transaction, in the sense that let us say, the International Monetary Fund would understand it. It is because money was not born suddenly, even in our civilizations, in the mind of a start-upper wearing animal skins, who one day would have had the idea of multiplying the exchanges, by inventing a universal substitute able to cast swapping into oblivion. First of all, money was *beautiful*, it circulated for itself in a ceremonial setting – of which nothing would give a better or simpler idea than the exchange, in the schoolyard, of Poulain chocolate images or marbles, for my generation, Pokémon cards for that of my children. It was handled with a sacred respect and frank joy. It was only very gradually that it became what we know today, in short, a lethal abstraction. The artists of the second half of the 20th century often dreamed of abolishing this money that they saw as a corrupting binder: Yves Klein threw gold into the Seine, Joseph Beuys pleaded for a return to swapping (the different path of their careers, early for the former, late for the latter, sometimes makes us forget that they were contemporaries: Klein was born in 1928, Beuys in 1921).

Silvana Mc Nulty, with the often flamboyant nerve of her generation, seems to me to formulate a slightly different artistic hypothesis, but one that is also quite sound – that of giving currency back its beauty rather than calling for its effacement, to create signs for a new, more elegant, more worthy and fairer exchange than the one that governs our lives. A currency, one could say, of the Mc Nulty republic, that is, a dreamed-of universe between childhood as such and the childhood of humanity. Have we suddenly realized that the financial disease that has blighted our world worsened with the growing dematerialization of money, the abandonment (in any case official) of the gold standard? If money today is virtually everything, is it perhaps because it is no longer concretely anything, and is no longer held in the palm of the hand that would feel its weight with fear and jubilation – the Club Med had clearly understood, by attracting its real customers with fake pearls. The reach of intuition must not be underestimated: in the general idea of a repair of the world, the dream of a currency that is both primitive and new very naturally succeeds that of a less orthogonal rearrangement of objects, and gives us as much to see as to think about. After all, Kurt Schwitters isn't so far: hadn't he called his art *Merz*, by lopping off the first syllable of the word *Kommerz*? Silvana Mc Nulty has transformed the currency of the financial markets into a currency of admirable signs...