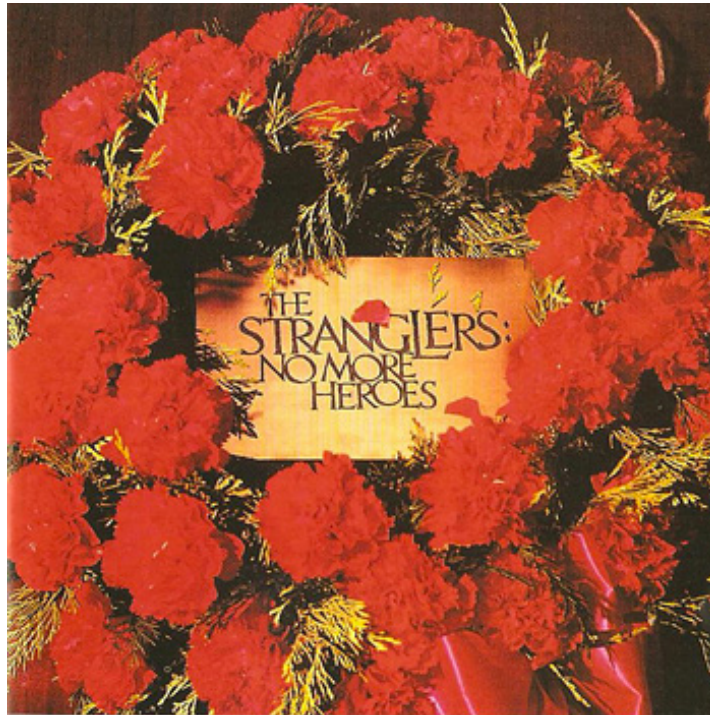


# A Thing Like You and Me

Hito Steyerl



*Whatever happened to Leon Trotsky?  
He got an ice pick, that made his ears burn.  
Whatever happened to dear old Lenny?  
The great Elmyra, and Sancho Panza?  
Whatever happened to the heroes?  
Whatever happened to all the heroes?  
All the Shakespeares?  
They watched their Rome burn.  
Whatever happened to the heroes?  
No more heroes any more.*

– The Strangers, 1977

1

In 1977, the short decade of the New Left violently comes to an end. Militant groups such as the Red Army Faction have descended into political sectarianism. Gratuitous violence, macho posing, pithy slogans, and an embarrassing cult of personality have come to dominate the scene. Yet it is not 1977 that sees the myth of the leftist hero come crumbling down. The figure has on the contrary already lost all credibility, beyond rehabilitation – even if this will only become clear much later.



In 1977, the punk band The Stranglers delivers a crystal clear analysis of the situation by stating the obvious: heroism is over. Trotsky, Lenin, and Shakespeare are dead. In 1977, as leftists flock to the funerals of RAF members Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, and Jan Carl Raspe, The Stranglers' album cover delivers its own giant wreath of red carnations and declares: NO MORE HEROES. Any more.

2.

But, also in 1977, David Bowie releases his single "Heroes." He sings about a new brand of hero, just in time for the neoliberal revolution. The hero is dead – long live the hero! Yet Bowie's hero is no longer a subject, but an object: a thing, an image, a splendid fetish – a commodity soaked with desire, resurrected from beyond the squalor of its own demise.

Just look at a 1977 video of the song to see why: the clip shows Bowie singing to

himself from three simultaneous angles, with layering techniques tripling his image; not only has Bowie's hero been cloned, he has above all become an image that can be reproduced, multiplied, and copied, a riff that travels effortlessly through commercials for almost anything, a fetish that packages Bowie's glamorous and unfazed postgender look as product.<sup>1</sup> Bowie's hero is no longer a larger-than-life human being carrying out exemplary and sensational exploits, and he is not even an icon, but a shiny product endowed with posthuman beauty: an image and nothing but an image.<sup>2</sup>

1 I tried unsuccessfully to find production details for Bowie's video. I am referring to this 1977 version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejJmZHRlzhY>  
Elsewhere, I have come across a note concerning the 1979 video for Michael Jackson's 1979 video "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough," which uses similar layering techniques to show a tripled Michael Jackson. This technology is considered new at this point and explicitly mentioned in reviews. Apart from that, any psychoanalytic reading of Bowie's video would have a ball superimposing its specific take on post-gender narcissism onto the East-West divide (the Berlin Wall indicated by pantomime!). But this is not my intention here.

2 David Riff pointed out the connection to Andy Warhol's work, especially in Bowie's song "Andy Warhol" (Andy Warhol looks a scream / Hang him on my wall / Andy

This hero's immortality no longer originates in the strength to survive all possible ordeals, but from its ability to be xeroxed, recycled, and reincarnated. Destruction will alter its form and appearance, yet its substance will be untouched. The immortality of the thing is its finitude, not its eternity.

3.

What happens to identification at this point? Who can we identify with? Of course, identification is always with an image. But ask anybody whether they'd actually like to be a JPEG file. And this is precisely my point: if identification is to go anywhere, it has to be with this material aspect of the image, with the image as thing, not as representation. And then it perhaps ceases to be identification, and instead becomes participation.<sup>3</sup>

Warhol, Silver Screen / Can't tell them apart at all), and introduced this amazing quote to me: "To desire fame – not the glory of the hero but the glamour of the star – with the intensity and awareness Warhol did, is to desire to be nothing, nothing of the human, the interior, the profound. It is to want to be nothing but image, surface, a bit of light on a screen, a mirror for the fantasies and a magnet for the desires of others – a thing of absolute narcissism. And to desire to outlive these desires there as a thing not to be consumed." Thierry de Duve and Rosalind Krauss, "Andy Warhol, or The Machine Perfected," *October* 48 (Spring 1989): 4.

3 The concept of participation is explained in detail in Christopher Bracken, "The Language of Things: Walter Benjamin's Primitive Thought," *Semiotica*, no. 138 (February 2002): 321–349. "Participation, which is the 'absence of relation,' merges the subject of knowledge, which is not necessarily a human being, with the object known" (327). Bracken goes on to quote Benjamin directly: "In the medium of reflection, moreover, the thing and the knowing being merge into each other. Both are only relative unities of reflection. Thus, there is in fact no knowledge of an object by a subject. Every instance of knowing is an immanent connection in the absolute, or, if one prefers, in the subject. The term 'object' designates not a relation within knowledge but an absence of relation" (Walter Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Howard Eiland [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996], 146, emphasis added). Accordingly, participating in an image is not the same as being represented by it. The image is the thing in which senses merge with matter. Things are not being represented by it but participate in it.

I will come back to this point later.

But first of all: why should anybody want to become this thing – an object – in the first place? Elisabeth Lebovici once made this clear to me in a brilliant remark.<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, emancipatory practice has been tied to a desire to become a subject. Emancipation was conceived as becoming a subject of history, of representation, or of politics. To become a subject carried with it the promise of autonomy, sovereignty, agency. To be a subject was good; to be an object was bad. But, as we all know, being a subject can be tricky. The subject is always already subjected. Though the position of the subject suggests a degree of control, its reality is rather one of being subjected to power relations. Nevertheless, generations of feminists – including myself – have strived to get rid of patriarchal objectification in order to become subjects. The feminist movement, until quite recently (and for a number of reasons), worked towards claiming autonomy and full subjecthood.

But as the struggle to become a subject became mired in its own contradictions, a different possibility emerged. How about siding with the object for a change? Why not affirm it? Why not be a thing? An object without a subject? A thing among other things? "A thing that feels," as Mario Perniola seductively phrased it:

*To give oneself as a thing that feels and to take a thing that feels is the new experience that asserts itself today on contemporary feeling, a radical and extreme experience that*

4 This comment was based on her interpretation of Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's propositions in *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), in which both authors investigate the role of the inanimate in cinema. Another great proposition by which to think through this issue was made by Carsten Juhl, who suggested Mario Perniola's *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*.



*has its cornerstone in the encounter between philosophy and sexuality... It would seem that things and the senses are no longer in conflict with one another but have struck an alliance thanks to which the most detached abstraction and the most unrestrained excitement are almost inseparable and are often indistinguishable.<sup>5</sup>*

A desire to become this thing – in this case an image – is the upshot of the struggle over representation. Senses and things, abstraction and excitement, speculation and power, desire and matter actually converge within images.

The struggle over representation, however, was based on a sharp split between these levels: here thing – there image. Here I – there it. Here subject – there object. The senses here – dumb matter over there. Slightly paranoid assumptions concerning authenticity came into the equation as well. Did the public image – of women or

other groups, for example – actually correspond to reality? Was it stereotyped? Misrepresented? Thus one got tangled in a whole web of presuppositions, the most problematic of which being, of course, that an authentic image exists in the first place. A campaign was thus unleashed to find a more accurate form of representation, but without questioning its own, quite realist, paradigm.

But what if the truth is neither in the represented nor in the representation? What if the truth is in its material configuration? What if the medium is really a message? Or actually – in its corporate media version – a barrage of commodified intensities?

To participate in an image – rather than merely identify with it – could perhaps abolish this relation. This would mean participating in the material of the image as well as in the desires and forces it accumulates. How about acknowledging that this image is not some ideological misconception, but a thing simultaneously couched in affect and availability, a fetish made of crystals

<sup>5</sup> Mario Perniola, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* (New York/London: Continuum, 2004), 1.

and electricity, animated by our wishes and fears – a perfect embodiment of its own conditions of existence? As such, the image is – to use yet another phrase of Walter Benjamin’s – without expression.<sup>6</sup> It doesn’t represent reality. It is a fragment of the real world. It is a thing just like any other – a thing like you and me.

This shift in perspective has far-reaching consequences. There might still be an internal and inaccessible trauma that constitutes subjectivity. But trauma is also the contemporary opium of the masses – an apparently private property that simultaneously invites and resists foreclosure. And the economy of this trauma constitutes the remnant of the independent subject. But then if we are to acknowledge that subjectivity is no longer a privileged site for emancipation, we might as well just face it and get on with it.

On the other hand, the increased appeal of becoming a thing doesn’t necessarily mean that we have reached the age of unlimited positivity, whose prophets – if we are to believe them – extol an age in which desire flows freely, negativity and history are a thing of the past, and vital drives happily splash all over the place.

No, the negativity of the thing can be discerned by its bruises, which mark the site of history’s impact. As Eyal Weizman and Tom Keenan remark in a fascinating conversation on forensics and the fetish, objects increasingly take on the role of witnesses in court cases concerned with human rights violations.<sup>7</sup> The bruises of things are

deciphered, and then subjected to interpretation. Things are made to speak – often by subjecting them to additional violence. The field of forensics can be understood as the torture of objects, which are expected to tell all, just as when humans are interrogated. Things often have to be destroyed, dissolved in acid, cut apart, or dismantled in order to tell their full story. To affirm the thing also means participating in its collision with history.

Because a thing is usually not a shiny new Boeing taking off on its virgin flight. Rather, it might be its wreck, painstakingly pieced together from scrap inside a hangar after its unexpected nosedive into catastrophe. A thing is the ruin of a house in Gaza. A film reel lost or destroyed in civil war. A female body tied up with ropes, fixed in obscene positions. Things condense power and violence. Just as a thing accumulates productive forces and desires, so does it also accumulate destruction and decay.

So then how about a specific thing called “image”? It is a complete mystification to think of the digital image as a shiny immortal clone of itself. On the contrary, not even the digital image is outside history. It bears the bruises of its crashes with politics and violence. It is nothing like, say, a carbon copy of Leon Trotsky brought back to life through digital manipulation (though of course it could *show* him); rather, the material articulation of the image is like a clone of Trotsky walking around with an ice pick in his head. The bruises of images are its glitches and artifacts, the traces of its rips and transfers. Images are violated, ripped apart, subjected to interrogation and probing. They are stolen, cropped, edited,

6 According to Benjamin, the expressionless is a critical violence that “completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world.” Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*: Volume 1 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 340.

7 According to Weizman, their idea is based on putting forensics back in the frame of rhetoric (where it originated in Roman times) meaning “in front of the forum,” and implying

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the speech of objects in professional or legal courts. When evidence is given the capacity to speak, objects are treated as “material witnesses”; they also therefore possess the capacity to lie.



Still from Bruce LaBruce, *Raspberry Reich*, 2004.

and re-appropriated. They are bought, sold, leased. Manipulated and adulated. Reviled and revered. To participate in the image means to take part in all of this.

4.

*Our things in our hands must be equals, comrades.*

– Aleksandr Rodchenko <sup>8</sup>

So, what's the point of becoming a thing or an image? Why should one accept alienation, bruises, and objectification?

In writing about the surrealists, Walter Benjamin emphasizes the liberating force within things.<sup>9</sup> In the commodity fetish, material drives intersect with affect and desire, and Benjamin fantasizes about igniting these compressed forces, to awaken

“the slumbering collective from the dream-filled sleep of capitalist production” to tap into these forces.<sup>10</sup> He also thinks that things could speak to one another through these forces.<sup>11</sup> Benjamin's idea of participation – a partly subversive take on early twentieth-century primitivism – claims that it is possible to join in this symphony of matter. For him, modest and even abject objects are hieroglyphs in whose dark prism social relations lay congealed and in fragments. They are understood as nodes, in which the tensions of a historical moment materialize in a flash of awareness or twist grotesquely into the commodity fetish. In this perspective, a thing is never just an object, but a fossil in which a constellation of forces are petrified. Things are never just inert objects, passive items, or lifeless shucks, but consist of tensions, forces, hidden powers, all being constantly exchanged. While this opinion

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 347.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and the Languages of Man,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 69.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Christina Kiaer, “Rodchenko in Paris,” *October* no. 75 (Winter 1996): 3

<sup>9</sup> See Bracken, “The Language of Things,” 346ff.

borders on magical thought, according to which *things* are invested with supernatural powers, it is also a classical materialist take. Because the commodity, too, is understood not as a simple object, but a condensation of social forces.<sup>12</sup>

From a slightly different perspective, members of the Soviet avant-garde also tried to develop alternative relations to things. In his text "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing," Boris Arvatov claims that the object should be liberated from the enslavement of its status as capitalist commodity.<sup>13</sup> Things should no longer remain passive, uncreative, and dead, but should be free to participate actively in the transformation of everyday reality.<sup>14</sup>

"By imagining an object that is differently animated from the commodity fetish... Arvatov attempts to return a kind of social agency to the fetish."<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, Aleksandr Rodchenko calls on things to become comrades and equals. By releasing the energy stored in them, things become coworkers, potentially friends, even lovers.<sup>16</sup>

Where images are concerned, this potential agency has already been explored

to some extent.<sup>17</sup> To participate in the image as thing means to participate in its potential agency – an agency that is not necessarily beneficial, as it can be used for every imaginable purpose. It is vigorous and sometimes even viral. And it will never be full and glorious, as images are bruised and damaged, just as everything else within history. History, as Benjamin told us, is a pile of rubble. Only we are not staring at it any longer from the point of view of Benjamin's shell-shocked angel. We are not the angel. We are the rubble. We are this pile of scrap.

5.

*The revolution is my boyfriend!*

– Bruce LaBruce, *Raspberry Reich*

We have unexpectedly arrived at quite an interesting idea of the object and objectivity. Activating the thing means perhaps to create an objective – not as a fact, but as the task of unfreezing the forces congealed within the trash of history. Objectivity thus becomes a lens, one that recreates us as things mutually acting upon one another. From this "objective" perspective, the idea of emancipation opens up somewhat differently. Bruce LaBruce's queer porn film *Raspberry Reich* shows us how by presenting a completely different view on 1977. In it, the former heroes of the Red Army Faction have been reincarnated as gay porn actors who enjoy being each other's

12 The last paragraph is taken from: Hito Steyerl, "The Language of Things," translate (June 2006)

13 Boris Arvatov, "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)," trans. Christina Kiaer, October 81 (Summer 1997): 119–128

14 Ibid., 110.

15 Ibid., 111.

16 Lars Laumann's touching and amazing video *Berlin Muren*, about a Swedish lady who married the Berlin Wall, makes a strong and very convincing case for object-love. The lover would not just love the Berlin Wall while it was functional but would continue to love it long after it had come down, after history had impacted violently on the object she desired. She would love it through its destruction and agony. She also claimed that her love was not directed to the things the Wall represented, but to its material form and reality.

17 See for example Maurizio Lazzarato, "Struggle, Event, Media," trans. Aileen Derieg, *republicart* (May 2003), or Hito Steyerl, "The Language of Things": "To engage in the language of things in the realm of the documentary form is not equivalent to using realist forms in representing them. It is not about representation at all, but about actualising whatever the things have to say in the present. And to do so is not a matter of realism, but rather of relationalism – it is a matter of presencing and thus transforming the social, historical and also material relations, which determine things."

playthings. They masturbate on pixelated photocopied wall-size images of Baader and Che. But the point is not to be found in the gayness or pornness of the film, and certainly not in its so-called "transgressivity." The point is that the actors do not identify with heroes, but rip their images. They become bruised images: sixth-generation copies of dodgy leftist pinups. This bunch looks much worse than David Bowie, but is much more desirable for it. Because they love the pixel, not the hero. The hero is dead. Long live the thing.

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