

The Girl and her Object

Steven ten Thije

I have a three-year-old son. It is impressive and indeed alarming to see how, with the conviction borne of faith, the first person possessive pronoun has appeared on the scene: "Mine!" As I see from close by how the world is appropriated, I ask myself what John Lennon meant by "easy" when he sang: "Imagine no possessions; it's easy if you try." Possession seems to be a primal force – and I have the idea that we are not simply dealing with "nurture" but also with a good deal of "nature". I was reminded of this when I saw "The Girl and her Object" by Margret Wibmer.

The work is a photograph of a relatively small size: 32x50 cm. This is a size that you may consider when having a family portrait enlarged. The photo is mounted within a sober passe-partout in a simple frame. This protrudes slightly, thus creating some space around the work. The environment and the size of the photo transform it into an intimate monument. However, the photo itself breaks with this domestic association. A young, dark-skinned woman is portrayed in a frontal pose. She does not entirely fit within the image; her feet remain outside the frame. The background is an even black, and the dark skin of the young woman causes her to blend into her surroundings to some extent. She wears a medium-length jacket inside out, and is as a result wrapped in somewhat futuristic, fringy cream-white. The "object" referred to in the title appears to be a lampshade from a dentist's lamp. It is a hard plastic object, somewhat clinical in appearance. She holds it tight against her breast. Her gaze is neither cold nor warm, but rather empty. A word is "stamped" onto her body at the hips: "sold". The word, in blood red, sets the whole composition and meaning in movement. What belongs to whom here? What is sold? Who has bought it? Has "she" perhaps been sold?

The mix of historical references and a sort of shiny futurism move the question towards "possession" in a complex no-man's-land. It appears to be a reference to the slavery of the past, but the sharpness of the image and the dental lamp give it a clinical, medical edge. It is as if the question of possession is being asked in a sort of "non-time", one that is both historical and external to history. It is also possible to read the contrast between history and futurism in yet another way. The historical is intimate and personal: a human relationship with a thing. The hard nature of the photograph is, in contrast, very impersonal and inhuman, just as a slave trader robs a person of his or her humanity by stealing time in its entirety and selling it on to someone else.

And of course the work is also a work of art, which is shown in a gallery. The work is for sale: the young woman, her object, the time that Margret Wibmer has invested in making it. It adds yet another layer to the work, one which to some extent provides an answer to the earlier question of who owns what in this photo, since it is now no longer about everyday "possession". Owning a work of art is special, since the work cannot be used in the same way that most things we buy can be used. We do not buy the work in order to consume it, but in order to keep and preserve it. Perhaps we must even say that we do not own works of art, but that we take responsibility for them. This also makes the gallery a special sort of commercial space. We buy something there that in a certain sense does not become our property, but our concern.

The core of this special relationship between us and the artwork lies close to the strange "timelessness" of the girl with her object. The image, the photo, is positioned as it were on the edge of our world and its own world, one that we are able to feel as we look at the image but which we can never fully possess. In this sense the work is autonomous. What we possess is not this autonomous world itself, but the possibility of relating to it: the possibility of looking at the work time and again and of thinking about the image.

The world behind the image is in a certain sense the domain of the artist. If we search for the meaning of these images, then we search within the life of the artist and her oeuvre. All these works together tell their own story, one in which each work is its own door to the inner space of the

work. This sounds romantic, and conjures up images of the artist as genius, as semi-divine being, but this need not be so. The autonomous space of the work is in the end independent of the artist herself, although she does of course have a special relationship with it. This space is not simply the space of the artist, but is something that emerges because the artist engages in relationships with the world. The photo is also what it is because of the young woman, the jacket, the object, and even because of the gaze of all those who subsequently look at it, and in particular that of the person who decides to buy it. These gazes perhaps do not alter the work in a material sense, but they change the world in which the artist lives, and in this way influence the works that will come and that already exist. In the same way, this text leaves its mark on the world of the work and becomes a part of it.

As such, what we look at when we see this photo is not so much a "thing" that we can possess. We instead become part of a relational field, one that in this case is dominated by questions of possession. The image appears to give direction to these questions through the latent reference to slavery and to a medical environment. These things direct the question of possession towards the term "care". The question of how we can care for the body of the girl arises. But another type of "care" for the body is also suggested. In English, we speak not only of an "oeuvre" but also of a "body of work": the oeuvre as body. How do we take care of the integrity of the body?

It is an infectious question, one that makes itself felt in our everyday form of possession. When compared to our care for the artwork, our everyday form of possession is almost a form of violence, as we use up and consume that which we possess. But the work also makes another suggestion. It is not simply concerned with the object itself, but also with the world from which that which we possess emerges. Do we use the things around us and each other in such a way that the social-material fabric that exists between us and these things can recover after use, or do we cause permanent harm through our possession? The reference to slavery shows how often possession results in harm. But the self-assured, although empty, stare of the young woman acts as a counterpoint to the heavy burden of the past. The image places "consuming" in opposition to "caring": the care of the girl for her object, that of the artist for her work, and of the eventual owner for the work, the oeuvre and in turn also for the girl.

If I allow all this to sink in as I think about the work, and I look at my son, then the thought creeps over me that he will really need art. Sometimes you can already see that things are no longer simply used in the game, but that they retain their value and gain a role. The dolls are given names, the plastic cow that he plays with is given a house made from blocks. He gains admission to a world that manifests itself in the objects with which he plays. Perhaps my son will learn not only to possess, but also to care. And then I think to myself, softly: "The art of caring is reflected in the care for art."

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