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IN DEFENSE OF ACEPHALIA

-Dieter Roelstraete

The work of California-based Scottish artist Thomas Houseago (born in 1972) occupies a central position in the recent revival of certain sculptural traditions that were long deemed dead (or at the very least terminally anachronistic) in this day and age of accelerating technological developments. Unlike many of his like-minded con-generationists, however, whose reappraisal of sculpture very often entails a reconsideration of an angular, abstract modernism, Houseago has chosen to explore the domain of figuration and the depiction of the human form instead – adding a further edge to the defiant radicalism of his artistic program. In this short text, Dieter Roelstraete considers one particular feature of some of Houseago's most striking, monumental works: their headlessness.

Here is what a certain Eugenia Bell wrote in a book review published in Frieze #119, November-December 2008: “It is the year of the object. MIT’s psychologist of all things technological, Sherry Turkle, has released Falling for Science: Objects in Mind, a book about the relationships we develop with our electronic friends; the director of Helvetica (2007), Gary Hustwit, is onto his next documentary, titled Objectified, which will explore the origins of and people behind the things we take for granted; and now there is the new book The Language of Things (2008) by erstwhile Observer architecture critic, Domus editor and director of London’s Design Museum, Deyan Sudjic”. How she came to overlook my own “thing theory” essay for the catalogue of last year’s Berlin Biennial, titled “Art and/as Object Attachment: Thoughts on Thingness”, I guess we will never know – but that’s not the point right now. Even though the issue of thingness is tangentially related to the art we will be talking about in a minute.

In a slightly different context (that of grand curatorial designs, so bear with me), 2008 has also been named the year of the occult – of the dramatic return of (a certain concern with) the spiritual in art, alternately named the magical, the mystical, the paranormal, the religious even – a “fact” attested by too many exhibitions to enumerate here. In any case this, I think, is also tangentially related to the art we will be talking about in a minute – but very differently so. Looking at the man’s recent exhibition schedule, however, 2008 may well have been the year of Thomas Houseago instead.

The work of the Scottish, Los Angeles-based sculptor was on view in as many as eight exhibitions last year, three of which were substantial solo shows at high-profile galleries – at David Kordansky in Los Angeles, at Xavier Hufkens in Brussels, and at Herald Street in London; other exhibitions took place at Isabella Bortolozzi in Berlin, Michael Werner Gallery in London, Sonsbeek in Arnhem, and Galleria Zero... in Milan. Visiting the charmingly titled Brussels show “When Earth Fucks with Space” back in December, I spent some minutes talking with a long-time gallery employee about the remarkable turnabout in exhibition fortunes that had befallen the artist of late. Houseago’s first exhibition at Xavier Hufkens in 2001 had not been particularly successful, it appears, and my interlocutor remembered the overall hostility (or hostile, incomprehending indifference) of the press to the work on display above anything else. Clearly, back in 2001 – how distant that year now seems, with its most important, era-defining political event slowly fading from active memory – the times simply weren’t ripe for Houseago’s non-conformist brand of crudely executed, muscularly “expressionist” sculpture. Flashing forward (back) to 2008, it seems the times have definitely been a-changin’ – today, we are without a doubt living through the revival of a certain type of non-conformist, crudely executed, muscularly “expressionist” sculpture indeed. [These are highly charged terms whose use requires some serious arguing – but not now.] And for that reason alone, 2008 may well be called the year of Thomas Houseago – perhaps the genre’s most emblematic, and simultaneously most genrebending, boundary-pushing, representative.

I first came across Houseago's work in S.M.A.K., the municipal museum of contemporary art in Ghent, Belgium, which in 2001 had acquired a formidable sculpture by the young Scot (then still living in nearby Brussels) called Untitled (Golem) (1998). A huge kneeling figure resting on a pedestal, made of plaster, iron and burlap, the work's most eye-catching feature was the absence of its head.

A literalist reading of the work of course inevitably involves the old Jewish folk tale of the Golem alluded to in the bracketed part of the title, the mythical animate being created wholly from inanimate matter – clay, in most versions of the story (the word is etymologically related to the Hebrew term for “raw material”), just like Adam in Genesis – to perform menial household tasks and/or defend its creators from antisemitic attacks. The Golem's head was famously inscribed with the phrase “Emeth” (Hebrew for “truth”), the act of its inscription actually serving as the ritual that brought the Golem to life; to return the Golem to its original inanimate state, one merely had to rub out the first letter “E” to produce the word “Meth” (Hebrew for “dead”). An age-old parable that later also resurfaced in the alchemist myth of the homunculus and in the story of Frankenstein – both clearly allegorical paraphrases of the existential anxiety that surrounds the creation of lifelike or life-size human figures, whether artistically conceived or not – but also in the Surrealist lore of the Acéphale, where headlessness was actually considered a critical virtue corresponding to the Surrealists' programmatic distaste for, and suspicion of, all that was rational, conscious, and (literally) cerebral or “brainy” in the human animal.

Headlessness certainly must have “meant” something to the artist (who emphasized the importance of the 1998 sculpture in a telephone conversation we had some months ago) – it resurfaced, vengefully like the wrath of the Golem himself, in the Brussels exhibition in 2008, in a work titled Crouching Figure: standing both hand and headlessly in the pristine gallery space, this hesitant figure (only slightly crouching, it must be added: it looks like it's ready to jump instead) operates, obliquely, as the shadow of a self-portrait – with the absence of the figure's hands adding another dramatic twist to the overall symbology of artistic creation with which Houseago is so closely, physically concerned. Heads abounded elsewhere in the exhibition, in the meantime, in the lugubrious, skeletal masks that adorned the gallery walls or were mounted on free-standing pedestals: if these were meant to resemble faces at all, they did so in the manner of death masks – as morbid echoes of lifelessness, rather than life itself.

Headlessness, then, as a paradoxical cipher of liveliness – of the vital energy that so visibly, yet also ambiguously, animates the crouching figure, of the heroic, knowing resolve of artistic creation – a good portion of which Houseago probably needs more than many other artists working in sculpture today: not many of them have dared to face up to the formidable, taboo-laden challenge, after all, of sculpting the (in)human figure with comparable manual vigour. And this brings us to the best-known example of headlessness, finally, that recent history, for one, has given us – that of Georges Bataille's mythical Acéphale, as the breakaway Surrealist publication headed (no pun intended!) by the decidedly anti-cerebral Bataille was appositely called. In its first ever issue, published in 1936 and adorned with the famous cover image designed by André Masson – a headless mirror image of Leonardo's picture of Vitruvian Man, one of the foundational documents of the Western humanist tradition – Bataille wrote the following, by way of an anti-manifesto: “Human life is exceeded of serving as head and reason of universe. Insofar as it becomes this head and this reason, insofar as it becomes necessary to the universe, it accepts serfdom”. So off with their heads!

*But I promised to talk about thingness (and the occult), too. Here is a story I recently heard about Michael Baldwin, of Art & Language fame, teaching at Leeds University in the eighties, where he used to walk into the classroom and present his students with the following riddle: “Let's pretend a monkey and a human sit in a room. You cut off the monkey's head, then you cut off the human's head; you put the monkey's head on the human's body, and you put the human's head on the monkey's body. Now which one is the monkey and which one is the human?” Upon which, it is said, Baldwin would leave the room. It is clear, from this short story, that decapitation immediately reduces the headless human body to a mere “thing”, while the severed head's claim to thingness is of a different, more complicated nature: the head is intricately bound to the magic of animation – if only because it has a mouth through which animation can literally take place – in a way that the body is not. Now this harsh dialectic of death and animation is precisely what constitutes the Freudian category of the “uncanny”, as it was first propounded by Sigmund Freud in his groundbreaking essay *Das Unheimliche* from 1919 – a key text in any tentative theory of thingness: “When we proceed to review things, persons, impressions, events and situations which are able to arouse in us a feeling of the uncanny in a particularly forcible and definite form, the first requirement is obviously to select a suitable example to start on. Jentsch [Ernst Jentsch, the author of the 1906 study *Über die Psychologie des Unheimlichen*, n.d.r.] has taken as a very good instance ‘doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate’; and he refers in this connection to the impression made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata”. If both Jentsch and Freud had stuck around long enough to see one of Thomas Houseago's eight exhibitions in 2008, they would certainly have added his sculptures to this list.*

Michael Werner 4 East 77 New York New York 10075



Telephone 212 988 1623 Facsimile 212 988 1774

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