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Collector/Collected

Primitive Art, Passionate Discourse, and the Imaginary Crossing of Boundaries

Brigitte Derlon and Monique Jeudy-Ballini

Abstract. – An analysis of interviews highlights the instability of the subject/object boundary in the discourse of primitive art collectors. While an object may become autonomous to the point of acquiring the status of a quasi person, collectors tend to lose their autonomy to the point of viewing (or imagining) themselves as pieces in a collection. This imaginary blurring of identities shapes the conceptualization of the relation construed as an exchange in which what each receives is proportional to what each has given. As shown by examples borrowed from literature and ethnology, the fusion between persons and things is not specific to primitive art collectors, but is also apparent in other forms of passionate involvement. *[collection, primitive art, passion, aesthetic experience, subject/object relation, exchange]*

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I draw the collection of my surroundings
into being along with myself.
(Jean-Paul Sartre 2000: 590)

The blurred distinction between subjects and objects, humans and animals, or person and cosmos has become a familiar and widespread notion through ethnographic studies of traditional non-Western societies. In certain cultures of Oceania, it is not enough for an individual to be *born* a human in order to *be* a human; neither is it enough merely to die in order to become an ancestor. Such distinctions commonly involve rites and rituals. For people, the nature of what is seen is never definite or certain – a stone, an animal, or a tree may, for instance, be the deceptive temporary figure of a spirit or sorcerer. In ceremonies involving ritual objects, an object is never simply an object, but is viewed rather as a presence in its own right – the presence of a supernatural being or of a dead person or as the counterpart of a living person.

In Western societies, the Christian tradition has generated analogous representations embodied by various artefacts and interpreted as the "presentification" of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, or saints. Material examples of such artefacts include statues that bleed, move, and speak, and other miraculous images. The historian David Freedberg, author of a book-length study on the subject, has observed:

> We may be quite happy to believe that images in primitive cultures are felt to partake of the life of what they represent, or even of the life of something altogether different from what they represent. But we do not like to think this of ourselves, or of our own society. We refuse (or at least we have refused for decades) to acknowledge the traces of animism in our perception of and response to images;

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not necessarily animism in the ethnographic sense of the term, which in the nineteenth century implied the transfer of a spirit to an inanimate object, but rather in the sense of the degree of life or vitality that is imagined to be inherent to the image (1998: 47).

It is now widely accepted that religion is the privileged domain of expression of the blurring of boundaries between beings and things. Yet this tendency is not only apparent in the religious sphere. Much the same phenomenon was highlighted in our ethnographic investigations conducted on the attitudes of primitive art collectors located (for the most part) in the Paris region (Derlon et Jeudy-Ballini 2008).[1] The way in which collectors speak of their passion suggests that their intimate relationship with objects may exemplify a similar kind of definitional instability in the secular realm.

Before pursuing this line of thought, some remarks about the broader context of this research are in order. In the 1980s, US-based scholars working in a wide range of fields (history, ethnology, comparative literature, art criticism) and claiming allegiance to postmodernism and postcolonialism began to adopt a critical approach to art collections and the Western relation to the material cultures of formerly colonized peoples. Strong criticisms were levelled against the destruction of indigenous cultures as a result of the collection of native artefacts and against the primitivist stereotypes subtending their reinterpretation. Primitive art collectors, often discredited for their "received ideas" (Price 1989), were targeted as emblematic figures of the arrogant neocolonial tendency of the West to appropriate the world and to "shape non-Western arts in its own image" (Clifford 1988). For many years, the sheer force of this condemnation has impeded attempts to adopt an *ethnographic* approach to primitive art collectors. Though it acknowledges the contributions of postmodernism and postcolonialism, this study is premised on the assumption that the time has now come to go beyond a purely critical perspective and to adopt a position of axiological neutrality in an attempt to reconsider the viewpoint of primitive art collectors. The purpose of this study is to examine how collectors intellectually reappropriate primitive art pieces, how they invest them with their own imaginary frameworks, and how they experience their intimate relation with them.

Our study will focus on one of the recurrent themes noted in the accounts given by interviewees: the assimilation of objects to animate beings. Such an assimilation, echoed in Alfred Gell's theory of art as a "social agent" (1998), already has been pointed out in a number of studies on private collecting. Susan M. Pearce, a professor of museum studies, reported about a doll collector treating "the dolls like real children, giving them names and talking to them" (1995: 188). In his essay on the consumer society, Russell W. Belk wrote that among the automobile collectors "their much loved automobiles are often given names such as 'My Cherree,' 'Candy,' and 'Shot Through the Heart,' or referred to as 'my baby' and 'my child'" (2001: 75). For Belk, "naming collected objects … is a way of further individualizing, singularizing, and decommoditizing them. … When we anthropomorphize collected objects we animate our regard for these objects so that a person-thing relationship becomes a person-person relationship" (2001: 75 f.). Our conviction is that this kind of phenomena deserves fully ethnographical attention. Yet, to our knowledge, no other anthropological investigation had been conducted on this aspect of collecting. Let us mention that still today no comparable study has been published.

One collector interviewed during our research insisted that for him, "these objects are very much alive. I don't collect things just for the sake of owning objects", while another collector noted: "In fact I live with objects. For me, they're like human beings." Yet another interviewee echoed similar views in complaining that he always missed pieces lent for an exhibition just "as if they were a human being." Most of the collectors interviewed tend to describe their practice as an activity that involves a relation with *beings* rather than *objects*. The act of collecting is thus less a matter of accumulating objects than of surrounding oneself with "presences" – to cite one account that may partly explain the reluctance of many collectors to view themselves as "collectors." Interviewees often use terms drawn from the

1 Interviewees included approximately fifty men and women ranging in age from 30 to 75 and drawn from highly differentiated social origins and circumstances. Interviewees owned collections that varied significantly in terms of geographical origin (Africa, Americas, Asia, Oceania), size (ranging from a dozen items to over a thousand), financial value (from a few hundred euros to nearly a million euros in the case of one particular item), and the main sites used to source and purchase items (purchased in the country of origin, auction rooms, flea markets, galleries, exchanges, or through inheritance, etc.). No significant differences that could be explained by gender were highlighted in interviews conducted since 2000. However, no general conclusions can be drawn from this observation, given the limited number of female collectors interviewed in the course of this research. When several quotations from interviews are given consecutively, quotations from different interviewees are given on different lines. This article is a revised and augmented version of an article published in the French journal *L'Homme* 177–178.2006 and, therefore, all original citations were also translated into English by Robert Reay-Jones.

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sphere of human relationships to describe the emotional or sensual relationship linking them with objects, thereby erecting each item into the equivalent of a unique human individual.

Whether it be an African dancer, revering a mask crafted by his own hands and viewed as a dangerous spirit, a Christian worshipper interpreting a wafer as if it were the body of Christ, or a scholar hurling abuse at a failing computer accused of ill will, the point is not to assume that collectors are unable to draw a distinction between beings and things. Rather it is to account for what collectors view as the most eloquent means of expressing their passionate relationship with some objects rather than others. Because primitive art lovers are seldom loners and since their activities routinely involve travel and social gatherings in a wide range of settings (galleries, auction rooms, flea markets, museums, specialist bookshops, invitations from fellow collectors, etc.), collectors may be said to share a common knowledge, language, and imaginative universe transmitted from generation to generation.

In the same way that a sociologist, seeking to understand the social conditions of access to "the love of art," may persevere at the risk of being suspected of "challenging the authenticity and sincerity of aesthetic pleasure by the mere fact of describing its conditions of existence" (Bourdieu et Darbel 1969: 161), so ethnologists should not be deterred from pursuing their interest in the imaginative universe of art lovers – however, much of their interest might warrant the accusation that they tend to disregard the sociological mechanisms involved in its reproduction. To those who might presume that the only justification of the discourse of passion is to conceal unavowed or shameful economic motives, it is perhaps worth recalling that the existence of such motives is entirely compatible with the capacity to feel and communicate passion, notwithstanding the claims of a long tradition of thought that has tended to oppose the economic sphere and the realm of affects,[2] a tradition vehemently criticized by the sociologist Viviana A. Zelizer (2005).

Of the Object as Subject

Collectors are prone to view objects as autonomous agents, a tendency often manifested at the very first encounter with an art object. Far from being chosen by the collector, the object often imposes itself on the collector as if *it* had chosen *them*. As noted by the collector Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller (2001: 10): "One might easily be forgiven for thinking, not that Hubert Goldet [a famous French collector] had bought these statuettes and masks, but that they had recognised and chosen their master, and had fervently offered themselves to him." By virtue of its "force," its "terrible presence," its "life," its "soul," its "vibrations," its "emanations," its "expressiveness," its capacity to "emanate," its "magnetic power," its "magic," or "spellbinding charm," the object forces the collector to acknowledge its distinctiveness. Whether the object is glimpsed in the window of a gallery, on a stand in a flea market or in the hands of an auctioneer or of a Melanesian villager, collectors are invariably drawn to the object that "strikes us most," that "winks at us," and that "calls out" to its future owner. As Cousin Pons said it in Balzac's novel (1999: 86): "I believe in the intelligence of art objects; they know art lovers; they call out to them; they say: Psst! Psst!" Rather than eliciting a judgment of taste, the object subjects the owner to its effectiveness, forcing the owner to experience emotionally that, which makes the object conspicuously unique and uniquely desirable.

Unlike ordinary things, the art object owes its autonomy to the fact that it is never truly owned and possessed. The person who owns an object (at most for the duration of a lifetime) will often experience a sense of acting merely as a link in the life of the object. The object will continue to exist long after the owner has died, just as it existed before them. In short, the object is destined to a lifetime of collecting collectors. Ownership is thus not experienced as a complete appropriation: purchasing an object is nothing more than a form of rental – i.e., payment for the right to enjoy the object for the duration of a lifetime:

> I've got something from the fourth dynasty down the corridor. How much did I pay for it? I've had it for ten years. I've still got … what … fifteen years to live? I paid for the right to live in its company for twenty-five years, and after that? It dates from the 4th century B.C., so I suppose it'll carry on quite happily without me!
>
> I know that I won't be taking them with me to the grave. I just consider myself lucky to be able to live with them for a while.[3]

2 Primitive art collectors often view themselves as part of this tradition, as shown by analyses of the relation to money expressed in accounts given by collectors.

3 "Works of art are permanent (or nearly so!): collectors come and go", as Frank Herrmann (1972: 22) observed, as quoted by Russell Belk, who also remarked that "[c]ollectors are stewards of treasures that are only temporarily theirs" (2001: 73). "Owners come and go, while objects remain …," observes Rolande Bonnain-Dulon (2001: 252). In a similar vein, Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller has noted that "[a]rt works are the only things that truly matter; art works remain and see collectors come and go" (2003: 16).

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The autonomy of the object also means that full intellectual ownership (and not only material ownership) is forever impossible. For primitive art lovers, primitive art retains an irreducible element of mystery, and might, therefore, be said to owe part of its appeal and power to its partial incomprehensibility – i.e., its capacity to resist complete understanding. By a kind of enigmatic asymmetry, the object exerting an emotional impact on the subject remains impenetrable, impregnable, and impervious to complete cognitive appropriation. The subject contemplating the object is affected by the power of the object, which resists all attempts by the subject to rationally "circumscribe" it.

Collectors also tend to imbue objects with a unique and distinctive temperament, a "personality" replete with positive and negative traits in equal measure. Sometimes likened to a "companion," a "friend," or "confidant," the object is deemed to have a sense of "humor," "depth," "benevolence," "generosity," and other highly valued "human feelings." Such representations can apply to any item irrespective of its degree of anthropomorphism or whether it is associated with death, war, or witchcraft. An object may also be viewed as being endowed with its own affects as a result of its original autochthonous use. One interviewee, instead of saying that a club was used to kill, said that the item itself "*had killed*." Another interviewee imputed "evil ideas," "envies," and "petty tricks" to a "sorcerer's statuette." In short, objects are often imputed with the presumed actions and intentions of their original users.

However, based on the evidence provided by collectors, it is not merely that an object has affects. It may also have "rights" (for example the right to "deserve" its place in a collection) and even morals, inasmuch as its owner may pass judgement on the honesty of the object – just as we might pass judgement on a person. In speaking of the questionable authenticity of an object, one collector observed: "If it tells me it loves me, I know it's not lying." In this instance, the moral dimension has to do with the sincerity of the feelings (i.e., love) expressed by the object toward its owner. Conversely, since it is deemed to be guilty of disloyalty, a forgery jeopardizes the future of the relationship. If most of the interviewees stated that they could never conceive of keeping any item of questionable authenticity, it was precisely because of the "relations of trust" developed with every item in a collection (as one interviewee put it). Those who mistake a forgery as being authentic tend to feel cheated or abused by the object – in some sense victims of its petty schemes and dishonesty.

> The object seduced me and to that extent it deceived me.
>
> I stopped loving the object as soon as I realized I'd been betrayed. I deceived myself and, at the same time, the object deceived me.
>
> [When I found out that one of my objects was a fake] I felt scorned.

Yet the object-person analogy[4] extends beyond the ascription of a specific personality to items in a collection, since it also involves the realm of the tangible or perceptible, as suggested by the tendency of collectors to describe their contact with objects in highly tactile, physical, or bodily terms. One male collector claimed to be particularly fond of small items because of their "sensuality," comparing the pleasure experienced in handling objects for long periods of time to the sensual pleasure experienced in caressing a "woman's shoulder." According to another collector, who handled clubs with a form of "maternal care," reminiscent of the care applied by cousin Pons in handling precious objects (Balzac 1999: 51), the sensation produced by physical contact has nothing to do with an expression of virility or physical violence: "It's very sensual … It's affectionate … A baby's bottom is just as soft. My son has the same consistency … You know that firmness, when you touch the cheeks, the arms, the bottom, the thighs … He has the same … How can I put it? You get the same sensation from it as when you handle a beautiful club or a very beautiful pestle or a very beautiful jade axe blade." After comparing the object with the body of his son, the interviewee proceeded to invert the comparison, observing that physical contact with his son evoked the tactile softness of the object – so that it became unclear whether it was the weapon that reminded him of his child or vice versa.

The emphasis on the sensuality of the body of a woman or baby suggests that collectors primarily invoke parental and/or love relationships in describing their singular relationship with objects.

The Parental Analogy

The *rapprochement* between the club and the baby (two seemingly antithetical entities) needs to be seen in connection with similar comments that form a dense and highly meaningful network of associa-

4 Nathalie Heinich (2002) has focused on what she terms object-people. However, the general categories used by Heinich, operating as a sociologist, are based on notions (fetish, relic) which, in view of their largely metaphorical usage, are of little use in a strictly ethnographic research context.

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tions. Asked whether there were any objects with which he would never agree to part, the same interviewee replied (after a brief pause): "No, I don't have any. Let me think … Apart from my wife and my children, I can't think of any … And actually they're not objects!" The comparison of his family to items in a collection was anything but spontaneous. There was no intended humor in the final remark, which was merely added as a corrective afterthought following a brief pause in which reason appeared to have regained the upper hand. At a later stage in the interview, the same collector remarked: "I have diligently begun to collect small Eskimo objects. That's my new thing. I've devoted the last eight years of my life to my most prized collection – my family." In this instance, the interviewee made no attempt to correct himself in the heat of conversation, thereby appearing to endorse the description of his family as a collection and to experience his activity as something involving a continuum extending from some objects (Inuit) to others (family members). The interviewee was thus able to shift between different objects, while carrying out what is fundamentally the same activity, i.e., collecting. Objects and persons are placed on a par, with the events marking the life of the collection of objects also marking the life of the "family collection."

The same tendency was illustrated by another instance involving the purchase of a New Ireland *uli* (an anthropomorphic item smaller than an adult man):

> Uli was a special one because he was quite impressive and he was very important to me. His arrival coincided with the physical reunion (at the very same time) of my father's long-lost family. The box came at the same time as my cousin and her children. So it made a whole … . We put Uli in the bedroom, opposite the bed.

By leaving out the definite article in front of the vernacular name of the effigy (not the *uli* but "Uli"), the interviewee appeared to view the term as a male first name common in Germany, the country of his ancestors. The coincidence noted between the reception of the object and the family reunion implies an equivalence between object and people – as if all the members of the family had reintegrated the household subtending its original unity ("It made a whole"). The incorporation of the object in the network of family relationships is further entrenched by the fact that the object is viewed as having been fully appropriated by the interviewee's children: "They immediately named it 'Big brother' because it was bigger than them." By emphasizing the adjective "big" rather than the term "brother," the interviewee appeared to suggest that the family relationship was a matter of course and that further explanations were only required to clarify the rank or status of the *uli* in relation to its other siblings. By placing the *uli* in the bedroom – the site of conjugal intimacy – the collector and his wife also appeared to have symbolically created another child.

The capacity of the object to foster (and participate in) social relations may transcend the limits of one collection, extending potentially to other collections. The subsequent story of the *uli*, which the owner eventually sold, provides a good example. The item finally drew the interest of another collector who owned a similar effigy, the only item in his collection (he had sold all of his other items). The collector reportedly told the former owner: "I had a lot of things, and then I got Uli. He was too strong and he was the only one I kept. Now I think he's lonely and I need to get another one." Imputing his own personal tendency to personalize the vernacular name of the effigy to his fellow collector, the interviewee went on to say: "He sold all of the other items and then realized that his *uli* was a bit lonely and he wanted to buy a brother to keep the *uli* company … or a wife … or … I don't know what the relationship is … But it's very surprising!" The interviewee appeared to attribute his desire to acquire a second *uli* to his desire to break the solitude of his only object – just as one might speak of an only child – and to find a relative to keep it in company with "brother," "wife," "or another, undefined relationship. The implicit assumption is that the motivation of the buyer is not based on his own personal taste for the effigy as much as his desire to find an object with a unique relation to the object already in his possession. The interviewee construed the relation as a family tie or relationship and not (for example) as a means of achieving a sense of decorative symmetry or harmony.

The collection-family connection was a recurrent theme in accounts given by other collectors – even in the form of Freudian slips. One interviewee got into a very telling muddle: "When I see the collection of my daughters … um … the attitude of my daughters toward the collection ….". Another collector, when asked about her favourite objects, replied: "I don't have a hierarchy. How can I put it? You can't choose between your children!" Speaking proudly of his offspring, another interviewee stated (just as he might have put it in speaking of an item in his collection): "I'm happy to be the guardian of a very gifted little girl."

The collector Pierre Amrouche appeared to be similarly inspired by the parental analogy while commenting on photographs of André Breton. "In the many snaps taken in his studio, Breton can be

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seen standing among his objects, just as you might do in a family photo. He is amongst his own in a high forest of kindly spirits over whom he casts a brotherly eye. They are the companions of a lifetime" (2003: 19). In reading Amrouche, it is difficult to decide just what is involved: a personification of objects likened to the members of a brotherhood or a reification of the collector as a person that has become a piece among others within a large family of objects – in short, an item in his collection.

The confusion of categories is sometimes perceived as a potential identity confusion – for instance, when a collector has the impression of being just an intruder among his own objects: "There comes a moment when … I have this feeling, after having bought a number of African pieces … All of a sudden, I find myself surrounded by thirty statues and I say to myself 'who's that white guy over there [laughs]?'."

The Love Connection

Even more so than the blood or family relationship it is the love relationship that collectors tend to use as their preferred metaphor for expressing their passion for art objects.[5] While the legendary figure of Pygmalion, the sculptor in love with his ivory statue, is evidence of the long-standing literary tradition of our love relationship with objects, evidence of a similar tendency in more unexpected quarters (for instance, in the Christian writings of the eighth century devoted to holy images) is perhaps indicative of its broader importance in Western culture. The author of an addition to a letter sent by Pope Gregory to a hermit, who had made a request for pious paintings, compared "the desire of the hermit to see and possess these images to the desire of the lover hastening to precede their loved one on the way to the baths in order to catch a passing glimpse of them and return happy" (Schmitt 2002: 104 f.). In the realm of art collections, later examples of the same theme are found in Romanticism. In "Le cousin Pons," Balzac describes one character who had caught a glimpse of a rival's collection as experiencing "the same happiness as a lover of women sneaking into the boudoir of a beautiful mistress concealed by a friend" (1999: 194). Maupassant provides one of the most suggestive illustrations of this tendency:

> You contemplate an object and little by little it seduces you, troubles you, and takes hold of you as might the face of a woman. Its charm enters into you as might an alien charm … and you love it, desire it, want it. An overwhelming need to possess it takes hold of you – first as a gentle need, a shy need, but then it grows, becoming violent and irresistible.
>
> Oh! I pity anyone who has never experienced the honeymoon of the collector with a trinket they have recently purchased. You caress it with your eyes and hands as if it were made of flesh and blood. You return to its side at all times. You think about it all the time, wherever you go, whatever you do. The fond memory of the object follows you down the street, out into the world, everywhere you go; and when you go home, before you've even removed your hat and gloves, you contemplate it with all the tenderness and affection of a lover. (2000: 141).

Among the (mainly male) collectors interviewed in this research, the analogy drawn between the object and the loved one was sometimes expressed so indirectly that interviewees appeared to be largely unaware of the comparison. For instance:

> There was this sale in 1979. I'll never forget it. It was the first piece I'd ever bought, the first important piece I ever bought – at some cost – in a public sale. I was euphoric, absolutely euphoric! I was with my brother-in-law and my wife. We went for a drink in a place I liked, on the Place de la Contrescarpe, which I liked because I experienced my first passion not far from the Place de la Contrescarpe.

The first object acquired is thus likened to the first woman ever loved – events experienced as first loves and both associated with the same place and the same unforgettable sense of elation. Whether conscious or unconscious, the analogy is often extended to include all aspects and stages of a love life, a tendency exhibited in various ways by many of the collectors interviewed in this research:

– Orgasm

> If you weren't women, I'd say it's like an ejaculation. But that's exactly what it is. I think purchasing objects is an imaginary act of love.

– Narcissism

> We have the objects we deserve. We have the collection we deserve. We sleep with the women we deserve. It's the same thing! Absolutely!

– Emotional dependence

> It's a need, you're in love, you want to see the woman you

5 See Rheims (2002); Baudrillard (1968); Muensterberger (1996). – While many scholars have drawn a parallel between the activity of collection and "Don Juanism," it is important to note, that the love metaphor is not only found in contexts where possession is the issue at stake – the aesthetic relation may also involve a similar process. The philosopher Mikel Dufrenne (1992b: 532) notes: "Between aesthetic admiration and love, there are significant common traits – first and foremost the acknowledgement of the power of the other and the recognition of their rights: I am as disarmed before an aesthetic object, about which I have everything to learn and receive, as I am before a loved one."

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love, you go out in the middle of the night just to see her. That's it! It's exactly the same thing!

– The mystery of renewed attraction

A woman's smile can be inexhaustible. We'll never understand why it works and why it produces the same emotion every time. It's the same thing with an object! It's the same kind of thing! It's the same instinct!

– Cohabitation, a source of deeper knowledge and, therefore, of surprise or disappointment

If you really look at the object, it will eventually reveal its true self … It's like a woman you desire; when you eventually sleep with her, you realize she's no good. Then there are women you don't see, that you discover little by little …

– Bouts of jealousy

I envy objects owned by collectors who don't understand them, but I'm never envious of objects that are owned by collectors who deserve them. Just like a woman.

– Separation of a couple

There are a lot of people in the milieu that I don't like, that I despise. People who are both rich – which I am not – and that I find stupid, coarse, in all senses of the term, and who buy expensive items … I find them heavy-handed, and I wouldn't like them to handle what I've loved all my life. The same thing goes for a woman.

Though a more prominent feature of male discourse, the metaphorical connections drawn between object and lover also figure in the imagination of female collectors. One female collector described her masks as her "big darlings," while another evoked "the mad love" she had felt for years for one of her very first purchases. Among both male and female collectors, love relationships are not necessarily limited to the realm of discourse or feelings. They may also be expressed as a physical connection manifested in the particular treatment given to art objects. In speaking of a fellow collector, one female interviewee said:

When he loves an object, he says he has to sleep with it. I went to see him once at his house in the country and he asked all of his guests to choose an item … Every guest chose an object and took it with them to their room … I chose an object from Nigeria, a decapitated warrior. We were going to bed with the object of our choice. So we're talking about relationships that are both physical and loving.

The account might even be construed as suggesting a place of tolerance where special guests are invited to retire to their private quarters with a sexual partner of their choice under the benevolent eye of the master of ceremony.

Another interviewee, who had described similar attitudes only to mock them, confided that he had in fact slept with an object following a family tragedy. "I was really hurt, and I just felt the need to spend the night with an object. It was the first time it ever happened to me!" The only time, or the first time? Unfortunately, we did not have the presence of mind to inquire.

Collectors and Their Double

"Ultimately, is there anything more beautiful than loving a woman, of understanding and knowing oneself through a woman?" It was precisely in such terms – terms suggesting the narcissism of the love relationship – that one male interviewee described his passionate relation with objects. The personification of the object clearly involves the figure of the loved one, but it also (inextricably) involves the figure of the collector, for whom every item potentially represents a projection of themselves. André Breton once stated: "Nothing prevents me from declaring that this object … has only ever spoken to me about myself, that it has always taken me to the highest peak of intensity in my life" (1970: 20). Similar views have been expressed by others: "In search of oneself in an object" (Jean-Willy Mestach, quoted by Sirven 2003: 59); "In search of self-knowledge" in seeking to understand the object; "to love oneself, but through what is very different from us" (Chazal 2000).

While the object may serve as an intermediary of self-love, Michel Leiris (who was not a collector) viewed the object as the very materialization of self-love:

In the realm of art works, we rarely find any objects (paintings or sculptures) capable of meeting the requirements of this fetishism, or of meeting the demands of self-love – real love – projected from the inside to the outside world and clothed by a solid carapace that imprisons it between the limits of a particular thing and, like a piece of furniture at our disposal, situates it in the vast foreign chamber called space (1929: 209).

According to Leiris, an exceptional art object is an icon of self-love. The collector Jean-Paul Chazal has observed that "[l]iving with such objects involves a desire to perfect the self by constantly improving the quality of our interlocutors. The search for the masterpiece is a quest for the absolute – for the ultimate truth that we carry within us" (2000). The object serves as the support of a specular relation that does not reduce subjects to a purely contemplative position but rather helps them to engage in a dynamic process of self-construction.

The object, conceived fundamentally as a pro-

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jection of the self, was a recurrent (though varying) theme in accounts given by collectors, and was invariably subtended by the question of identification – including physical resemblance:

> Although we are never completely aware of it, these objects may bear an uncanny resemblance to us. It was Max Itzikovitz [a collector] who, seeing me purchasing a *lobi* sculpture, drew my attention to its close physical resemblance to me. One of my friends, the owner of a *kusu* statue, was perhaps not aware that the physiognomy of this work, of which he is rightly proud, bears an uncanny resemblance to him – at least straight on (Chazal 2000).

Photographers are particularly adept at using presumed physical similarities in crafting portraits of collectors standing near one of their items. Playing directly with the imagined assimilation with the object more than the idea of resemblance, Jacques Kerchache once posed crouched down on a pedestal in the window of the Pavillon des Sessions (Louvre Museum). Posing as an effigy with his hands over his ears, a wide-eyed Kerchache was made to become an object in the lens of the photographer (see photograph in Bethenod 2003: 196).

Another form of identification involves the assimilation of an object with a fantastical feature of the owner, an almost physical, even prosthetic, feature. According to the collector Liliane Durand-Dessert, the love given to an object is a way of "resonating with the object so that it becomes an aspect or extension of our body or consciousness" (Espenel 2003: 52). The fact of rediscovering items to which he had provisionally granted less attention caused one interviewee to say that we "forget objects just as we forget parts of ourselves that suddenly re-emerge." Discussing overmodeled skulls from Oceania, Jean Benoît observed that "[t]hese objects are dear to me and live in my eye-sockets" (Degli 1997: 9). Benoît, an artist in the surrealist movement, admitted to a pronounced fascination for relics presented as visually perceived objects in situ and as organs of human visual perception, as if objects were to contemplate themselves. The boundaries between person and object thus become blurred, and a colonization of the former by the latter is set in motion: the subject is reified by becoming what s/he contemplates.

Construed as the expression of an intimate and passionate relationship with the object, the imagined incorporation of the object may sometimes be likened to a form of psychological compensation: "Of course you have guys who sleep with their club. They sleep with a sex they don't have. Quite simply! That's it!" Reassurance may involve a sense of protection, as suggested by the painter Henri Cueco, the "collector of collections"[6]: "Perhaps it is the case that all the works around me are of the same nature as me – they extend me, inflate me, 'protuberate' me to protect me and perpetuate me. … I don't like to give. I am not particularly stingy but I don't like to spread myself too thin, to divide myself" (1995: 103 f.). The "obesity" (Cueco 1995: 103) of the collector, swelling because of his objects, may perhaps be seen as conferring an excess of identity upon the collector – not unlike the assumed effects of practices enabling a natural or artificial growth in physical size in many cultures.[7]

The strength of the bond created by a strong sense of identification can be such that separation from an object is experienced as a form of mutilation ("Every now and then, I would give an item away, but it always tore me apart") or as the sign of an intimate transformation of the subject. As noted by one interviewee: "We're all full of things we never throw away, because we can't throw them away, because they're the very basis of our personhood. In the midst of a crisis, we tend to throw things away because we're changing. Something we don't discard is something we just cannot cast away." For this particular interviewee, objects form a kind of structure within his internal architecture. In speaking of a deceased fellow collector, another collector observed: "The day his objects were taken away, he died, he let himself die." Another collector described the woman who shared his passion as being "nourished by objects" – thereby likening objects to a vital energetic substance. Such a representation of the incorporation of the object by the person underlines the intense and close relationship deemed to connect them beyond death.

Making One

"It is inexhaustible. But it is I who become inexhaustible," observed one collector in speaking of the irreducible mystery of an object. "The more I understand, the more I grow with the object. Sometimes I want to embrace it and merge with it, and to keep it as an archaeological reminder of myself. … I feel as if I am a dying world. We are faces that disappear and I am a world that is dying." In this instance,

6 Rather than collecting primitive art, Henri Cueco collects the most disparate series of discarded items and functional or worthless objects: strings, used shoes, used pencils, stones, pits, sponges, postcards, etc.

7 Consider the virtues attributed to prolonged physical immobility during certain Melanesian initiation rites, or the prestige earned by Polynesian noblemen as a result of enveloping themselves in barkcloth several hundred meters long.

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the process of transformation affecting both object and person creates an image of a cell ingesting others – as if the two presences were redundant and that there were one too many. Another image emerges: the image of a collector gestating what he collects and who is only ever himself – a peculiar metaphor of parturition subverting temporality since the subject carries within him a womby projection of what he no longer is. Described as "archaeological evidence" by the collector, the object prefigures the future survival of the self, a kind of metaphorical relic by anticipation.

"My name is X and it so happens that X is the name of a fetish": troubled by this nominal identification, one collector sought to live in accordance with this sign of fate – by seeking to distance himself from certain Western values (something he clearly intended to pursue even after his death). He considered viewing the object not as a virtual relic (as had the previous interviewee) but as a genuine reliquary of his own self:

> I was on my way home from a funeral cremation at the [Parisian cemetery] Père Lachaise, and I said to myself: "Wouldn't it be nice if I were to be cremated when I die and if I were to ask my wife to put my ashes in a fetish [laughs]. I have a fetish … There's the hole where it was desacralized; there's nothing in it now. You stuff it in there and before you know it, you're on your way to enjoying a second youth among collectors.

Originally, the fetish (in all likelihood a "nail fetish" from the Congo with a hollowed stomach) probably contained magical substances. Viewing himself as a thing ("you stuff it in there"), the collector expressed a strong desire to fill the vacant space with his own ashes – to make the object sacred once again – to become one of its intimate components. Incorporated into the fetish, the collector would begin a second life as a piece in a collection, circulating among (or between) his former fellow collectors. Sigmund Freud, himself a keen collector of archaeological objects, expressed a similar desire as one of his last wishes – a wish that was eventually granted. After his incineration, a Greek vase from Freud's own collection was used as an urn to contain his ashes (Neuburger 1988: 95). Reflecting a similar funeral process, another interviewee dreamed of surviving beyond death as a skull incorporated into the collection of a close friend, an amateur of primitive art and relics.

To be physically associated with an object is precisely what Pierre Harter ensured would happen by including a specific request in his last will and testament, as explained by the executor of his will (also a collector):

> When he died – he was the kind of person who always made plans – they placed him, as requested, in a Senufo deathbed from the Ivory Coast. … Harter laid on his Senufo bed like a recumbent statue from the middle ages. An extraordinary *mise en scène*! He was surrounded by all of his great sculptures: Dogon, etc. And it was really very impressive! Oddly, I later saw it [the bed] on sale in a gallery … All I could see was the corpse that had lain on top of it … It was really a very strange sensation!

The request made by Harter serves to return the Senufo deathbed to its original purpose while turning Harter's body into an exhibit, thus placing it on a par with all of the other pieces in his collection. The visual display associates the person with the object so powerfully that on later seeing the bed in a gallery, one interviewee was unable to erase the mental image of the recumbent effigy, as if it now constituted an integrated whole – i.e., one and the same object.

There is a temptation to view many of the collectors interviewed in this research as instances of the figure of the collector as depicted by Walter Benjamin: "the true collector, as he should be," for whom "ownership is the deepest relationship that can be had with things: it is not that objects become alive within the collector; rather it is the collector who inhabits the objects" (2000: 56). In speaking of a piece in a collection recurrently likened to a loved one, the term "possession" may be used in every French sense of the word – i.e., material, loving, and mystical.

The process of fusion and identification involved in the relationship between object and collector may also be reflected in the relationship with the collection as a whole. One might claim that one loves showing one's collection because one is an "exhibitionist." One might refuse to part with the collection on the grounds that parting with it would be to "tear oneself away from it," to "dissociate oneself," or to "sell oneself"; or that it is impossible to conceive negotiating it away to begin another collection, since collectors "are not interchangeable." Subverting the boundary between objectivity and subjectivity, one interviewee stated: "If these objects, that I myself have chosen, engage in dialogue, perhaps it is me talking to the self …" On the one hand, the collector viewed the "I" as being external to the subject, in some sense objectifying it ("it is me talking to *the* self" and not "talking to *myself*"). On the other hand, the collector assimilated the collection with the subject, since the plurality of pieces forming the collection is reflected in a condensed form in the split self of the collector.

At an imaginary level, object and person form a dual identity that tends to see itself as being indi-

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visible. So long as it has yet to occur, everything is geared toward achieving fusion. This tendency was exhibited in interviews in the form of a recurrent belief in the predestined nature of the encounter between the collector and the object, in some sense promised to one another or destined to find one other. Even when fusion ends and collector and object are dissociated, something endures that makes it impossible to conceive of the separation as complete:

I'm going to say something that may sound very silly, something that has no basis in reality, and which is probably completely untrue, but is probably real nevertheless: even when an object goes somewhere else, a subtle connection remains between the object and yourself. The fact that you will probably never see it again is of no importance.

It is precisely by invoking a kind of soul mate bond between object and collector that another interviewee explained his frequent encounters with pieces, which he had previously owned and are exhibited in galleries, as his destiny constantly to want to bring them together. Is it not the case that the notion of pedigree is founded on the postulate of a lasting connection between an object and its various Western owners beyond their separation? The lasting connection represents a memorializing, mystical, or even organic relation for those who believe that renowned collectors, before them have left a physical trace of themselves in the patina of the object, that "humanism turned to matter," as the collector George Ortiz once put it (de Roux et Paringaux 1999: 327).

Exchange and Reciprocity

When collectors evoke extreme situations in which the intensity of their passion "inhabits the entire self" (Veyne 1996: 261),[8] the object becomes autonomous to the point of acquiring the status of a quasi person. The owner loses his/her autonomy to the point of believing or imagining him-/herself to be a piece in a collection. The imagined parity between subject and object is linked to a conception of the relation as a form of exchange. These may involve exchanges in the form of a dialogue:

The first thing I saw: it speaks to me!

There are objects I won't ever sell because I communicate with them.

Everybody's waiting for my African jewellery. They're all lying in wait for my jewellery, they're crazy, they phone me, they want them. But the thing is, I can't sell them. First of all, I love them too much, they're just too beautiful. And besides … my items still have a lot of things to tell me!

I have many conversations with it. Turn it around, you'll see. It talks to me all the time. That's a masterpiece in itself!

They may also involve exchanges in the form of the repeated gifts made by objects to those living in their company:

Every morning, I get up, I check up on them, and every night I check up on them as well. Why? Because they give me strength!

It helps me to switch off. When I put an object next to me on the table, like that, I'm able to write for an hour, maybe two. With the object next to me, I feel enriched.

Every time I've gone on a crazy shopping spree [purchasing new pieces], it's always been art objects that have given me the most comfort, the most satisfaction … Once I've given myself a little fright …

Some collectors justified their decision to part with some pieces of their collection on the grounds that they no longer got anything out of them. One particularly disenchanted collector stated:

These objects taught me things for years and years … And then all of a sudden, I realized they had nothing more to give save aesthetic satisfaction. … There was no longer any communication between us. I'd taken everything, or perhaps it was just that they'd given me everything they had to give.

Collectors tend to construe the gifts they receive from their objects as fair compensation by viewing them in the context of reciprocal exchanges in which what each partner receives is a reflection of what they give. As one interviewee confided: "I become the fetishist of fetishes"; "I think they have something to give me and that I, perhaps, have something to give them." The interviewee was unable to explain what the objects gave him or what he gave them, but could not imagine that anything but a reciprocal relation could exist between them. Some interviewees clearly suggested that what they gave to objects was nothing less than life itself. Since a collection represents an organic whole, it needs something more than mere beauty or authenticity. It needs the living presence of which objects are inherently deprived and which is instilled in them by their owner. Was it not the passion of Pygmalion for his statue, that incited Venus to turn the statue into a body of flesh and blood?

8 These are situations in which (as Paul Veyne notes) "the music lover might be seen as *becoming* the music or spectators and even football players might be seen as *becoming* the match itself" (1996: 261).

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That love could breathe life into objects is precisely what inspired Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller (2001: 10) to describe his first visit to his fellow collector Hubert Goldet in the following terms:

> I realized the extent of his erudition and the quality of his eye the day I walked into his half-lit apartment only to be formally introduced to hundreds of objects, each with a unique personality and luminosity nourished by the sparkling love of their owner, which even the staggering hodgepodge before my eyes could not possibly conceal.

By contrast, even if they are indeed "masterpieces," objects are said to be "dead," "deprived of life" among those – pure speculators – who fail to love them sincerely and condemn them to remaining mere things.

Besides love, what collectors offer to objects is their own form of excellence. According to Jean-Paul Chazal (2000):

> … the contemplated object becomes an actual subject in which we invest the very best of ourselves. This explains why the object-subject is so generous, why it provides us with so much pleasure and happiness, but also so much energy. … The relation established with an object to which we give life and which gives us so much in return is a deep and stable relationship.

That which is received is invariably returned in some form. Reciprocity is thus conceived as a form of moral justice or necessity, since an object cannot fail to reciprocate whenever it is offered the very best of our selves.

The balanced exchange is almost governed by a tacit and natural law. It is self-evident, almost guaranteed – an intrinsic protection. In discussing objects that are liable to cause misfortune or unhappiness (such as the instruments of sorcery), several interviewees stated that collectors have nothing to fear as long as they love the objects in their possession. The love given to objects operates as a form of defence against any potentially harmful intention of the object. The same protective power attributed to passion is deemed to be at work against other kinds of misfortunes, this time more prosaic:

> It was something old X [a gallery-owner] told me. He was an old crook … But he had a great love for objects, an immense love of objects. I once got swindled, he was an old thief, you see, he lived off his famous collection and he'd sell us crap. I had to understand how it worked. [In an amused tone.] I lost a lot of money because of him! I paid a heavy price to learn a good lesson. But there you go! [Laughing.] The old crook used to say to me "right, well … no … if you love the pieces, there's really no problem, there's no problem at all …" And … it is true that in the end … .

The victim of the fraud put his misfortune into perspective by viewing his financial loss as a fair price to pay for learning a lesson from which he will reap future benefits. The victim was thus able to turn a financial loss into a gain in knowledge – a gain that has served to enrich and deepen his appreciation of objects rather than turning him away from them. The interviewee attributed his philosophical interpretation of his misfortune – the fact that there is "no problem" – to the authenticity of his appreciation, appearing to suggest that a person driven purely by speculative motivations, no doubt, would have viewed the same experience as an unalloyed misfortune.

Life versus Immortality

Objects appear to return what they receive in the way of love and personal investment from the collector by displaying their "sincerity" and their ability to enter into a "dialogue" with their owner, to abstain from malice or deceit and to fortify the collector against adversity. Reciprocity is not only in evidence in the daily course of the relationship between object and collector. It may also be deferred once the separation has been consummated. The real focus of reciprocal exchange is life – the life of objects turned subjects and the life of the subject after death. While the love given by the collector turns objects into quasi people, the objects brought to life by passion ensure a presence beyond death by enabling collectors to pass into posterity. "If we were ever to doubt the fact that these objects have a soul, we need only consider the aura of Hubert Goldet breathing life into them. They perpetuate the memory of the subject who venerated them," wrote the collector Daniel Hourdé (2001: 7).

The incorporation of all or part of a collection in a museum clearly represents the mode of perpetuation *par excellence* – as illustrated by the case of Pierre Harter, who, knowing that he was suffering from an incurable disease, chose to leave a significant legacy to the French national museum of African and Oceanian arts. The executor of his will writes: "Two to three months before his death, I took him to the Musée de la Porte Dorée … We showed him the area where the Harter space was to be located, the 'Harter Room' … It's extraordinary! Shortly before his death, this man was able to project himself into eternity …" While immortality is a dream shared by many, not all of the collectors seemed keen to secure immortality in a museum:

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Of course, I don't want it to end up in any old hands! But I would like these objects to be sold and for them to live their life. I've got something from the fourth dynasty down the corridor. How much did I pay for it? I've had it for ten years. I've still got … what … fifteen years left in me? I paid for the right to live in its company for twenty-five years, and after that? It dates from the 4th century B.C., so it'll carry on quite happily without me! I couldn't care less if it was placed in a museum with some ancient collection! I just couldn't care less!

This particular interviewee, who tended to view himself as being collected by objects rather than as a collector of objects, nevertheless, appeared to attach some importance to the fact that his name would be forever associated with the pedigree of his pieces. His name is assumed to embody or represent his particular taste and vision of the world – i.e., everything that might erect every piece in his collection into a kind of residual emanation of the self. One young collector used the metaphor of the transmigration of souls:

When you know an object comes from such and such a collection, you get the subjective impression there's something of the collector present in the collection. In a sense, what's there is his watchful eye … . So there might be a kind of metempsychosis … Because collectors are often very anxious people, and tend to have a close relation with death … They might find … you could say … a psychological way of assuming he exists and endures in his object. We survive through the ideas we've expressed, ideas transmitted verbally, by gestures, by accumulation, all those kinds of things. Not through psychic means – for me, that's all rubbish, nothing more than a charm, aired by people who aren't self-critical – from, if I may say so, a metempsychotic point of view. I think a soul can travel between different souls, but through words, … through a landscape, … through a face, … through an object, a philosophy, poetry, art … Always through the medium of something else.

The collection acquires the status of a materialized vision (objectified by the collector) that shapes the act of contemplation of future viewers. The act of contemplation *creates* the collection, which in turn creates the contemplation of future collectors. The relation between a person and every item in his/her collection may involve a filial relation, a sense of transmission. One interviewee, who felt out of step with his time (and vehemently criticized the contemporary era), said of his young daughters: "We don't have a television at home, so they watch objects instead! … Perhaps it will create beings who will be able to disagree with the society we live in and to transmit other things …". The interviewee appeared to view objects as potentially having the transformative power to change the relation to the world of those living in the vicinity of such objects. In other words, what is perpetuated by the collector and mediated by his aesthetic preferences involves his entire personality and concerns in equal measure his ideological leanings, his affective dispositions, and his life choice. As well as being a legacy, the metonymic element of an individual story and history, the object also implies the construction of other, subsequent stories and histories.

Contemplation and Self-Contemplation

While the object serves as a mirror mediating between self and self, as argued by Jean Baudrillard (1968: 126) and Maurice Rheims (2002: 76) before him, a third dimension is almost invariably involved – namely the contemplations of others (relatives, colleagues, visitors, art critics, etc.), casting a look of approval, admiration, incomprehension, or repugnance that serves as a judgment passed on the collection and by extension the collector him or herself.

Speaking of Alain Schoffel, the last owner of the *uli* effigy exhibited at the Louvre, Jean-Paul Chazal (2000) writes:

His evident satisfaction, which I myself witnessed [during a visit to the Pavillon des Sessions in his company], is probably not explained by the fact that he had become, if we are to believe newspaper reports, an "*uli*-millionaire," but rather by the fact of seeing his choice – a part of himself – ratified and exhibited in the most prestigious conditions of acknowledgement and recognition.

Consecrated by the museum institution, the effigy (that "part of himself") communicates the high quality of his self to the media and the general public. Conversely (though implying a similar logic), one collector explained her refusal to sell a piece she claimed not to like in the following terms: "Too ugly! I'd have been ashamed if someone had said they had bought it from Mrs X [herself]!" In her view, any financial rewards would never have been an adequate compensation for the harm caused to her reputation by the mediocrity of the object.

Others often find themselves credited with a critical acumen enabling them to estimate the value of what they see – though not always:

You have to earn the right to see the collection! We only show it to a select few. There's nothing more hurtful than showing someone a collection they don't understand. In such cases, there's a real sense of narcissistic retraction – i.e., if that's how it's going to be, then I won't show it to anyone! Showing your collection to someone who understands it is a real reward.

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In this respect, the incomprehension of third parties severely endangers the capacity of the collection to do justice to its owner. Experienced as an affront, as an attack on one's identity, the effects are not unlike the indifference vehemently denounced by one collector:

Interviewee: "There are people I hate. Yes, really! People I really hate – and I could give you some really famous names – people who've come to dinner, people who didn't look at a single object, or make a single remark throughout the entire evening. They could've been sitting in a Louis XV salon – it would've made no difference whatsoever. Oh really! Like this guy, not very long ago, a really famous person that's well-known in the art world … These objects really leap up at you, particularly when there are so many of them and in such a shambles! They're such powerful objects! Now *that* I really can't stand! I hate the guy."

Authors: "Is it envy, scorn?"

Interviewee: "No, it isn't. It's just stupidity and pretentiousness! By contrast, three years ago I invited a grand old Russian lady for dinner. She's since passed away. It was the first time she'd come to my house. She walked in and immediately said: 'Oh my goodness, it's so horrible here!' I loved her straight away. All throughout the evening, she kept telling me how horrible the place was. Now *that* I like! But indifference! That someone should fail to react! At least say it's ugly or beautiful. … I was staggered, distraught!"

Authors: "So you admit, your pieces may not necessarily be to everyone's taste?"

Interviewee: "Yes, I do. Yes, absolutely! But I like to have a chat about it. What I can't understand is indifference."

While the detestation felt toward his objects by a third party was construed by the collector as a flattering recognition of his uniqueness, indifference (i.e,. the eye that fails to see and acts as if objects did not exist) denies him the intense pleasure of "being looked at through his collection" (Wajcman 1999: 39). In return, the insensitive visitor will be met not with disdain, but with a far stronger feeling: hatred. The collector's propensity to become an object under the gaze of others in lieu of his objects, to confer upon himself the emotions or judgements elicited by his collection, was also in evidence in cases where judgements were positive, as illustrated by one man in speaking of his wife: "She derives a real pleasure from living with objects, from understanding them, from seeing them. I've had a thousand signs of this, signs of love." To love objects is to love oneself, and even more so, to keep showing such love.

Passion as an Experience of Fusion

The tendency to assign uniqueness to the objects that inhabit our daily surroundings – a uniqueness assimilating objects to quasi people – is also common in other spheres. Jean Bazin and Alban Bensa observe that even a tool cannot be reduced to its practical function and that "relations of complicity and intimacy" may be forged with it that turn it into an "alter-ego. … Following Mauss, we need to take the uniqueness and 'soul' of things seriously" (1994: 6).

Among lovers of primitive art, the phenomenon is otherwise more complex since (in its most fantastical expression) the fusion-like relation of the collector with his/her object can be viewed as a personification of the object and as a reification of the self. What appears to be at work is a process of identification founded on the abolition of generic distinctions, sometimes expressed through a sense of encompassing the object or of being encompassed by the object. This kind of process, which tends to make each entity a foreigner to itself and akin to the other, may remind us of what the philosopher Mikel Dufrenne (1992) has written about aesthetic experience conceived as "alienation":

Just as perception cannot be explained merely by depicting an object and a subject that are external to one another … , so the presence of a subject witnessing a work cannot be reduced to their mere physical presence. They must enter the intimacy of the work. Music provides a good example of this: at a concert, I am sitting opposite an orchestra, but I am also *in* the symphony; you might also say that the symphony is *in* me to describe this sense of reciprocal possession (Dufrenne 1992a: 96).

… I must accept to give way to enchantment: to renounce my tendency to want to control the object and to conjure away the physical or tangible in order to merge with it. I will then be in a position to see that the object has an inner life and that I share an affinity with it. It is what I am directing my attention toward, but I am directed toward it as if it were consubstantial with me by entering into it or by allowing it to enter me. … I *become* the melody or the statue, and yet the melody and the statue remain external to me. I become them in order that they may become themselves (Dufrenne 1992a: 286).

The process of bridging or crossing the divide between beings and things – a process that inevitably reminds us of the experience of mystical union[9] – is not an exclusive feature of the aesthetic relation. We

9 As stated by Thérèse d'Avila: "I was suddenly overcome by a strong sense of the presence of God. At that point I had no doubt whatsoever that God was within me and that I had become part of Him" (1964: 65).

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might argue that all forms of affective or passionate involvement are liable to involve a similar imaginary dimension, independently of the activity considered and of its suitability for anthropomorphization.

"I am extremely fond of botany. All I have left in my head is straw and one day I'm going to wake up only to realize I've turned into a plant," wrote Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Drouin 2004: 96). Still in the realm of horticulture, the ethnologist Martine Bergues underlined "the friendly relation that develops between women and plants" (endowed with temperament, patience, kindness, generosity), highlighting "the fragility of the distinction between genera, plant, and human" (2004: 70–73). The same idea applies equally to animal and human genera – as shown by the case of a butterfly lover who experienced a sense of becoming a butterfly by contemplating a mirror image of her skin, "so pale, almost bluish, transparent. … She is persuaded that she belongs to the insect world and that she has not yet reached the caterpillar stage. She waits impatiently for the day when she will come out of her cocoon, spread out her wings, and fly off to join her fellow butterflies" (Waldmann-Tozo 2005: 22).

In the realm of literary creation, the narrator of "Du côté de chez Swann" considered any "new book not as a thing with many fellow creatures, but as a unique person, with no other reason to exist except as and for itself" (Proust, see Descombes 1987: 123). Amos Oz, "at the age when children learn to read, decreed that he did not wish to write books, but to become a book himself" (Rérolle 2004: 1).

The fantasy of the instability of the boundaries between people and things is also apparent in the industrial world, a realm often (mistakenly) viewed as being dominated by rationality and less prone to affective investment. Philippe Erikson emphasizes the intense relation between the foundry workers of a steel company and the steel they mould and shape. The correspondence posited between the respective qualities of man and steel (credited as having sensations and a will of its own) is such that "people [are] all the more 'metalizable' as metal itself [is] metabolizable, thus acquiring the status of a quasi animate being" (1997: 120–123). In professional jargon, the frequent use of metaphors drawn from the food, culinary and digestive fields suggests the existence of an imaginary dimension articulated around the incorporation of steel (Erikson 1997: 127 f.). The fascination of the foundry workers with steel casting also sustains a particular fantasy – the fantasy of throwing themselves into the tank to blend with the substance or the testamentary request "to be incinerated, after death, in the furnace of the steel factory" (Erikson 1997: 128 f.).

These accounts are invariably suggestive of representations in which those who find in primitive art their main source of enchantment might well recognize themselves.

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