

# THINGS

If, according to its literal meaning, a thing is inherently non-conforming and contradictory, then the object in Friedrich Theodor Vischer's *Auch Einer*<sup>1</sup> is acknowledged to be even devious. "Oh, the object lies in wait," warns the anonymous hero A.[uch] E.[iner] (A.[lso] O.[ne]). Here, the *objectum*—literally something thrown against someone or something—has given up its passive status and become active. "As long as some human being is on the move, an object thinks about mischief and malice from daybreak until late at night." In the relationship between things and humans interference has been discerned, which Vischer sums up in terms of an *object's malice*. Various forms of this proverbial malice are described in the novel and are virtually taxonomically composed. An object hostilely slips from one's clutches, because it loves a "game of cat-and-mouse above all." Things hide, sliding under other things. During such dealings A. E.'s key finds a place "as if measured for it" beneath the foot of a candlestick; his glasses even creep away into a mouse hole. Man is always the inferior in this game. Who can "practice such superhuman caution," A. E. exclaims, "to avoid the malice of such objects"? Life is a search, not in a symbolic sense, but quite tangibly. Things demand the greatest portion of our attention. They have to be watched constantly, because "all objects [lie in wait]—pencil, pen, inkpot, paper, cigar, glass, lamp—everything, everything, for the moment one isn't looking." The objects listed here can be found packed closely together on desks. Nevertheless, Vischer does not draw his character A. E. in the image of an awkward intellectual. The cause for the belligerent status in which things are found does not lie with him, but rather with the things. They are malevolent and gifted with their own wicked humor. Doesn't the sheet of paper falling "truly gracefully" to the ground mock us through the "taunting movements with which it flutters back and forth? Doesn't every move say with a blasé, elegant frivolity 'I won again, nevertheless?'"

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Theodor Vischer, *Auch Einer. Eine Reisebekanntschaft* (Also One: A Traveling Acquaintance), Frankfurt am Main 1987; the first edition of this philosophical, tragic, comical novel was published in 1878, nine years before the death of the author, who was born in Ludwigsburg in 1807.

A thing's greatest triumph would seem to consist in falling: "creeping to the edge and allowing itself to fall from a height [is] an object's main malice." One does not perceive this "perniciousness" in a piece of paper or in a shirt button, which doesn't want to go through a buttonhole—and rebounds all the more as one enslaves, mistreats, overtaxes or tortures oneself. Obviously, however, "the tendentiousness" of an object manifestly declares itself "in the gallows physiognomy of the hooks." But it is precisely here that their malice exists. One thinks one knows them, is negligent in dealing with them and is outwitted from the beginning. The hooks are predestined for one of the "most cursed forms" of an object's malice—"accompaniment"—described by A. E. as an assembling of those things that do not belong together: the watch chain and the pillow, for example; the latter flung to the foot of the bed, taking the watch along, which swings "in a splendid arch" on the wall and [...]. Nevertheless, in the variety of the attacks to which A. E. is subject, a seemingly harmless button is indeed responsible for a virtually slapstick-like "accompaniment." Sitting at a covered table at a wedding in front of a tray spread with "various kinds of sauces and side dishes," A. E. wants to pick up his neighbor's fork that has fallen to ground, but "a button of my jacket had gotten under the edge of that tray with diabolical cunning, suddenly raising it upward, and as I quickly jumped to my feet, the entire junk that it carried—sauces, preserves of every kind, in part made of scarlet-colored liquid—began rolling, rumbling, flowing, shooting over the table, and still wanting to save the situation, I flung a bottle of wine around; it poured its contents over the white wedding dress of the bride to my left and I stepped quite vehemently on the toes of my neighbor to the right; another who wanted to help intervened and hit a vegetable dish, a third party knocked over his glass—oh, it was a greeting, a rightful scolding, in brief, a genuinely tragic case. The fragile world of everything finite generally seems to want to go to pieces."<sup>2</sup>

During a journey, A. E. reports such occurrences to the narrator of the novel, who, after the death of the hero, will organize the writings that he left behind. Faced with the abundance and complexity in which A. E. represents "exterior things," the narrator wipes from the table all the written sheets that have been haphazardly filled with lines and letters in various colors, clenching all the paper lying around into a big ball and finally flinging it against the wall. However, when the multicolored paper ball was lying in front of him, he leisurely looked at it and recognized that in an attempt to make an ordered image of the disorderly one could produce nothing else than that "the object transferred itself to the subject and the contents to the form."—"A. E. had wanted to create a diagram to thrust the world order [...] [the order of the world of things] before its [the world's] eyes [...], to show what kind of bad order it is [...], he had wanted to produce a

<sup>2</sup> The scene appears like one of the films made a few decades later in the grotesque style, which included heroes such as Buster Keaton, Laurel & Hardy or Karl Valentin. If it is mostly the inadequacies or peculiarities of the bodies of these comedians, which invoke the breaking up of the fragile world of the finite, we might ask whether or not individual limbs have previously been flung to things. Just like them, their limbs escape their limited use, have lost the taste for their natural purposes and curiously attempt to make the most of their existence in a new way.

harmonious overall view of all the discordant intersections.” Yet, isn’t the thing which the narrator forms out of A. E.’s notes—by balling up the paper covered with multicolored intersecting and overlapping lines and patterns—a comprehensive image of the whole world? A. E.’s task would then certainly be completed.

Although Vischer focused on things, he aimed his critique at an alleged order of the world of things. Alone his attempt to form obligatory categories and to put these into clear relations to each other failed.<sup>3</sup> What the narrator perceived when looking through the papers was—on two sheets of thick drawing paper of an immense size—“a chaos [...] of lines and colors. In the fields of these crimped nets was writing leading in different directions [...] vertical, horizontal and crosswise on the diagonals [...] while next to them on the same surfaces, other dividing lines attempting to lead, became more and more confused [...]. Both paper monsters bore a heading written in very beautiful Gothic type: *System of a harmonious universe.*”

Maria Zinfert, Berlin, September 2009

<sup>3</sup> M. Blecher also wrote about the “tyranny of things” in his novel *Aus der unmittelbaren Unwirklichkeit* (From the Immediate Unreality), published in 1936. However, he upheld a view of things in their uniqueness, which was specifically connected to the idea that they remain outside a fixed order. A comparison between the two authors is actually quite impossible, because in the final analysis Vischer, writing a century before, is involved in a hopeless fight to represent that which holds the world together. In contrast, Blecher was already looking at things in a world that is captured by the nearly perfect illusions of its effigies and is perceived by him as being immediately unreal.