

Emanuele Coccia

The Light Within Things

***Meltingsun* by Christine Rebet**

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At first sight they would seem to be objects which can only be described negatively. They are useless and have no obvious function, as if the considerable technical and artisan effort which went into their creation has left untouched man's existence on the earth, has had no influence on his forms and on his well-being. History has no hold on them almost as if they were artefacts which have never shown any real progress: it is impossible for them to divide time into an abandoned or irretrievably lost past and a new present, they are not the result of an idea, of an unprecedented praxis, unlike any other self-respecting technical object (the wheel, the car, a computer). Jewellery is one of the most antique and constant objects which have always accompanied man and which still accompany him today yet it is useless and technically impossible to write a story.

Articles of jewellery are not indifferent only to history but also to culture and geography. There is no culture which hasn't produced them, made them or utilized them, but the differences which separate one culture from another seem to be extremely reduced compared to all the other forms of art. It is as if, faced with such splendour, man rids himself of all that is superfluous and transforms himself into a child with no culture. Wandering through museums which preserve traces of long-lost cultures as well as those cultures which still today populate our planet searching for jewellery belonging to this or that civilization, each visitor, wherever he looks, seems to see the same forms just as if he keeps returning to the same starting point in some improbable game of Snakes and Ladders.

Jewellery is the only technical artefact in which both prehistoric and modern times, East and West, civilization and nature, seem to find a lasting yet ephemeral point of contact: it is as if a shining ornament opens a space in which man lives in a bubble of perpetual exile from history and cultural differences. It is as if humanity is divided in everything except ornaments, its love for all that is superfluous, futile, unnecessary and decorative. It is as if the most antique transcendental culture, the most universal and primitive anthropology is precisely this curious obsession, this need to decorate the body with shining ornaments.

Articles of jewellery are non-objects, indifferent to history, to culture, to geography: they are objects suffused and defined by negativity, from at least three other points of view. For centuries jewellery has suffered from and taken advantage of a triple limitation: physical (or anatomical), social and material. Above all, pieces of jewellery are objects destined to adorn only the extremities or the most exposed parts of the body: the head, the ear-lobes, the neck, the fingers, the ankles. Unlike clothing, jewellery does not consider the human body as a significant whole, it refuses to imitate or accompany human forms and it breaks the body down into an insignificant mass interspersed with highlights. And above all it presents itself as a significant and distinctive object able to bring value, sense and distinction,

compelled to submerge the anatomical body into a sea of irrelevance, insignificance, of no value. A piece of jewellery can have value only by producing an absence of value in its anatomical substrate. As if to say that if jewellery exists, if we need jewellery, it is because our bodies alone are not sufficient to give us value, because our anatomical forms are unable to distinguish us. As if in order to enrich something it is necessary to take value from something else. Jewellery is that which, in order to have great value, must subtract value from everything else.

This striking but insignificant argumentation is not only limited to an anatomical level, but it also extends to a social level. Pieces of jewellery are artefacts able to distinguish and give value to part of a society, only on condition that everything else is deprived of its value. The same argumentation seems to be mirrored also regarding materials. Pieces of jewellery are objects made of precious materials: not necessarily rare, but precious, precious because all other material does not have, and must not have, equal value.

In creating a piece of jewellery, man's ability seems to have reached its extreme limit. Technique has nothing to do with historical progress, because these objects cannot generate any form of advancement. It is not the expression of the domination of spiritual life over matter, because in them the spirit is the means to practice the cult of substance. And if every technique seems to aim at improving the condition of our existence, in jewellery this advancement is only an illusion. It is for this paradoxical condition, for this dark and obscure light which descends on human ability, on his limits and on his inexorable illusions, that jewellery questions art. Every work of art seems to be extremely close to a piece of jewellery but at the same time extremely far. Not in the most banal sense (or not only) for which a piece of jewellery is often a true work of art. Not only (or not truly) in the sense that, for at least a century, great artists have practised the art of jewellery (with examples which range from Picasso to Lucio Fontana, from Pol Bury and Alexander Calder, from Man Ray to Niki de Saint-Phalle and Miquel Barcelò, to Asger Jorn, Roy Lichtenstein, Alberto Giacometti and Louise Bourgeois). This proximity is metaphysical rather than empirical. Art is, or would like to be, not only a magnification of matter (just like jewellery), the creation of an object which claims incomparable value (just like jewellery), and finally (today more than ever) an area of absolute luxury, a separate, confined reality, in which objects have an absolute value but also in a way that is different from the way in which other objects seem to have value. Close to but at the same time far away and not only because a work of art cannot be carried around and neither can it be used to adorn the body.

And it is on this accursed closeness that Christine Rebet has concentrated her work. This closeness is, at the same time, assumed, represented and exorcised ironically. In *Meltingsun* the atelier of the artist becomes a *maison de luxe*, the works of art are pieces of jewellery in both a literal and metaphorical sense, the art is a sort of true alchemical fusion of metals able to reproduce a Philosopher's stone, pure light and the melting sun, the title of this exhibition. In this presentation there are however some significant differences. Jewellery is both imagined and created, it is at the same time a project, a design and an enormous reality or matter in its purest state, fused, which seems to plunge down from above, from

the sky, black light, as if the earth were in fact that which cools the rays of the melting sun. The state, not casual or paradoxically objective, of the piece of jewellery is inverted. Jewellery-Art is the space in which design and material seem to find a point of contact, as, paradoxically, an object and its cast, an animal and its footprint. As if jewellery were not an exclusive, numerable and small collection of objects, but something both more and less than objects, or a project in which an object can simply be its design or its excessive projection.

Jewellery represents another metaphysical paradox which Simmel defined as «a sphere in which corporeal and psychic elements become inextricably combined» and in which every element «is in some way the bearer of a spiritual flash and operates as a symbol of this». To emphasise our individuality, in every piece of jewellery we lose ourselves in a small part of the world (a handful of coloured dust, some stones, a particular metal, a well-cut piece of material) which has nothing to do with us. This is the real paradox of jewellery: an extrinsic part of our body made of stones and metal is more subjective than our own soul, it is able to convey and express more than our anatomical body, our psychology, our character.

Christine Rebet seems to suggest that this excess of subjectivity should be interpreted in a literal, almost biological sense. If jewellery is able to transmit a sense of subjectivity it is because jewellery itself is alive. Only because of this is it able to leave its print on matter. A piece of jewellery is the space in which matter becomes animated and alive.

Meltingsun seems to represent both a distancing but also the roots of Rebet's early animated works. If, in animation, the design attempts to incorporate within itself the life existing without, now life is so absorbed in things that the work no longer needs to mime the movements of living beings. In the real world the designs become animated without movement, and no longer within the strip of celluloid and in the fiction of a screen. Movement however can also go in the opposite direction: it is the pieces of jewellery which recall the designs as their aim, their most living form, as if the design were the life of the objects, as if the images, in reality possessed the principle of animation of all matter. This is one of the strongest theories: jewellery exists and the art is possible because the material is animated.

The identification between art and the art of jewellery produces another significant displacement. The piece of jewellery becomes a sort of absolute paradigm of the objects. No longer a series of specific objects, easily distinguished from other objects, but the entirety of the objects. It is only for this that art and the art of jewellery coincide. If the matter is animated, everything can become jewellery and all objects are jewellery. And if the matter is animated everything, every piece of jewellery is a device, something which produces other things (the technical dimension and the biological dimension coincide) and it is for this reason that in many pieces of jewellery, technical instruments and forms of life seem to coincide. Jewellery is a device and devices are jewellery. But as has been said, all objects can now become jewellery.

This is something which the culture of jewellery has already anticipated over recent years. From a certain point of view the range of materials utilised by goldsmiths has increased. Not only certain stones,

but all stones: rubies, topazes, emeralds, sapphires, turquoise, opals, jade, lapis lazuli, agate and above all, diamonds. Not only metals such as copper, gold, silver, platinum, but also materials of organic origin such as wood, ivory, pearls or coral and, more recently, plastic, polymers and synthetic materials. Since the 1970s the culture of jewellery has extended to experimentation of new synthetic or organic materials which are considered by society to be less precious.

Also in this case, Rebet's work seems to both radicalise and grasp this movement on a metaphysical level. And the result is extraordinary. Creating jewellery no longer means making a selection in function with the intrinsic quality of the material, but neither does it work in function with the social or economic values which it is, more or less arbitrarily, able to convey. It is no longer a case of searching, collecting and selecting material in its most rare and unusual forms, for its refined quality, for its unique colours and shades or for its exceptional texture. Neither does it regard using these intrinsic, economic or social properties (the economic value) to express in a direct and metonymic manner its own social or human value. Now any material can become a piece of jewellery. And jewellery becomes the generic and unconditional expression of this boundless love for material in all its infinite forms, in all its indescribable and varied textures. More recent tendencies in the culture of jewellery reveal something about our deeply-buried relationship with the world. In fact there is something anthropologically curious in the creation of jewellery. This demonstrates that man is the only animal who loves material, every type of material, so much so that he studies, gathers and collects it, even that material from near and far and which has no use in his everyday life or for his biological needs. Tommaso d'Aquino attempted to defend the thesis of the resurrection of the body affirming that the soul, which is immortal, had such a natural desire for its body that the body had to rise from the dead so as not to leave this desire unsatisfied. It could be said that Tommaso's judgement is limited: the soul loves all material, all the worldly material beyond its anatomical body. This love for material is not limited to that enclosed in its anatomical body. For this type of love there is no need to incorporate material, man respects it for what it is and does not bend it for his use or utility. Man is the only being who loves his earth so much that he adorns himself with fragments of earth in order to better identify himself with it. Palaeontologists have learnt that, ever since the Palaeolithic Age, man has buried his dead together with ornaments and jewellery: bracelets, earrings, necklaces, pendants and brooches¹. As if these objects could express the purest individuality of the deceased, that which resists death, the end and the consumption of the body.

¹ Graham Clark, *Symbols of Excellence. Precious Materials as Expressions of Status*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, p. 7.