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## ***Three kinds of Bed***

**Daniele Del Giudice**

"Well then, it would appear that there are three kinds of bed; one, the bed as it is in its essence, and of which God can be said to be the creator. Or is there someone else?"

"To my mind, no one else."

"Another is the bed as made by the carpenter."

"Yes," he replied.

"Yet another is the bed as made by the painter, wouldn't you agree?"

"Indeed."

"The painter, the carpenter and God are three who oversee three kinds of bed."

These are the first words known to us on the subject of objects, of the craftsman and the artist, the words of Socrates and Glaucon in the Tenth Book of Plato's *Republic*. The topic is beds, as well as bridles, saddles and flutes, not to mention three kinds of art: the art of the person who manufactures things, the art of the person who makes use of them, the art of the person who depicts them. The beds in the example turn out to be of three kinds: the first, the natural form of the bed as made by God, the second, the bed as constructed by the workman or craftsman, and third that very special category of bed depicted by the painter. For Plato, neither the manufacturer of things nor the painter who depicts them can come close to the truth of things in themselves; in particular, the object constructed by the manufacturer, being an imitation of the Divine Form, is two stages removed from the nature of the object; as regards the painter, who imitates the object already in its turn imitated by the craftsman imitator, the distance in stages rises to three.

To an artist like Lavier, to all outward appearances more than a realist, whose sculpture-painting is made up of guitars, motorcycles, pianos, safes, refrigerators, cars, this prime reminder of the distance between art and truth, its paradoxical non-realism exactly at the point when it shows the thing as it is, cannot be other than reassuring. In his dialogue with Glaucon, Socrates entertains no doubts: the only one who comes close to the truth, the only one capable of knowledge of the object is the person who makes use of it; the horse rider astride the saddle, the flute player, the sleeper in the bed. There is a certain charm on this insistence on use. Who knows an object? The very person who derives something quite different from it, quite distinct from the object itself: movement, sleep, melody. Truth lies in a simple relationship.

"And the painter? Will we call him manufacturer and creator of the bed as well?"

"By no means."

"So then, in regard to the bed, what would you say he was?"

"The name," he replied, "which is in my view more fitting than any other for such a person is imitator of that thing of which those others are manufacturers."

Bertrand Lavier does not manufacture the objects of his art, but neither does he merely imitate them. Is he capable of using them? The car possibly, possibly the piano, probably not all. His objects however - and on this point he has never wavered - are nonetheless objects, they have never

lost their usability. The piano, even when transformed into a "canvas," could still play if its lid were raised and a key were pressed, the safe conceals the combination needed to open it, the refrigerator which is superimposed on it could still keep meat fresh if only it were plugged in. On the contrary, Duchamp's fork with bicycle wheel was quite definitively bereft of all bicycle-ness, just as the urinal placed horizontally and disconnected from its inflow and outflow pipes will be forever incapable of any flow at all. The irony and "cold" genius of a Duchamp expressed a gesture which was at one time innovative and protective, and conservative of art itself on the very threshold of its limitations; and they speak of that, of the state of art in the "poverty" of time, and of how to perpetuate its possibility even while accepting time. That kind of *mise an abîme*, or rather *mise en nu*, against art and for art, is of value only once, the first time. Afterwards, no one can really present himself with his own iron or bicycle-less wheel. In fact, I believe that Lavier does not in any way consider his *objects-works* as ready-made; on the contrary, the object is no more than the preparation of the canvas, the basis, the substratum of the work, as we learn from the captions accompanying the exhibits: acrylic painting on sail, acrylic painting on fire extinguisher, acrylic painting on aluminium ladder, acrylic painting on office furniture, acrylic painting on railing. It is not always true that "a thing is a thing is a thing," as Gertrude Stein had it: things are a metamorphosis, they can be at one and the same time something quite different while still remaining what they are in themselves, for instance an object painted on itself, no longer an object imitated in paint on canvas but a canvas made of that object, a painting overturning the relationship between both the basis and surface and its manifestation of itself to us, a painting which really is what it depicts, a unique coming together of portrait and subject. Sometimes, the physical, crinkled sheen of the colours recalls the liquid, fluid, flowing vision of the Impressionists, enclosing in this way the thing in the painterly perception, setting in the object the encasing, related subjectivity of the person who paints it. It is in this way that Lavier's things, while maintaining an existence as things are such no more, and lose in a certain sense their "objectivity."

Objects are like us, they are what was not there, the object is alone an unnatural presence against a background of what is natural, *artefactum*. Its mystery is certainly explicable; if we come across a plough in the desert, we rapidly assume a workman who created it. The mystery lasts as long as the perception of that unaccompanied presence, and is due to the fact that the creator of those objects is not there, is not to be seen. In Arthur Clarke's novel, *2001: Space Odyssey*, and subsequently in Stanley Kubrick's film, the starting point was marked by the discovery on a tiny, lifeless planet, among the craters, magmatic rocks and spatial dust, of a perfect parallelepiped, a form of metallic monolith, a form not accidentally created since all around was crystallization and the chill of chaos. Lavier talks to us of objects, created and usable but without creators and users, of their constant and mysterious presence in this day-to-day world of ours; and if he highlights things, it is certainly not to debate questions of art (of which he is in any case perfectly aware) nor to denounce their present limits; on the contrary, like a figurative painter of old, he chooses his models to provide an iconography of his own times, he chooses them with care from the world of things, ironically and joyfully disguising them as themselves. As a paradoxical performer of twentieth century *body art*, he anticipates that it will be the body *as* painted *thing* which will do the talking. So, as an approach to his painting, Plato's dialogue could be of as much, and perhaps even greater service as any comparison with César or Jasper Johns. In the classification made by Socrates and Glaucon, his activity would certainly find its place, a sophisticated piece hewn out in the interstices: we have already seen how Lavier does not imitate the object made by the craftsman, as does the painter, nor does he, like the craftsman, imitate the natural form. Making these objects a work of art, he fixes their existence for all time, he saves them from time, he preserves and joyfully points to their truth, and with them to the existential truth of our being.