

DECORATION AND DETECTION

George Baker

Ann Burke Daly, *The Automaton Olympia's Cabinet of Curiosities*.
Installations at the Linda Kirkland Gallery, New York, and 57HOPE
Gallery, Brooklyn, 1996.

I

... the moments when everyday
life becomes the most vivid or
tangible are the moments when
most people find themselves liv-
ing more than one life.

—Kristin Ross,
"Watching the Detectives"

Why do some people, including
myself, enjoy in certain novels,
biographies, and historical works
the representation of the "daily
life" of an epoch, of a character?
Why this curiosity about petty
details: schedules, habits, meals,
lodging, clothing, etc.? Is it the
hallucinatory relish of "reality"
(the very materiality of "that once
existed")? And is it not the fan-
tasy itself which invokes the "de-
tail," the tiny private scene, in
which I can easily take my place?
Are there, in short, "minor hys-
terics" (these very readers) who
receive bliss from a singular the-
ater: not one of grandeur, but

one of mediocrity (might there
not be dreams, fantasies of medi-
ocrity)?

—Roland Barthes,
The Pleasure of the Text

We are examining a bedroom.
Perhaps two separate bed-
rooms. It is hard to tell. The
video camera does not move; it does not
circumnavigate this space; the room will
not come into view. Instead the camera
stutters, we see ten-second shots of this
room, an aleatory sequence of various
details. Our vantage point rests low to
the ground; we always seem to be look-
ing up at objects, as if the camera's
viewpoint—the synecdoche of our
own—had descended to inhabit the
estranged life-world of the child. (Es-
tranged, because the supposed plenary
experience of childhood actually takes
place in a landscape of objects sized to
the physical scale of adults; the child
exists in a world that literally *does not*
fit.)

Two formal procedures govern Ann Daly's most recent video project, *The Automaton Olympia Throws Her Voice* (1995–96), and both only seem to add to the disquietingly regressive affect of the whole: fragmentation and immobilization. The video presents the objects of the room as literal fragments; as they loom above or stretch out before our view, we realize that the camera has always positioned itself *too close* to these objects, cutting them off from the continuity of space that should surround them, sapping them of their autonomy, eliminating the experience of their very boundedness. Thus we are pushed down to the almost microscopic inspection of the weave of a bedspread, we are pressed close to the folds of a curtain, we hover in front of a mirror and yet see only its framing edge. The fragments continue to accumulate: the video presents us with a painting, yet concentrates only on its frame; rumpled sheets, so close to our view that we could be lying among them; a figurine decapitated by the framing edge so that we are pressed amorously close to its plaster breasts; the intricate form of cut crystal decanters and lamps; the wild flowers of a plaster molding.

A pattern has developed: in fact patterns have become the pattern. Decoration seems to be the governing scheme of the video's selection process, and we become like the young John Ruskin, focusing steadily on the decorative details of this interior environment. The forms of nature completely dominate the decoration of the room: flowers on the sheets, ivy garlands around the mirror frame, abstract plants on the bedspread. And yet there is a counterpoint. The only shots in the video that do not

seem too close to the objects, that do not necessarily fragment their views, are the shots that reach out beyond the interior, gazing out through the bedroom windows onto the greenery beyond.

This view onto "real" nature presents the only possibility of movement within the video as a whole. For as the trees outside the bedroom billow softly in the wind, the viewer is thrown back on the utter stillness of the interior scenes, where nothing moves and no events occur. The immobility of this interior space, frozen in a phantasmagoria of the natural, recalls Freud's formulation of the logic of fantasy; fully transformational, this logic allowed Freud to see in the stillness of the Wolf Man's famous nightmare (a pack of white wolves frozen in a tree outside his room) the traumatic primal scene of witnessing the violent motions of parental sex. The formal device of the ten-second cut determines this immobile content: the camera's gaze remains fixed, the video frustrates all filmic expectations of real-time continuity and narrative flow. Yet as the video becomes resolutely *photographic*, the random sequencing of the cuts retains the possibility—or at least the tense expectation—of a narrative.

What story do these fragments tell? In one cut we see a chair surmounted by a photograph; a few cuts later we are directly above the chair, peering down at its surface, noticing amid the leather cracks the trace that a body has left. Then again, a bit later, we are brought up close against the photograph: another record of a trace, the picture shows the legs of a young child, otherwise unrecognizable. In another cut,



Ann Burke Daly, *The Automaton Olympia Throws Her Voice*, 1996. Installation for three monitor/VCR units, without sound. Video still: Courtesy of the artist and Linda Kirkland Gallery, New York.

there is a family photograph: the Oedipal triad, father-mother-child. And in yet another, we see the time—8:15 AM—but there is no indication of the date, which could be any year in the last three decades; the interior is *dated*, but not *datable*. Nothing happens here, and yet the viewer is left with the uncanny feeling that indeed something *has* happened here, and the video has been nothing but a repetitive inspection, a record, a series of clues. It is as if, in the cast-off marginalia of decorative details, knowledge lies hidden, concealed, ever more mobile and evasive as the decoration becomes ever more inert. And yet the questions only multiply.

II

The urge to ornament one's face and everything within reach is the start of plastic art. It is the baby talk of painting. All art is erotic . . . A country's culture can be assessed by the extent to which its lavatory walls are smeared.

—Adolf Loos,
“Ornament and Crime”

“Modernity,” Roland Barthes once wrote, “is always striving to go beyond exchange.”¹ This is a counter-intuitive observation, you might object, since exchange seems to be the very criterion, the defining logic, of modernity itself. Barthes, however, was writing about the ideas of the dissident Surrealist Georges Bataille, whose work opens onto an axis within modernism that was resolutely set against exchange, transposability, metaphor, and transcendence. This anti-metaphoric axis, one posed against the ideational movement of symbolization

itself, indeed characterizes a great deal of the avant-garde work of this century: the avant-garde wants the impossible object, the irretrievable act, the irreducible experience. What we might term the particular phenomenology of the modernist object has then been characterized by one type of formal procedure above all others; whether attempting to displace the subjectivity of the author, to de-skill the artistic act, to open the work to the possibility of collective production, or to link referent, object, and site in an irreducible triad, the avant-garde object turned to the procedure that the semioticians label “indexical.” As opposed to symbols or icons, indexes, in Rosalind Krauss’s famous definition, “establish their meaning along the axis of a physical relationship to their referents. They are the marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify. Into the category of the index, we would place physical traces (like footprints), medical symptoms, or the actual referents of the shifters. Cast shadows could also serve as the indexical signs of objects. . . .” (*The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 1985, p. 198.)

In this essay, Krauss interpreted only Duchamp and the pluralistic art of the seventies in terms of the index, but it now seems clear (partially through Krauss’s subsequent work) that this procedure is central to an understanding of many important figures and works of the twentieth century avant-garde from Duchamp to the Soviets, from Rauschenberg to Johns, from Warhol to Minimalism, from Kelly to Nauman and beyond. In his recent essay on Gabriel Orozco, “Refuse and Refuge,” Benjamin

Buchloh clarifies this phenomenon in the following way: "Typical of the desire to establish an opaque, irreducible and indivisible material experience with artistic means is the recurrence of the indexical procedure, an operation that claims the material trace as strictly non-transcendable, as a pure material causality. Its supposed link with the performing body seems to guarantee that body's resistance against metaphysics (both that of origins as much as that of interpretation)."

If anything might be said to unify the plurality of objects and media exhibited in Ann Daly's "Cabinet of Curiosities," it is the repetitive experience of the indexical inscription. In *Sometimes Olympia has trouble concentrating* there are two found objects (desk and chair, the scene of inscription) covered over by the wax casts of flowers that are scattered everywhere, not just on the desk and chair but also on the walls and floor. Similarly the cabinet presents a series of found books, such as *Gift (from you, you, you)*, sealed shut by an overlay of cast wax birds and flowers. But casting is only one of a whole range of indexical procedures marked within this panoply of objects: the video is, of course, indexical, as are the sound recordings in certain installations (*The Collector's Dream*) and the polaroid photographs (in *The Collector's Notes*, indexes of inscription itself), or a gridded arrangement of sixty-four photographs of decorative jewels (*Olympia's Jewels*). We are also given *casts* of these jewels (*Missed Encounter: The Collector*), a series of *embossments* on leather gloves (*33 Hours—A Glove Collection*), and a suite of pencil *tracings* of mechanical parts (*Building Drawings for a Machine for Electroplating the Dead*).

As Rosalind Krauss has shown, Marcel Duchamp (and his alter ego Rose Sélavy) put together a "panorama of the index" in his last painting *Tu m'* (1918); here Ann Daly (and her alter ego, the Automaton Olympia) puts together what we can only call an "index of the index." The peculiar charge of all these disparate objects seems to rest in the paradoxical, indeed contradictory, double meaning of the word "index" itself. In a general (non-semiotic) sense, an index is, of course, a collection of objects, an ordered arrangement, an alphabetical list; in an index everything has its place and without exception may be submitted to the function of the catalogue and the stratified grid of an hierarchical knowledge system. Daly's collection, however, contains a string of *semiotic* indexes. And this creates a problem for the collecting mechanism implicit in the installation. For if an index points to its referent in a direct physical relationship of causality, if it insists on the unmediated physical surfacing of the referent within the work of art itself—as shadow, trace, material deposit, cast shell, direct transfer—it accomplishes this presencing only through the paradoxical act of *displacing* the original object, of *effacing* the referent itself both physically and temporally. An index preserves the trace of its referent, offers up its material residue, and yet this residue can only present itself as testimony to an *absent* object, an object both dissipated and opaque. Ann Daly's collections then are characterized by a recurring failure, a failure to amass a coherent knowledge, to produce a series of self-contained objects. They are collections of holes, if we can imagine this, literally filled with absence. Daly's project produces a collision between these two understandings of the index, the incon-

gruity of which creates the logic of the work as a whole.

III

The bourgeoisie has no relish for language, which it no longer regards even as a luxury, an element of the art of living (death of "great" literature) but merely as an instrument of decor. . . .

—Roland Barthes,
The Pleasure of the Text

To live means to leave traces. In the interior these are emphasized. An abundance of covers and protectors, liners and cases is devised, on which the traces of objects of everyday use are imprinted. The traces of the occupant also leave their impression on the interior. The detective story that follows these traces comes into being. His "philosophy of furniture," along with his detective novellas, shows Poe to be the first physiognomist of the interior. The criminals of the first detective novels are neither gentlemen nor apaches, but private members of the bourgeoisie.

—Walter Benjamin,
Reflections

Certainly the paradoxes of the index are more complex than I have just indicated. Insofar as the index has been and remains crucial to the art of our century (such as it is, and to the extent that it remains possible), these paradoxes would be useful to explore. They are registered in Daly's work, particularly in one object, *Gift* (from you, you, you).

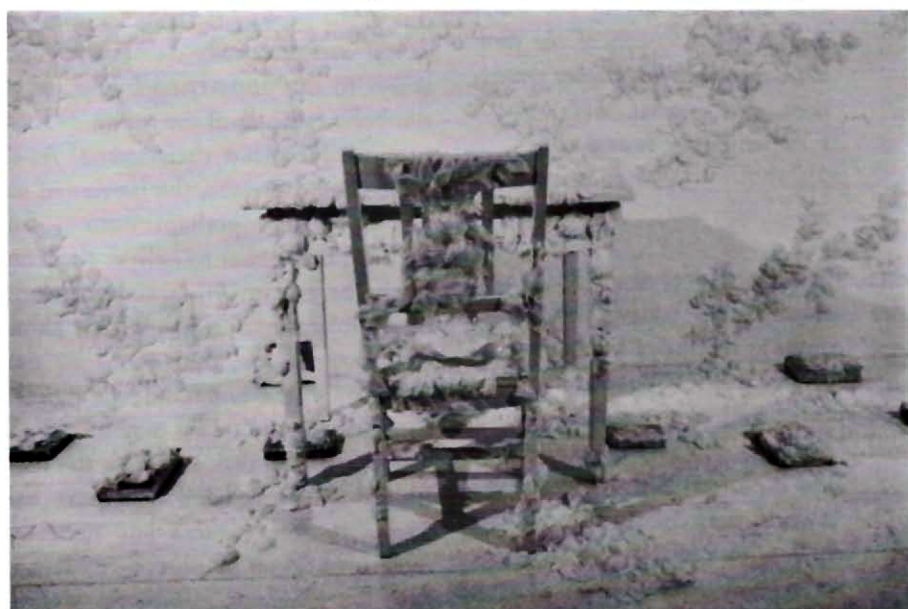
In relation to meaning, an index presents a frustrating double-bind. Unlike symbolic language, indexes seem particularly mute—in fact, quasi-autistic; representing a fall from the complexities of the symbolic, an index can only say, for example, "This." But in pointing to their referents, indexes seem to privilege one-to-one correspondences, a certain fixity of meaning, as they partake of all the qualities of the clue, the document, the body of evidence. In fact, contrary to their poverty in relation to symbolic structures, at least one commentator has hypothesized that the very origin of narrative form itself lies in the acquisition of the ability to read indexical traces, in the arrangement and deciphering of a series of clues.²

Allegorically Ann Daly's *Gift* registers this double-bind. In a gesture reminiscent of Marcel Broodthaers (whose first act as an artist was to embed his last book of poetry in plaster), Daly here encases a series of found books, covering them over with indexically formed wax casts. Typical of indexical procedures, the gesture remains a literal one, as the wax physically denies the viewer access to the underlying books, to the symbolic richness of the narrative forms supposedly within their covers. At the same time, however, the barrier of wax acts as a veil, perhaps even a lure, enticing the viewer to believe that there might be a narrative running beneath these objects after all, one that should be followed, one that could be deciphered. On the one hand, the moral of such a supposed tale is easy to see. *Gift* speaks allegorically—through the literal (indexical) procedures that have been the modernist object's last resort—of the conditions of forced uselessness



Ann Burke Daly, *The Automaton Olympia Throws Her Voice*, 1996. Installation for three monitor/VCR units, without sound. Video still: Courtesy of the artist and Linda Kirkland Gallery, New York.

Ann Burke Daly, *The Automaton Olympia's Cabinet of Curiosities*, 1996. Installation View:
Sometimes Olympia has Trouble Concentrating and Gift (from you, you, you).
 Writing desk, chair, wax, pins/books and wax. Size variable, 20' x 12' x 12' here.
 Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Linda Kirkland Gallery, New York.



characteristic of the artistic object, of its enforced silence, its utter refusal to communicate in the instrumental world of capitalist life. It registers on its very surface (Daly's work is *all surface*) the ultimate exile of modern artistic production to the world of the "merely" decorative.³

And yet, what do we make of these decorative details in the end? Do they function for the reader in the way that Freud conceived psychoanalysis, which, as he wrote in his essay, "The Moses of Michelangelo," is accustomed "to divine secret and concealed things from unconsidered or unnoticed details, from the rubbish heap, as it were, of our observations"? What, for that matter, defines the essence of the decorative? As is indicated in Daly's video, decoration seems to be involved inherently in processes of doubling. The interior, from at least the nineteenth century on, becomes a double of natural life; it duplicates the exterior world, a process that is achieved through the very agency of the decorative. The index, it should be added, performs the same operations: it too functions as a doubling device, and it is perhaps here that Daly's interest in the decorative and the indexical meet. Just as insistently, however, the decorative signals, within the modern world, the ever-present necessity of *loss*. The sumptuary object, the jewel, the useless object of interior decor: all share in the excessive desire for an expenditure beyond all utility. The decorative becomes a cipher of this desire.

Daly's objects thus proffer a reading beyond the single allegory of enforced uselessness characteristic of recent art. A deeper reading begins to form, one that

depends on stringing together the series of clues that form the work itself. In E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman," the narrative from which Daly lifts her double, the Automaton Olympia, one character believes that he has the answers to the narrative's troubling enigmas. When it is revealed that the character Olympia is indeed an automaton, a lifeless doll, a certain professor of poetry and rhetoric addresses the people of the story, imperiously declaring, "Most honorable ladies and gentlemen, do you not see the point of it all? It is all an allegory, an extended metaphor. Do you understand? *Sapienti sat*." Here, the function of narrative is expressed, self-reflexively, in all its simplicity; in the end a narrative is a machine for revealing knowledge, resolving ambiguity, unveiling the truth. Daly's clues lead elsewhere. We are faced with a non-Oedipal narrative (all narratives are Oedipal); with this work, no origin and no end, no denuding, no *dénouement*. Just the *automaton*—here to be read in the Lacanian sense, as chance, the very failure of causality—and its traces.

NOTES

1. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York, 1975), 23; here I use the altered translation as cited by Denis Hollier, "The Use-Value of the Impossible," *October* 60 (Spring 1992), 6. My thoughts in this essay are indebted to Hollier's text in many ways.

2. I am referring to the work of Carlo Ginzburg. See his "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm," *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method* (Baltimore, 1989). Ginzburg at one point states, "Perhaps the actual idea of narration (as distinct from charms,

exorcisms, or invocation) may have originated in a hunting society, relating the experience of deciphering tracks" (103).

3. See Benjamin Buchloh, "Refuse and Refuge," *Gabriel Orozco*, ed. M. Catherine

de Zegher (Kortrijk, 1993) for a pointed analysis of these conditions of twentieth-century object experience.

GEORGE BAKER has most recently published several essays on current developments in conceptual art, specifically on the Swiss artist Christian Philipp Müller and the Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles. Currently teaching art history at Columbia University, he is completing a dissertation on Surrealism and the commodity.

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