

Subject and Object, Desire and Seduction in Manon's Work

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(Translation: Ian Harvey)

*"Le sujet ne peut que désirer,
seul l'objet peut séduire"*
Jean Baudrillard

From the seventies up to the present day Manon has constantly put into practice the myth of the image in its effects of de-realization. In her work the man-woman subject has become the site of extreme identity loss, a screen for the projections of the other, an implosive space in communication. From the secrecy of her studio Manon, using instruments of great symbolic and metaphorical potential, works out a message-situation for the spectator that induces him/her to reflect on a shared problem, in her dialogue made up of emptiness and silence, light and shade, the body – present-absent, opaque-transparent protagonist of each of her works – stands like a splendid monument to the power and fragility of the feminine and masculine. Between dream and nightmare, the artist formalizes visions where the image of the pair becomes lost in the impulses and desire of the subjects comprising it, moving through the traces of their passage, luminous wakes, penetrating smells, diffused sensuality. The materiality of the body takes the risk of measuring itself against the immateriality of desire. In this exhibition two stuffed white swans recall the illusory nature of the mirror image, where the double of the subject replaces the pair in a monologue which is as seductive as it is melancholic. A dance of reflecting surfaces, revolving around themselves or immobilized in their gelidity, sends flashes of light onto a changing, multi-faceted, mutable reality. Desire in its obscene, guilty, violent, despicable implications writes on mirrors in lipstick words repressed by lips. Lined with black felt, this first room, tormentingly romantic, conveys muffled acoustic sensations, visual impressions of metaphysical abstraction. By using black and white Manon confirms again her aesthetics of mourning, bringing the still human condition closer to a black box. The key image is a shattered mirror: in this phase two possible interlocutors exchange glances in a process of disclosure that starts with the shattering of the surface where each person reflected himself irremediably. An ego narcissistically fed by its own mirror image, falsely reassured by an ideal-unreal companion – the product of its own projections on the other – is recreated by the shattering of its own image and then by the experience of a loss, where pain is relieved by the pleasure of mutual discovery and the transitivity of dialogue. In the past Manon used to disguise herself by exhibiting herself live or in sequences of photographs; now she "dresses up" environments, instruments, objects, investing them with meanings, immersing them in aura. Signs of the world continue to be transcribed on the room of the body, but differently from Cindy Sherman or Nan Goldin, where the conceptual language finds more expressionistic forms similar to those of an interior or relational psychodrama. Manon's aesthetic framework is always organized around an albeit mournful device aimed at producing seduction and eroticism.

She is familiar with the condition of the sublime, where feeling touches its highest points in pain and in pleasure. Manon's work used to hinge on subjectivity, and thus on the question of her own identity, right up to the moment she herself sought that identity

and lived out the story on the level of consciousness and the unconscious, loss and rediscovery. In the seventies and eighties she necessarily presented herself on the art scene, with the weight and lightness of her existential, psychic, genetic, biological and sociological stories. Once that phase was over – in a way once *le stade du miroir* was over, the stage where the subject through desire enters into dialogue (even painfully) with its double, with its ghosts – the artist left the stage, where she was exposed to the gaze of the world, and placed there the world of objects. Objects are not the slaves of desire, not sufferers of history, sentimentality and nostalgia, but – autonomous, integral, impassive, indifferent – continue to generate effects of seduction around themselves. The subject transfers eroticism to the object, which becomes sexual and enigmatic at the moment the subject disappears. While Manon showed herself in her subjectivity in order to be reduced to transparency to the point of self-extinction, the object chosen by her kept the impenetrable secret of the subject. In its place Manon now offers the object, a constellation of objects meant to invoke her absent body: and these are what now trigger seduction. The white swan, the black felt, the cage, the swing, the stage lights, the feathers – these are all metaphors which, when one thinks about it, are not used by the artist but repudiated by her as she detaches them literally from her body. Woman, in order not to be consumed by desire, transfers her sublime strategies onto the unconsumable but not therefore less obscure and seductive object. In one stage of this installation the mirror, having captured images around it, cracks. Beyond its fragments there are no two desiring subjects, but two objects of desire, pure projection screens onto which Manon directs the gaze of the spectator, while she herself moves away. The artist still keeps a place where she can exercise her subjectivity and that place is writing, the juxtaposition of cuttings of images in collages, almost and autobiography of sensations, memories and notes. In her two-dimensional paper works designed for walls or books, one feels the impulses of a subject that produces history, a personal history, the one that continues to implode in the black holes of her cool objects. Once again we need to repeat the words of Baudrillard in *Les stratégies fatales*: “The subject can only desire, only the object can seduce”.