

# Against the Grain: Some Words about Things, Complexity and Complex Things

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70 | Anyone who has stood in front of a Pieter Bruegel painting will know how difficult it is to decide where to start the observation, with the overview or with the details. Understanding the whole painting naturally requires an examination of both the overall structure of the picture, in which the individual motifs are embedded, the so-called ‘spatial depth’<sup>1</sup>, as well as the objects in it – the small hidden figures, scenes or riddles. Before taking an in-depth look at the picture, however, there is always the first impression, which arises from the immediately perceived material properties of the painting as well as the allocation and association activity that is already starting. The complexity of Bruegel’s paintings means that they illustrate this particularly well. It is through the act of description that one becomes aware of the difficulty with regard to the motifs and characteristics that present themselves first, and those that only emerge through the active attempt to understand. Kant’s sentence about sensibility being the “capacity for receiving representations through the mode in which we are affected by objects”<sup>2</sup> provides a starting point here.

The associations that come back to me when observing Burçak Bingöl’s works influence my attempt to describe and understand them. Within the range of impressions, I am fascinated by the fact that, first and foremost, it is books, texts and stories that come to mind. Why exactly with these objects that are so sensual, complex and visual, and where the play of forms and colours, the nuances in the materiality, play such a big role?

At first glance, these objects seem familiar. Some of them are different types of vessels, objects of use that we would usually employ to drink tea or put a flower in water in them. These forms have been familiar to us for thousands of

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Sedlmayr: “Die ›Macchia‹ Bruegels”, in: *Kunstgeschichte. Open Peer Reviewed Journal*, 1934, [www.kunstgeschichte-ejournal.net](http://www.kunstgeschichte-ejournal.net). From the German by the translator.

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Vol. 1, Leipzig: Verlag der Dürr’schen Buchhandlung, 1906, p. 97. From the German by the translator.

years. Possibly the oldest ceramic finds are the pieces of a vessel from China, around 20,000 years old. Later, in the Neolithic period, the production of ceramic vessels is already becoming more frequent, in Asia, Africa or Europe. Ceramic finds are highly valued by archaeologists, as the different styles mean that the fragments offer precise information about their period of origin. Apart from tools, a few of the oldest objects that we know are figurines. As their occurrence is more rare, they hold a special place in research and the museum world. The Lion Man from Stadel Cave is approximately 35,000 to 41,000 years old and sculpted from mammoth ivory. The Venus of Willendorf and the Venus of Dolní Věstonice are around 29,000 years old. While the first figurine is carved from a type of limestone, the Moravian Venus is a ceramic article. Reflections of human figures are part of the human ability to consciously appreciate ourselves and the world, to reflect and be able to abstract, even if the representation is of ritual figures rather than a person. But vessels are evidence of the ability to ensure one's survival through innovation. Museums around the world are thus replete with ceramic artefacts through time and space and reflecting human development. Even if a vessel is more than 10,000 years old, it seems familiar to us. The shape of these things is inscribed in us; we instinctively understand their form and function.

An important aspect of the object, to paraphrase Martin Heidegger, is its functionality. If we hammer with a hammer or draw with a pencil then these objects are to be assigned to the 'equipment' category. If we observe them, talk about them and ask about their purpose then the hammer and pencil each become a 'thing'. In Heidegger's eyes, things aren't primarily objects of the world but of consciousness. *Equipment*, like the pencil, is needed *to do something*, for example to draw something or write a text.<sup>3</sup> So in the thing, and in our case it can even be a ceramic vessel, there is knowledge. Using its presence as a basis, we reflect the way it came about and learn how it relates to other things.

Yi-Fu Tuan describes this experience wonderfully in his text *The Significance of the Artifact*. Here we come to the first of the books that came to mind in relation to Burçak Bingöl's works, as in one text Yi-Fu Tuan quotes from a book that I read as a child and have never forgotten:

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger: *Being and Time*, transl. by Joan Stambaugh, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, pp. 62–71.

Experience is fleeting, elusive, and chaotic. We use words, gestures, and artifacts to give it a semblance of duration and coherence. Experience is captured in a thing; an inner sense of harmony might appear as a thing in a world of tangible things. But a thing is seldom able to speak unambiguously for itself. Its significance relies at least in part on the support of words and gestures. Thus, after putting the final polish on a jar that we have made and feel proud of, we call on persons present to admire it and place it almost reverently on the mantelpiece. An object commands attention by virtue of its own outstanding quality and by virtue of a prominent location among other artifacts. Nonetheless, the visibility tends to diminish in the course of time unless it is recreated periodically with verbal and gestural appreciation. Valued artifacts must be maintained by human discourse. That is one reason why friends and appreciative critics are important. Consider the following incident from Kenneth Grahame's animal story, "The Wind in the willows." It illustrates beautifully how sympathetic speech and action can establish a home. Rat and Mole were friends. When the two of them found their way back to Mole's underground burrow, Mole felt shame because after a period of absence his home seemed such a poor and cold little place. Rat, kind beyond measure, set about to restore his friend's confidence. He was able to see all kinds of merit in the house that escaped his host's notice. "So compact! So well planned! Everything here and everything in its place!" Rat built a fire and got Mole to dust the furniture. Then they searched for food.

"No bread!" groaned the Mole dolorously; "no butter, no—"

"No *pâté de foie gras*, no champagne!" continued the Rat, grinning. "And that reminds me—what's that little door at the end of the passage? Your cellar, of course! Every luxury in this house! Just you wait a minute."

He made for the cellar door, and presently reappeared . . . with a bottle of beer in each paw and another under each arm. "Self-indulgent beggar you seem to be, Mole," he observed. "Deny yourself nothing. This is really the jolliest place I ever was in. Now, wherever did you pick up those prints? Make the place look so home-like, they do. No wonder you're so fond of it, Mole. Tell us all about it, and how you came to make it what it is."<sup>4</sup>

Rat and Mole are of course referring to everyday things – the home, the furniture, lamps, curtains and pictures on the wall; but also to the good *pâté*

<sup>4</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan: "The Significance of the Artifact", in: *Geographical Review* 70, 4 (1980), ed. by American Geographical Society, pp. 462–472.

and the tasty beer (in a lovely clay pot and neat bottle... Anything else would be unacceptable...), and in particular to the words and gestures that give these things the necessary positive meaning and human warmth.

The forms that we have talked about thus far are everyday use objects, but according to Heidegger just *not only* or *not completely*. In this sense, Burçak Bingöl works with these archaic, traditional and profane (and sometimes also mimetic) forms. But she weaves these things into another process. The items maintain their functional or natural form but through handling them reflect more: their ability to speak. We aren't the only ones who can talk (*about* things): as has been claimed in research for some time now, things can speak, too.<sup>5</sup> Nothing can substantiate this better than a work of art. It isn't Rat or Mole who underline this but the American-Chinese human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan himself: "An artwork is a special type of artefact that by virtue of its successful embodiment of complex emotions of great importance resists absorption into the daily activities of the utilitarian world." What is meant here is the oscillation of the object in our perception, between its place as practical *equipment* and its location as a *thing* on a meta level. This seems contradictory, and I'm also unable to remove the contradiction fully, but it is an important geographer who must be familiar with places and locations who said it.

Burçak Bingöl resorts to materials with historical connotations, such as ceramic and porcelain. She also cites the forms of traditional objects, of vessels like a bottle, vase, bowl or plate. But with Bingöl the things are not what they should be, and to return quickly to Heidegger: in their present form, they are no longer to be used *to do something*, so their status as things is clear. At this point, we have to pay our respects to Rat and Mole briefly before saying goodbye to them in order to tread another path en route to the next stories. Since our uncouth water rat has already waxed lyrical about the interior quality of Mole's home, and given us a good mental image of it, we must also describe a few of Burçak Bingöl's objects. Even if these works can be seen in the exhibition and the catalogue, they still need to be captured in words. Only thus will it become apparent that Bingöl's objects are not easy to describe, and furthermore it will become clear how the things only acquire their meaning through perception and description. Even if Rat and Mole are

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Joseph Leo Koerner: *Things that Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, ed. by Lorraine Daston, New York: Zone Books (MIT Press), 2004, pp. 9–24.

not known for being your classical examples of beings of pure reason, nor are they likely to be familiar with Immanuel Kant's works, you could get the impression that they were referring to his differentiation of objects obtaining their meaning by virtue of their qualities, or through the way we see them. (I'm not yet clear how beer and pâté correlate to this, but it's probably clear to Rat and Mole...)

We've already determined some of the basics. The objects discussed are different types of vessels, but they're only one part of these complex compositions. There are also plant objects and motifs, although these are not isolated but instead part of a mostly formless mass from which they partially protrude, or onto which they are transferred as an image. The vessels can be immersed in a shapeless ceramic mass from which only a neck or beak stick out. Sometimes things are covered with a trickle of glaze, at other times they are smeared with matt clay. The form can be clean and visible at some points or covered by rough clods of clay at others. The form of a vessel can suddenly transition into an organic structure, as if it were a wondrous reverse metamorphosis from a precisely processed object back to raw clay. Some things are kept in their natural colour while for others this colour order is reversed. Objects seem to melt, to harden and to shatter. The pieces on which illustrations of plants have been printed, or which, by pouring over glaze, assume the plastic form of a thorny flower, bring fossils to mind, and similarly to fossils the natural objects become images of themselves. Several of these small sculptures evoke fragments that could have come from an archaeological dig, or mineralogical finds in a natural history cabinet. But some could be corals or amphorae that after centuries have been raised covered in mussels from a shipwreck. The rack on which they are presented at the Zilberman Gallery exhibition strengthens the impression of a cabinet of curiosities from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And yet despite the individual differences between each object, these are things that are recognisably related, that form a group and that spring from a common idea. One could continue describing at this point, but the amount of impressions expressed is already sufficient to determine that one thing stands out from these descriptions: you could use the terms complexity and formless for all of the objects.

Bingöl's works have many characteristics that would be equal starting points in the search for an explanation. The origin of the forms as well as their associative strength, the diverse material properties such as colour, texture and structure but also the approach to be discerned that includes chance and

intention and persistently takes things out of their form are just a few of these possibilities. However in order to avoid an overly didactic object-related explanation, at this juncture I would like to skip a few of these undoubtedly appealing possibilities and move on to the next literary work, and through further description of a description show Bingöl's works in a different light, this time bleak and creepy.

In a dark room, lit by the modest light sources of the outgoing 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jean Floressas des Esseintes, the sad hero of Joris Karl Huysmans' novel *Against the Grain*, sits and watches his giant tortoise. Who is Monsieur des Esseintes? In the blurb for this work from 1884, he is described as an anaemic person who suffers from "neurasthenic hypersensitivity and morbid ennui" as the "final bearer of an aristocratic name and the inheritor of enormous wealth". He flees from "vulgar reality" and "into a private realm of esoteric artificiality".<sup>6</sup> This story is the description of the decline of a human being in an isolated space. At the heart of the narrative mode are the bizarre interiors and objects created by the protagonist, which allow him to immerse himself completely in an illusory world. One of the vivid highpoints of the story is his purchasing of the abovementioned giant tortoise. Excited by an oriental rug, "and following the silver gleams which fell on its web of plum violet and alladin yellow, it suddenly occurred to him how much it would be improved if he could place on it some object whose deep color might enhance the vividness of its tints." Taken by this idea, des Esseintes strolls through Paris until he finds the right object in a shop window at the Palais Royal. It's a long process before he works out how animal and rug could be brought into an ideal, formal harmony: "He therefore decided to glaze the shell of the tortoise with gold." But the effect doesn't last for long; something is missing and des Esseintes quickly discovers a way to solve the problem: "From a Japanese collection he chose a design representing a cluster of flowers emanating spindle-like, from a slender stalk. Taking it to a jeweler, he sketched a border to enclose this bouquet in an oval frame, and informed the amazed lapidary that every petal and every leaf was to be designed with jewels and mounted on the scales of the tortoise." The choice of stones, their name and individual significance, their appearance, light reflections and colour accents, and their exact arrangement on the tortoise's back take up many paragraphs in the book. The choice must be made between asparagus green chrysoberyls and bluish-red ouwarovite,

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<sup>6</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans: *Gegen den Strich*, transl. by Hans Jacob, Frankfurt a. M./Berlin/Wien: Ullstein, 1972, blurb. Translated from the German by the translator.

oriental turquoises, cat's eyes from Ceylon and the mahogany red *Compostella hyacinth*; the talk is of mysterious unnatural scintillations or the watery azure glow of stones that would sufficiently light up the dark tortoise shell. But such effort pays off:

He was perfectly happy. His eyes gleamed with pleasure at the resplendencies of the flaming corollae against the gold background. Then, he grew hungry — a thing that rarely if ever happened to him — and dipped his toast, spread with a special butter, in a cup of tea, a flawless blend of Sifayoune, Moyoutann and Khansky — yellow teas which had come from China to Russia by special caravans. This liquid perfume he drank in those Chinese porcelains called egg-shell, so light and diaphanous they are...<sup>7</sup>

On some afternoons, des Esseintes gazes into the sky through a double-walled window filled with water, then “he operated the stops of the pipes and conduits which emptied the aquarium, replacing it with pure water. Into this, he poured drops of colored liquids that made it green or brackish, opaline or silvery – tones similar to those of rivers which reflect the color of the sky, the intensity of the sun, the menace of rain – which reflect, in a word, the state of the season and atmosphere. When he did this, he imagined himself on a brig, between decks, and curiously he contemplated the marvelous, mechanical fish, wound like clocks, which passed before the porthole or clung to the artificial sea-weed. While he inhaled the odor of tar, introduced into the room shortly before his arrival, he examined colored engravings, hung on the walls, which represented, just as at Lloyd's office and the steamship agencies, steamers bound for Valparaiso and La Platte...” Tired by this view and the numerous nautical charts and instruments in the room, he rests his eyes by looking at the one book lying on the table: “‘The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym’, specially printed for him on laid paper, each sheet carefully selected, with a sea-gull watermark.”<sup>8</sup>

It is obviously impossible to present the complexity of the book here without having readers participate in the entire *durée* of the active reading process. Concentration and tiredness are part of the pleasure of reading. It is also not relevant to know the story in detail. *Against the Grain* (original French title *À rebours*) is only an example, an external source used to highlight the difficulty of conveying reality, or individual motifs and objects, and how this

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pp. 51–53.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 34.

can only be narrated via complex images that completely exhaust the reader's imagination. The descriptions of the nuances that manifest themselves in the tiny details arresting des Esseintes' attention fit Burçak Bingöl's works.

This situation is similar with other motifs and things, however: for example, how do you appreciate Hieronymus Bosch's complex motifs and describe a figure like the Tree-Man that consists of so many different elements, each one imbued with multiple references and offering manifold starting points for interpretation and allocation: "The heterogeneous, intricate, and rigged-together nature of the monstrous entity it displays..."<sup>9</sup> The Tree-Man appears in drawn and painted form in several of Bosch's works. A spontaneous and amateurish attempt to summarise this *thing* in a few words: a figure with tree-trunk legs in two boots, its body resembling an egg with its rear broken off and its front adorned with a human head wearing a construction as if it were a hat, on top of which is a vessel with a protruding ladder and a climbing figure grabbing a rope... and in all of this we haven't yet mentioned the surrounding landscape and a large number of the details let alone paid attention to any atmospheric compositional method. The art historian Joseph Leo Koerner highlights the difficulty of description by commenting on the journal of Antonio de Beatis, a Cardinal secretary who had seen Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* in Madrid in 1517: "Somewhere in this maze of wonders Beatis arrived at 'various other panel paintings of diverse bizarreness,' which at first he set about to describe, but gave up. These pictures, he concluded, showed 'such pleasant and fantastical things that it is impossible to describe them to those who don't know them.'"<sup>10</sup>

In his wonderful essay on the Tree-Man "Bosch's Equipment", Koerner cites the already quoted philosopher Heidegger:

Bosch's thing is unusable, and hence conspicuous, both because it escapes a referential structure of what it is (let alone what it might be for) and because it consists of things that are, in a spectacular manner, "improperly adapted for their specific use." Involved in everyday actions (for example, as the hammer the shoemaker reaches for), equipment stands unperceived but ready at hand until the moment when it breaks, at which point it becomes an "Object" in a strict sense and can be explored theoretically.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Leo Koerner: *Bosch's Equipment*, in: *Things that talk, Object Lessons from Art and Science*, edited by Lorraine Daston, Zone Books, New York, 2004, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 41. From the German by the translator.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 53. From the German by the translator.



Koerner continues:

Like so many of the artist's creations, the Treeman features everyday products in absurd combinations. It is a telltale sign of an authentic drawing by Bosch that such objects seem somehow carefully observed, even when they cannot be, since there is no real-world prototypes for them.<sup>12</sup>

Even if these words relate to works by Hieronymus Bosch that were painted and drawn more than 500 years ago, they remind me of Burçak Bingöl's view of things. The starting point of Bingöl's works is the ceramics profession, a discipline in which the primary focus is on a functional mastery. Nonetheless, she pursues her interest in the unreal and the impossible – in what is *against nature*.<sup>13</sup>

If Koerner describes Bosch's Tree-Man as being against nature, this reminds me of another prominent example from art history: Dürer's *The Great Piece of Turf* at the Albertina Museum in Vienna. The watercolour painting from 1503 depicts a cut-out spot of meadow with various grasses. Dürer probably painted his picture in the atelier, something that can be deduced from the deep angle, which provides us with a good view of his model. The grasses are indeed part of nature but at the same time they are also so precisely and comprehensively portrayed, roots included, that it could almost be a scientific illustration. The painting is a philosophical meditation on nature, the cosmos and representation, which is already attempting a modern take on things. If we look at Bingöl's work *Yaban* (2019), we see a similarly isolated piece of nature, but she finds her grasses in the streets of her district in İstanbul rather than Franconian meadows. Hers are wild plants that spread in an uncultivated way within an urban cultural space. Just as Dürer removed his model carefully from a neighbouring meadow, Bingöl plucks her grasses from cracks in the cobblestones on her way through Beyoğlu. In the atelier, Dürer must have rearranged the grasses in order to be able to observe and portray them. Bingöl subjects her model to the documenting view of a camera in order to then print them on clay or porcelain. For the presentation in the exhibition, she fixes the stalks in clods of wet clay. While the Nuremberg Renaissance master captured the grasses in *The Great Piece of Turf* at a particular moment in time forever, the İstanbul artist's plants will dry out and at some point fall apart. The work *against nature* thus turns back into one *with nature*, reflecting the is-ness of things, time and public space.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 53; Quotation by Gerd Unverfehrt: *Hieronymus Bosch: Die Rezeption seiner Kunst im frühen Jahrhundert*, Berlin: Mann, 1980, p. 33. From the German by the translator.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 58. From the German by the translator.

The book in a book in *À rebours*, des Esseintes' copy of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, is aptly placed on the table in his room. But in order to link Poe and Burçak, which makes total sense, I would instead choose another maritime story by Poe, namely *A Descent into the Maelstrom*. Burçak herself writes that her works remind her of flotsam and jetsam, things that the sea happens to wash up on the beach and have been joined together by salt or seaweed. In Poe's story, a fisherman and survivor tells of his experiences inside a gigantic whirlpool in the sea. He describes the things the vortex captured and pulled into it, and which circled around him in the Archimedes' screw of the water masses:

Looking about me upon the wide waste of liquid ebony on which we were thus borne, I perceived that our boat was not the only object in the embrace of the whirl. Both above and below us were visible fragments of vessels, large masses of building timber and trunks of trees, with many smaller articles, such as pieces of house furniture, broken boxes, barrels and staves.<sup>14</sup>

94 | At this point the man is surprised to find that his curiosity has been piqued and he observes with fascination the numerous objects circling downwards with him. However, because of his observations he regains the hope of survival.

It was not a new terror that thus affected me, but the dawn of a more exciting hope. This hope arose partly from memory, and partly from present observation. I called to mind the great variety of buoyant matter that strewed the coast of Lofoden, having been absorbed and then thrown forth by the Moskoe-strom. By far the greater number of the articles were shattered in the most extraordinary way --so chafed and roughened as to have the appearance of being stuck full of splinters --but then I distinctly recollected that there were some of them which were not disfigured at all. Now I could not account for this difference except by supposing that the roughened fragments were the only ones which had been completely absorbed --that the others had entered the whirl at so late a period of the tide, or, from some reason, had descended so slowly after entering, that they did not reach the bottom before the turn of the flood came, or of the ebb, as the case might be. I conceived it possible, in either instance, that they might thus be whirled up again to the level of the ocean, without

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<sup>14</sup> Edgar Allan Poe: *Ein Sturz in den Malstrom*, in: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. A, Frankfurt a. M.: Zweitausendeins, 1994, p. 311. From the German by the translator.

undergoing the fate of those which had been drawn in more early or absorbed more rapidly...<sup>15</sup>

What do the landscapes surrounding the individual figures in Bruegel's work have in common with Bosch's Tree-Man, which portrays a small world in a bigger one? What is the relationship between the rooms that form the backdrop to the decorated giant tortoise in Huysmans' novel and the maelstrom in Poe's story that rotates the sea's booty in the breakneck spirals of the water body before washing it up again on the beach?

All these scenarios and stories, visual or literary, reflect the dialogue between ourselves and the world of things. Burçak Bingöl's works are hybrid constructions in which the detail and the whole are equally unrestrained. An aporia of perception, they seem to be in a permanent dialogue, even if it's only conducted in whispers.

*From the German by Nickolas Woods*

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. pp. 312–313. From the German by the translator.