

FrameWork 4/16

Edward Bacal on Kevin Yates

Up, Down, Left, Right: Some Thoughts on the Inverse, Reverse, and Double.

Without consciousness of “mirror symmetry” the subject would dissolve into space, and the world, anthropocentric for the Gestalt-oriented human, would be stripped of its qualities, made characterless, isotropic. We would lose our marbles there: signs themselves would be empty, flat; there would be smoke without fire. Even the most immediate elements of communication, the index or indices, for example, would no longer point to anything. In a world with no differentiation of “regions within space,” to put it as Kant did, imprints would become illegible. For the world to lose its meaning, it is enough to turn it inside-out like a glove, to invert the full and the empty.

Yve-Alain Bois¹

Inverse

The history of modern art is full of disoriented objects. For example, story has it that Wassily Kandinsky arrived at abstract painting by coming upon one of his canvases placed upside-down. In misrecognizing his own work, the spatial disorientation of composition and the dissolution of fixed directional coordinates offered a new vision of art. This upside-down canvas revealed an art that could challenge the viewer’s oriented gaze and could assert itself free of the visual constraints of figural legibility. Within a decade, El Lissitzky had already incorporated this misrecognition into artmaking. Lissitzky’s *Proun* works, a set of abstract paintings designed to achieve formal balance irrespective of which side is up, actively embraced the art object’s indeterminate position in space.² Moreover, Lissitzky would create a dedicated *Proun Room* for these constructivist designs, wherein they took on three-dimensional form in direct relation to their architectural support. In addition to divorcing the object from its fixed axis, Lissitzky would constitute space itself in the absence of the object’s axial orientation. Physical space does not then guarantee the object’s spatial orientation as much as the object constitutes space without the bearing of cardinal direction. In a different respect, Piero Manzoni’s *Socle du Monde* (1961) inverts not art but the world; or more accurately, it suggests that the world itself is already upside down, and indeed lacks a right-side-up. In short, the work consists of a cubic sculpture on which Manzoni inscribed “Pedestal of the World: Homage to Galileo”. By planting this sculpture atop the ground, but with the text displayed upside-down, Manzoni put the earth itself on a pedestal. In doing so, he performed an inversion upon an inversion, turning the upside-down upside-down, and all while keeping everything upright. He did not simply flip over a pedestal as much as he turned its viewers, and indeed everything, upside-down, without moving anything or anyone. As such, he revealed the upside-downness of the upright, and further, of uprightness itself.

To be sure, sight is itself always upside-down. Because the eye inverts light in its passage through the lens, our vision of the world that appears upright, and so our ostensible orientation as erect phenomenological subjects, are premised upon the inversion of our already upside-downness. Or in other words, we see an upside-down world from an upside-down perspective. Accordingly, the mistaken perception is that gravity goes from the top down, illustrating the world’s verticality vis-a-vis the bipedal body. But of course, gravity is not vertical but radial, and any position in the world—not to mention the universe—becomes legible only in relation to a particular horizon of

¹ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 171-172.

² As Maria Gough writes, “The proun... possesses a rotational force, Lissitzky argues, that destroys altogether the perpendicular axis ‘proper’ to the easel picture.” Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005), 128.

perception (hence Manzoni's homage to Galileo, whose challenge to the ideological and ontological primacy of the geocentric-cum-anthropocentric subject demonstrates the ethical import of how we situate ourselves in relation to objects in space). That said, a horizon of perception does not guarantee an objective orientation, if we accept that objects are irreducible to their relation to phenomenological subjects; i.e. that objects don't rely on being perceived to exist.³ For instance, consider the absurdity of proposing that the sun is upright to us in the day but is upside down at night. Or think of the visual joke in *The Simpsons* where the image moves through the earth, going from America to Australia, only to reveal the latter upside down. In this scene, the frame remains absolutely fixed in its angle, but it is for that very reason that it becomes inverted; that is, the frame's failure to invert itself is precisely what causes it to invert, rather than any essential difference in spatial orientation. Or as Yve-Alain Bois writes, describing Robert Smithson's "Upside-Down Trees" (another appropriate example of art's simultaneous inversion of both object and world in a mutual negation of orientation): "The upside-down is a sadistic reply to the habitual childish question. What would happen if a tunnel to the other side of the earth were dug below my feet? The world loses its centre; that is, it has no meaning or direction (we are lost there) because its imaginary seat is inverted..."⁴ In sum, what these examples illustrate is that the premise of uprightness is essentially an illusion corresponding to the assumed phenomenological orientation of an embodied subject; specifically, this is a subject that takes the world as the objective extension of an individual perceptual horizon. In the presumption of an anthropocentric world, this perspective is articulated as a universal property; contrarily, I want to suggest that all matter is already both inverted and upright, and so already erases that distinction altogether.

Reverse

But let's take a step back from the universal to return to the level of modern art. There, a work like *Socle du Monde* is also significant for invoking the minimalist cube, which is itself significant for removing the pedestal that frames sculpture; that is, it eliminates the base that positions an object as sculpture, particularly by placing it on top of a bottom. In this respect, minimal sculpture—which is famous for conceiving the art object in terms of the viewing subject's phenomenological relation to objects—challenges the priority of the artwork's given position. For instance, think of Robert Morris' L-Beam sculptures, which present three identical structures in totally different positions, thereby illustrating the separation of form from its physical orientation (this in contrast to something like Anthony Caro's sculptures, which are to be seen from a "correct" angle). Here, the sculpture does not sit autonomously in space, but engages the mutability of the perspectives and positions it may take. Such works reveal the ambiguity of the object's spatial orientation, either failing or refusing to distinguish their up and down and their left and right.

Of course, this disorientation can occur in something as simple as any symmetrical painting; for instance, many of Barnett Newman's works. Nevertheless, I would wager that most creators of symmetrical paintings (probably including Newman) still insist on the "correct" orientation of their canvases: while the ability to produce art with no right side up may grant some a certain aesthetic freedom, the withdrawal of the work's proper orientation may also bring about a deep anxiety. Specifically, I am thinking here of the aesthetic angst spurred in the notorious Voice of Fire scandal, wherein the National Gallery of Canada accidentally printed a press photo of the eponymous Newman painting with its x-axis reversed (obviously no qualitative change to the painting was registered; in fact, the error was only noticed because the photograph included a man wearing jeans with the Levi's tag on the wrong buttock). While providing dubious ammunition for the denunciation of this painting and its purchase by the National Gallery, this ostensible gaffe also reveals the tendency—on the part of both art specialists and Newman naysayers—to attribute stock to an artwork's orientation in affirming its artistic ontology. Nevertheless, what this accident, as all the above works, demonstrates is that the idea of correct spatial orientation is never intrinsic to an art object itself, nor to our perception of it. The artwork continues to function even when it is turned around.

³ See Jane Bennet's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), as a relevant study (one of several in the recent strain of "object oriented ontology") that theorizes a politics and ethics rooted in the the agency and vitality of objects and non-subjective matter, rather than the primacy of the human subject.

⁴ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, 170-171.

Double

At this point, though, I must also turn this essay around, because the inverse and the reverse are only one half of an essentially doubled story. Indeed, the second half of this analysis concerns the second part of artworks that are comprised of two of the same thing, artworks that consist of objects and alter-objects but do not let on which part is which. These are works that invert and reverse the object by doubling it, mirroring it without the mirror that separates simulation from original. Of course, I am now talking about the work of Kevin Yates, whose mirrored sculptures do not seem to be about inversion or reflection as much as doubling. To that end, Yates carefully crafts sculptures of relatively ordinary items like synthetic flowers, snakes burrowing through leaves, and furniture, to cite the relevant examples from this exhibition. From here, he crafts these items once more, but this time in reverse. What results are pairs of items placed in symmetrical opposition, each approximating the same minute details, including the folds of flower petals and leaves, the delicate assembly of a plastic plant bouquet, and the labyrinthine twists of snakes, recalling the helixed figures of the caduceus medical symbol.

The placement of these items in such congruous symmetry is impressive, although there is more at work than just careful placement. Curiously, these items appear readymade, but are in fact made of bronze (save for the wooden furniture and the use of silk in the flowers), indicating that Yates is not simply doubling up mass produced items. The design of these reverse compositions is therefore much more deliberate, especially when one notices slight variations between paired items. Although these discrepancies are barely noticeable, they reveal an inherent difference in repetition, exposing the fault lines of a presumed symmetry; that is, these pairs only approximate, but never quite achieve, the perfect balance of a true mirror image. These variations thereby reveal the impossibility of a seamless mirroring of forms, an absolute symmetry in which two objects not only reflect each other but become virtually equal in their very being. These pairs are not, then, two sides of the same platonic token (like an image that one duplicates and flips in photoshop) but are two iterations of an essentially separate form.

To put this differently, these objects are not multiples—they are not two of a larger series of mass-reproduced objects—but constitute a precise arrangement of sameness and difference; that is, they comprise a relation that does not disclose which part is same and which part is different, or which part is reversed and which is not. For all intents and purposes these objects are the same, but they are also irreducibly different, suspended in a reversal/inversion that separates them absolutely. These forms are not, then, copies or reflections of one another, as if one is the inverse or reverse of the other (an other that would therefore be the same); rather, they are separate objects that sustain what I earlier called a mutual negation of orientation. Neither item represents a correctly or originally oriented object with which to determine proper positions. In their opposition, these objects cancel the orienting frame that would determine which side is which; namely, which part is the same as, or is different from, one another. Without that orientation we can only determine that these objects are the same because they are, in their opposition, both equally different.

To explain this more concretely, I think of Yates' work in distinction to the kitschy trope of photographing one's cottage narcissistically reflected in a bordering lake—a trope the artist calls to mind in his sculptures that depict mirrored images of houses. Here, Yates keeps the proverbial cottage and the woods that surround it, and he keeps their reflection, but gets rid of the lake, removing the material indicator for correctly orienting the scene. As such, Yates does not depict an inversion of a "correct" or prior structure—a given object reflected as a secondary image—and so offers no order by which to distinguish up and down, left or right. In doubling the object, then, Yates neutralizes its spatial orientation, negating any proprietary claim to any particular direction. Similarly, this effect is also evident in his mirrored multiplication of dressers, where the upside-down is only one side—whether that side points up or down—of a structure that is already inverted, in addition to also already being upright. For me, these sculptures unavoidably invoke Doris Salcedo's *Plegaria Muda*, an installation comprised of numerous sculptures that each sandwich a layer of faux-soil between a table and its upended counterpart. However, Salcedo drills miniscule holes in the tops (which is also to say the bottoms) of these tables, allowing individual blades of grass to emerge and reach upwards. We get, then, a subtle reassertion of orientation: a distinct ground and sky with a clear up and down. In distinction, Yates' furniture sculptures do not attempt to

resuscitate orientation or to claim an original uprightness on which to base the structure; rather, these works embrace an irresolvable directional ambiguity.

This is the case in a work like *The creature* (2016), where Yates balances an inverted dresser on top of its upright counterpart, precariously perching the former on what appears to be a clay figurine of the creature from the black lagoon. This figure, which presents the namesake creature holding his romantic conquest in outstretched arms, cuts off halfway, dissecting him along his waist; nevertheless, the figure continues upward by repeating its bottom half in mirrored symmetry. The creature thus becomes all legs while the woman's hair and limbs fall limp and rise firm against gravity; likewise, the pile of rocks on the ground simultaneously dangles from above, as if stalagmite were stalactite and vice versa. Meanwhile, the drawers and handles of these dressers symmetrically echo each other from top to bottom, resulting in a neat serialization of parts and shapes (indeed you could probably get something like a makeshift Donald Judd stack by pulling out the shelves). The work's formal pattern thus remains consistent throughout, despite the position and direction of the dressers themselves. As such, these forms question the orientations of interior parts within their respective structures: if the drawers on the upturned dresser are identical to those on the grounded one, what is to say the shelves are even mirrored? How can we know these parts exist in an inverted relation if we cannot determine their axis in relation to each other? Could we ever know if some drawers were put into their dressers upside down? My answer to these questions would be no, we must make do without the stability of a discernible orientation or order.

In sum, what we see in this work is an inversion—an upside-down that reflects a right side up—and a reversal—a symmetrical turning-around of form at its halfway point; however, this effect is not owed to flipping around forms as much as multiplying them. In the doubling of dressers and the further duplication of drawers, we lose bearing of the sculpture's orientation, both in the relation of top and bottom and within internal structures. Through the repetition and equivalences that come with multiplying forms, the sculpture amplifies its spatial ambiguity, contradicting the axial properties by which to ground the work. Thus, within the highly ordered and organized structures of works like *The creature*—whose symmetries and serialities invoke the most obsessive compulsive of modernist artworks—we can discern evidence of a kind of formlessness. These structures reveal a kind a void that points to what Bois, in this essay's epigraph, calls “a world with no differentiation of ‘regions within space,’” a fullness and emptiness where the world loses its meaning; that is a world without up, down, left, or right.

With this suggestion in mind, I want to conclude by briefly considering one of Yates' other works, which does not actually use the symmetrical format I've discussed. In *I held on so tight that I know I left my mark* (2016), an unkempt pile of around thirty faux-flashlights form a kind of impoverished chandelier that has collapsed on the ground. Although also made of bronze, these rubbery flashlights appear melted, as if collected and thrown onto the remains of a campfire, which now continues to glisten in the red LED lights that sporadically flicker inside these items. Amid this formless mass of ordinary consumer flashlights, which are each equally nondescript, individual items jump out by way of the physical variations that these otherwise identical objects take. Unlike the sort of mass produced products these objects resemble, Yates' flashlights reveal a multitude of forms through the uncanny distortions, deformations, and directions that each displays. While the items may all be the same, this arrangement comprises a catalogue of differentiations between essentially similar forms. Their collective deformation, in which each item asserts its shape and direction differently, brings this pile toward a state of formlessness, lacking the assurance of rigid form, autonomous space, and, indeed, a proper orientation. As such, distinctions between sameness and difference break down, revealing the meaningless and mutability of utterly familiar objects. While full of flashlights, we cannot quite place that form here; that is, we cannot quite locate an authoritative flashlight” within the pile. As such, this work points both everywhere and nowhere. Like Yates' other sculptures, it gives us the art object without direction, refusing to situate itself in terms of an orientation and position that would affirm our perception of it.