



Alina Szapocznikow,  
*La chose* ("The Thing"), 1967

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# TO HAVE AND TO BE

We value the things we own, create hierarchies of them, exchange them for others. However, there are some things whose loss we would never forget, because they are our inalienable possessions.

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One of the most important tasks in analyzing the semantics of language is to isolate the set of basic cognitive categories that organize how we experience the world. Even if we deem them to be universals, we still find that they take on different forms of expression in different languages and in different textual practices. The category of "possession" offers an interesting example of such differentiation. In some languages it is grammatical in nature (functioning at the level of morphology), whereas in others it is conveyed by lexical means (words or phraseological compounds).

"Possession" is a certain relation (as is implicit in the predicate "belongs to") between two elements – the "possessor" and the "possessed"; this relation is an asymmetrical one ("the possessor has possession of

the possessed"). We comprehend this in spatial terms, taking as a point of reference our three-dimensional body, which enters into relations with others that have similar characteristics. But this is not the space of Galileo and Newton: geometrized, homogeneous, infinitely divisible, equivalent to itself at any point. Rather, the spaces of the body or of artifacts are heterogeneous, qualitatively differentiated, saturated with a psychological element, and inseparable from time.

The relation of possession is fixed, but the entities involved in that relation are subject to change, including qualitatively. We value the things we own, we create hierarchies of them, we exchange them for others. However, there are some things whose loss we would never forget, because they are in some way inherently "ours" (in linguistics, this is described as "inalienable possession" or "inherent possession"). The construct of "I" is partly a function of the things that belong to me as a person; they constitute my "ego-sphere." It can be said that the sides of the person–thing pair mutually create one other (we create things, they create us; recall Heidegger: the question of "what is a thing?" is the question "who is a person?"). In the broadest sense, the self is the sum total of everything

## ACADEMIA INSIGHT Semiotics

Alina Szapocznikow,  
*Leg*, 1965,  
 black Swedish granite

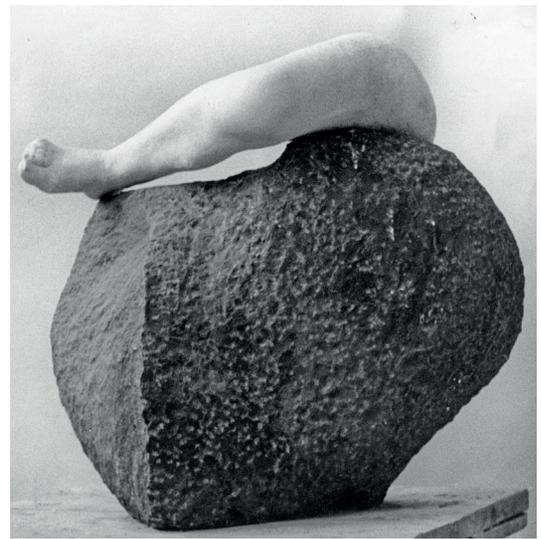
it possesses (what it calls “itself”). Subtle descriptions of the person–thing dialectic can be found in late nineteenth-century works by the psychologist William James or the sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen. They pointed out how the “ego-sphere” expands outward, extending beyond the body and seizing the area of what the “I” owns, what is “mine.” In reflecting on the origins of the concept of ownership, the data recorded by ethnographers seems extremely helpful. Christopher A. Gregory, in his classic treatise *Gifts and Commodities* (1982), wrote about inherent possession as the *differentia specifica* of the economics of traditional societies.

“Possession” is not a homogeneous concept; it is divided into subcategories, each of which may have different modes of encoding meaning. As a subject of interdisciplinary research (incorporating linguistics, especially historical-comparative linguistics, as well as ethology, anthropology, historical psychology, social psychology), it reveals important dimensions of social structure, both synchronically and deeply diachronically. Possessive forms express the systemic function of language of “making the world one’s own” and the very idea of possession is constitutive of the thinking, speaking subject (Wittgenstein: “The I occurs in philosophy through the fact that the ‘world is my world.’”)

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Linguists consider inalienable possession to be a deep universal category (grammatical or semantic). It manifests itself in certain fundamentally relational concepts, such as body parts and kinship terms, in words that refer to the relation of entering a set and being part of it. This is easy enough to grasp when it is expressed by surface exponents: possessive pronouns or possessive pronominal suffixes explicitly referring to the possessor. In many languages, like English, one generally cannot say “hand,” “head,” “father,” or “mother” without at the same time explicitly indicating to whom the body part belongs (“his hand”) or whose parent the person is (“your mother”). In languages like Polish, on the other hand, this is not the case.

Moreover, there are different degrees of inalienability: absolute inalienability (body parts or concepts such as “someone’s life”), relational inalienability (kinship terminology) and incidental inalienability (indicating inalienable ownership in a given situation described by the language). Structural exponents of these constructs were first described in Melanesia, so we will take some examples from the Mota language (from the Banks Islands, Vanuatu): *na tama-k* (“my father”), *na pane-k* (“my hand”), but *no-k o paraga* (“my axe”). The first two words refer to inalienable possession: *na* and *o* are articles, *-k* is a first person singular pronominal suffix. The morpheme *no* denotes one mode of possession, whereas another is expressed by *mwo*,



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used only in the Banks Islands and New Hebrides, indicates an activity of the subject, an action giving rise to possession: *m<sup>w</sup>o-k o vavae* (“my word, my speech” – an object resulting from my activity).

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The study of the different forms by which possession is expressed in so-called “exotic” cultures began with missionaries (in a sense, the precursors of modern ethnolinguistic research). Their observations were later reflected upon by philosophers (Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Ernst Cassirer) and, above all, by anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss, author of *Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques* (1923–1924). It was he, and later Claude Lévi-Strauss, who showed the importance of gift-giving as “total social fact” (matrimonial exchange, gifts, services rendered) for ensuring the structural stability of traditional societies. In addition to objects that can change owners, however, there is a set of objects that remain exempt from the rules of exchange. Excluded from it, they situate themselves outside the principle of reciprocity. Thus, we have things that can be put up for sale (for which an act of sale can conclusively seal the separation of the object from the owner), then valuables that circulate yet still retain a certain connection to their first owner, and then sacred objects that are excluded from such circulation. These are gifts that were given to ancestors by supernatural beings. They serve to legitimize the social, political order. Inscribed in them is a mythical family history that still defines the relationships of those living today, their social position. The destruction of these gifts means losing the right to the past that makes an individual who he or she is.

Societies with a separate institution of central authority ascribe quasi-sacral qualities to their crown jewels. Let us also recall family heirlooms – “contain-

ers” holding the past, guaranteeing the continuity of our history. And there is also a zone reserved for the state and the economy – the reserves of gold hidden away from view, which long guaranteed the circulation of their symbolic equivalent: money.

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Certain works of art (including verbal art) can be viewed as reflective studies of various forms of ownership. The artist in this case takes the perspective of a researcher. He or she makes experiments, offers a different view of language in its (non-)everyday use (we find the idea of this practice in Wittgenstein’s late works). The text becomes a theatrical form of transparency: the curtain rises, revealing what lies hidden behind habits of thought and behavior (we also grasp the very movement of the curtain rising). The sense of perspective we gain makes concepts drop out of their established patterns, cease to be obvious. This is how one of the greatest linguists of the twentieth century, Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), saw the artists’ quest.

Myths (such as Vedic mythology) tell the story of the creation of the world out of the body of a primordial man (*Purusa*). Literature (especially modern literature), on the other hand, paints the opposite picture, of the disintegration of the body and the autonomization of its parts, which gain control over the subject. This includes the work of Nikolai Gogol (*The Nose*, 1836), Vladimir Nabokov (*The Eye*, Russian 1930, English 1965), William Faulkner (*The Leg*, 1934), Bruno Jasiński (*The Nose*, 1936), Philip Roth (*The Breast*, 1972). In such prose experiments, a body part or organ becomes dominant – in an inversion that transforms the tautological formula “the possessor has possession of the possessed” into a radically different one: “the possessed (the part) has possession of the possessor (the whole).” Neurologists are familiar with a syndrome known as *asomatognosia* – sufferers experience of the alienation of a body part, treating it as existing autonomously or denying that it belongs to them. Such a violation of the body schema has a destructive effect on the feeling of being an agentive subject. So what does it mean for something to be “my part” when it extends the sphere of its power to my whole self?

The crucial components of ownership are taken to be constant contact and control. The above-mentioned fictional stories problematize the perception of one’s own identity in the situation of a defective body or its partial metamorphosis. What does it mean to be one’s own eye, to be one’s own breast? What happens, then, to the sense of existence? Parts detach from the body, change shape (having a different nose turns an Aryan Nazi into a Jew in the blink of an eye), grow on the body to absorb it. In Nabokov’s work, the eye functions as an instrument of self-destruction. It absorbs the protagonist, who becomes part of himself, only to be annihilated in a game of reflections, con-

demned to exist in the visual memory of others. The works of Witold Gombrowicz must also be viewed from this perspective.

Finally, let’s recall artists who create enlarged replicas/casts of body parts (parts of their own body): the thumb of César or the work of sculptor Alina Szapocznikow (1926–1973): a cast of her knee-bent leg, a collection of mouth-lamps and breast-lamps (made of dyed polyester, e.g. *Buste étincelant I* – 1967).

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When the intimate objective sphere disappears, identity is destroyed. The state of being stripped of possession is experienced as the annihilation of the self; what remains is the naked body:

*Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, or shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. (...) We know that we will have difficulty in being understood, and this is as it should be. But consider what value, what meaning is enclosed even in the smallest of our daily habits, in the hundred possessions in which even the poorest beggar owns: a handkerchief, an old letter, a photo of a cherished person. These things are part of us, almost like limbs of our body; nor is it conceivable that we can be deprived of them in our world, for we immediately find others to substitute the old ones, other objects which are ours in their personification and evocation of our memories (Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf).*

Paris, February 2005. Michel Lévi-Leleu is viewing an exhibition on the Holocaust together with his daughter. He sees a cardboard valise on display and realizes that it belonged to his father, recognizing the initials and address on it (part of the exhibition had been supplied by the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum). He asks for the valise to be transferred to the permanent exhibition of the Paris Shoah Memorial Museum. He wishes to restore the item’s individuality, to make it a vehicle for remembering his father. Perhaps he also wants relatives to be able to witness it firsthand in his hometown, as a visual keystone of memory. Lévi-Leleu was four years old the last time he saw his father. Together with his mother and brother, he hid under the name Leleu (which he retained after the war). Now he cannot imagine allowing the valise to go back where it came from. The Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum refuses to relinquish it. It fears setting a precedent; above all, it considers its collected testimony to constitute an inviolable and indivisible whole. A four-year trial ends with a compromise: the museum agrees to let the valise remain temporarily in Paris. The son unites two surnames: his father’s and his assumed name, as if by this act he is reclaiming his past. ■

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