THE LURE OF THE OBJECT

Edited by Stephen Melville

Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute
Williamstown, Massachusetts

Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London

This publication is based on the proceedings of the Clark Conference "The Lure of the Object," held 30 April–1 May 2004 at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts. For information on programs and publications at the Clark, visit *www.clarkart.edu.*

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Printed by the Studley Press, Dalton, Massachusetts
Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London

ISBN (Clark) 0-931102-61-8
ISBN (Yale) 0-300-10337-9

Printed and bound in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Title page and divider page illustration: George Henry Seeley, *The Firefly* (detail), 1907. Photogravure from *Camera Work,* October 1907. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The lure of the object / edited by Stephen Melville.
p. cm. — (Clark studies in the visual arts)
Based on the proceedings of a conference held Apr. 30–May 1, 2004 at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-931102-61-8 (Clark : pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-300-10337-9 (Yale)
1. Masterpiece, Artistic—Congresses. I. Melville, Stephen W. II. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute. III. Series.

N72.5.L87 2005
709—dc22

2005049791

The Object as Subject

Ewa Lajer-Burcharth

A few cooking utensils sit quietly on a stone ledge amid some raw ingredients for a simple meal (fig. 1). A shiny copper pan with a ladle stuck under the handle of its lid and a white glazed pitcher are at the core of this seemingly random arrangement, *with* the smaller objects—a mortar and a pestle, a pepper mill, and a blue-green casserole with a handle jutting forward into view—distributed around them in a harmoniously haphazard way. The vessels create a barely discernible rhythm of vertical forms. A knife, a piece of raw meat, a plucked chicken, some kidneys or gizzards, an onion, and a swag of white cloth are balanced on the very edge of the table to secure the illusion of depth—the sense of the objects emerging from within a space rather than simply appearing on the surface of the canvas—but, in their downward pull, they also provide a subtle planar effect of counterbalance to the upward verticals of the kitchenwares.

Featuring recognizable everyday objects rendered with an unassuming accuracy—no showiness, no feats of illusion, yet the object's presence unaccountably secured—Chardin's *Kitchen Table,* now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, may be seen as the epitome of the painter's uncanny skills. It was Chardin's fidelity to the object, the unforced harmony of his composition, and the ease of his delivery—the legendary magic of his touch—that most impressed his contemporaries. In his *Dialogues sur les arts,* published in 1756, the critic and theorist Pierre Estève presented Chardin as "the most exact and true painter there is of the French school," able to capture "the most truthful nuances of the objects [bodies] with admirable accuracy."[1] Commenting on Chardin's still lifes exhibited at the Salon of 1763, Diderot exclaimed: "Oh Chardin! The colors crushed on your palette are not white, red or black pigment; they are the very substance of the objects. They are the air and the light that you take up with the tip of your brush and apply to the canvas."[2] Others, too, shared this high appreciation of Chardin's imitative gift, especially his superior use of color: "His eyes seemed to be like prisms capable of breaking down each object into its component tones, distinguishing the subtlest of transitions between light and shade," wrote the painter Renou in his eulogy of the artist.[3]

Immersed in the very materiality of the object, faithful to its physical makeup to the degree that produced the effect of confusion between the substance

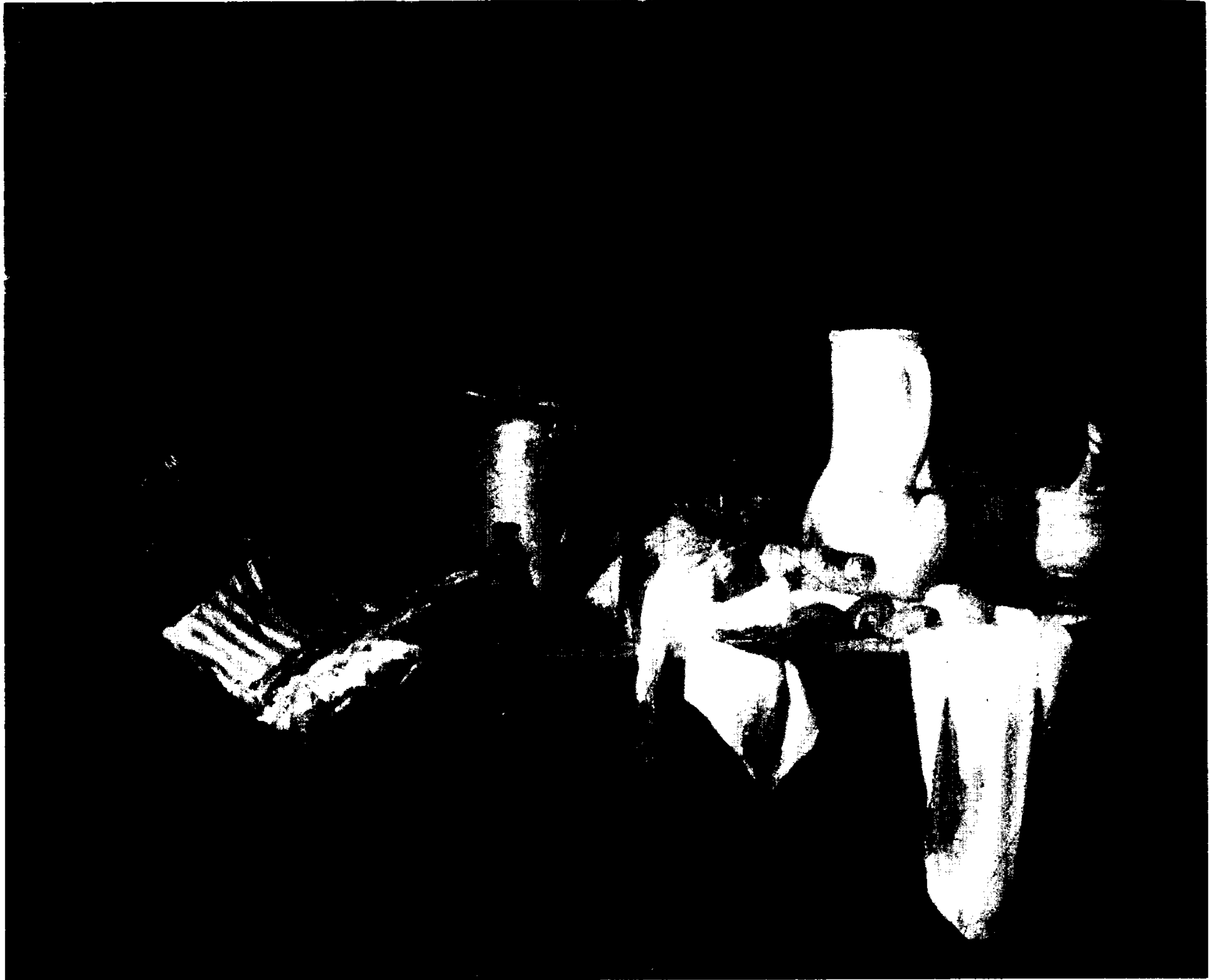

Fig. 1. Jean-Siméon Chardin (French, 1699–1779), *The Kitchen Table*, c. 1755. Oil on canvas, 15 ⅝ x 18 ¾ in. (39.7 x 47.6 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Mrs. Peter Chardon Brooks

of the thing and its image, capable of perceptual deconstruction and recomposition of the object on canvas through a magic use of color—these descriptions of the painter's method imply a peculiar, evidently unconventional intimacy with the painted object. Conveyed in these commentaries is the assumption that such a close engagement with the object amounted to a quasi-effortless mastery over it.

Yet, this mastery was not as easily achieved as these appraisals may seem to suggest. It is enough to take a closer look at the surface of the canvas of the Boston *Kitchen Table* to get a sense of the amount of effort apparently needed by the painter to get things right: for example, the mortar on the extreme right stands surrounded by a halo of pentimenti that indicates the ghostly presence of the objects originally painted in its place. The X-ray of the painting confirms this, revealing a bowl-shaped vessel and a standing dish to have been where the mortar is now,

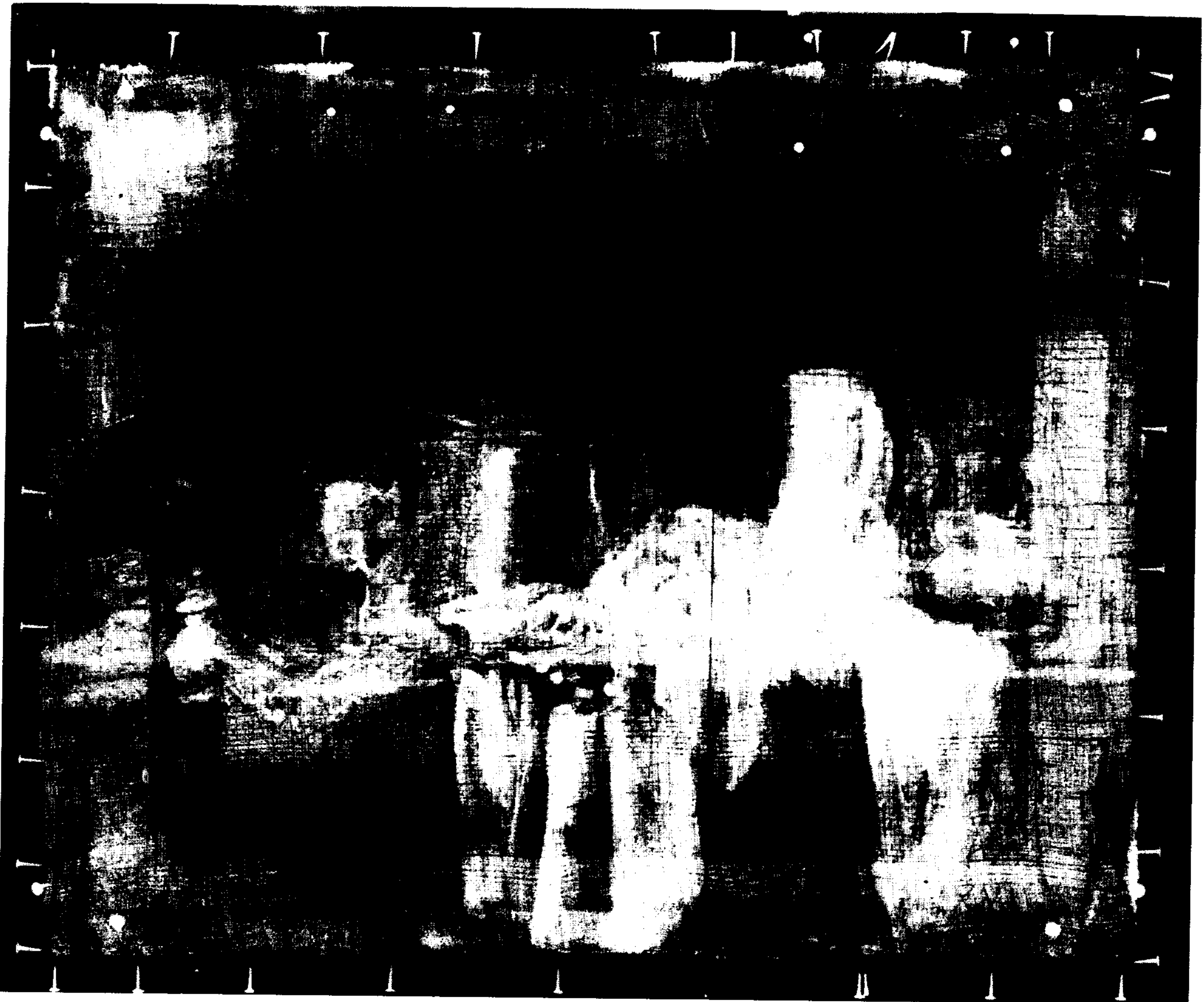

Fig. 2. X-radiograph of fig. 1

and further making visible a whole geography of doubt about the placement and choice of almost all other objects. (fig. 2) Thus the meat was originally placed on the piece of cloth at the very center of the image, while the now-central copper pot stood on the side, approximately where the meat is now. Both the mortar and the pepper mill had been to the left of their present locations. Other elements, such as the handle of the casserole, the lid of the pot, and the ladle were also placed differently. We see here the artist changing his mind quite considerably before settling on the final result, his extensive changes in the design necessitating substantial repainting. (The network of shrinking cracks around the objects that you can see on the canvas with a naked eye is due to Chardin's method of painting in layers without waiting for the paint to dry completely—an aspect that, too, may be linked to the unusually long time it took the artist to produce the image.)[4] The unforced

harmony of composition, with its casual organization of the objects, was, then, a result of a great deal of elaboration through trial and error.

Though making changes in the process of painting was common enough practice in the eighteenth century, such an extent of internal reorganization of the canvas was unusual. It is more surprising that our painting is not an example of the artist's early work, when the artist may be expected to rehearse different solutions. *The Kitchen Table* was painted about 1755, when Chardin was fifty-six and at the peak of his artistic capacities. Nor was the set of objects represented here by any means new to the painter. On the contrary, the key elements—the copper pot, the mortar, the blue-green casserole with a jutting handle—had appeared before in many of his paintings. They belonged to the artist—as both his props and his property[5]—and were featured in numerous paintings, some of them compositionally close to the Boston picture.[6] Like a proto-minimalist, Chardin works in series with variations, recycling elements from earlier pictures. One would expect him to have the art of composition at his fingertips. Yet, as the X-ray indicates, it proved to be a challenge.

How does such a glimpse behind the curtains of representation affect our perception of the image? More generally, how is the process of making, when we know anything about it, to figure in our account of its end result, the painted image? In the case in point, what do we make of so much hesitation in the artist's search for the final solution? Since it cannot be blamed on the artist's inexperience, it must be recognized as inherent in his approach to the task of painting—specifically the painting of still life—though it stands in some contrast to those flattering assessments of Chardin's craft that focused on his natural painterly ease and knack for deception. It is not that such extensive repaintings may simply be taken, as they have been, to indicate "the care Chardin took in arranging his composition."[7] Rather, they indicate that behind the material mastery of illusion, behind Chardin's uncanny capacity to render the "truth of the object," there may be a somewhat more complicated story, a more difficult negotiation.

This difficulty, it must be said, did not go unnoticed by Chardin's contemporaries. Thus Pierre-Jean Mariette, one of the very few eighteenth-century commentators who remained unseduced by Chardin's art, offered an unkind but interesting assessment of the painter's craft:

> One cannot deny that the paintings of Monsieur Chardin reveal too much fatigue and effort. His touch is heavy and undifferentiated. There is nothing easy about his brush; he expresses everything in the same

> way, with *a kind of indecision* that renders his work too cold. . . . Lacking a sufficient knowledge of drawing and unable to make his studies and preparatory sketches on paper, Monsieur Chardin is obliged to have the object he seeks to imitate continuously in front of him, from the very first touch of his brush on canvas to its very last, which takes a long time and would put off anyone other than him. Therefore, he always talks about how his work *costs him infinitely.* While he would like to hide it, his work signals it against his will.[8]

The eager hostility of this assessment warrants some caution about its accuracy. Yet, the theme of pictorial indecision that Mariette stressed accords well with the material evidence of Chardin's doubts offered by his painting. Moreover, the painter's excessive dependency on the object that Mariette suggested appeared also in other testimonies from the period, such as that of Chardin's friend and supporter Charles-Nicolas Cochin, though he gave it a more sympathetic spin. Rather than a result of poor training or a lack of imagination, Cochin suggested perfectionism as the reason for Chardin's difficulty of delivery. The painter's slowness and wavering was, in Cochin's view, due to his "cruel severity in chastising himself, which is natural for an educated man who does not allow himself to take any liberties and who is very difficult to please."[9] Even Diderot, otherwise more inclined simply to marvel at Chardin's pictorial wizardry, recognized the painter to be a "severe self-critic" who left many of his works incomplete.[10]

The master of illusion was then, as it turns out, also a kind of neurotic *avant la lettre.* His legerdemain concealed painstaking effort, procrastination, dissatisfaction, and a frequent inability to complete the task of representation. Suggested in these commentaries was a connection between the character of the painter and his method, the issue of personality and affect appearing as factors responsible for the idiosyncrasies of his process.

I would like to use this connection to open up the question of the object as a problem or challenge for the painting subject. My argument is that Chardin's still lifes call for a recognition of the object in terms different than a mere physical thing or its more or less convincing imitation. Nor is this, in my view, a matter of an object as an optical or perceptual phenomenon, as some of the nuanced modern readings of Chardin propose. Rather, Chardin's still lifes—some of them, in any case—suggest a kind of strange romance with the object as at once a material thing and an imaginary spectral entity, something experienced on the psychic register, which is what renders

the process of its representation "infinitely complex."[11] In Chardin's molecular fidelity to the object—in the notion, if only metaphorical, that he may have painted with the stuff or flesh of the object itself[12]—we detect evidence of an attachment that may have been at once a stimulus and a very source of Chardin's difficulty.

To be more precise, I must say that I am not interested in explaining Chardin's difficulty through external circumstances, be it his putative lack of drawing routine or, one may imagine, the pressure of excessive praise under which he had to work; rather, I wish to examine the *form* this difficulty took on canvas, its aesthetic symptoms, as it were. Following Chardin's own recognition, reported by Mariette, that he painted at an immense price ("sa lui coute infiniment"), I want to focus specifically on the notion of cost in the process of visualizing the object. My point is that the object in Chardin reveals itself to partake in a kind of illusory game where the stakes are higher than the mere accuracy of rendition, where the subject—beginning with the subject who produces the illusion—seems to be at issue.[13]

Fig. 3. Pieter Claesz. (Dutch, 1597–1661), *Still Life with Clay Pipes*, 1636. Oil on panel, 19 ¼ x 25 in. (49 x 63.5 cm). State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

In the common sense of the term, Chardin's indebtedness manifests itself most obviously in relation to the tradition of seventeenth-century Dutch still life. His paintings—and *The Kitchen Table* is no exception—take up some of these classical tropes of still life but instill in them a different sense of purpose. It has been observed that in regard to his Dutch predecessors, Chardin gives up on the circumstance and cedes the central place to the object itself.[14] Yet, this is not simply a question of privilege or a more focused attention to the object. It is that Chardin's mode of staging it, a subtle transformation of the earlier mise-en-scènes, implies an altogether different relation to the object. Thus, as deployed in *The Kitchen Table* the standard device of placing things on the edge of a table so as to provide a sense a depth (as in Pieter Claesz.'s *Still Life with Clay Pipes*) makes the sense of risk involved in such

placement come to the fore (fig. 3). Placed precariously on the ledge, the knife, the piece of raw meat, the plucked chicken, the suspended cloth are multiplied beyond the necessity of illusion to produce the effect in this arrangement of opening up, a sense of material excess leaking out of the prescribed field of representation.

How different a lesson one could learn from the Dutch may be illustrated by the work of Chardin's younger and emulating contemporary Anne Vallayer-Coster. In her exquisite *Still Life with Ham, Bottles and Radishes* (fig. 4), the tightness of the composition endows a similar grouping of objects with a sense of belonging, stability, and evident utility—see the knife firmly stuck in the ham to demonstrate its function. Things are put *together* and stay there; only the hair-thin ends of the radishes venture out. By contrast, Chardin's compositions often tend to turn things inside out. This may be more or less literal, as in his numerous early still lifes with the motif of the copper cauldron turned over on its side—for example, one of 1734, now in the Musée Cognacq-Jay in Paris; or, more pronouncedly, as in the *Kitchen Still Life with Loin of Mutton* (fig. 5), in which a piece of raw meat placed on white cloth cascades down as if the overturned copper pot had just spilled its uncooked contents. One could say that in such examples Chardin activates the standard tropes of still life from within and, due to its internal dynamism, the resulting arrangement actually describes what the composition *does* as opposed simply to how it *looks*, the action of pulling the image inside out, almost disgorging it.

Fig. 4. Anne Vallayer-Coster (French, 1744–1818), *Still Life with Ham, Bottles and Radishes*, 1767. Oil on canvas, 17 ¾ x 21 ½ in. (45 x 54.6 cm). Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie

Disgorgement comes to mind because of the comestible nature of the displayed objects but also because of the violence they represent or are marked by: the flayed meat and, in the Boston painting, the chicken with its throat cut, its head dangling sadly on a long neck, its insides taken out, the white cloth slightly

Fig. 5. Jean-Siméon Chardin, *Kitchen Still Life with Loin of Mutton*, 1732. Oil on canvas, 16 ½ x 13 ⅜ in. (42 x 34 cm). Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris

stained by blood. We are far from the tactfully vanitative signifiers of decay in Dutch still life, such as the bees and the caterpillars marking discreetly the inevitable erosion of life in the paintings of Balthasar van der Ast.[15] In the Chardin, death enters the image more explicitly. But more important, it penetrates the very process of painting. Thus, while the project of the seventeenth-century painters was marked by a thorough separation from the suggested intrusion of death on live matter—the eating away of life in van der Ast had nothing to do with the painter's own process—in Chardin, painted death becomes inseparable from the painting. (Incidentally, it is only in 1756, precisely at around the time when *The Kitchen Table* was painted, that the notion of death enters the French terminology for still life, and what had previously been designated as *vie coye,* or *nature reposé,* becomes *nature morte.*)[16]

Fig. 6. Detail of fig. 1

Look at the way Chardin painted the throat and the neck of the chicken, like a mottled wound, slightly blurred (fig. 6). Though the term "relaxed focus" has been used to describe this type of blurring in Chardin, there is nothing relaxed about it.[17] It looks as if blood has been mixed with the pigment here, as if the painter, as Diderot would put it, indeed dipped his brush in the dead chicken's flesh. Then there is the meat: tilted forward, the white smudges of the bone conveyed through unblended

strokes of gray and red, with some dabs of pinkish-red in between. (Obviously Soutine would look attentively at such instances of raw painterly bravura.) In the sticky chewiness of Chardin's marks there is a kind of inside-outness that echoes the reversibility of the composition suggested by the arrangement of some of the objects on the edge of the ledge, as if the surface of the canvas threatened to suck them back in. The idea of ingestion implied by the displayed food thus moves back and forth between the possibilities of eating and being eaten.

This is, then, how Chardin's object speaks of the costs involved in fleshing it out. We may call it an object porous to the subject—not in the sense of marking the painter's voluntary complicity with the depicted world (as Norman Bryson has argued in relation to Chardin's genre scenes),[18] but as implying a far more dangerous play with the visual field that appears to have a haptic capacity to catch and retain the subject. In other words, Chardin's handling of paint points to the possibility of the object as a trap for the painting hand. His touch often seems both to bring the thing into the visual field, the sphere of legibility, and to draw back into the object, entangled in its midst.

This is evident in the painter's habit of approximation of the object's material presence through open-ended, uncontoured forms. He often dabs the pigment on, sometimes with a finger, to create the effect of crusting. Diderot succinctly described its effect: "Come close, and everything becomes blurred, flattens and disappears; stand back and everything is re-created and takes shape again."[19] You can see what he is talking about when you look at the detail of the melon with the pile of creamy dabs balanced on top of its wedge, its rind a crust of whites and greens produced by layered hatchings (*Cut Melon,* 1760, private collection); or at the cup of tea from its pendant, *The Jar of Apricots* (fig. 7), with the saucer's edge dissolving in a mist.[20] (Gilles Deleuze's description of the sense of things manifesting itself in the "faint incorporeal mist that escapes [their] bodies" comes to mind.)[21]

Often enough these formal aspects have been described in terms of unity of the haptic and the optic in Chardin's vision. Jonathan Crary, for example, takes Chardin to exemplify the last moment in the classical vision wherein different modalities of sensory experience were understood to belong together in one indivisible body of knowledge. Notwithstanding some resemblance to Cézanne, what Chardin paints, according to this view, is not the instability of optical experience but a stable structure of knowledge and relations behind it.[22]

Yet, I think that Chardin's technical procedures call for a different kind of exegesis. From the point of view of the painter, the two modes of looking described

Fig. 7. Jean-Siméon Chardin, *The Jar of Apricots,* 1758. Oil on canvas, 22 3/8 × 20 1/8 in. (57.2 × 50.8 cm) oval. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

by Diderot—up close or at a distance—are not just options for a disinterested viewer to choose from; they are a necessity of the painter's procedure. It is mostly up close that the painter experiences his vision of an object when he paints it, his hand on the canvas, his eyes close to its surface—an activity that eventually blinded Chardin due to the noxious lead in the oil pigments—with an occasional drawing back to gauge the effect of his labor from a distance. The questions he confronts are: How much detail is enough; how much approximation too little? When would a saucer seem delightfully aerated, and when would it simply look unfinished or interrupted? The delicate nature of this negotiation is made clear by the examples of the arguably less successful works, such as the apples in the *Still Life with the Faience Pot* (1764) from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, that make one think of the heavy-handedness of Chardin's touch evoked by Mariette.

This *is* indeed different from the Cézannian doubt—it is not about documenting perception as an endless, open-ended process; it is a risky game of finding the threshold of the visible right before it dissolves into the invisible. The point is that touch and sight are not experienced as unified in this process (though they may appear to be so for the viewer looking at the finished canvas from the distance). The making of an image implies a split: to touch is to be up close; to see is to be at a distance.

This back and forth movement—toward and away from canvas—describes a hazardous trajectory in which both an object and a subject are at risk of incompleteness: incompleteness as a threat of invisibility for the object (the underarticulated

object that fails to "take," to make an appearance on the stage of representation); and incompleteness as a challenge to the painter confronted with the specter of failure to make it appear on canvas, to pull the image off. This is what Chardin's apples illustrate: they are not delivered as totalities of perception; the kind of consciousness they imply is not that of a unified mind but of a split perception of a painter at work. The sense of difficulty involved in this work manifests itself in ways in which the object cuts the field of the subject, and vice versa, the smudge of touch interrupting the edge of the cup, its fullness thus available *only* at a distance. It is, then, an image not of doubt but of the painting subject's debt drawn on the object.

Nowhere are the violent implications of this debt more explicitly spelled out than in Chardin's notorious painting of *The Skate* (fig. 8). The whole composition revolves here around the eviscerated body of the fish suspended on a hook, its voided

Fig. 8. Jean-Siméon Chardin, *The Skate (or The Ray)*, 1725–26. Oil on canvas, 44 7/8 x 57 1/2 in. (114.5 x 146 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris

inside shown in all the details of its glistening horror. The power of this horror—which this painting solicits and expects, with the cat alarmed by the oysters (a not-so-veiled reference to the feminine body) acting as the displaced figure of the (male) viewer's fright—has to do with the anthropomorphic dimension of the fish: her "face" appearing right above the eviscerated cavity, with its Mona Lisa smile, and its "eyes" (which are in fact its gills) staring out. This "physiognomic" presence is then another instance of inversion—her real eyes are actually on the other side—that underwrites the whole composition.

Two things about it are worth emphasizing. One is the way in which *The Skate* makes evident the structural centrality of the trope of representation as evisceration in Chardin's vision. It literalizes the violence entailed by the visualization of the object—the idea of the replete object as a possibility underwritten by an inherent threat—that informs Chardin's work as conveyed, albeit more subtly, by the far quieter Boston still life. The eviscerated skate is then a figure of the "cost" of painting, that is, of the loss incurred by the object and subject in paint.

Secondly, what *The Skate* makes clear is the bodily dimension of that cost. You guessed it: castration is in the air. It comes as no surprise that in French, the name of the fish, "la raye," has explicit sexual connotations; thus as the *dictionnaires* from the period inform us, in eighteenth-century popular parlance it referred to both the parting between buttocks, male and female alike, and female genitals.[23] Yet, I would insist that it is not a genital loss that is evoked here but rather an idea of loss that, as Lacan never tired of repeating, every subject experiences upon entry into the realm of language. *The Skate* at once embodies this loss—the sense of becoming visible only at the cost of losing one's sense of bodily plenitude—and situates it in relation to the process of painting, as experienced by Chardin. More specifically, *The Skate* embodies the fraught nature of the relation between the object and the subject that we detected in Chardin's art (the pleasure and threat of reciprocity). As psychoanalytic theory insists, all relations to the object are always "about" the subject. Thus Lacan has noted that, in psychic life, all the positions implied by the object are occupied by the subject, that there is an imaginary reciprocity between one and the other.[24]

But, we may ask, what happens when the object usurps the position of the subject? The disemboweled skate may be seen to capture the sense of Chardin's relation to the object as a kind of bilateral indebtedness, both good and bad (to put it quaintly) for the thing and its painter alike. Thus the "mouth" of this horrific creature, at once rising (like a specter) and hanging, gives the slippage between the

notion of eating and being eaten that underwrites Chardin's still life another gruesome spin: it reveals that the associative distance between ingestion and incorporation is short. (This is Melanie Klein's emphasis as well.)[25]

It comes as no surprise that *The Skate* was a painting of particular importance for Chardin: it was one of the pendants that constituted his admission pieces for the Academy, which is to say, his entry ticket to the institutional space of painting as a codified language. Interestingly enough, it was presented by Chardin as a gambit. Rather than making an official submission, Chardin placed *The Skate* together with *The Buffet*—a far more conventional emulation of the Dutch—in the hallway leading to the room where the academicians assembled. One of them, Nicolas de Largillière, himself a portraitist and still-life painter, not suspecting Chardin's ruse, took the paintings to be by a Flemish master. When Chardin revealed himself to be the author of these works, he was elected and received as a full member of the Academy on the same day.[26]

It is curious to note how congruent this story is with the pictorial logic of Chardin's submission. Like the skate, Chardin staked his professional fate on a kind of sacrifice, a momentary renunciation of authorship, in order to enter the institutional field of painting. In more than one sense then, *The Skate* is a pawn, an image of a symbolic ransom, both the trophy and the price of representation as a code. As such, it points to another group of works where Chardin commented on the mortifying powers of painting: the still lifes with the dead game. Throughout his career, Chardin repeatedly returned to this type of image and, in the process, he entirely reinvented the subgenre of the hunting-trophy piece. This reinvention, in a nutshell, amounted to the infusion of the image with an affect unwarranted by the genre, a lyrical presentation of death that displaced all other traditional concerns that had framed the trophy picture as a genre.

The difference in Chardin's approach becomes clear when compared to that of his contemporary Jean-Baptiste Oudry. The latter's *Hare and Leg of Lamb* (fig. 9), which aimed at the highest degree of verisimilitude—in its contrasts between the glistening fat of the meat and the furry pelt of the animal—is a trophy of both the hunter and of the painter eager to demonstrate his skills. The success of this demonstration relies on the invisibility of the artist's hand: for the *trompe l'oeil* effect to succeed, the traces of its production must be carefully hidden. The idea of the painter's control—of the represented object, and of the viewer who must be tricked into the belief in its presence—is preponderant. Something else entirely happens in Chardin's *Dead Hare with Powder Flask and Game Bag* (fig. 10). There

is a kind of pathos to this presentation, a sense of violence combined with empathy for the hare. It is not simply that the artist's traces are here more visible or more frankly acknowledged. It is that the painting declares a kind of affinity between the painter and the dead animal, the process of representation itself being likened to a hunt in which the painter is both the controlling hunter and the hare.

Thus, in contrast to the careful and firmly anchored arrangement in the Oudry, in the Chardin the space of representation is unstable, as is the position of the animal corpse within it. Its body twisted, its legs indecorously splayed, the hare threatens to slide off the ledge at the very place where the artist's interest in securing the illusion of space seems to have momentarily slackened. (The ledge loses its edge and disappears halfway through the painting.) Rather than simply hanging down or resting on the ledge, the hare seems embedded in the very structure of the painting, not only a product of illusion but part of its very mechanism. Where Oudry's animal was displayed as a separate, self-enclosed entity, Chardin's hare is still half buried in the field of representation, at once enveloped by the soft materiality of its fold and floating on its surface. The quasi-monochrome tonality of the painting, which is just like hare's fur, enhances this effect of reciprocity or identification. (One is reminded here of Diderot's anecdote about Chardin being unable to finish a still life when the dead rabbit had gone bad and he could not find another that would match the tonality of the one already started.)[27]

Fig. 9. Jean-Baptiste Oudry (French, 1686–1755), *Hare and Leg of Lamb*, 1742. Oil on canvas, 38 ⅝ x 28 ¾ in. (98 x 73 cm). The Cleveland Museum of Art. John L. Severance Fund

Similarly, a lack of precise location and the sense of abandonment this implies permeates the *Dead Hare with Powder Flask and Game Bag*, where the rabbit's corpse has been thrown across an otherwise unmarked and undifferentiated

space—neither a pantry nor the abstract space of the *trompe l'oeil,* but a more opaque, temporal spatiality of the process in which the body emerges into vision yet fails to take its place.[28]

Cochin left us an account of Chardin undertaking to paint a rabbit for the first time: "He wanted to depict it with the greatest veracity in all respects, yet tastefully, giving no appearance of servitude that might make its execution dry and cold. He never painted fur. He realized that he should not paint it hair by hair or reproduce it in detail."[29] As this report makes clear, Chardin was trying precisely not to do the kind of thing that Oudry did, which was for him a symptom of an excessive dependence on the object or a lack of taste. Yet, in his own approach, there was, too, a kind of dependence, though of a different kind. It manifested itself in his very mode of painting, marked not by servitude but by a visible bonding. Look up close at the Louvre *Hare:* instead of the animal's hair you will see a flurry of the painter's brushstrokes that verge on over-elaboration, that are agitated especially in the area of the chest and the loin, places where the painter seems to have forgotten himself in his process, buried himself in it, his brush burrowing and sniffing like a hunter's dog. The snare resting in the hare's underbelly, an instrument of its passion, as it were, echoes in the wisps of brushstrokes hovering about—presumably loose hay—driving home the analogy I have been suggesting between the hunter's snares and the trap of paint. Hanging on its hook, the hare may thus be likened to a painting hanging on the wall. We are reminded that Chardin was in charge of the *accrochage,* that is, the hanging of the picture during the Salon exhibitions at the Louvre, a responsibility he performed for almost twenty years, from 1755 to 1774.[30]

Fig. 10. Jean-Siméon Chardin, *Dead Hare with Powder Flask and Game Bag,* 1728–30. Oil on canvas, 38 5/8 x 30 in. (98 x 76 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris

Fig. 11. Jean-Siméon Chardin, *Two Rabbits, a Pheasant, and a Seville Orange on a Stone Ledge*, 1755. Oil on canvas, 19 ½ x 23 ⅜ in. (49.5 x 59.5 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Samuel H. Kress Collection

Fig. 12. Nicolas de Largillière (French, 1656–1746), *Partridges in a Niche*, 1680–85. Oil on canvas, 28 ⅛ x 23 in. (71.5 x 58.5 cm). Musée du Petit Palais, Paris

Perhaps the most eloquent and strangely moving are the paintings of dead game flung over the ledge, a type of composition adopted from the displays of edible things, done mostly in the 1750s and 1760s, such as *Two Rabbits, a Pheasant, and a Seville Orange on a Stone Ledge* (fig. 11); and *Rabbit and Two Thrushes* (Musée de la Chasse, Paris). The intimate lyricism of these scenes is striking: note the tenderness with which Chardin gently deposited the corpses on the stone ledge, the pheasant's leg almost caressing the dead rabbit's body, the corpses of two birds softly nested in the cavity of the rabbit's underbelly. What we witness here—and this is where the originality of these paintings resides—is a collapse of the elaborate architecture of showiness typified by such depictions of the hunting trophy as *Partridges in a Niche* by the doyen of the genre, Nicolas de Largillière (fig. 12). The artfulness of this tradition of representation is of no interest to Chardin. Instead he *deflates* the trophy—the notion of detumescence rather than castration comes to mind. The artist's signature carved in stone on the ledge of these representations—again a standard trope of still-life painting—acquires here an ambivalent air. What does it mean to be signing your name under these

depositions of dead flesh? Are these tokens of a pictorial triumph or a gruesome reminder of the painter's costs?

Lastly, let us very briefly consider two small but important paintings by Chardin that take up differently the concern with the costs of representation I have discussed. *The Draughtsman* (c. 1738) describes a kind of fixation on the object that played a key role in artistic training in the eighteenth century (fig. 13). Chardin denounced the tediousness of artistic education in his well-known tirade that Diderot reported in his introduction to the Salon of 1765. "The chalk holder is placed in our hands at the age of seven or eight," he recounted, and then the young artists spend entire years having to copy the art of others before being allowed to draw after nature. Such postponement was, in his view, unfortunate because of the tremendous challenge posed by the process of imitation and because it added difficulty to the career of the artists already marred by the tremendous difficulty of earning a decent living. Yet, Chardin also stated: "Those who've never felt art's difficulty will never produce anything of value; those who, like my son, feel it too early on, produce nothing at all; and rest assured that most of the high posts in our society would remain empty if one gained access to them only after trials as severe as those to which we [the artists] must submit."[31]

Fig. 13. Jean-Siméon Chardin, *The Draughtsman*, c. 1738. Oil on wood, 7 5/8 x 6 7/8 in. (19.5 x 17.5 cm). Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

The Draughtsman is an image of these "severe trials" that the young artists must endure. Seated on the floor, bent over a sheet propped on a portfolio, his legs apart, the young man seems entirely consumed by his task. The cost of his devotion to the object is evident not only in his pose, but also in his garb: the prominent red hole on his back is not just a mark of his poverty but also a kind of wound.

Fig. 14. Jean Siméon Chardin, *The Monkey Painter*, 1735–40. Oil on canvas, 11 1/4 x 9 1/4 in. (28.5 x 23.5 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris

The tone of Chardin's second commentary on artistic process, *The Monkey Painter* (fig. 14), is, on the other hand, resolutely comic. It is a carica-

ture of the notion of the artist as an imitator. The simian transposition of the painter was not invented by Chardin—Teniers and Watteau had taken it up—but it resonates with new meaning in the context of his own practice. Attired with mock elegance in a gold-trimmed coat and a feathered hat, Chardin's monkey-painter is confronted with a choice between imitating a statuette of a putto standing on the table or some everyday objects, the kind of kitchenwares Chardin himself painted, lying about the studio floor. He is, however, looking straight out, possibly at his own reflection in the mirror. As it has been suggested, this may be a self-portrait (faint contours of the monkey's own features have been recognized on the canvas), but, if so, it is definitely an ironic one. Since irony is, among other things, a safe mode of posing questions, *The Monkey Painter* may be seen as Chardin's query about himself, a satirical rephrasing of the very question that haunted Chardin's practice as a painter of still life: am I the painting subject or the object that I paint? Thus, this caricature may be seen as a comic version of the argument formulated in *The Skate* about the subjective loss involved in the process of making an image, visualizing as it does the dehumanizing aspect of painting, the notion that the project of imitation is not only tedious but may be a menace to artistic subjectivity.

Fig. 15. Jean-Siméon Chardin, *Self-Portrait with Pince-nez*, 1779. Pastel, 16 x 12 ¾ in. (40.5 x 32.5 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris

The arguments that these two paintings suggest about the inherent difficulty as the defining feature of art-making, and about the connection between the image of the object and the painter's self, seem to confirm the understanding of Chardin's work that I am presenting here. Contrary to René Démoris's suggestive reading of Chardin as a painter who dwells in the paradise of preverbal fullness, whose work fleshes out the zone of the senses protected from the irruption of language, Chardin's work seems, rather, to be about the costs of straddling two spheres, about the engagement with the object that opens up the boundaries of the subject, that implies loss.

Such a notion of the loss of self through representation underwrites one of Chardin's last self-portraits, done in pastel, to which the artist resorted when his sight deteriorated (fig. 15). Here the artist has turned away from his easel to cast a somewhat blurry glance at his viewer from above the eyeglasses sliding down his nose. It is the way his face seems about to slide down as well, with the dense pattern of hatchings simultaneously securing his features and threatening to lift them, that is interesting here. A kind of flaying—a defacement—is thus being produced, not unlike the physiognomic loss in Chardin's drawing of the wild boar—*pace* Mariette, Chardin did know how to draw—where the animal's features are buried under a flurry of strokes.[32] The red crayon gripped firmly, almost demonstratively, in Chardin's hand contributes to this discomfiting suggestion. Sparkling on the tip of the crayon are some material traces of the object that has just been depicted, or undone: the painter himself.

1. "Les nuances les plus vrais des corps sont saisies par M. Chardin avec une justesse admirable." Pierre Estève, *Dialogues sur les arts* (Amsterdam: Chez Duchesne, 1756), 29–30, 31. All translations are mine unless stated otherwise.

2. "Ô Chardin, ce n'est pas du blanc, du rouge, du noir que tu broies sur ta palette; c'est la substance même des objets, c'est l'air et la lumière que tu prends à la pointe de ton pinceau, et que tu attaches sur la toile." Denis Diderot, "Salon de 1763," in *Oeuvres,* 6 vols., ed. Laurent Versini (Paris: R. Laffont, 1994–97), 4:265.

3. [Antoine] Renou, *Memorial Address on Chardin,* 1780, cited in Pierre Rosenberg, *Chardin,* trans. Helga Harrison (Geneva: Skira; New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 98–99. Charles-Nicolas Cochin also noted that "He painted his pictures over and over until he had achieved that breaking down of tones produced by the distance of the object and the reflections of all the surrounding objects, until he finally achieved this *magical harmony* which so distinguished his work." "Essai sur la vie de M. Chardin," 1780, published in English translation in Marianne Roland Michel, *Chardin,* exh. cat. (Paris: Hazan, 1994), 269, italics mine.

4. Conservation report on file at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

5. For identification of some of Chardin's household objects, see Marie-Laure Rochebrune, "Ceramics and Glass in Chardin's paintings," in *Chardin,* exh. cat. (London: Royal Academy of Arts; New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), 37–53.

6. E.g., *Tinned Copper Pot,* 1734–35, Detroit Institute of Art; *Copper Pot,* private collection, Paris (Pierre Rosenberg and Renaud Temperini, *Chardin: Suivi du catalogue des oeuvres* [Paris: Flammarion,

1999], cat. no. 146); and *Copper Pot with Casserole,* Mauritshuis, The Hague.

7. Eric M. Zafran, *French Paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1998), vol. 1, cat. no. 35.

8. "[I]l faut en convenir, les tableaux de M. Chardin sentent trop la fatigue et la peinne. Sa touche est lourde et n'est point variée. Son pinceau n'a rien de facile; il exprime tout de la même manière, et avec *une sorte d'indécision,* qui rend son ouvrage trop froid. . . . Faute d'être assez foncé dans le dessein et de pouvoir faire ses études et ses préparations sur le papier, M. Chardin est obligé d'avoir continuellement sous les yeux l'objet qu'il se propose d'imiter, depuis la première ébauche jusqu'à ce qu'il ait donné les derniers coups de pinceau, ce qui est bien long et capable de rébuter tout autre que lui. Aussi, a-t-il toujours à la bouche que le travail *lui coute infiniment.* Quand il voudroit le cacher, son ouvrage le déceleroit malgré lui." Pierre-Jean Mariette, *Abecedario,* 12 vols. (Paris: J. B. Dumoulin, 1851–53), 2:359–60, italics mine.

9. Cochin, "Essai sur la vie," 269.

10. "[U]n juge si sévère de lui même." Diderot, "Salon de 1769," in *Oeuvres,* 4:844.

11. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre IV: La Relation d'Objet* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 27. The question for us is, of course, what kind of complexity it is in Chardin's case.

12. "And this Chardin, why does one take his imitations of inanimate things for nature itself? It is because *he creates flesh* when he pleases" (Et ce Chardin, pourquoi prend-on ses imitations d'êtres inanimés pour la nature même? C'est qu'il fait de la chair quand il lui plaît.) Diderot, "Essais sur la peinture," in *Oeuvres,* 6:476.

13. For discussion of the illusory game between the subject and object, see Lacan, *Le Séminaire,* esp. 26–30.

14. René Démoris, "La nature morte chez Chardin," *Revue d'esthétique* 22, no. 4 (1969): 369.

15. E.g., his *Still Life with Fruits and Flowers,* 1620–21, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

16. Charles Sterling, *Still Life: from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century,* 2nd revised edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 64.

17. Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still-Life Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 167.

18. Ibid., and Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 118.

19. "Approchez-vous, tout se brouille, s'aplatit et disparaît. Eloignez-vous, tout se recrée et se reproduit." Diderot, "Salon de 1763," in *Oeuvres,* 4:265.

20. Diderot noted (ibid.): "Sometimes it is as if a mist has been blown onto the canvas; and sometimes as if a light foam has been thrown over it." (D'autres fois on dirait que c'est une vapeur qu'on a soufflée sur la toile; ailleurs, une écume légère qu'on y a jetée.)

21. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense,* trans. Mark Lester, ed. Constantin Boundas (New York:

Columbia University Press, 1990), 10.

22. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 62–66.

23. According to the eighteenth-century *Dictionnaire de Furetière,* "On appelle populairement la raye le cul, la séparation qui est entre les deux fesses." Cited in René Démoris, *Chardin, la chair et l'objet* (Paris: Olbia, 1999), 32.

24. "Thus it is the identification with the object that is at the basis of all relations [of the subject] to it." Lacan, *Le Séminarie,* 26.

25. See, for example, Klein's "Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States" (1935), in *The Selected Melanie Klein,* ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York: Free Press, 1986), 116–45.

26. The anecdote about Chardin's admission was told by Cochin in "Essai sur la vie," 268. The best discussion of Chardin's complex relation to the Academy can be found in Philip Conisbee, *Chardin* (Lewisburg, N.J.: Bucknell University Press, 1985).

27. Diderot, "Salon de 1769," in *Oeuvres,* 4:844.

28. Philadelphia Museum of Art; reproduced in *Chardin* (see note 5, above), cat. no. 20.

29. Cochin, "Essai sur la vie," 268.

30. See "Chronology," *Chardin,* 22–24.

31. Chardin's tirade was reported by Diderot in the introduction to his "Salon de 1765." See *Diderot on Art,* 2 vols., ed. and trans. John Goodman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 1:5. The painter is referring to the well-known failures of his son, who was also a painter and who was to die, most probably by suicide, in 1772.

32. *Head of Wild Boar,* c. 1725, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.