
**Man, the Object-Mythologist:
Literal and Spatial Objects
(A Tentative Statement)**

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Master Essay for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts: VMASEX, Spring 2013.
Presented to Valand Academy at Gothenburg University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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Social inquisitiveness is a factor we would like to enforce. All in all we are still bound up with the search for myths. [...]
Imagine this game. Groups of people with highly constrained artificial behaviors moving through zones with different functions (like: magic, camouflage, enlargement, reversal, disparity). Gives you: zone-shifts, time-shifts, identity-shifts.
No light-pen needed to work out that potential.
Dare we talk about art and social modeling?

Roy Ascott, "Behaviourables and Futuribles" (1967)¹

¹ Stiles and Selz 2012: 570

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Preface: One Possible Scenario

Two persons meet in a room. They wear only plain cotton robes that desexualize body form and any distinctive features. Before entering they have both donned masks that cover their eyes but allow the mouth area to be free.

A vague light shines, granting only a view of a square-meter table with low legs. The corners of the room are not illuminated, it is impossible to account for the possible size of the space. Materials are low-tech, made from as natural materials as possible, nothing synthetic. The amount of steps from natural organic resource to “refined” thing is minimized. So, nothing seems fabricated from a denaturalized context or material essence.

Upon sitting down by the table a small bell rings. A third person enters carrying a tray. The character approaches, setting down the tray and laying out small servings of food. Plain, flat water is served as a meal drink.

The two persons drink. Food is eaten, slowly and deliberately. It is given ample time to feel the texture of the prepared dishes. At that precise moment the only active action unfolding is that of Eating. The action unfolds as a delimited, exact event.

With the finishing of the food, time is introduced as an element. They weigh it as it passes. Then: One speaks. One listens. This alternates, they take turns. Possibly, the vocals have nothing to do with words familiar to the two. Simply the sound would suffice.

After some time has passed, tea or coffee is served in small black lacquer mugs by the same third character. The mug does not allow a transparent view of the liquid, instead disguising it in shadow and darkness – the liquid and its color entrapped within the ceramic container. Like with the food, the choice of drink is made before-hand from a small menu to avoid food allergies and other experiences that would quickly derail the meeting. While it is “exact as a science”, the larger event is highly staged and framed. They have applied, been invited and accepted this chance to meet each other under utterly specific circumstances. But the case is not entirely true that this simply constitutes a meetings of humans: the

attention, and possible appreciation, of the materials is elevated to become its own actant. The turning of the pot when pouring the drink, or the silent recognition of the presence of the exterior are both examples of the acting and handling that happens.

Now talking is allowed again. The other speaks, demanding listening. Again, the framing of this action is what clearly defines the speech act itself. The speech may take any form that the speaker wishes. A fully embodied speech format is what is required here: as little as possible should be left to chance. If there is chance, then that is calculated and weighed in.

Words are chosen carefully. Balanced – a combination of experienced levels, such as those of sound, physical (tongue) movement, implication/meaning/possibilities of each word as a linguistic shard.

Sometimes, it is required to go beyond words. The urge will always be there. However, here only speech and the mutual collocation that happens with the eating is allowed. The multitude of expression is quenched, if only for this time.

They meet, totally constructed, yet freer than during a normal conversation. Their meeting is scripted and constructed through interactions with items and objects, without which this sequence would not be possible. A final factor is that of mutuality, a belief in the respectful

meeting of two unintegratable individuals.

When the bell strikes for the final time they leave, never knowing the political identity of each other. Reintegrating into instrumental life, actions are again measured, unlike in that room where two strangers spent a few hours, having the time and space to experience the unspoken, the alluded, the eluded.

Introduction

This text is produced as an extended artistic statement or work-in-progress-art-philosophy in the shape of an essay. As such it will be a text both personal, explorative and processual. As such, it also is necessarily incomplete, associative and likely far too wide in its scope. My basic artistic vantage point is that human life is endowed actionability to a large extent by the things we make and use. This for me has consequences for those objects that permeate daily life, like spoons and carpets, as well as the “enframed object” made by the artist. What I mean specifically with “enframed” will be made clear later. Suffice to say that I do not mean paintings in particular but all of art in the expanded contemporary sense.

To act or use something expands our repertoire of verbs possible to use. Here I am indebted to Richard Serra's “Verb List”² as it is elegant in its simplicity and conceptual heft. It sometimes seems to me that there

2 http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2011/10/20/to-collect

is usually a highly matter-of-fact and dry, impotent idea of what “use” entails: the hammer drives the nail, the jacket keeps out the cold and the chair allows sitting. Nothing about the experience of doing so or other looser experiential data – just the consequence of something leading to something other, i.e. nail being external to the board, and then through the application of force through the hammer-object, the nail becoming part of the board. Admittedly this flatness has its points; that is also exactly the breaking point between language and experience I will address here. So, beyond these basic functional differences, objects depend on a complex network of history, belief and knowledge. While there is a historically sanctioned reason (history being necessarily a precondition for religions) for Muslims not to eat pork or for Swedes not to drive on the left, the “belief” or commonly upheld enforcing of this rule is infused both ways. Knowledge or even the lack of knowledge of something, whose antinome can become its own discrete action, can interrupt the belief in question. Ultimately, I find this to be an area where our lives can be said to be delineated strongly by what one can, or cannot, do – in other words – determined by what one's potential for actionability is in a given situation.

My primary goal is to develop a small theoretical groundwork for where art may be situated within human life, and especially an art-making that actively engages with the possibility of certain actions being acted out. The object is perhaps like a spawning pool for imaginary events (in the first, ideal stage) that may unfold, many of which may not be available to

simple representation through another medium such as voice or text. I see this type of art as being an activator of both conceptual levels of thought, association and so forth, as well as being practically or “possibly” used. “Possibly” may for example be likened with that certain level of balance that one encounters in humor: that something is quite plausible yet one is hyper-aware of one's involvement in the present situation, so as not to become the joke oneself. That is an example I think makes sense for dissolving the simple duality of use object or art object. The ridiculous can therefore gain a foothold for enacting real critique in a way that a streamlined process of discourse has gradually disallowed.³ My argument is that art as it is understood today should be buried as a concept, instead allowing for a criticality of the contemporary variety (and its connected philosophical and political fields) into an experiential, culturally-diverse and historically more accurate version. In this alternative model, greater energies are to be found within the unspoken, uncertain, asocial, non-literal segments of experience.

Using the word “experience” is of course troublesome as it is fairly wide and general. I mean sensory perceptions (bodily and mental) that pertain to one existing within the world, as part of it, something that is most likely only ever a momentary instance of time as it occurs to oneself just then. Every attempt at remembrance and retelling is a point of symbolic interaction. While it would be unfair to totally and entirely reject symbolic realms, I wish to pursue an art-making and art-participation that allows this to be a unitary practice.

³ Note how the bizarre humor manages to bring up the very crux of the recent years' speculative-materialist debate: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PN6xemdjik>

“Use” is a broad concept I invoke in order to level out the differentiation that has been created historically regarding how specific interactions with art-media are expected to happen. To move forward, I propose that artworks be deemed objects or things even if they would, by others of more conservative flavor, be seen as transcending into a class of things that become classified as types of “exceptions”, for example, as a Photograph or a Painting, not a chemical residue collection on dead wood or oil-based foam board with dried paint on top. So, I will henceforth say that one “uses” a photograph as one uses a backpack. The medium or format or material properties are separate from any kind of representational veneer, or rather, intertwined because the material and the performing of it spawns its own work by way of interaction or conceptual possibility spaces emerging from, even, inter-passive handling. What I will argue for is an approach that attaches temporal, spatial and activity-based meaning to the artwork regardless of formal classification. Thus put, I also place emphasis on the imaginary and unutterable qualities of inter-human communication, where text and other formal language use may be allowed, but where alternative strategies of contact are given more room.

Throughout the essay images of my most recent work, together with very short presentations, will be found which may elucidate my own artistic progress in parallel with the writing of this text. I have been slowly building this framework for at least the last 12 months, which is now presented here in its current, transient, somewhat unkempt form.

The starting point will be to draw up some parameters as to what the relation may be between general sign-making, the more directed activity of art, and their respective connection to human life. With the latter I am referring to the being or existing of human animals living on a biological planet, with a unique and specific set of possibilities for communicating among one another. It will be impossible to provide any great deal of answers, instead I hope to inspire a view on art-making and art-experiencing that takes a fuller stance on art's potential as a form of communication and human activity.



Detail from artist book

Plays with slogans, typography, suggestions, words and the speculative message sender in order to jumble up expectations of real (political?) readings. While it has the flavor of a joke, it is dead-pan, and therefore still plausible to believe in.

Symbol Power

I will begin by providing a speculative model of what art and aesthetics constitute in human life and society. Note that I separate life from society as they are two individual concepts which overlap but do not replace each other. Life is a biological process; society is an overarching construction on top of that basic process that defines ways of living, and specifically for our intents and purposes, human actions and interactions. While quite a few of the upcoming statements and points will undoubtedly be less well founded than if they were published as part of a scientific journal or some such similar context, I want to elucidate my position a bit. The first and foremost task of this essay is not to decidedly "answer" issues that arise from, say, biological or evolutionary-psychological perspectives, but rather to pose an own historical arc through which to create a general idea of the object, symbol and the primary tokens at hand as they relate

to working with art. If anything, I want the claims to stem from a philosophical standpoint, that is, as something constructed and rationally manipulated and also up for discussion or critique.

My entry point will be in the particularities surrounding the concepts of belief and trust in conventional symbolic commands – power that goes both ways, towards the instigator as well as the talked-to. It is reasonable to assume that the ground between established institutional megastructures such as religion, institutions, the art-world and politics is blurry at best and totally integrated at worst. This is necessarily going to involve all of the levels suggested by the areas of making art, the social place of art, the discourse around art as well as considering art as a dynamic and responsive usage-object rather than something relegated to a plane of purely cognitive processes, and therefore yet again separated by Cartesian dualism. Starting out, I want to point to Michel de Certeau who defines belief not as “the object of believing (a dogma, a program, etc.) but as the subject's investment in a proposition, the act of saying it and considering it as true – in other words, a 'modality' of the assertion and not its content. The capacity for believing seems to be receding everywhere in the field of politics. That capacity once supported the functioning of authority.” (de Certeau 1988: 178) The *object of believing* (that which interfaces human and thing with the idea world) will be the thing I return to over much of this text. Similarly as de Certeau, there is still a discrete difference between that object – being latent until existing as either mental construct or being physically present – and the private

sphere in which the belief is made reasonable to invest belief in. While his argument is that believing is beginning to recede in our times, we might gain something from instead viewing belief as infused and outsourced over a vast quantity of proxies, objects in an ecology of surfaces, ideologies, and action-spaces, rather than into the traditional hegemonic institutions I listed earlier. At the core of each object or proxy lies an apparatus that involves its own belief or theology/teleology, vision or expression of ultimate goal. Forged en masse, traditional large-scale frameworks shift into finer-grained ones, and the hegemony changes clothes, yet still dependent on its every instantiation in our life-world. As I've written previously:

Hegemony is the distillation of numerous ideologies into a coherent grand narrative or *weltanschauung* (world-view). It is what forms a culture or nation or even transnational positioning. Their power comes through the use of firstly large-scale apparatuses like institutions, but also through the reification inherent in material objects and spaces. An object (or art-work) can be both entirely automatic or conceptual but still retains the quality of *being made and set apart to create a position to be seen from*. That is how art is external even if shaped as being bodily, momentary or imagined.

(Vesavuori 2012: 6) ⁴

4 http://www.mikaelvesavuori.se/media/MikaelVesavuori_Apparatheid.pdf

All is not bleak and miserable. The use of power is but one use of this hegemonic character, and I will not dwell substantially on these notions. However, what it does point to, is that objects participate greatly in the activity of living in a symbolic world.

Moving back in history, we can speculate on what seems to have happened to the primitive human: a need arose, sometime in the distant past, to short-hand experience(s) into a transferable form. Before language, the symbol or sign had to be born. John Dewey writes that symbols are "used to designate expressions of abstract thought" but that they are not simply flat, intellectualistic mannerisms because they also were "immediate enhancements of the experience of living" (Dewey 2005: 30). So in order to designate or say or point to something inside us (like emotions) or beyond us (reference; abstraction), man discovered the symbolic performative practice. This seems to be one of the key differences between the human animal and every other: we perform mythologies surrounding the symbols for their own sake as well as having a set ready for displaying language. In using the symbol, we must not necessarily accept it is having been of "use value" from the get-go. This notion is the one we will return to, contrasted to an instrumentalized language of absolute, compact, concrete definitions. We might call this a *gradient of articulation*, in that the one end of the spectrum allows only faith in the word itself and its subsequent production, and the other end being loose, associative and thoroughly unproductive in the instrumental, ordered sense. A kind of aesthetic dreaming or reverie.

With the trust in words that one may feel when accustomed to them, knowingly perusing them or wildly flinging them about, every shock against this core trust of modern civilized life comes at increasingly high price. It seems as probably the most central tenet of society itself: the spoken (the command; the named) and its inscription (absoluteness; permanence; almost as mystical as pre-Christian nature religions). We could say that we encounter the absolute, literal thought in the will to classify and concretely express our ideas, to be unambiguous in the inter-human communication. David Bohm writes that:

Literal thought aims at being a reflection of reality as *it is* – it claims just to tell you the way things are. We tend to say that's the best kind of thought. Technical thought, for instance, aims to be literal. Such thought intends to be unambiguous; it may not succeed, but it aims that way – to know something as exactly what it is. Owen Barfield has compared such literal thought to idol worship. If you make an idol, it may stand in at first for some force which is greater than itself, or for some spiritual energy. But gradually the idol is taken to be it – literally; and therefore you give supreme value to that object. We could say that in a way we are worshiping our words and thoughts, insofar as they claim to be descriptions or statements about reality *just as it is*.

(Bohm 2004: 97)

Political language, often maligned for its sloganishness or statement-laden drive, is perhaps not a derailment but a natural, unconcealed core of it, then. Therefore it might be possible to suggest that its special breed of verb-rich language is consistently a paradox, with it both referencing (linguistically) and commanding the Other (by will, force, political strength, sheer trust of communication et cetera). The belief is believed in because, while language may not be normative per se, it manages to have sufficient power of its externalities (like the language-operators and believers: the speakers) to produce that which it says it is.

Is the fear of losing society's grounding in formal, mainly delegative and/or instrumental, language one of shocking gravitas or of hopeful wonder? I am still finding ideas as well as rethinking any possible conclusions, but I understand its epicenter to lie at the heart of the communicative core of (at the very least) Western cultures. It seems that for example Islamic culture and art are far more integrated into each other, allowing for a broader and more complex understanding of the role-play between the divine and the corporeal in the way it is staged in architecture, objects, religious spaces, and artworks. Even the old Christian churches had a very different way of creating "connection" between the church-goer and the divine plane than in today's highly literate Western cultures.

Let me clarify my specific interest in this (perhaps) aggressive downplaying of faith in language a bit before we continue. I derive this stance from a fairly complex notion: our concepts, as well as actual

methods, of living among one another, the ways in which we form relationships, and the products we create by harvesting minerals from the earth – thus sometimes leading to the making of art – are flawed. Their absolute center seems to be founded on the large nexus of language. For me, the word-object carries the same virus that the symbol (visual as an image or signified by letter/sign) does: the possibility of infectious disease in society's key infrastructure – belief and “shared knowledge”, “shared interests”, “commonalized” ideology rather than truly common living and impromptu adaptation. So, it should come as little surprise that I find it impossible to not understand how a notion of “how life is generally supposed to be lived today” (or some such ideological positions) as merely, and only, an obeying of symbolic orderings. If that colossal power lies dormant in the word and the symbol – by extension in both power utterances, threats and in art – then it is simply erroneous to think of art and society as being separate from each other. They should be understood as separate typologies, but still as typologies that influence and redirect energies in their own ways: society by its semi-precise social agreements and unified groups (essentially locks down processes), and art as a play of senses (fundamentally opens thinking; is radically individualistic). So, I see this as initially taking place in the symbolic plane and in its power to generate bases for further belief. Society is the big model on which most other ideas extend from.

I will henceforth be a bit radical. My point of departure on the concept of society is that society is essentially an existential afterthought, a

constructed organization, an intentional activity among any other, a deferral of individual acts into the funnel of a larger social group. It has the same ontological status as the idea of market-value or philosophical utterances about which goes first on a hamburger: lettuce or cheese? I do not find "society" necessary, natural, given or in any other way something one should presuppose or base any individual theory or set of actions on. Thus, I want to avoid that. Simply: society is fundamentally "unnecessary", and then as important or worthless as any other intentional activity or social enframing. It gains traction through belief and its related actions of upholding that belief as being true and right.

Alan Watts, an eminent name in the Western writing on Zen buddhism, begins his "The Way of Zen" with an almost immediate discussion about formal communication. While his thematic is different from mine, we both share a common sentiment. After presenting the notion of *conventional language* in the Western sphere and the role of codes (of conduct, behavior) and language in the becoming of a civilized person he writes the following on abstraction:

Abstraction is thus almost a necessity for communication, since it enables us to represent our experiences with simple and rapidly made 'grasps' of the mind. When we say that we can think only of one thing at a time, this is like saying that the Pacific Ocean cannot be swallowed at a gulp. It has to be taken in a cup, and downed bit by bit. Abstractions

and conventional signs are like the cup; they reduce experience to units simple enough to be comprehended one at a time. (Watts 1957: 7)

Trapped in existence predicated to a large extent on central vision and the continual flow of one thing after the other (linear time as experience, but not necessarily spiritual truth) the importing of the sign becomes the only easily available way of informing others of ourselves. Unfortunately, this means we have vast swathes of life, including religion, that cannot be properly expressed. Noting differences between Western and Eastern reasoning, he writes that "the West has no recognized institution corresponding to Taoism because our Hebrew-Christian spiritual tradition identifies the Absolute – God – with the moral and logical order of convention. [...] When the throne of the Absolute is left vacant, the relative usurps it and commits the real idolatry, the real indignity against God – the absolutizing of a concept, a conventional abstraction." (Watts 1989: 11-12) Watts saw the rise of symbolic order, though from a highly unlikely angle, in that the spiritual was evacuated and replaced by a laissez-faire "God" that was both idea and its enacted truth, and therefore never accountable in the first place.

In the formation of human groups it is reasonable to think that oral or written communication had some role in creating the conditions for actions to be deferred toward and within a "conceptual unit" such as the group, family, band, society or whatever the imaginable scale might be. The people band together and make some type of arrangement that they

will “act as one” under the circumstances: we can see that the oneness is the deferral as active process of denying the individual. On evolution and instinct, David Bohm writes:

When we evolved to the chimpanzee – which could think of other chimpanzees even when they were not there – then the *image* of the other chimpanzee could produce the same reaction as the chimpanzee itself. This began to confuse the new part of the brain, due to “fight, run, freeze,” reactions, neurochemicals, and so on. The new brain couldn't get things straight, and it further tangled up the old brain. [...] So perhaps this is one of the ways we got to where we are. The thing to notice is that the major environment of the old brain is now, not nature, but *the new brain*, because nature is not filtered through the new brain. (Bohm 2004: 62-63)

What I think Bohm is onto here is a sense that there is no vast degree of inherent human capacity which commands the level of dedicated communication one is capable of. Instead he argues that one needs to hone, polish and be critically aware of how the thinking and communication process is performed and as being diametrically opposed to born instincts and neurochemical factors. This is a significant position to take as it also implies that neither thinking nor talking (et cetera) are activities for which we are equally suited, based on the skilling we have in them. A chink in the armor of current society, to say the least, as the

notion of democratic society is predicated on the idea that an opinion is ontologically always justified to express. That this does not translate to actions (and other enacted forms) is one evidence of the chasm that exists between believing, using, and acting out.

If we accept something that may seem quite obvious first: language is yet another of these constructs and therefore not a "given" provided by the elements, God or natural occurrence of any sort. Formal language – with which I mean syntax, grammar, the belief in parallel/mutual understanding of representation/utterance – is a "system" as it involves the mechanics of a large number of related parts. With the quotation marks on "conceptual unit" and "system" I want to point at these terms as not being exclusive, new, novel or so, but rather that they are ways of understanding concepts which might not make sense in the basest/barest of symbol-primitive existence. The unit is a construct, concept, word object, reference pointer. While others may persuasively argue that there exist natural forms of interplay and interaction between species and/or groups of humans, say in the older Homo species, this is not the matter of some biological magnetism between individuals but a question of rational group instigation through acts and language. So, the group was trusted in, in order to form what became a shared notion of community or band. The system is the dissection of these relations that simply cannot have existed before they were accepted, formed and followed. The core standpoint in this is how the actions formed a basis that would subsequently, likely at a much later point, become uttered and named, and thus syntactic. One

can see the role of trust or belief in this conceptual plan or mental image-object of this group. Otherwise it would have made sense to negate, destroy or leave the group as it did not provide that which the individuals required from this particular fellowship. It would have been no more efficient to point to the unit than to the individual within. A kind of efficiency is allocated within the realm of language, and the symbolic is born – the shorthand for pinpointing existential experiences.

In the earliest art there may have been some kind of ritual basis or function, an engagement with something beyond the represented. Modern aesthetics (and for that part, trends et cetera) would be a part of a push toward the idea of a total mutual understanding as symbols are transferable and culturally independent (as the world is forming a unitary culture of multinational conglomerate capitalist aesthetic production). It is symptomatic that the repetition of certain allowed actions in the world (with which I do not mean "global" but the lifeworld of humans) is similarly relegated to a small variety, but even lacking the religious level of "beauty in action" or repetition. Simply, one has to make do with tedious repetition for the sake of desiring something from far away.



Promotional image for "Black Block" video

The video shows how a black block is flying and crashing into a plate of glass, time after time. Every hit rocks the glass a bit further into a slanting position, but never manages to break it. After some time the glass falls flat on the floor. Yet, not even that manages to destroy it. Incessantly the block keeps pounding on it even when it is down.

Objects of Faith

For Roland Barthes, objects, among other typologies, were all about "mythologies". Writing in 1957, the development of plastics was rapidly taking place and he saw his own childhood's toys, made of wood and natural materials, be replaced by synthetic versions that were also semiotically much more complex. He saw the plastic dolls as "essentially a microcosm of the adult world", being "reduced copies of human objects, as if in the eyes of the public the child was, all told, nothing but a smaller man, a homunculus to whom must be supplied objects of his own size." In playing one is winding up a procedural creation of the world, "literally [prefiguring] the world of adult functions [and] obviously cannot but prepare the child to accept them all, by constituting for him, even before he can think about it, the alibi of a Nature which has at all times created soldiers, postmen and Vespas." Barthes points here at the object as a conceptual production of the mind rather than the merely material

instantiation of something within the world-space of the child but exactly depending on the item to inform that conceptual framing. The endless (re)production of these ideas is their primary output.

Here I want to bring in the *spatial object* that I have chosen to put in the subtitle of this essay. The reproduction of ideas through material is a good example of the *multidimensional* qualities in an object, as opposed to the *flatness* one encounters in most non-poetical, non-art, usage objects.

While the plastic toys are *spatial objects* (they create possibility spaces, actions, suggestions of use), the latter example would instead connote a *literal* object. The literal object either is disguised, or tries to be so, as it is an instance of that concrete, absolutist position I wrote about previously. Still, not even that manages to fully dissolve it of imaginary power, as it then is merely stiffer to look through, but always a product of some ideological framing, just as Roland Barthes writes about. The literal object moves into being spatial when it gains explicit belief/faith, for example through symbols, that bring about highly instrumentalized or even radically unintended *poetic* uses. Richard Sennett, in his book on craft and craftsmanship, explains how the the "Ancient Greek [language] embedded wonder in *poiein*, the root word for *making*." In the creation of things, wonder arose as "intuitive leaps" occur; consequences that could perhaps be somewhat planned for were still of a quality that is wondrous, exciting, life-affirming. A connection between praxis and the conceptual seems inherent in this activity, and wonder is a universal feeling. Continuing, he references Plato who has said that "'Whatever

passes from not being into being is a poesis,' a cause for wonder." (Sennett 2008: 211) With the title's "literal" and "spatial" objects, I mean this kind of performativity, in that the object is materially-existent and materially-examined (looked through, one might say, or investigated ontologically) and "spatial" in that it is part of a definition set for cognitive and physical para-material activities.

We can see that there is no simple iconic worship of the doll-object, but rather what might probably be a pleasurable use of it. Barthes warns about the consequences of being side-stepped as creators or craftsman of the material (and implicitly psychological) world: "However, faced with this world of faithful and complicated objects, the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it: there are, prepared for him, actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy." Here we find the problem inherent in consumerism: it provides a wide range of exotic, novel suggestions and experiences which we find tantalizing, but some degree of depth of involvement or more substantial emotional attachment seems utterly lacking, beyond *desire* and *novelty* which are frequently used tools in the toolkit of the capitalist magician. Finally, writes Barthes, the child ends up "a little stay-at-home householder who does not even have to invent the mainsprings of adult causality; they are supplied to him ready-made: he has only to help himself, he is never allowed to discover anything from start to finish." (Barthes 2000: 53-54) You are what you play.

We might also call these spatial objects *performative objects*^{5 6}, as

5 <http://niedderer.org/po.html>

6 <http://www.postarq.com/performative-object.pdf>

has been written on about Kristina Niederr, as they are made meaningful in the usage of them. The performance goes both ways as the object acts upon the user, and the user teases out the available actions from the performative object. I do not believe that the spatial and performative aspects necessarily clash or negate each other, since they are active at different stages: the spatial forms the conceptual plane of action, and the performative aspects are involved in both intentional and poetic use, in the very hands-on experience of it. Again, by using an object, a social level of inter-relationship is understood – which I will look at later, using the game metaphor – but details of aesthetic character are revealed as well. One might also go as far as to begin making “moral-aesthetic judgments” on objects in order to understand and contextualize them within ethical frameworks that are either explicit or implicit in their design; a moral trajectory. (Saito 2007: 208)

We might now begin to understand the symbol, as well as the object or myth (or their fusion) as, under some conditions, behaving like a fundamentally normative device, enclosed by its associative and material specificities. To place a person in relation to symbols, and in turn making people into symbols of a “greater”, higher-level symbol – remember how the group is the emergence of several “lesser” units – we can invoke the concept of “ordering”. For considering “ordering”, let us imagine a family portrait. In it, we are lined up, set up in a specific sequence, inter-relations and distances between subjects made up in an instant. Every frame is an exclusion in as much as it is an inclusion, defining what is not inside,

pointing silently to everything not present or welcome. This ordering is called *Gestell* by Martin Heidegger:

That original gathering from which unfold the ways in which we have feelings of one kind or another we name "*Gemüt*" [disposition]. We now name that challenging claim which gathers man thither to order the self-revealing as standing-reserve: "*Ge-stell*" [Enframing]. [...] The word *Stellen* [to set upon] in the name *Ge-stell* [Enframing] not only means challenging. At the same time it should preserve the suggestion of another *Stellen* from which it stems, namely, that producing and presenting [*Her-und Dar-stellen*] which, in the sense of poiesis, lets what presences come forth into unconcealment.
(Heidegger 1977: 20-21)

Similarly, picture an execution. Again, subjects are lined up and set up, "*Gestellt*". The enframing that happens is also noted by Judith Butler who writes that "'to be framed' means to be subject to a con, to a tactic by which evidence is orchestrated so to make a false accusation appear true." (Butler 2010: 11) Our relationships (themselves "orderings") with others are necessarily to some degree, or possibly entirely, dependent on similar strategies of placing and structurally disposing others – effectively objectifying people as well as things. Not, then, as a way of imposing "rule" on others, but in order to create structured thought in the first

place.

To enframe is to do the work of the artist. This same activity is what social life is fundamentally based on if we are to understand the ordering regime as being related to a level of thinking that must abstract experiences. While it may at times probably feel like I am arguing that we are hostage to every slight material artifact existing in the sensory world, I want to give a small disclaimer and breathing pause. What is at stake is something like Sherry Turkle has written, "...we often feel at one with our objects. The diabetic feels at one with his glucometer, as increasingly we feel at one with the glowing screens of our laptops, our iPods, and our BlackBerries. [...] Indeed, in the psychoanalytic tradition, both persons and things are tellingly called 'objects' and suggest that we deal with their loss in a similar way." (Turkle 2011: 9) By every way that things created in the world has a possibility for mental entrapment and political tampering, so they also can provide rich resources for our experience of life: sensuous, wondrous, curious or serious could be words for it, but their minutiae is immediate, present, and private.

Ecologies of Object-Relations

The ultimate stage of a spatial object is being massively, physically spatial.

With the entrance of architects like Le Corbusier⁷ ⁸ and the modernist architectural movement this dimension expanded into life, finally forming a politically motivated socio-spatial element which could be rearranged. The primeval symbol that became a representation or icon, morphing into the poetical objects discussed here, recently in the 20th century found their ultimate form, as ultra-spatialized, now even in experienced, physical space: architecture. Language-centric thinking that began evolving after the 1st World War was very active in the discourse of political power through architecture. Where the symbol acted as a gateway for a phantasmatic, fantastical mental image of what something might be, the literal object or spatial object is an impediment as much as it is another

7 <http://www.monuments-nationaux.fr/thumb2/cache/45c85ef116d72033d707b64d14676bc3>

8 <http://www.house42.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/unite02.jpg>

vector for action to be bounced or acted against. Symbols might offer cognitive resistance but are, per definition, a flat gateway where the new symbols, the literal or spatial objects, reject likening or connection and instead forces some degree of actionable consequence or structuring/ordering. Taking the shape of living quarters, entire neighborhoods or even cities, architecture began to see its mission as one of forming life, living and those who are living.

In ancient Greek and Roman societies the building of empty space (plazas) and straight roads granting views of the buildings of the mighty would often act as the showcase of power of the time. Large buildings were not necessarily the immediate way to display that power, and while even older cultures, such as the ancient Egyptians or first Mayans, have a popularly known history of megalithic architecture⁹, their special eloquence lies in the use of something rather simple to reach maximum effect. By creating flat planes it could be argued that very “inhuman” angles (parallel corners are highly inorganic and almost always the effect of technical reproduction or great material expenditure) could invoke a godlike, sublime sensation in the subjects of the state, when moving around such milieux. The ultimate scale of power was the commanding of labor to flatten the organic world, with all of its inconsistencies and curvature, into a white marble plaza, straight roads or into inhuman scales and heights.

As much of the world became rapidly modernized after the 1st

9 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_the_oldest_buildings_in_the_world

World War, irregularities and centuries of town planning (or lack thereof) was “corrected”, and subsequently remodeled into cities and towns that were many times centrally planned. Modernist architecture had the ambition to provide the best of the new world with all that implies of water closets, hygienic kitchens, and rationally planned rooms. Where previously disorder and chaos reigned, the mission was now to sanitize, standardize and rationalize. I want to point to the characteristic high modernism of the so-called brutalist style¹⁰ and the geometrical, vast landscapes of 50's England and Sweden as places that almost denied sentimental bourgeois opposition at their time: the projects were pinnacles of technology, scale and social-economic-cultural support¹¹.

Constant Nieuwenhuys, affiliated with the Situationists, had strong opinions on this top-down planning that ran the very real risk of also conforming the lives lived in the cities. His answer: New Babylon^{12 13}, a grand architectural scheme where flowing open spaces and incidental relations would overtake the strict Modernist plan of formalist buildings and planned lifestyles, to create impromptu meetings and a playful “derivé” (drift) through them. With all of the conveniences and positives that arose from the new life being installed in (primarily) the West, a fatal problem appeared, namely the dearth of imagination. In the expansive 1930's, John Dewey asked “why is the architecture of our large cities so unworthy of a fine civilization? It is not from lack of materials nor from lack of technical capacity. And yet it is not merely slums but the apartments of

10 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brutalist_architecture

11 Consider such architectural spaces as the Barbican in the City of London, http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1e/London_Barbican_501593_fh000025.jpg

12 <http://intersections23rdn5th.wordpress.com/2012/01/29/blur-polemic-representation/>

13 http://25.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_m7pp5uPvd01qle3ko1_1280.jpg

the well-to-do that are esthetically repellent, because they are so destitute of imagination." (Dewey 2005: 358). While it would be hard to state quantitatively if the collective powers of imagination have grown smaller or not (can one even do so?), the stricter, more highly formalized new lifestyles made it clear that the symbolic realm had permanently moved into daily life. Architecture became a social venture, ordering actions in space. "Space thus becomes something more than a void in which to roam about, dotted here and there with dangerous things and things that satisfy the appetite. It becomes a comprehensive and enclosed scene within which are ordered the multiplicity of doings and undergoings in which man engages." (Dewey 2005: 23) Unfortunately, many times, this conceptual model was reinforced and meant in a very literal, programmatic sense.

In the example scenario that this essay begins with, I wished to inspire an image of a situation that might seem fairly alien to most people, what with its rigid setup and essentially ceremonial structure and locale. One of the great classics of literature on the Japanese culture (albeit skewed and unfortunately timed, politically) is Kakuzo Okakura's "The Book of Tea" which includes a section not entirely different from the one I wrote, wherein he explains the tea-room. (Okakura 2010: 47-58) My depiction of the scenario is a loose pastiche of the Japanese tea ceremony, as I find that the likelihood for art at its most radical is closely related to that of old, or even ancient, cultures: Rome and Greece around 0 AD, Japan and China in the Middle Ages, Native American tribes before being colonized.

In them man's aesthetic senses were not yet as tamed and modified as they are in our current predicament. In the Japanese Middle Age society, power was played and displayed in tea houses built especially for purposes of creating ceremonial meetings between powerful social actants like the shogun or aristocrats. By creating flat-planed interiors where decoration was highly spartan, aesthetic effect was created by deep understanding of light and shadow. With the sliding doors, a mutual viewing point could be created by opening up unto the exterior landscape. Dialogue was not necessarily, as we now understand it, the main thing in such a meeting. Rather, by actively engaging in an activity and being mutually involved in a space-time moment, other levels of meeting might occur. The reliance on imagination and sensuous play in the Japanese aesthetic tradition I find a very compatible match for much of the general tone I am looking for in this search for a new aesthetic category, or whatever we wish to call it. Because many of the activities require several participants, it is important to attain a level of synchronicity. Yuriko Saito writes that:

[T]he aesthetic experience must be created by each guest, attending to those aspects which have been intentionally prepared by the host but also to those items such as falling snow and wind felt as they walk through the garden [...] Here, unlike in the case of an eating experience carefully choreographed by the cook to give rise to a sense of season, the unified atmosphere in the tea ceremony is not as definite

and the coherence among various elements results from our exercise of imagination as much as the host's preparation. (Saito 2007: 127)

This dedication to amplifying minute and vague details, the ambience itself of a situation, is something which especially Junichiro Tanizaki has explored. With ambience we could also, contemporaneously, see to recent decades' of artistic work with ambient or locational music, or "receding" works that use light and smell. This type of work I argue has a great deal of connectivity with my focus on Japanese aesthetics that already explored such notions fairly elaborately and concisely a long time ago. Let us also think of something universally existing: the shadow. Perhaps my favorite depiction of the subtlety of austere conditions and presence of mind and body is when Tanizaki, in an entire though small book on the subject of darkness, explains the fundamental core of this play of light:

Whenever I see the alcove of a tastefully built Japanese room, I marvel at our comprehension of the secrets of shadows, our sensitive use of shadow and light. For the beauty of the alcove is not the work of some clever device. An empty space is marked off with plain wood and plain walls, so that the light drawn into it forms dim shadows within emptiness. There is nothing more. And yet, when we haze into the darkness that gathers behind the crossbeam, around the flower vase, beneath the

shelves, though we know perfectly well it is mere shadow, we are overcome with the feeling that in this small corner of the atmosphere there reigns complete and utter silence; that here in the darkness immutable tranquility holds sway.

(Tanizaki 2001: 32-33)

A frame is literally set up in which we are “allowed”, in a sense, to move freely in our mind. Rather than, like Western art traditions, be primarily a question of the visual, here Tanizaki shows how void, space, enframing makes a world of difference when it comes to experiencing. The room is a place for meeting, seeing, experience while still remaining a strict, formal work of its own. The rooms are never “just built” and disposed – they require subjects using them, living in them. Similarly, Okakura discusses how the chance of proper appreciation of something erodes when there is too much visual (or other) information in a given space: “It calls for a mighty wealth of appreciation to enjoy the constant sight of even a masterpiece, and limitless indeed must be the capacity of artistic feeling in those who can exist day after day in the midst of such confusion of color and form as is to be often seen in the homes of Europe and America.” (Okakura 2010: 56) I find it helpful to start from this point of extraction, to de-emphasize all possible detail from everything except the thing itself, which is under scrutiny. Only then can we approach it for its unique qualities. A similar reasoning gave us the white cube, however different that context might have been.

Objectionable relations

Today art is society. If anything, a move for art to “become” more socially inserted is a double affirmation that makes little sense – the point is already made, so to speak, as relational art is rather a borrowing from instrumental society instead of the other way around. What the human units – the participants – do is essentially to load and use symbolically those Objects which are there for them to use. A child playing with a doll cannot be blamed for the actions or symbolicisms inherent in the actual physical doll or the ideatic realms that the child has received from social constructs. The child could physically manipulate the doll to create “another” doll from the same basic material in order to derail the givenness of the manufactured object. This is all good and well. In the same way participants in a work of relational art, or society in general, could manipulate the materials served, thus constructing their own set of

ideals and beliefs.

To reiterate, my argument so far is that a larger turn has occurred which places the concept of the multidimensional, *spatial* object – and with it, related notions like space, interface, interaction – where the flat symbol was earlier. Something like relational aesthetics make this connection fairly clear: why represent something by acting upon dead matter like oil or wood when you can use the real thing itself – the human – to give direct access to the experience or situation? One moves from traditional, disinterested, cognitively loaded symbol-interaction with art into witnessing the immediate reaction/interaction/inaction of people often with interface objects. With interface objects I mean those intermediary things that people deal with, like the food-making tools and food-eating utensils that create the context for Rirkrit Tiravanija's food-centered relational artworks¹⁴. In the way I am laying out my claim here, those intermediary objects would be the primary actants in this chain. So, let's dissect the interactions in a kitchen situation á la Tiravanija.

14 http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/02/03/rirkrit-tiravanija-cooking-up-an-art-experience

Actor specification: general food-centered relational artwork

Actant 1 → Interaction device (Plate and eating device)

Actant 2 → User-interactor, spectator ("Gallery visitor")

Actant 3 → Location and spatial conditions ("Kitchen")

Actant 4 → Instigator/enframer (Artist)

Who “speaks” or communicates, and in which order, may vary and is probably a highly contentious issue in the first place. That the sequence is structured based on the previous elements, however, will likely seem fairly true. So, it is probably fair to say that upon the creation of a context, outlined by the delimitations of the interaction devices (utensils and plates), the artwork produces itself in the unfolding of the latent action, which most commonly would be to use the device to eat food. The role of the enframer/artist is to direct the experience in the way which is relevant according to his/her plan. The work unfolds.

An issue constantly circulating within this kind of art-making is that of “origin” or epicenter for the larger – and in a way, the recomunicated part of the action – sequence or event. A “rhizomatic” understanding of this chain could potentially put out some of the air in the originary balloon, because what in the end is at stake is not the division of art or life but the endlessly integrative process of action into further action. Every action is an inverse relation as it blocks any other event from happening at that precise moment. Because the effect or direction of one event is not possible to foresee in absolute clear-cut detail, one might find oneself side-tracked by the chain of (in)consequence. That is why I propose that “plan” is a more useful way of thinking of the artist's instantiation of the work. But as there is not always an intention to get to a specific point of knowledge (a critique against pedagogy in general) or a certain common compromise or understanding (social constructs, “democratic processes”)

one is faced with a string of events predicated by the centrifugal effect of some conceit or active object/relation. In the previous case, this is predicated on what happens when people meet to cook and eat together. In that sense it points back to a Kaprowesque likening of life and art insofar as food is viewed as a basic tenet of biological sustainment and that the social act of eating is enframed in the naming of this as art.

There is implicitly in my standpoint a critique against the critique that is within relational art. Again: This leads me to believe that relational aesthetics are unnecessary, as that art form is already a slice of society itself. The relational work only ever points at the (yet again) inverse relations between the actions that happen as being the directly inverse to all the things that did in fact not happen. What it tries to do is enframe activities as being external to life. This is – though it might look and read like a scathing critique – what makes that kind of art actually effective as well as necessarily makes it simply another one of the “non-life” arts.

It is my opinion and best guess that no form of art really ever can manage to be entirely politically effective until it reaches the point of pure “givenness” and presence, which relational art in a sense does manage to become. Ergo, it is likely ethically impossible to conduct larger-than-group-scale art-making as consensus or willingness to engage might not be possible to gain. Art-as-society is ultimately fascism and society-as-art would at best be a non-permanent band or group that organizes itself until it no longer is relevant. The second alternative seems hopelessly

naïve and lost today though it always has its champions. One could wish for better conditions for it to sustain itself. Opposing it is the Law as the outstretched arm of instrumental life.



“A Question of Definition” installation shot

The M4 type rifle (derived from the AR series of rifles, first actively used in the Vietnam war) is one of the most common and typically known assault rifles on the planet, after the mythical AK47. An American design, it has been at the core of Western/US arms manufacturing for some time - it is now an industrial design export of considerable merit. Recently, a bank robber was killed by Swedish police after fleeing, carrying an automatic rifle. Only later was it discovered it was a replica. While making these models I was under suspicion and some minor investigation. Not even as a “free” artist, the symbol could be distanced from reality.

Do You Mean It, If You Do It?

Games embody the sense of being activities as well as constructions of relations between its players. Artists have historically returned to the game, as both actual thing, and as a stage for ideas. Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström's "CIA Monopoly (Small)"^{15 16} (1971) is certainly a politically direct, but funny and expressive example of how to modify what is often innocuous enjoyment for new, politically charged causes. Other elegant examples include the various games of the "new games movement", like three player soccer and three player chess, jumbling the bi-polar adversarialism, as well as making points about indecent tactics and alliances and the general asymmetry of a system that previously enforced justifiable antagonism.

15 <http://other-ai.org/2011/11/23/serious-games-modding/fahlstr3/>

16 <http://www.fahlstrom.com/interactive/interactive-art-oyvind-fahlstrom>

The reason that the concept of play could be a pervasive and critical way of dissecting art and culture is because it is inherently based around mechanisms of input, output and feedback loops. It has qualities of intuitive agency, cooperation and mutual imagination, imagination being the primary material of all extended civilized life. Pragmatically, it takes more imagination to imagine an office desk as holding power over oneself, than to imagine a world without that quality – yet the desk is insistently there and its power often remains unquestioned. Opening the door towards the informal, action-based languages of play (and to some extent, games) one rediscovers their core qualities of fantasy and imagination, the embedded components that much later created mythological constructs like gods and society. Artist-scholar Mary Flanagan is a veteran of designing for *critical play*, a broad notion of play and games as entangled with issues that concern us as individuals and collectives. She explains the term as:

Critical Play is built on the premise that, as with other media, games carry beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics Artists using games as a medium of expression, then, manipulate elements common to games – representation systems and styles, rules of progress, codes of conduct, codes of reception, winning and losing paradigms, was of interacting in a game – for they are the material properties of games, much like marble and chisel or pen and ink bring with them

their own intended possibilities, limitations, and conventions.

(Mary Flanagan 2009:4)

If on the one hand we have the concept of symbols and objects as being the "glue" binding people and activities, then what remains – the inverse, immediate, lived, experienced rather than arranged – is something akin to a "poetic acting". Performance studies, according to Richard Schechner, is predicated on the concepts of play and ritual. (Schechner 2007: 50) In society we seem to try to separate similar actions by indexing them into contexts and devising agendas to understand the rationale and greater reason for an action to (have taken) take place.

Society is about the necessary; we might even say that it is, frankly, about the ritual activity and process. With this I mean that society is a vast conceptual device to produce effectively the conditions that allow groups to co-exist in so far as it is done precisely as specified. The social apparatus, like other *spatial objects*, defines a list of verbs or commands, that the groups act out. In so doing, this involves a certain active/activated belief: to produce or exist within this mindset and to carry out the verbs that the "social" device demarcates. To understand the machinations of society one must learn to see those parts where belief is made visible. Let us use "game" as a synonym here: we "game" the system, we follow the rules of the "game", we win or lose. The game is procedural and rule-based, it has a set number of conditions which can be improved by a number of actions. Conversely, "play" is usually defined as

much looser, a type of activity that takes place as a dynamic, interrelated chain of communication, often by multi-layered constraints. It could be said to be non-productive, carrying little or no extrinsic value, thus adding nothing to the production of society, at the very least not in an economic sense. Playing is intrinsically different from gaming. As an interesting example of a "game" that explicitly aims to create a meeting, consider the E-awase games of 18th Century Japan: "E-awase, or image-based games generally consisted of two alike, or related, images painted on shells. Players would then arrange the pictures in pairs or triplets, a pastime intended to be a casual, conversational game, suitable for debate, comparison, and judgment calls relying on the artistic and aesthetic sensibilities of those involved. In E-awase-style games, chance facilitates social exchange." (Flanagan 2009: 74) Similarly to three-player soccer the exact delineation for the game is not important beyond the somewhat obvious fact that in E-awase games you are not in it for "winning". Instead the E-awase game is a spiritual relative to the previously discussed tea room.

The promise of games is similar to that of neo-liberal capitalism: that everyone can rise above the rabble, become something greater, that there is an equal, level playing field from which wheat is separated from chaff. We are basically thus interested in conflict and adversarial relations and in teleological action for some distant directive. To play to lose is counter-productive or deemed unsportsmanlike; just follow the discourse on the immorality of suicide terrorism to see this in its most extreme

political context. Activities in society are marred by their incongruous need to be “meaningful”, to provide some reward (money, career advancement, or other gain) or to be generally measurable.

With the radical possibilities invoked by a playful decentering of the social, 50's and 60's artists of such illustrious groups like Fluxus and the Situationists were at the fore of a new art-making. Sadly, the same energies that some pragmatically spent into the social-political affairs were opposed to the more “pure” dealings with art of, say, Asger Jörn for example. I believe that why these parallel energies moved in the first place is because of a deep dissatisfaction with the overshadowing qualities of an increasingly administered life, albeit that the two main strands of work – the political and the art – did not meet each other, or rather lost touch, because of the heightened tensions and stakes in the claims they respectively made. But right now our worldview prefers games. Before a human subject becomes truly accepted into the adult realm, he or she must drop the bad habit of play, to learn to follow rules, to be free from the desire to create own paths outside of those that are trusted and symbolically enforced. Remember the story of Red Riding Hood and what happens when you don't conform. The moral of the story has a history that predates the brothers' Grimm's version and will likely remain a staple of a moralistic society for a long time to come.



“Chair for Democracy”

A chair which is almost entirely sawed through, with the saw still sticking in. Impractical as a chair, it asks the question if you want to share it with someone. The activity of sawing is expected, but it also works allegorically.

The Role of Persuasive Imagination

Recurring is – yet again – belief as a construction and the enforcing of rigid regimes (the birth and recurrence of abstract ideas) rather than the experience of, and natural consequence thereby, an event as captured by sensory inputs. It seems too impossible a notion to render language powerless, instead promoting art that is immediate and sensory, lacking the capability to create a basis for ordering devices. Yet, I find the thought intriguing if it meant that hegemonic control was lost. Can one retain the mystical qualities of diffuse symbolic objects and still remain free from the weight of administered life? Is it a gradual scale, which it seems to be as these qualities existed in less controlled societies than our current, or is it a paradigm/mindset/one-way door that once walked through is already too late to exit?

The two extreme ends of this approach, thus far, might possibly be:

1. That the making of objects that order thought or action is the most contemporary art-form.
2. That the above art is to be avoided, leading to art that is only primitively symbolic, however impossible that may seem.

The lack of an aesthetic anarchism (rather relegated to anesthetic anarchism), so to speak, is apparent as Seeing (as an active event, a verb) is so highly structured now by control instances.

Humans are far from what might naively be called an "original experience", as nothing longer seems fresh, new, captivating or unspoiled by placement in ordering regimes. Relearning the fascination for Seeing – although understood in the expanded sense of Experiencing, Doing et cetera – is something that is sorely needed. One may then rediscover the multi-layered beauty of everyday actions and to also dismantle the instrumental-consequential-relational notions of much contemporary art and society. We need aesthetic anarchism, or symbolic atheism, maybe even pagan usage-sorcery. Something other than to just do it, at the very least. Meeting others should be done with utmost respect, where the making of art is not through making of the object, but by unpacking its actions, together. A parallel discourse between object and humans may then proceed to evolve naturally from this.

Where the "basic human experience" stems from is our partaking in the world such as it appears to us. Instead of thinking of some mind-body

split, we ought to see the biological functioning as much more intertwined than that. However, we are still essentially flesh and bone, perceiving and acting within a physical world with physical qualities. Where objects, come in is in their tool status in the purely mechanistic sense – a hammer can transport a given force with more exact, predictable, and less immediately painful results than a fist – but also in their symbolic sense. This is where belief, faith, trust and their respective antitheses enter.

An object thus demands a varying degree of imagination to be fully created and potentialized in the mindscape. It is not as easy as arguing in favor for a “white cube world” of only constructed frames (as in a way I might be proposing, in order to regain control and composure). Yet our collective lifeworld, quite literally, is attacked through the strengthened mass of symbols under influence of collectives we feel alienated from. As I wrote in the very early parts of this text, we might say that a photograph or painting is “used” similarly to how a backpack is used. One artist who chose to entirely accept this thinking was Mark Rothko, who famously designed an entire chapel¹⁷ to work in tandem with a selection of his paintings in order for them to be properly used, that is, not specifically viewed but rather engaged bodily not only because of their sheer size but by his notion of usership/viewership based in a certain kind of religious format. We thus find that the mind (and the human subject) is always plastic and malleable. Even Tadao Ando^{18 19 20}, with his very formal and

17 <http://www.rothkochapel.org>

18 <http://orianakesseler.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/ando-copy.jpg>

19 <http://behance.vo.llnwd.net/profiles5/231240/projects/703660/a47e900738978a5b69c160275efda19a.jpg>

20 <http://lgarquitectura.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/casa-koshino.jpg>

strict architecture, has a style which almost demands a brutally present vision and experience, like a modern-day form of the tea house, but larger in scale. Yet his style is therefore very human in its sublime play of light and attention to texture, curvature and surfaces. Like with commercial desire-creation and commodities, I find that artist-designed objects or devices can become similar tools with which reality can be reconfigured, deconstructed or otherwise investigated. Good examples of objects that shake symbolic foundations would for example be Sonett Ehlers' Rape-aXe (or RapeX) anti-rape condom²¹, or FemDefence, artist Leif Lindell's fictional anti-rape tampon^{22 23}, things that create new discourse but also violently disrupt the potential action-spaces (which seems to have been their real target in the first place, and based on comments and generated discourse it worked very well). These are speculative products or things, and in that way, they gain both artistic vigor and a far more flexible conceptual basis as they is inserted into the symbol-play of the general lifeworld.

Persuasion might be a reasonable way of semantically understanding what is going on within contemporary *democratic capitalism*. Imagination, on the other looser hand, is then extremely important as it allows associative connections, as well as other non-linear processes to enter, even in the case of "static" works, such as installations, paintings or recorded music. (Intuitive leaps and the knowledge of the hand, and tacit

21 http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_i-fVelx-cY/TOOv1HXgUnI/AAAAAAAAACY/GpvlbzBYLSY/s1600/Untitled-1.jpg

22 <http://www.sfi.se/sv/svensk-filmdatabas/item/?type=MOVIE&itemid=58016>

23 <https://thewhoryspirit.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/femdefence.jpg>

knowledge, for example, enters here) What happens with the brain and one's thoughts when subjected to a material that is highly unstable or destabilizing – think of the experience of encountering hazardous materials in a work by Mona Hatoum for example^{24 25} – gives a bodily credibility to something that otherwise might only exist as a blunt mental construction. While fear of bodily harm is frequent as a trope in art-making, it makes us remember our body in our space, and what that proprioception means for how we engage with the world and what we make in order to engage with others.

²⁴ http://www.theguideistanbul.com/uploads/172000/172969_orj.jpg

²⁵ http://arttattler.com/Images/NorthAmerica/Minnesota/MinneapolisInstituteofArts/Until%20Now/06-09_mia327_UntilNow02_Hatoum_detail.jpg



JAMES CARLYLE
* *JANUARY 18TH 1952*
† *MAY 6TH 2013*

Funeral services for Mr. James Carlyle were held on May 10th at 1:00 p.m. in the Somerset End-of-Life Center. Mech. Ass. 7GN officiated, with Sr. Disp. Eng. Thomas J. Hansen on video link.

Mr. Carlyle completed in excess of 10,000 workdays and enjoyed excellent physical health until he found it hastily deteriorating during winter of last year. With less than 20 sick-days in his lifetime he was certainly a model careerist and his competencies, which were of no ill repute, will be missed at his place of occupation. Earning an average disposable income, he usually spent his free time driving his Toyota hatchback to the supermarket for common groceries that belong in a middle-class household when not betting on wind-up horses, his great pastime leisure.

An avid sportsfan, he donates his petty remains to the local football club. He leaves behind his family of three, including his loving husband Carl.

Detail from artist book

The entire spread from where this is taken is based on the notion of plausible absurdity. Obituaries are interesting text-works in themselves, as they paint a very specific kind of image of the deceased. In the context of this specific text, I wanted it to give a highly narrative vibe and also to critique how text implements this narration of our lives.

Conclusion:

Man, The Object-Mythologist and the Far End of Action

What the artist does, then, is to enframe. The art lies not in the image but in its frame which decides whose eyes we are viewing from, what the subject matter is, and what the overall scheme could be said to represent. Nothing is beyond representation, it is merely a question of ethics that allows or disallows, among other things, humans to be instrumentalized and objectified. Relational art objectifies people in its enframing of a context or situation or event because without it one would not be able to pursue either a straightforward modernist pedagogical mission nor do a slip-slidy "loose" event like those of Tiravanija as it would be entirely identical as an ontologically existing space-time event. At its core, it is

rather such artists as Santiago Sierra²⁶ or Christoph Schlingensiefel²⁷ who have properly pinpointed how life (as it were, in the capitalist West) is regulated, enframed and experienced by using the art-as-frame to contain events that would otherwise flow naturally in lived experience. Take the example of water in a glass: isolated in its glass frame it is allowed to acquire depth as the walls constrict linear expansion. As such it is forced to build upward volume and we can now talk about a separated and “massive” volume. Without the glass, however, there would be a shallow pool which would expand laterally until it finally settles. It lacks depth and definition, but is physically the same material and quantity. Yet, this is what separates the inconspicuous mess from the controllable substance.

I do not want to pursue an agenda of rigid control over sensory, aesthetic or perceived life or something else. Far from it, and on the contrary I would wish for a far greater uncertainty of meanings, a wider expanse of possibilities in our own imagination (and mine!) when encountering situations, as well as greater reception of poetical existence. What I hope to have done is place some valid effort into suggesting that the discursive field which contemporary art engages is well integrated into the ways of “framing” such seemingly loose, free-form or uncontrollable events like relational or situational art. By understanding an event – in the very large sense I suppose this might be a meaningful way of extracting the core of such art – as an “object” that contains delimited space and affordances like any other material, physical or immaterial, we can see social

26 http://bombsite.com/images/attachments/0002/5005/Sierra01_body.jpg

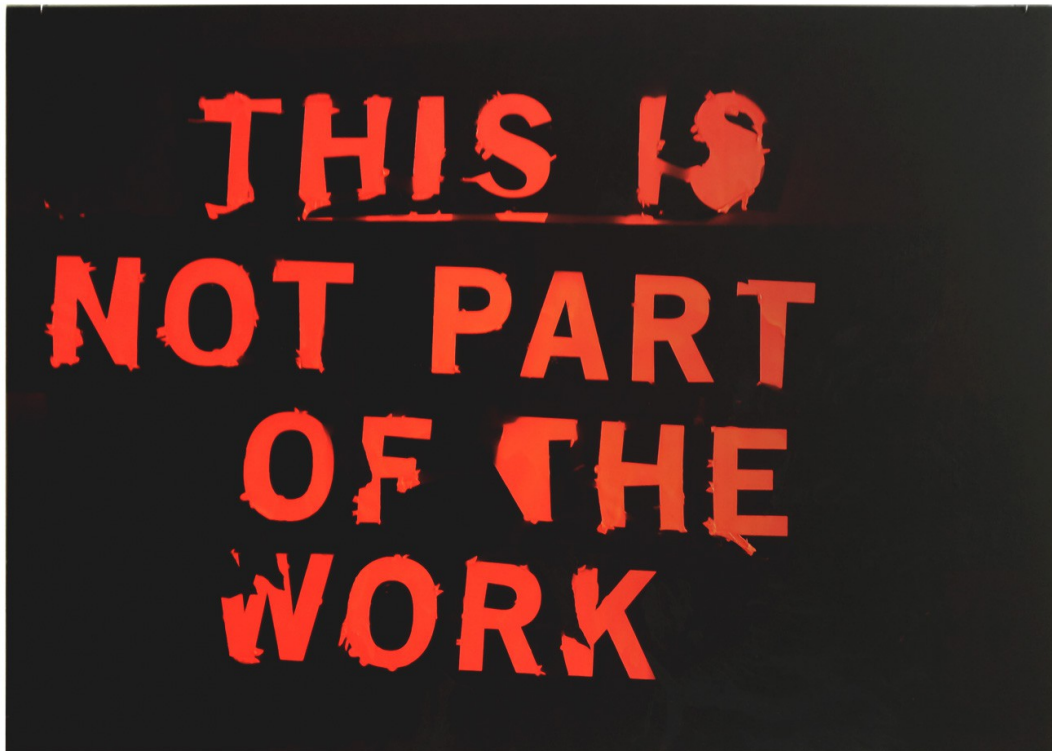
27 <http://www.ica.org.uk/?lid=16134>

constructs and art as working with very similar types of raw material. Their inter-relationship comes from the notion that independent actors can engage in a specific number of sub-relations by way of discursive practices and also object-based constraints. Why this might seem both novel and old at the same time is that it echoes some of yesteryear's social constructionism, yet it suggests a very blunt existential position in that every act is inherently flat, pointless and only ever a purely ethical standpoint. This ethics is likely then the far end of what the mythologizing quality of human cognitive life and possibility for action is made up of. Then finally, we are faced with the question of free will again: if one believes in nothing, and the symbolic realm holds practically no power over one, what creates the basis for an ethics? What is possible to choose as a belief. I am not certain, and feel that there may not be hard and fast answers for such a vast, theoretical enquiry.

Civilization is perhaps something like the cobbled-together unified power, a common worldview – whereas this less civilized form I aim to conjure up points to a life teeming of ambiguity, openness to stimuli and directness in action which we today fail to grasp and even less, acknowledge. It might be too late for a “regression” into alternative lives that are no longer social in our large-scale sense. Contemporary art is a highly social affair concerning (though not exclusively, of course) the pursuit of an ethical standpoint, contrasted to the moral, and therefore *definitive*, standard and for my own part, my goal has been to understand if there can ever be consensus in this department. If not, then the more primitive

or ancient arts suggesting a oneness with nature and *bios* or even other humans makes more sense than might be the case were we entirely intellectual creatures.

But if all space is occupied, either materially by laws and capital or cognitively by ideology and suggestions, one would need first to create a space, silent and apart, from where to witness and engage. As David Bohm writes, "we need to establish a place somewhere, where we can have leisure, as it were, to go into this. The work *leisure* has a root meaning 'emptiness' – an empty space of some sort – an empty space of time or place, where there is nothing occupying you." Having found such a space, it may be high time to re-connect with each other, to find that primordial fascination and dedication to integrate with others, when we have been already stripped bare of the iron-clad ties that bind us in our current moment. "Then", Bohm continues, "if a group of people really trusted each other and had a right spirit of fellowship, something like [finding the unlimited potential of contact] may arise in a dialogue." (Bohm 2004: 108) We need to discard and rethink many things before we get to that ideal position, but anyone who has been really close to another knows exactly what that unlimited potential is experienced like. Still, it is extremely hard to write about, as I have been arguing here for some length. That says something about the exclusive position of this contact and how it is neither democratic, always accessible or even possible to attain. In the end, it is only your own reference to a similar feeling that will, just possibly, make you understand what I am trying to get at and why that is worth struggling for.



This is Not Part of the Work (spray paint on foam board)

A bastardization of the painting-as-object by using the least classical “painterly” materials that still materially allude to that medium. Having the visual quality of a sign, textually it is a “liar’s paradox”, which is similar to how the text in Magritte’s “This is not a pipe” was used. Processually, I made this work with a variety of styles and methods I wouldn’t normally use. Exactly what the subject in the work is becomes very hard to pinpoint.

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