

Art and Objects: A Manifesto

Said Mikki

E-mail: said.m.mikki@gmail.com

Abstract. We develop a series of theses on the philosophical aesthetics of design art. A sketch of an outline of a theory of objects is drawn from within a naturalistic worldview, that of abstract materialism and the general, still ongoing, quest to build a comprehensive philosophy of nature encompassing not only the physical world, but also culture, art, and politics.

An object is the final product of a process of *ontological seeing*. However, an object is not seen by the eyes, but felt by the mind. Objects do *not* exist *for* us; they belong with the universal process of thinking-in-nature. When I say ‘there is an object here,’ what I mean is that something outside myself has suddenly grasped my attention and made me aware of its real presence. In a certain way, the structure of “this-something” is more active (and hence more fundamental) than my own transitory self-cognitive and perceptual capacities.

One of the fundamental pillars of a new theory of objects is the *nonfoundational* status of the human subject. In the ontology of nature, objects are free of the observer’s consciousness. There are no seeing-beings informing the hypostasis of objecthood in the real world.

An object is an emerging field of ontological vision. The object in the world is grasped by an essentially nonpersonalistic feeling already infused into the being of the object. Therefore, the object is not produced by the seeing agent’s mind, but both mind and objects are eventually made of the same “stuff”: *perceiviedenss*.

In order to bypass idealism, a theory of objects in aesthetics is necessary. Here, our goal is not to study the sociological structure of the system of objects, but rather the *onto-aesthetic* status of objecthood as such.

For us, an object is a sector of being that somehow fell into our ownmost sphere of vision. The artist and the philosopher are both concerned with the ontological status of objecthood in the world. It is not merely because common sense apparently suggests that the world is nothing but a collection of objects (a theory we reject here, in agreement with Heidegger¹), but more importantly because learning how to live in a creative tension with surrounding objects is an important factor in our education as human persons. Although the theory of objects must renounce the Cartesian-Kantian Ego, we are still going to pay considerable attention to the various subtle mechanisms of integration and individuation responsible of producing the mature human subject.²

¹Heidegger [1–5].

²Jung [6, 7].

But the process of personal development can be seen as extending even beyond the human by further embracing the animal world.³ In general, we would like to envisage an *ethological* theory of aesthetics in conjunction with objects and design.

We must distinguish between *design* and *architecture*. Classically put, architecture is about constructing buildings, while – in our view – design is all about *things*.

Instead of ‘things’, we say *objects*.

The work that lays in front of us herein is *A Theory of Objects*. It is part of *Aesthetic Theory*, a Division of *Being and Nature*.⁴

We don’t address only architects, designers, engineers, mathematicians, scientists, painters, sculptors. First of all, we are *philosophers*. Philosophy is a way of life. It has no purpose, no goals, no aims, no objectives. The intention of the philosophical act is to create for the sake of creation as such. *To create* means *to live*. And living well is the prime motor of the philosophical vocation of man and woman.⁵

Design is the discourse of creating formed objects. Objects are not mere things. For something to become an object, it must go through a process of *transformation*. But instead of saying ‘transformation of things’, we prefer the *metamorphoses of objects*.

For a thing to become an object, it must enter into a *social* process.⁶ The making of an object is akin to the production of commodities.⁷ But design and economics, though subtly interrelated, are *not* identical. There is a fundamental difference between the two. Design is a subfield of *aesthetics*; economics is a subdiscipline of *sociology*.

An object is a thing *designed for play* (aesthetics.⁸) An object is a thing *produced* (technology.⁹) An object is a *commodity* that has exchange value (economics.¹⁰) In fact, objects are located right at the intersection of the three fields of aesthetics, technology, and economics. We can’t fully grasp the essence of object-hood without paying careful attention to what those three disparate discourses have to say on the subject. We need to learn patience and humility, we need first to become students.

Fundamentally speaking, objects can *not* be grasped *conceptually*, because logic, judgement, classification, analogy, and the entire conceptual apparatus of language do not capture the essence of object-hood.¹¹ What makes an object *as such* is not merely a context of use (economics), but rather the *environment* inside which it dwells. Dwelling will immediately take us into a theory of *space*. To live “inside something” is like sharing common resources with others. Space is sharing. Sharing is living. Objects are implanted into the Other. The Other is that which lies outside my direct innermost sphere. We must learn how to disentangle the inside and the outside of the same thing: Objects do *not* pop out like isolated “individuated” heaps of countable ejected “stuff.” Instead, every object is a complex structure composed of *core* and its surrounding *world*.

³Jakob von Uexküll [8, 9].

⁴Mikki [10].

⁵Seneca [11]; Nietzsche [12, 13].

⁶Baudrillard [14].

⁷Baudrillard [15].

⁸Gadamer [16].

⁹Simondon [17].

¹⁰Marx [18]; Baudrillard [19, 20].

¹¹Heidegger [1, 21].

The ontological bifurcation of an object into *core* and *world* does not present a return to Cartesian dualism. We are not trying to reinstall those worn-out binary structures of mind/body, spirit/flesh, I/You, Subject/Object that have been damaging and distorting the quest for philosophical truth. Core-and-World is a framework for ontology. It is post-human and material, but also nonreductionist in scope and spirit.

The major goal of philosophy: To exclude the Cartesian Subject, the Despotic Signifier, the Ego, Consciousness, Ego-Consciousness, the Transcendental Self, Personal Deity, etc.¹² Those are to be ejected and replaced by Nature, Thinking, Pantheistic Deity, and so on. How does such reorientation of philosophy's scope in the large intersect with the theory of objects? In several very important ways. First of all, we no longer take for granted the basic structure of 'economics-as-human-social-science' to be the most fundamental constitutive factor for defining what objects are. Objects are no longer reducible to the commodity form, and the orthodox Marxist hypostasis of use and exchange values in which the latter became the primary defining ontological structure of object-as-commodity-form will be rejected here. Objects are to be seen now as final outcomes resulting from a long and complex nonpersonalistic, nonhuman process of material individuation. In order for this to make sense, we must develop in parallel a theory of nonhuman sociology, which in fact is the task of the Division on Society and Organization in *Being and Nature*. Within this intellectual framework, objects are incomprehensible outside social relations, *this* remains true, but the seachange of experience is that the very concept of the 'social' we are operating with has to undergo a substantial and almost complete transformation. Against sociology as a science of human organization, we study social *ontology*, which is a discourse on multiplicities of organisms and anti-organisms. Objects in this view are still defined by their "context of use" though now with respect to generalized agents we call *organisms* instead of the celebrated "rational agents" of Weberian sociology.¹³ Moreover, since every organism is already bounded by the explosive/implosive field of the anti-organismic, the concept of object-hood as such becomes inherently and fundamentally *metastable*¹⁴; that is, and in a first-order approximation, objects are never fixed or completed wholes. They are always changing and transforming into something else.

As an artist, I have now to face objects in a manner quite different from that adopted by the classical aesthetic theories of Hegel and Adorno.¹⁵ For me, the creator and consumer of formed matter, the object is like being itself, a structure embedded into a larger structure. Every kitchen utensil and chair and room is enclosed within the larger confines of an enviroing field, that of the *world*.

Object = Core + World.

This is not a formula, neither binary nor dualistic. The scheme above is a *framework* for thinking about objects, not a prescription. Nor an instruction. In art, we are against method and methodology.

The Core is not a substantial being. It is not Aristotelian, though respectful of the original impulses in Aristotle's thinking. We disagree with Aristotle's followers, not

¹²Guattari [22]; Deleuze [23].

¹³Weber [24].

¹⁴Simondon [25, 26].

¹⁵Hegel [27]; Adorno [28].

the master himself, who continues to be extremely interesting even while erring.

The World is not a spatial space. It is not a container. It is not physical space, though the latter is conditioned by the World. The World belongs to ontology. It is a philosophical conception of the Real, while the Real is secondary since it is *produced*, that is, subsequent and posterior to that which created it.

Deleuze wished to rehabilitate the Platonic conception of the Idea even while critiquing Plato.¹⁶ He installed the Idea as the “genetic cause” we just alluded to above. But for us there are no efficient causes, and even Deleuzian Ideas do not count as such formative agents. The object is produced, that’s all right, but the producer need not be known or anticipated in a causal fashion. It is highly probable that every object “we” design is in fact created by Nature in a way making it impossible to trace this genetic act back into any localizable “part” of the sum total of that holistic system named ‘Nature’. Nature produces whether through human or *nonhuman* agents, that is all.

If we reject all Platonic¹⁷ and Neoplatonic¹⁸ theories of origins, including those highly modern and sophisticated ones developed by Deleuze¹⁹ and Whitehead,²⁰ then we have no other alternative than going back to the Heideggerian scheme of being-in-the-world.²¹ There, the object is thought of as a “composite” of the form Core + World. But we must guard against the danger of reinterpretation and overinterpretation. We are not reactivating the Heideggerian Machine, but also we don’t wish to bypass Heidegger. The relationship of the philosopher to previous philosophers is quite complex. It has nothing to do with the anathema of schools and followers. What are we, anyway?

The object has a material constitution. This constitution carves out its visible boundaries. Therefore, there must be some “observer” capable of “seeing” the object. This, in a nutshell, is the Cartesian ontology *par excellence*. But if we now turn toward the anti-subjective view, thinking of the object as an inextricable “compound” of Core and World, then things will look quite different. Here, an object needs not be “seen” at all since it is already enveloped within an infinite *open* field of clearing, that which we referred to as *World*. The World “sees” the object’s Core, even when there are no humans around; the object’s “interior essence” is unthinkable without its all-caring atmosphere supplied by its World. The World is already “observing” the object’s flesh, and the object’s Core acquires its existential legitimacy from the structure of being-embraced-by-the-other enacted by this engendering World. The World is the Other of the Object’s Core, and this otherness has nothing to do with any ego or subject associated with the designer or producer of the object under consideration.

The purpose of design: To distance the self from the Cartesian Subject, the artist-as-designer becoming a non-Ego, though still conscious of his position in the world.

An object is not something you design for some “social application”; it is not here “for an other” or made under some obligation toward certain external institutions. Objects are created by nature; even if the designer happens to be human, that does

¹⁶Deleuze [23].

¹⁷Plato [29].

¹⁸Plotinus [30]; Proclus [31–36].

¹⁹Deleuze [23, 37].

²⁰Whitehead [38–41].

²¹Heidegger [1].

not change the essence of the problematic of design as art, because the latter has no strategic objectives. The ultimate aim of art is to have *no* purpose whatsoever. Yet, in contrast to Capitalism, art is not production for the sake of production as such. *Art and Capitalism are poles apart*. One cannot tolerate the other, and in general the relationship between the two has always been tense, even though they both have learned how to live with the co-presence of each other.

Object design is a revolt against representation, exactly like some powerful currents of abstract painting. In the aesthetic theory of design, the guiding formula is this: *Non-objective art is transformed into abstract object design*. The question now is the following: Does an object design aim at conveying an objective meaning? The answer of postmodern design is plainly negative. Object design uses objects as medium but not in order to communicate any semantic or philosophical message to some presupposed audience. It is true that objects are still designed to be sold, not to be viewed in a museum or an art gallery, but that does not make them amenable to any instrumental reckoning. The truth is that the designer in the postmodern moment is facing the dilemma of being *both* an artist *and* a professional. In contrast to the painter, he cannot just proclaim something like “total art” or “pure free art” as his zealously-guarded mission to humanity.²² By merely being *postmodern* artists, designers are not bound to obey even the most radical intellectual currents of thought. The designer, if he wishes to be an artist, must first of all transform himself into a *philosopher*. Only a philosopher-artist is a postmodern artist, and only as a postmodern artist a designer can be an artist.

Design is the creation of new objects for no apparent reason other than the whim of the moment, the desire to live in *freedom*. Freedom is the prime mover of the design artist in his quest for change and societal reform.

References

- [1] M. Heidegger, *Being and time*. New York: HarperPerennial/Modern Thought, 2008.
- [2] —, *Nietzsche: Volume 1 and 2 (Vol. 1: The Will to Power as Art, Vol. 2: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same)*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.
- [3] —, *Nietzsche: Volume 3 and 4 (Vol. 3: The Will to power as knowledge and as metaphysics; Vol. 4: Nihilism)*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.
- [4] —, *On the way to language*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982.
- [5] —, *Poetry, language, thought*. New York: Perennial Classics, 2001.
- [6] C. G. Jung, *The red book*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2009.
- [7] —, *The black books: notebooks of transformation (1913-1932)*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020.
- [8] J. Uexkull, *A foray into the worlds of animals and humans: with A theory of meaning*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- [9] —, *Theoretische biologie*. Berlin: J. Springer, 1928.
- [10] S. Mikki, *Being and Nature: Abstract materialism and the ontology of dynamic space*. Unpublished book, 2013-2021.
- [11] L. Seneca, *Letters on ethics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- [12] F. Nietzsche, *The birth of tragedy and other writings*. Cambridge, U.K. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- [13] —, *The gay science: with a prelude in German rhymes and an appendix of songs*. Cambridge, U.K. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- [14] J. Baudrillard, *The system of objects*. London: Verso, 2005.
- [15] —, *The consumer society: myths and structures*. London: Sage Publications Ltd, 1998.
- [16] H. Gadamer, *Truth and method*. London New York: Continuum, 2004.

²²Baudrillard [42].

- [17] G. Simondon, *On the mode of existence of technical objects*. Minneapolis, MN Minneapolis, Minn: Univocal Publishing, University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- [18] K. Marx, *Capital: a critique of political economy (volume 1)*. London New York, N.Y: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1978.
- [19] J. Baudrillard, *For a critique of the political economy of the sign*. London New York: Verso, 2019.
- [20] —, *Symbolic exchange and death*. London Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1993.
- [21] M. Heidegger, *What is a thing?* Chicago: H. Regnery Co, 1968.
- [22] F. Guattari, *The machinic unconscious: essays in schizoanalysis*. Los Angeles, CA Cambridge, Mass: Semiotext(e) Distributed by the MIT Press, 2011.
- [23] G. Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- [24] M. Weber, *Economy and society: an outline of interpretive sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
- [25] G. Simondon, *Individuation in light of notions of form and information, Part I*. Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2020.
- [26] —, *Individuation in light of notions of form and information, Part II*. Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2020.
- [27] G. Hegel, *Aesthetics: lectures on fine art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
- [28] T. Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- [29] Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*. Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- [30] Plotinus, *The enneads*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- [31] Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus: Volume 1, Book 1: Proclus on the Socratic State and Atlantis*. Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- [32] —, *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus: Volume 2, Book 2: Proclus on the Causes of the Cosmos and its Creation*. Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- [33] —, *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus: Volume 3, Book 3: Part 1, Proclus on the World's Body*. Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- [34] —, *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus: Volume 4, Book 3, Part 2, Proclus on the World Soul*. Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- [35] —, *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus: Volume 5, Book 4: Proclus on Time and the Stars*. Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- [36] —, *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus: Volume 6, Book 5: Proclus on the Gods of Generation and the Creation of Humans*. Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- [37] G. Deleuze, *Logic of sense*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- [38] A. Whitehead, *The concept of nature: the Tarner lectures delivered in Trinity College, November 1919*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- [39] —, *Science and the modern world*. New York: Free Press, 1967.
- [40] —, *Process and reality: an essay in cosmology*. New York: Free Press, 1978.
- [41] —, *Symbolism: its meaning and effect*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1985.
- [42] J. Baudrillard, *The conspiracy of art: manifestos, interviews, essays*. New York: Semiotext(e), 2005.