



# UTOPIC IMPULSES

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## Object Theory

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*A novel is, it often seems, nothing but an  
elusive search for a definition.*

— MILAN KUNDERA, *The Art of the Novel*



Among all living things, humans are the only ones with the capacity to think (we think). This capacity for thinking gives us a consciousness of the world: we know that we exist, that we are born and that we will die, that we are temporal beings, with a past, a present and a future. And this consciousness requires that we make sense of the world. We do this through language, spoken and written words, literature, fiction, theory, science, religion, history, and also with music and song. We do this as well by creating images, and we do it by creating objects. Each of these categories of action upon the world is distinct yet connected to the others. Object-making is probably the oldest making-activity of humankind, and we can speculate that it preceded the development of language and the making of images. To survive in the

world, humans first needed tools. Formalized language probably came next, followed by images. If there is such a “genealogy,” it is actually of little importance, and if there is such a precedence, it remains irrelevant here. Yet language and images are closely interconnected, while objects are at a farther distance, temporally and ontologically, from language. We now live in a world where language, in all its fictionalized forms, rules the world, and it does so largely through images. One of the many forms of fiction that language takes is theory, or history, and, in the present instance, art history.

And the history of art is really the history of images.

In the world as it exists and as we experience it, there are two complementary phenomena, usually perceived and presented as distinct: i.e. nature and culture. Nature encompasses all the things (among other things) that exist outside humankind yet includes humankind itself. Nature is construed as either that which is created by divine intervention or that which creates itself through the laws of physics. Culture is what humans do to nature. The world of culture is vast and complex, as is nature. Culture includes speech and the written word, sounds and music, movement and everything we humans (and probably other life forms too) make, alter,



“Culture is what  
humans do to nature.”  
Jingdezhen, China.  
Photo: Paul Mathieu.

transform and create. Material culture is more specifically concerned with physical things: architecture, engineering, design, crafts and objects of all kinds (fashion, textiles, furniture, jewelry, pottery and other containers in all their forms and materials, etc.), but also with all manifestations of image making (visual culture), that is to say, those things that are best experienced with vision alone, primarily through sight, such as painting, drawing, photography, sculpture, television programs, computer imagery, all print media, graphic design, illustration and so forth. All of these aspects of material/visual culture contribute their own potential to what is generally known as art, the world of creativity and expression, perception and aesthetics. Yet, the history of art is still largely the history of images, of things that are visually experienced, of visual art.

#### DEFINITIONS

By “image,” what do I mean exactly? An image, in the narrow yet specific definition I am using here, is a cultural (as opposed to natural) phenomenon experienced through sight alone, visually. A painting is an image, a photograph is an image, a sculpture is also an image, a tridimensional image but an image nonetheless. A building can also be an image if it is simply looked at, and buildings tend more and more, unfortunately, to have a flat quality as a result of being generated from a flat image, a plan. Just think of the spatial complexity of Gothic cathedrals, in many ways the ultimate handmade objects, which were not generated from architectural plans but from three-dimensional examples and models. If we make some exception for blindness, anything, and certainly any perceptual experience, even sound often, can be reduced to a visual experience. Anything is potentially an image, a visual experience. And, of course, any experience can also be expressed in some way through language.

In the world of material visual culture (all those things humans do to nature), there is another category of things that are not experienced solely through sight, visually, and which do not necessarily necessitate language either, but which require other senses, primarily but not exclusively touch,

for a complete experience and a full understanding. These things are what I call here “objects,” and an object theory is what I am attempting here. “Every history implies another history, one that is not being told,” to paraphrase Michel Foucault.

Objects are all the things largely ignored by the history of art as we presently know it. It is possible if not requisite to obtain a terminal degree and become an authority in art history without ever considering the role and importance of objects within culture. If there is a remaining place where ignorance, prejudice, discrimination and censorship still exist within the experience of art, it is specifically where handmade objects are concerned. Entire “Histories of Art” have been written that do not contain a single object. It is more accurate to consider these books as “Histories of Images” instead.

Despite continuous attempts throughout the preceding century and before to reconcile art and life, to open up the definitions and practices of art, to blur differences and remove hierarchies, the world of art (in its theories, discourses, institutions, power structures, etc.) is still largely and often exclusively the world of visual culture, of visual art. Today, with the new technologies, it is even more so. This leaves behind large sections of material culture whose contribution to culture is immense, essential and continuous, yet still largely dismissed and/or ignored. The silence is quite simply deafening. There are two main exceptions to this state of affairs: architecture and design, either industrial design (industrially produced things of all kinds) and graphic design (the ever changing world of images constantly altering the visual landscape we inhabit, again, outside and beyond the natural landscape). Architecture and design have been readily embraced by the theories and studies of visual and material culture; they have been somewhat absorbed and included in what we understand as “art,” in all its manifestations and institutions, largely because of their inherent economic power and their importance in the world we live in, in a direct relation to consumerism and capitalism. And the analysis of the importance of power structures is essential to any understanding of

theories and discourses. Seen in this light, the art world is largely a marketplace, of things as well as of ideas. This embracing of architecture and design practices by the art world was preceded by the similar acceptance of photography (in its materialization, a mechanical and chemical process, originally anyway) as a legitimate art form (and it could be said that today 95% of art experiences are mediated by photography and related practices), a phenomenon now repeated with other technologies of image making, because, quite simply, they were instantly acceptable to a world obsessed by visuality to the detriment of all other senses. Although I am not directly interested in architecture and design here, the basic principles behind the theory of objects I am exploring still directly apply to these practices, if not at the political level, at least at the conceptual.

#### WHAT IS AN IMAGE?

First, a better understanding of the workings of images is necessary. How do we experience images, what is their phenomenology? Obviously, images are experienced visually, primarily. This visual experience is one of distancing, of removal, of separation. Sight establishes difference as rupture, as an opposition. This is even more the case within representation. A portrait of your mother — be it a painting, a drawing, a bust, a photograph, a film, a video or even more so, a virtual image — such an image is not your actual mother. Experiencing that image distances you, separates you, removes you from the actual physical experience of your real-life mother. It exists in opposition to reality. It creates another experience, a new experience, powerful and real, yet removed from the reality of a live experience. Images are always representation. Images establish a fundamental opposition between two types of experiences. All forms of binary oppositions are intrinsic to images. These oppositions between two very different forms of experience are also hierarchical in nature (in either direction) since they cannot possibly be equal. Most importantly, images and all representations are directly connected to language through fiction and the operative power of symbols. Images are always literal and they imply and

demand the production of a narrative. This narrative around images often takes the form of a theory (or theories), especially with abstract images, which are also representations of something else, be it a geometric form or even a drip or a stain (and, in many cases, the fiction often takes the form of myth-making around specific practices or, even worse, personalities). This is where the direct link between images and theories resides. Since our world (and certainly the academic world of institutions where art, visual art, operates) is largely constituted around power structures based on language, texts and images have become the predominant forms for the creation of meaning. This is why theory is so important and essential in order to clarify and establish the critical role played by objects (and specifically here, handmade objects).

#### WHAT IS AN OBJECT?

Objects are of two main types: TOOLS, which are active (the conceptual aspect of tools is function) and CONTAINERS, which are receptive (the conceptual aspect of containers is containment; that is to say, they establish a transition between interior and exterior. It is important to keep in mind that this transition does not imply an opposition but a continuity). As always with objects, these differences are not absolute, but complementary. Cars, for example, are altogether tools (when they displace their content) and containers. Tools are different within the general category of objects since they are used to make other objects and these objects are usually containers, at the conceptual level anyway. Yet containers usually, if not always, imply a tool-aspect as well, and they can be used to act upon the world. This is yet another example of the reconciliation of differences, the main framework around which this object theory is constructed.<sup>1</sup>

What is the main characteristic shared by all objects in whatever form they take, independent of materials, of the processes, tools, equipment and technologies used in their making, or even when and by whom they were made? My answer is that at the CONCEPTUAL level, all objects are



"At the CONCEPTUAL level, all objects are CONTAINERS."  
Chen-Lu, China.  
Photo: Paul Mathieu.

CONTAINERS. They are articulated around the transition between exterior and interior. Containment has to do with the relationship between the object and its environment. Containment bridges an object with its environment. Objects are about difference as continuity, not difference as rupture, which is the operative characteristic of images (if an image always represents something else, an object, on the other hand, only represents itself). A container is a space where opposites are unified, where differences are reconciled (an object is always altogether an image AND an object.). Containers bring together the extremes in reconciliation; they cancel the dialectical impulse of language, which makes them so difficult to be understood solely through language (by resisting narrative and theory). All the binaries, polarities, opposites and dichotomies present in language (and implicitly in images as well) are reconciled within the container, within the object. Containers and objects combine in symbiosis the top and the bottom, the front and the back, the interior and the exterior, the surface and the form, representation and presentation, image and object, material and concept, nature and culture, art and life, intellectual experience and physical experience, body and mind, and all and any



other binary oppositions we can conceptualize. Objects are always inherently material, inherently abstract and inherently conceptual. These three aspects are equally important, and, thus, they resist hierarchization conceptually, beyond market value and consumerism.

#### THE EXAMPLE OF THE FRAME

In an art context, the ultimate object is the frame. The frame is the ultimate container for paintings, drawings, photographs and other images. In sculpture, the equivalent is the plinth, now largely replaced by the floor of the museum or gallery as institutions become, by extension, a different version of the plinth. And we have seen the progressive removal of plinths and frames in art presentation in the twentieth century, where their historical role has been replaced by architecture and by the printed or projected image, which occupies the full space of the page or the screen. Yet the frame and the plinth (a form of furniture) hardly exist within the art discourse. How often have I seen in exhibitions and in museums worldwide, paintings exhibited in frames carved and painted by the artist where the identification label simply stated “oil on canvas,” with no mention whatsoever of the frame! Total invisibility of the object, even when made by the artist! Does the function of frames render them irrelevant conceptually? Isn't function a concept, anyway? Could this be because they are objects first and not solely images? The frame or the plinth is the space, the place, the site where things change, where the transition between art and life takes place. An image is *always* defined by clear borders. It has edges where things stop and end. An object has ambiguous borders where things start and begin, and this is made even more complex by the presence of images on objects, when characteristics of images and objects are present on the same thing. Images are always signs for something else. They always represent something else, are stand-ins for other things and phenomena, including other images. Objects, on the other hand, do not represent anything else; they are signs for themselves. You know a chair is a chair because it embodies chair as sign for chair while still being chair

as thing. A drawing of a chair also embodies chair as sign, but it has lost the materiality of the chair. Such a drawing is then weaker as a tool but more powerful as an image; through representation and the imaginative power of language it opens, at the symbolic level. Images on objects are also very rich in potential since they bring together two aspects of conceptualization: signs and things. Still, images on objects do not operate as independent images do. An image on an object is framed differently, since the frame is the object itself, on which the image is localized. The borders of the images are then different, in concept and in experience, from the borders of images that are independent and separate from a real, physical context. Images are always inside something, they are localized. They have borders, and they need a context to operate: a frame, wall, museum, book, catalogue, theory, etc. Images are in need of institutions, while objects can dispense with them (except politically, of course, since, in our culture, it is institutions that validate all human activities). Objects are, on the contrary, conceptually outside, mobile, independent of context, since they carry context intrinsically within themselves. They can go anywhere without significant (if any) loss of identity and meaning. Objects have no real locality. Again, images are directional, in order to be read correctly, to make sense, while objects are multidirectional and retain their identity even when upside down or inside out. They do not have such a specific viewpoint as images do, either. Frames and objects create epistemological breaks, where meaning and understanding is altered; they operate paradigm shifts where a real experience suddenly takes a new form, while still remaining real. Is the frame, the object, any less important conceptually than the image? The frame and the object both define a territory and establish a frontier. Images are localized (you know where they go), whereas objects have no real locality and they go everywhere (and also nowhere, not only physically, but especially conceptually). They have no place within existing theories, beyond semiotics (which reduces objects to the status of images, as social and cultural “signs,” anyway). The frame and the object fix the image, and the image is, by definition and experience, always

fixed. When the image changes, it is always really just another version of the same image. It is the frame and the object containing the image (at times, just a sign for a sign) that is, on the contrary, mobile. The frame is a prison for the image, yet images are also prisoners of their own selves, even when unframed or independent of plinths and seemingly free from physical constraints. Objects are free. You can always change the frame

(and change channels). Frames and all objects are interstitial, they operate in the “space between,” and, as such, they connect to reality and connect two realities, art and the real world. In psychology, the term would be “transitional,” but now is not the time or place to go there.<sup>2</sup>

#### DECORATION

Today, images on objects are largely “decorative,” and this decoration has retained none or little of the symbolic power of historical signs (often abstract) on objects, which connected humans among themselves and with the larger world of myths and religion. At best, decoration on objects today only plays an iconic role as referent for other signs, for history and for culture. As well, signs on objects today are too often simple optical

devices for seduction in order to foster consumerism. That is as true for industrially produced design products (and design, now, is mostly a stylistic practice concerned with presentation, with how things look, based largely on the particular personalities of designers) as it is for handmade unique objects, with few exceptions. The decorative now denotes the superfluous, the unessential; yet, the surface itself of an object, at the conceptual level, is not decorative, since the surface constitutes a system of signs where everything is, on the contrary, essential.<sup>3</sup>

Historically, the surface of an object, its ornamentation, played a powerful, symbolic role. That surface was never purely decorative. Objects made today need to return to that stage where any marking is essentially



“Frames and all objects . . . connect to reality and connect two realities, art and the real world.”  
“Door as Pot,” China.  
Photo: Paul Mathieu.

symbolic and not merely ornamental, empty of meaning beyond optical excitation. Signs on the surface of objects are there to inform us about the nature and use of the object (its ontology), how it is perceived and experienced (its phenomenology) and how we come to understand it (its epistemology). Any other sign on an object is unnecessary. Modernism and modern design have largely resolved this problem of decoration and ornamentation by altogether dispensing with them, yet, in the process, transforming artworks into museum decorations and material for kitsch giftware. I foresee that this situation will very soon change, and, due to the expanding role of computer technology in both the design and fabrication of things, the potential for extremely complex and excessive adornment offered by these technologies will permit the creation of personalized, idiosyncratic and highly varied surfaces on all the things in our daily life. This might create a visual revolution the like of which we haven't seen since the reductive, minimalist, "negative" aesthetics of Modernism.

#### ABSTRACTION AND CONCEPTUALISM

Containers and objects are also the ultimate form of abstraction. They never "represent" anything (except themselves). The resistance of institutions toward objects and toward containment as a concept is a resistance to abstraction as a concept as well. By their very nature, objects contest the necessity for institutions; they challenge and contest present knowledge and existing hierarchies. It is much easier simply to ignore them. If abstraction as style, abstraction in its visual and formal aspects, has been embraced by art (image making) in practice and in theory, abstraction as concept hasn't been fully understood yet. To do so would have to imply a complete reexamination of the contribution to art history of certain practices (largely craft practices where abstraction has existed since the beginning of "culture"), which would destroy the present power structure of hierarchies (of materials, of practices, of markets, etc.) created by art history and other art institutions. In the 1950s, a prominent abstract painter predicted that we would have a period where abstraction in art would

predominate for one thousand years. By art, as is so often the case, he meant images, paintings, etc. Not only was this important artist proven wrong almost instantly, but what is essential to remember here is the complete fallacy of the statement, since there had already been a period of abstraction reaching back into the past for at least 30,000 years! However, this investigation of abstraction as a concept was not taking place within image-making primarily, but within other practices (object making), which were deemed (and still largely are) irrelevant, or, even worse, impossible to be considered as valid. It is important to realize that within object-making, not only are the notions of abstraction and conceptualization very ancient, but, if we truly reflect upon the generative and operative nature of objects, we discover that such categories as modernism, expressionism, minimalism and even postmodernism all have very long histories within object-making. Objects are at the source of these developments within the art discourses and theories, even if that contribution has been ignored (and will likely be denied by many).

Objects are inherently abstract (they can only represent themselves, even if, metaphorically, they often are substitutes for the human body, and, physically, they often act as extensions of the human body). Objects are also inherently conceptual; they are the materialization of an idea, even if that idea, that concept is, more often than not, function and/or decoration. Yet these notions of abstraction and conceptualization have been appropriated and absorbed by visual art practices; they are now generally perceived as intrinsic and, for the most part, unique to visual art (and to language). Object makers need to reappropriate their historical ownership of these terms. Abstraction in art is presented as a phenomenon that had no precedent before the beginning of the twentieth century. Anyone remotely familiar with the history of objects knows that this is a fallacy. We are also all too familiar with the category of “conceptual art,” which is, in fact, a gross misnomer. Conceptual art is not any more or any less conceptual than any other human activity. Art is, as Leonardo said so well, “*cosa mentale*,” a thing of the mind. That is, what we humans do is to con-

ceptualize the world through consciousness. We do this either by creating myths, fictions, narratives, theories, histories, symbols, signs and images, or, by changing the world by acting upon it and its materiality — by making objects.

Conceptual art would be much more appropriately labelled “immaterial art” since the materiality of that type of art is absent or irrelevant, but I prefer “contextual art,” since it is a form of art that acquires meaning only through context, the institutional contexts of art experience, the physical context of museums, galleries, magazines, catalogues, monographs and photographs, and the literary context of art history, criticism and theory. Conceptual art, or, as we should really say, contextual art, does not exist outside these specific contexts. It relies entirely on context for meaning. “Contextual art” is a better term, more precise, more accurate and, above all, more honest. Since obfuscation and appropriation of precedence have been trademarks of art history, I do not foresee redress in the near future. But if we were to acknowledge the contribution objects have made through abstraction and conceptualization to art history, the whole structure of art history would have to be rethought, and the whole of art history itself would have to be rewritten. I am not too hopeful that this will ever happen. It is much easier to ignore the continual invisibility of certain practices.

#### THE HANDMADE OBJECT

Again, I propose that a re-examination of the role and importance of handmade objects within culture and their theoretical underpinnings could serve as the basis for a new type of art experience, where art and life are truly reconciled beyond the false promises (which are fundamentally little other than pressure to ever-more consume) of new technologies. New technologies are, nonetheless, important tools for new forms of creativity, yet they cannot in themselves provide satisfactory answers to the present situation of growing alienation. To make an object by hand, material, technique and skill remain central to the task. And both technique and skill,

in a world where mechanization, mediation and industrial processes are the norm, have lost their historical importance. Technique has been replaced by technology and, now, by the virtual reality of computers. The skill, the actual manual and physical skill necessary to operate a computer is almost nonexistent. It has been replaced by an expanded role for intellectual skill, but for fewer and fewer people. The others are just indentured slaves to machines. Yet intellectual and conceptual skills are not absent from handwork. On the contrary, in handwork, the manual, physical skills, and the intellectual, conceptual skills are in balance. This balance has been broken by new technologies. These technologies are also language-based and rely on a system of codes and of signs. They are primarily visual as well; even if recent advances in haptic experience show promise in reestablishing the role of the hand, they will probably find their primary use in virtual gaming and other form of entertainment.

The maker of objects by hand is like a virtuoso musician or professional dancer, while being also altogether composer or choreographer. That performance doesn't have the implicit theatricality and entertainment value of spectacles, though. It remains a performance without witnesses, which can only be experienced through the product of the performance. If images are inherently spectacular and entertaining, objects are ordinary, quotidian, domestic and based in labour. If images are reflections of the world, objects are actors on the world and their transformative power, while being different, is as great and certainly as important.

Handmade objects do not only object to theory. By resisting and undermining language,<sup>4</sup> they contest and subvert contemporary visual art by not being mediated, by operating outside institutional contexts, by being physically and/or conceptually permanent instead of temporary, by being timeless instead of grounded in the instant, in the present, in the fashionable now and by resisting both conceptual and stylistic change. They contest design products by being unique and, again, handmade. The focus that contemporary design presently puts on style instead of substance, on personality instead of vision, is also in need of reexamination and contes-

tation. And, above all, the best, most relevant and potent handmade objects contest and subvert craft practices by going beyond material and technique, by denying the importance of the well-made, the tasteful and the personal, to become witness and memory of our present (as well as past and future) times. If handmade objects have become largely useless in a practical sense, they nonetheless remain socially essential, as receptacle for the imagination and memory of humankind, memory of knowledge and experiences. This repository for experiences and memories, historically the domain of objects, has progressively been usurped by images, which now occupy the central stage in fulfilling that archival role (just think of photography and digital practices). Yet it might be possible that objects are slowly reclaiming that role now given to images, without notice from anyone and without anybody admitting it. Quite simply, just to make handmade objects today is a potent form of contestation and an effective exercise of criticality. This might be where objects' most important role within culture resides now, and, I repeat myself again, as recipient for the memory of humankind, a memory of knowledge as well as a memory of experiences. It could be argued that the only place where contestation, subversion, criticality and the real possibility for change reside, remains within those practices that have the making of objects as a central activity. At the very least, they offer a potent, if marginalized, alternative to the current state of general aesthetic and physical alienation.

Handmade objects in the global world we now live in have the amazing potential to be transnational and operate beyond geographical borders. Their universality attests to that potential. They can also be truly transcultural, combining various cultures in juxtaposition, blurring identities while remaining significant to the local particularities of makers and users. And, most importantly, they can also be trans-historical, working timelessly, reuniting past, present and future seamlessly. Only objects, and, more specially, handmade objects, have such a complex role to play within culture now.

Handmade objects contest the contemporary and disrupt the apparent



"To make an object by hand is a profoundly political act." Chen-Lu, China.  
Photo: Paul Mathieu.



cultural consensus. In handmade objects, we find the last traces of what we used to call “work” (beyond agriculture, yet for reasons as vital as producing food), the last place where effort in use still exists, non-mechanical and non-mediated, and the last place where contestation and subversion are still possible in the cultural sphere. To make an object by hand is a profoundly political act.

If objects, and particularly handmade objects, have not received the attention they deserve, it is not because they have become irrelevant and meaningless in the world in which we live. It is because, of all cultural phenomena, they imply a complexity that exists beyond language and beyond theory, thus beyond the reach of those who are confined by language and theory. Images are complicated, they need to be explained, to be fictionalized; they are, thus, the privileged domain of theory. Objects are much less complicated but much more complex. And this complexity resists language and theory. Yet a theory of objects, an object theory, remains essential, if we are to reexamine and reevaluate, reassess and reposition the important role played by objects within culture.

NOTES:

1. These ideas were first explored in a text "Toward a Unified Theory of Crafts: The Reconciliation of Differences," published in *Studio Potter* 29.1 (December 2000); in *Artichoke: Writings about the Visual Arts* 13.1 (Spring 2001), and reprinted in *Craft: Perception and Practice: a Canadian Discourse vol. 2*, edited by Paula Gustafson (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press and Artichoke Publishing, 2005).
2. For the development of these ideas, see the work of psychologist Donald Winnicott on the infant/mother relationship and art critic Peter Fuller, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (London: Writers and Readers, 1981) and *The Naked Artists: Art and Biology and Other Essays* (London: Writers and Readers, 1983) on this subject in relation to the art experience.
3. See Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*. 1968. (London: Verso, 1996).
4. I have developed these ideas elsewhere around a reading of Michel Foucault's "Of Other Spaces" (*Diacritics* 16.1, Spring 1986), and *The Order of Things* (New York, Pantheon, 1970). "The Space of Pottery" was published in *Ceramics: Art and Perception* 22 (1995); *Studio Potter* 19 (June 1991); and *Making and Metaphor: A Discussion of Meaning in Contemporary Craft*, Ed. Gloria A. Hickey (Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Institute for Contemporary Canadian Craft, 1994).