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The Distancing Effect and Utilitarian Objects

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine
Art in Furniture Design

School of American Crafts
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology
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Abstract

This thesis is an investigation of the *distancing effect* through utilitarian objects. This body of work consists of three boxes, all designed to hold various utilitarian objects related to the acts of preparing and consuming food. Viewed together, they represent a “tea service” that seeks to generate the *distancing effect* for the user. The *distancing effect* is a term coined by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht to describe the critical perspective he sought to elicit from his audience.¹ Applied broadly to art forms outside theater, it refers to any experience that confronts expectation with reality. I have adopted the mechanism of surprise, or revelation, found in the distancing effect, and have applied it to my work, exploring the relationship between two-dimensional versus three-dimensional perception, between two different tactile qualities of a single material (brass), and between two different materials (wood and iron).

¹ Brecht, Bertolt, and John Willett. *Brecht on Theatre; the Development of an Aesthetic*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964. Print.

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Proposal

This body of work began with the realization that utilitarian objects receive daily interaction, and that this interaction can develop into an increased appreciation of the materials we live with. In these pieces, I will explore different components of the utilitarian object and its design, by applying the *distancing effect* to the interaction between the user and the object. By combining physical function with aesthetic insight, I will encourage the viewer to take a critical look at several elements of these utilitarian objects: the various materials used, the processes used to work them, and the perception of the final created object.

Sources and Research

In my research, I have tried to understand how the process of making matters to me, and how I can engage with the *distancing effect* through my work. The *distancing effect* is a dialogue between expectation and reality, whereby any preconceived expectation is challenged through experience. An example that I find particularly inspiring as an artistic source is the work of Wolfgang Laib. He is a German artist who works with various combinations of natural materials, ranging from marble and milk, to beeswax and pollen. In his practice, he uses his body to complete repetitive actions, be it collecting pollen in a glass jar one flower at a time, or slowly grinding a hollow in a slab of marble by hand. These gestures, as well as the considerable time involved, combine with the physical objects to generate a statement about nature, process and time. Although Wolfgang Laib is not creating utilitarian objects, I believe that his worldview and practice run parallel to that of a utilitarian maker, and it is from his work that I first understood how the *distancing effect* encourages a critical perspective. In a series of works called “Milkstone”, Wolfgang selects particularly white marble slabs, in various dimensions, but typically thin rectangles or squares, and grinds a hollow dish shape into the middle. He then pours milk into this hollow, and displays the work on the ground. To the viewer, the two materials are not readily differentiated, and it is initially hard to notice the milk at all. Perhaps a subtle breeze will leave a ripple pattern, revealing that what was thought to be solid marble is in

fact liquid milk.² This is a *distancing* experience because we are caught slightly off-guard. Our expectation of a solid piece of marble was in fact wrong, and we are encouraged to re-consider the properties of both materials. I find that the work of Wolfgang Laib and the way it interacts with time, labor and materials directly influences my thinking about what utilitarian objects can be. What I took from this work was the belief that objects could embody a set of ideas, and that the methods of construction used could be as engaging and relevant as the specific characteristics of their design.

Robert Irwin is another artist whose work, particularly in its investigations of perception, has inspired mine. In “Discs”, a series of works by Irwin, the artist constructed a plastic dome roughly 60 inches in diameter. The “disc” was mounted on a wall, and lit in such a way that it created a shadow pattern. The 3D object appeared to blend into the flat wall and shadows, and as a viewer, it is very hard to tell the difference between these elements. This type of work questions the reliability of perception, and merges the flat and the spherical.³

In addition to artists and designers I find inspiring, I have also researched the tools and techniques involved in metal machining. As somebody who is inspired by the process of building solid wood furniture, I view machining as an extension of this investigation. In woodworking, a certain level of accuracy is required in order to achieve consistent and soundly constructed forms. Generally speaking, woodworkers need their material to be: flat, of known dimensions, and square. These considerations are pushed to an arguably more intense level in machining. A machined cup, for example, will be more truly circular than a turned bowl, and a machined surface will also be flatter than a planed or jointed board. I don't think this implies any kind of hierarchy between machining and woodworking, but I am interested in how rough materials are turned into consistently dimensioned parts (or objects), and view machining as another means toward this end. Through a deeper understanding of machining, new possibilities have emerged in my work.

² Ottmann, Klaus, Wolfgang Laib, Margit Rowell, and Harald Szeemann. Wolfgang Laib: A Retrospective. New York: American Federation of Arts, 2000. Print.

³ Weschler, Lawrence, and Robert Irwin. Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin. Berkeley: U of California, 1982. Print.

Process

The process of creating these objects was characterized by the same critical distance that I hope to inspire in my audience's interaction with them. I work via the *workmanship of risk*, as defined by writer David Pye in *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, where the successful completion of each element is, to some extent, uncertain.⁴ As a result, the creation of each piece required my full attention. As far as my audience is concerned, this method does not in and of itself produce a more durable, or more beautiful object, but it does require me to be critical of my process and product, and to reflect on the best way to create beauty and durability. To outsource the construction, or to transfer these forms from idea to object via automated processes such as the 3D printer would eliminate a primary source of inspiration and insight for myself. I am aware of the potential of each material I use because of my prolonged and focused contact with it.

In my design process, I often think first of the relationships I wish to create, and then begin generating a series of physical mock-ups, refining the design elements and construction process across multiple iterations. It is one thing to describe parts that are of specific tolerances in the abstract of CAD, and another thing entirely to bring those parts into reality. For instance, I choose a lap joint for the joinery of the boxes because of its visual simplicity, but realized during the construction that it would not hold up over time. I reinforced each joint with a steel rod, which ensures a structurally sound object, although it is invisible in the final design. Had I produced the design exclusively in CAD, I may not have discovered this weakness. In order to achieve the barest, most effective design, I had to experience the process of making my work by hand, feeling the logic of the material properties in a literal way. I use the physical reality of materials, and the relative difficulty of their working as a kind of feedback loop, pushing me to a deeper understanding of precision, and keeping the design of my work on track. While I am someone who enjoys the pursuit of the very finest precision, my ideas must be sufficiently compelling so as to justify the effort, and the object must also have a logic to its construction. Emerging from a belief in simple precision, the construction of my objects becomes as refined as their design.

⁴ Pye, David. *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*. London: Cambridge U.P., 1968. Print.

Two Bowls

In the piece “Two Bowls”, I have explored the tension between 2D and 3D experiences. Taking the work of Robert Irwin as inspiration, I wanted to create objects that could shift back and forth, showing a 2D, graphic, or “flat” experience from one angle and from another a 3D form with depth. In order to generate this dynamic, I designed this piece to be viewed in conjunction with its documentation. In its design, I arranged forms in order to appear as a composition of rectangular elements when viewed straight down from above. Since this is not a viewing angle most people would think to take when interacting with these pieces, I have commissioned a photograph from this vantage point to make this experience explicit. The goal with this work is to have the viewer experience the photograph first, then to realize that this composition is actually a 3D object with depth. I hope to use the revelation as a means of calling attention to the forms I created.

Scoop

While the Two Bowls piece comments on visual perception, the scoop piece focuses on the tactile experience of the object. I created the scoop with two distinct sides, each one being treated with a different finish. For the concave surface, I polished the brass, while for the convex surface I sandblasted the metal with the coarsest grit medium I could find. This difference is intended to be discovered upon manual interaction with the object, as the container is designed such that only one side will be “up”, and thus visible to the user, before handling. While exploring this dynamic, I also tried to consider the utilitarian nature of this object, and thus polished the side used to collect the tea or coffee, and employed the more “toothsome” surface as a means of improving grip for the user. In addition, the thumb of the user will naturally rub the polished concave surface, which will re-enforce the high-polish over time. By creating a surprising tactile experience, I hope the user is encouraged to more closely examine the object, scrutinizing its design, material appearance, and the different tactile experiences offered from the same material.

Plates

This piece presents three identical forms, all small plates, on their side and in close proximity to each other. In this presentation, the user must rely on the appearance of the edges of the objects to compare one to the other. Because the *distancing effect* relies on revelation, I set up the false expectation that all three plates were identical. By presenting three identical forms in both shape and color, the only remaining differences between the plates are their weight and physical appearance. It is the physical appearance that I find most interesting because it highlights the uniformity of the metal, while also presenting wood as exactly what it is: a material with grain. In the edges of the plates, these characteristics are relatively hidden, but upon interaction, we see the flat, open surfaces which serve as “vignettes” for each material. I tried to think of the plates as small compositions, being careful of where I book-matched the grain, or preserved machining marks. Another significant decision, and the “opening” experience in this piece is the difference in weight between the cast iron and ebony. This difference is meant to be the initial surprise, and is intended to spark the interest in exploring the other contrasts between the two materials.

Unified Design (the body of work)

Because I wanted to engage with the *distancing effect*, I sought to keep my design work consistent. In this way, the differences between each piece serve as an entry point for discovering their meaning. By using a standard box design as a kind of frame, I was also able to help direct and focus the attention of the user towards the specific object, or set of objects I created. In addition to the similarity of design and construction for the boxes, I also sought to unify the design of the objects. Toward this end, each object is based on a 3-inch diameter. This ties them together visually, but also creates an interaction between a square and a circle, which is present in each piece.

Implications for the future (canister, multiples and commodity)

After the completion of my thesis work, I continued with the theme of a tea service, and designed a canister meant to hold tea or coffee. This object follows the design logic of the other objects in that it is based off a 3-inch diameter, and follows a similar aesthetic. The goal with this piece is to complement the tea scoop, while also exploring the possibilities of machining. One of the most rewarding experiences of building this body of work was creating the physical

connection in the Two Bowls piece that located the bowls on their sides. The interlock of the bowls to the aluminum uprights is sufficiently fine as to be a piston fit, meaning the user experiences a small amount of air being trapped, and then escaping, as the bowls are located. Working from this experience, the canister will re-create this piston-fit between the lid and the hollow container. Thus, when the user engages with this object, the experience of two precisely fitted objects, as perceived through the “piston fit” may work as a kind of distancing experience.

In addition to the canister, I am working to develop and refine the objects outside of the context of the boxes. Dimensions, proportions, material selection and appearance may all change slightly, but the goal will be to make finely crafted utilitarian objects. I believe that this work may create a larger audience, and could also open the opportunity to make my pieces on a larger scale. This, for me, would not be an abandoning of the *distancing effect*, but would be an effort to simplify the work, and focus more on material selection and utility. One issue that is as of yet unresolved is how to store the objects; I am searching for a container less involved than the three boxes of my thesis, but still engaging enough to not be out of step with the objects. I still find the “revelation” of a lidded container to be an engaging experience, and am trying to consider the interaction of revealing the object while also being able to store it simply.

Conclusion

The goal of this body of work was to be critical of the objects I live with, and to try to conceive of new ways of interacting with utilitarian objects. Ultimately, I view these pieces as proofs of concept, where the design was refined to near completion. While I found individual elements of each piece to be unsuccessful, I’m intrigued by some of the unexpected discoveries I found during the making of the work. One such discovery was the relationship between the object and its photograph. This was the primary *distancing* experience explored in the *Two Bowls* piece, and while the object and photography did create a tension between 2D and 3D experiences, I’m now interested in how this dynamic could be further developed. Different techniques in the documentation or image editing process could be used to reduce any visible perspective, while different, less reflective materials might be explored to lessen any 3 dimensional light reflectivity. Along similar lines, I’m interested in how I could create an even rougher, more textured surface on the scoop piece to heighten the textural contrast of the polished inner surface

versus the rough outside surface. With the Plates piece, I am now fascinated with just how similar I could make two disparate materials appear. An unexpected discovery is just how deep this exploration of a utilitarian object can be, both for the creator as well as the viewer. There is virtually no limit to the juxtapositions I have tried to create—the iron plate could always be blacker, the back of the scoop could always be rougher—and the level subtlety that can be detected upon interaction and physical handling are also seemingly limitless. I believe that utilitarian objects are capable of celebrating the materials they are made of, and I hope that my work contributes to this goal.

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