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Common Objects Common Gestures

Article by Adriana Ionascu and David Scott

PROBABLY THE BEST WAY OF UNDERSTANDING AND explaining the everyday objects that populate our lives and that pass our eyes and hands is through using them. The subtle, intimate ways in which we all 'make do' with objects (as makers and as users) amount to and account for the objects' multiple histories and meanings. In the everydayness of their

*Adriana Ionascu. Cast Footless Bowls.
Various sizes and shapes.*



(objects) use, gestures are reconstructed, usages adapted, reinvented and appropriated by sensibilities refined in repeated acts of known activities.¹ Our experience of using objects is situated in an elusive, subliminal, fluid and alterable territory that evades precise definition or classification.

To some extent, the subjective relationships between people and things lies beyond the reach of the makers: how then do objects enter people's ways of use and how and when (or to what end) are they used? Debates on various meanings and uses of functional objects consider that objects' primary role is to be instrumental and reliable (as in Heidegger's philosophy)²; while, from a consumer perspective, Baudrillard³ (1996, 92) proposes two central functions for every object: to be put to use and to be possessed. This understanding of functionality suggests a closer look at the processes and activities whereby people relate to everyday objects and at the ways in which human beings achieve a personal (meaningful) relationship with their possessions.⁴ Constructs such as Baudrillard's object value system may not reflect the full complexity of our relationships with the things that facilitate our lives, and it is perhaps worth remembering that objects are made by 'us'.

The subjective relationship between people and things, objects and users is indeed probably beyond the control of makers, but it might be a mistake to assume that the maker or designer does not exert a sphere of influence around the things they create. By imbuing objects with certain characteristics, the relationship between object and user, possessed and possessor, may be influenced by the how and why of its creation: all objects that we make have consequences – and using them has too. The hand-made object may have a particular role in this debate.

Ceramic objects for use are maybe the most touched everyday objects: their surfaces neat and reflexive, always providing an edge for gripping, a fit shape for holding, subtle indentations, recesses or handles on which our hands fit with comfort. We experience their physicality (hardness, glassiness, inertness and resistance) at an unconscious level, when we eat from plates, drink from mugs or sip from teacups. Handling these known objects is in tune with our senses

and routines: Bourriaud⁵ (2001) comments on the rapport between objects and gestures – how objects ‘disappear’ into gestures and how, in turn, gestures ‘disappear’ into objects. In fact objects originate from movements (gestures) and are returned or transferred back into movements and enactments and, as it has been observed,⁶ when ‘use-objects’ function well, we don’t notice them anymore; we make use of them without thinking – they fade in our daily routines and rituals. This is probably because in becoming extensions of our gestures, they imply the inherent participation and adaptability of the body, “embracing intuitive body response, emotive understanding, [besides] the demands of use”.⁷ As the form of the object adapts to the shape of the hand, the object becomes subservient to our activities and needs – and yet, at the same time – it represents a kind of material equivalence for our gestures.

It is in implicit association with their physical features that we make use of things: the universality of body references in utilitarian vessel forms, for example foot, belly, shoulder, neck, lip, etc, is well known, but what the use of these terms reveals is the intimate relationship between the user and the used, and that we see the majority of the objects that we encounter in our daily lives in human terms. When asked how people could recognise good work, the Japanese potter Kanjiro Kawai answered “with their bodies”, by which he meant, with the mind acting directly through the senses – referring to the sharp immediate impressions to personal experience of use and beauty.⁸

The notion of the mind operating through the senses is pertinent in this discussion: it is important to trust our intuition in dealing with interpretations of encounters with objects and artifacts and allow ourselves to know and understand objects through our bodily senses. So often we project meaning on to what we see and touch through our preconceptions and associations, as we are often convinced by superficial and chance resemblances.

Furthermore, the maker and writer Emmanuel Cooper (2005) believes that the pleasure of our intimacy with such objects “satisfies haptic and numinous needs whether through the pouring of tea, the handling of a cup, [or] its touch on the lips”.⁹ Beyond the anonymity of factory mass-produced ware (aren’t we also anonymous?), functional objects perform well if they fit their intended task: they must, as Cooper says, be part of an act, “...whether of pouring, drinking, serving, storing or such like ...”, heightening our awareness of their inbuilt qualities.

As such, objects are dependent on and adjacent to the activities, operations and manipulations of their possessors: the manner in which we use objects is tailored to the patterns of interaction that products demand of and develop together with their users. Different object forms introduce different formalities

of use, other relationships, inserted and contained within our gestures. However, the history of tableware shows that, although the archetypal shape of the container has not changed its main anatomy, a series of modifications linked with the ways in which users ‘make do’ have changed our ways of drinking; in replacing the smaller sized cups and saucers used in the past with today’s mugs, our more delicate gestures have been adapted into drinking single-handed from and holding a larger sized container. In consequence, the elegant balancing and holding of the cup and saucer with both hands, which involved the user in a more committed way, and the inherent participation of the body posture in maintaining the equilibrium of this act is transformed. Similarly, the attentive holding, balancing and inclination of a teapot adds to the harmony and elegance of our interactive body participation: the tea ritual, involving a sequence of calculated gestures¹⁰ concerned with pouring, holding,

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the passing of cups, all performed in measured timing, has been replaced with the more casual drinking from large cups or throw-away paper-cups. The use of a more diversified body of objects (tools) in the performance of a single ritual enhances or diversifies physical interaction and, as such, the physical use of filling, picking, carrying and brewing becomes that of a metaphoric 'use'¹¹ of offering, sustenance, or emotional comfort; drinking means also warming up, and so, the teacup is transformed from a container to a warming-up activity.

In this sense, mass-produced or handmade teapots and cups have represented a whole traditional culture: beyond being commodities, they are well accommodated in our habitual lived customs. The modern social acts of tea making are arguably not so far removed from the stylised Zen Buddhist tea ceremony: at its centre the act of making tea (or coffee) is still one of social interaction, a shared moment aside from the prevailing concerns of the day. The emphasis

has perhaps shifted away from that of a domestic ritual to one which occurs in the social environment where the preparation of various coffee drinks rivals the tea ceremony in its complexity, but the importance of doing and touch are still ingrained. By marking time 'off', the tea ritual gives a sense of organised structure to everyday life which is dependent on the humble use of objects.

The ceramic objects involved in the everyday use make us conscious that our daily rituals are embedded in these objects and embodied in repetitive acts. As such, objects signify not only through their form and function, but through the gestures they create and, in this sense, they complete and are in resonance with bodily movements; our mundane interactions bring them to life. This is particularly true of the bowls, plates and cups that we use to eat and drink, but also and more poignantly in the pottery vessels which have a more occasional function. Large vases or jugs may sometimes serve to dispense liquid or



Left: Adriana Ionascu. *Cups and Plates*.
Various sizes and shapes.

display flowers, but are often left out in our homes even when they are empty and seemingly serving no particular purpose beyond that of ornament. It is precisely in these objects that we see ceramics in a spiritual role that humanises the domestic environment, a stripped down sculptural language serving as a metaphor for ourselves and animating our homes and lives. In other words, these handmade objects “belong to a world antedating the separation of the useful and (from) the beautiful”,¹² as experiencing them is as much visual as physical.

Domestic ceramic objects thus represent a fluctuating body of evidence for the manner in which we make use of things and how we construct meaning and value in everyday activities. In this sense, they become ‘objects of aesthetic enjoyment’¹³ and each of them bears the significance of an enactment that cannot be ‘consumed’,¹⁴ probably becoming the ‘left-over’ of an activity that contributes to our experience and to our system of meanings in everyday life.

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