

Becoming Object, Other, or Self through Designing and Making.

An object is never seen nor experienced in its raw-state; that is, we always experience the object in relationship with ourselves. What are the implications of this statement? When we encounter an object we interpret it through (and in terms of) the filter that we unconsciously impose upon it. Lang [1] highlighted that if objects were understood simply in terms of their physicality, then their meaning would be limited. Consequently, due to the embedded experiences and the context, object meanings will differ to some degree between individuals. In addition, Lang [1] and Peirce [2] state that objects have sensual qualities, and as Peirce explains, we come to have beliefs about the world we live in through our interpretations. As a result, the object in its physicality (or rawness) is simply the potential to be many things. The object reveals itself to us through our interactions or experiences in relation to it—and it is these that form our beliefs. Interestingly, our beliefs are fluid and subsequent encounters can confirm or alter the original understanding. Therefore, the meaning that object has is neither fixed nor mono-dimensional.

‘...we have sensuous experience of the thing, for it is through the way a thing shows itself qualitatively to use we can recognise its behaviour and on this basis rationally adjust our own behaviour to it’ [3]. ‘This implies that the object ‘is known’ as we experience it. We define it through the resultant and evolving beliefs and actions embedded in the experiences’ [4].

This paper explores how the designer and an object which is designed; and the maker and the object that is created; are each examples of a person in relationship with an object or artefact. However, this relationship is constructed and exists through experiences and beliefs—knowledge, aspirations, ethics, and enculturation to name a few. Therefore, it is posited that a single object—a wooden chair for example—does not (and maybe cannot) have the same meaning for the designer, maker or owner. We also posit that the act of designing requires personal investment that is greater than the owner’s by purchasing an object; and that making with one’s hands involves even greater personal engagement. In terms of the sensuous—the latter’s investment is not only visual and intellectual but also bodily and kinaesthetic as the material is manipulated and refined to become the object.

This proposition also complements yet challenges Belk’s statement that there is a universal belief that: ‘we make things a part of self by creating or altering them’ [5]. Instead, the reciprocal position is also raised—that is, through engagement our evolving beliefs, which arise through our encounters, creates the meaning that the object comes to have. The act of designing and making an object involves multiple phases including the idea, the generation of concepts and forms, the representation, the testing, the construction, and so on. Each phase manifests as a relationship between designer/object, as the object is not only emerging but is also integral to the process—informing the next iteration. Each therefore has the potential have meaning and to influence the characteristic of the connectedness to self for the designer and maker.

In order to test this hypothesis the discussion within this paper will be based on the creation of the work; ‘Terrain’ occasional table/ stool prototype. An object designed by Penelope Forlano, made by Glen Oldfield and subsequently acquired by the Art Gallery of WA for their permanent collection. The process, from idea to object and the interpretations, relationships and meanings through this process are examined against recent research on object attachment and object meaning.

Case Study: Through narrative, this paper articulates the relationship between the extended self of both the designer and the maker in relation to the 'other'; a particular object, during its becoming or creation. In order to capture the first hand relationship with the object, narrative inquiry enables the experience of the person to be captured in a contextualized manner, [6]. The narrative below has two voices; the first, the highly subjective personal accounts of the individual's meaning and interpretation of the relationship (POR^{*}); the second, is the more objective description of the design and making process as it is taking place. The process is further captured in a third visual narrative. Together, these narrations contrast the difference between narrating what is happening and narrating the experience of creating; and therefore, how the object is understood. The process of 'creating' and 'knowing' the object is examined as a series of stages or events in the developing relationship from its early intangible origins as an idea, through the various interpretations and relationships to its later stage of a tangible object.

Person-Object Relationship

Dissolution and desire for the new-

Designer Perspective (DP): The switch from practice to academia led me to rethink my ways of working, to explore and discover new stimuli to the design process. My past practice was largely client-driven. This new proposed research process was now MY project, I 'owned' it completely. Largely driven by my commitment to creative production as a research academic, the driver for the project could now be something new for me. I could develop a new design process relationship with no restrictions placed on the final outcome. To step into new territory and see what eventuated.

The relationship between 'self' and 'other' began to emerge, as my personal values, history, interpretation and experience were being layered and integrated into what I was seeing and creating. After meeting with various forms, one form emerged which was more intriguing, reflected a 'past love' the Eames' Walnut stool of 1960, and a form that could explore some previously held ideas. What it would become was still unclear.

The meaning at this initial stage lay in it's potential, it's uniqueness, it's possibilities, how I could engage with it. The project was now driven by emotions toward the project; exciting, uncertain, enticing and fascinating.

Object Process- textual narrative

Ideation

I wanted to test, if after years of habit, I could take a more maker-like process driven approach first, and open up to new ways of thinking, working and developing solutions. Generating solutions, from the material first, was not unfamiliar to me, but starting with the idea of making the three-dimensional form from the two-dimensional media, without having preconceived ideas on the material, industrial process or user. Forms emerged, some instantly recognized as applicable to space making, others less so. The two-dimensional starting point- an everyday sheet of bond paper, began to take on a sculptural form, yet still somewhat two dimensional, more evocative of a textured plane (see fig. 1).

'so... what do you think of him?'

DP: When a form was ultimately realized in a paper model format, which I felt was 'final' it was then the first time that I was to introduce the object to another. Conscious of the fact that another's interpretation of the work, would colour my opinion. Knowing my conscious re-interpretation of the iconic Eames' solid walnut stool, the work became a clear symbol to me. The work formed a relationship, (if only slim and one-sided), between a past designer's work, and myself. I could see the relationship and meaning I held, but would these attributes and meanings be understood by others, or interpreted in the same way?

'Are we compatible?'

DP: As the object is constructed within my mind, it has already become the 'other'. It has gained some autonomy and identity of its own. It feels as though I have now taken on the role of a custodian of the object. As the designer, I feel the need to ensure that it is nurtured, and remains focused, to be the best it can be.

Maker Perspective (MP): As the maker, the first introduction to the object was somewhat intangible; words, drawings and a paper model. The physical aspect of making a one-off prototype, particularly with natural materials, emphasized the person-object relationship through its uniqueness and challenges of making it 'real'. Through a rigorous process of examining the challenging form, the maker began to understand it, to 'know' it, resolving complexity not previously encountered, creating a more intense personal involvement in the project. The object begins to evoke emotions in the maker, it is challenging and tested the capacity and skills of the maker.

'Can we work out our differences'

MP: The craftsmanship and accuracy of the object becomes a direct reflection of the 'maker'. Judgment to the degree of quality is directly

Design Development

As the paper folding process evolved, it evoked a more sculptural three-dimensional form, something that began to 'stand up'. It started to develop an entity of its own, more than simply an idea. Through this paper folding process, I attempted to address this form in a new way while also solving the construction method to sustainably use timber. This design also allowed me to test the possibility of integrating new technological tools, to create an unexpected form for this traditional furniture material (see fig. 2).

Working Drawings

Words, sketches and paper model explained the object, but the work needed to be translated into a 3-D model so it could be better visualized, and resolved. The virtual model began to imply properties of mass and stability whilst still not yet physical. The thickness of the material, junctions and details were all resolved at the virtual level, between the maker and designer. The junctions were complex; two materials joining at acute angles to more complex joins of up to six planes of timber. Each corner and piece of timber, needed to be carefully addressed as the angles were acute, sharp and liable to fail or join incorrectly. Joins slightly misaligned would result in a failure of the whole work (see fig. 3).

Construction

The designer and maker joint-decision making process, from the selection of the individual timber pieces, direction of the grain, natural

translated from object to the 'self'. The success of the work is seen by the maker as a reflection of himself. Through 'knowing' the object, emotions are embedded in the meaning of the work, 'pride in overcoming the difficulties, challenges and complexity' (pers. comm. Oldfield, 2010) alongside a new understanding of its physical and visual properties 'unexpectedly lightweight, intricate' (pers. comm. Oldfield, 2010). The maker 'knows' qualities about the work, that no other person could experience in the same way.

'I think it's time you meet my parents'

DP: I am no longer bound to it, to conceive the solutions or see it come into being. It has become the 'completed object' which no longer needs me. It is now something of its own identity which strangers will interpret in their own ways, yet at the same time becomes a mirror of me. When exhibiting the object to peers, friends, family, and strangers it feels as if there is a tension between me, personally, being on display, and the work being able to 'speak' for itself as a separate entity. Here it is where self-extension exists in the public realm, it is 'mine' and 'me' yet 'other' at the same time. Exhibited, it appears to be less of a useful functional object and more something to be visually and cognitively understood. It creates a disconnect between the user and its use.

However, its varied contexts in publication evoke a range of responses, and meanings in individuals. As a work that was intentionally multilayered, this varied interpretation supports the original intent but also reinforces the shifting and changing person-object relationship.

'Good bye and good luck'

MP: Foremost for the maker, the work on display has transformed, from a kinaesthetically known work- which can be touched- to an almost intangible, untouchable work again. From a sensory perspective, its gallery presence demands a purely visual understanding of the object. It is

features and the accuracy of the junctions emphasises this individual 'knowing' and becoming of the work. The creator, in making the work, establishes a unique and immediate intimacy with the object. Weight, texture, other physical properties begin to, for the first time become explicit. Understanding the work in the round, its weight and construction, including the base detailing and the internal void is entirely hidden from the observer but is thoroughly understood to the maker (see fig. 4).

Handover and release into the public domain

Now physically complete, the work is exhibited at two galleries, and published in print and online. Publicly, the object becomes the designer's most recent work, cementing the relationship between the originator and the object.

At one art gallery it is representative of work by an Interior Design graduate, at a craft gallery as part of a multidisciplinary exhibition on innovation, and a state gallery as an example of local design and in print as the outcome of research as creative practice. The varying contexts, shift the interpretation and reading of the object by the audience (see fig. 5).

Permanent Display through state acquisition.

Approximately a year after the completed construction of the object, the work was introduced to the Art Gallery of WA. During discussions with the various individuals from conservators to curators, it is clear that each person is identifying with the work in a different

both alienated to the maker in the restricted gallery context yet in other ways, evermore personal. The maker knows qualities of the work that others will never directly experience. In the makers' own words 'it feels weird that I can no longer touch it, I just expect to be able to pick it up' (pers. comm. Oldfield, 2011).

way and assessing it's suitability for the collection. It is later acquired and exhibited in the permanent collection alongside an international designer and Australian artists, some working with similar technological tools to execute their works, while other works are paintings, glass and ceramic artworks. Again the context and display of the work has given new meanings and significance to the object (see fig. 6).

Object Process- Visual narrative



figure 1. Ideation phase: paper folding. (Forlano, 2009)

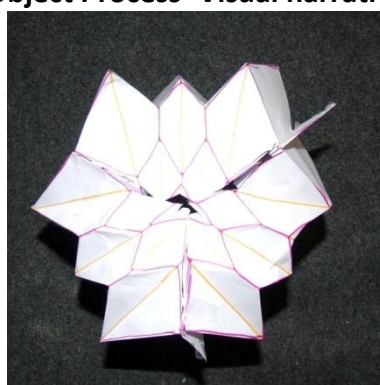


figure 2. Design Development phase: paper model. (Forlano, 2009)

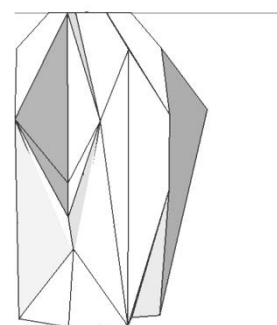


figure 3. Working Drawing phase: CAD Model. (Forlano, 2009)



figure 4. Construction Phase: First timber prototype. (Forlano, 2010)



figure 5. Public Display: 'Embracing Innovation' exhibition, CraftACT Gallery, Canberra. (Image courtesy of CraftACT, 2011)



Figure 6. Permanent Display: '1980's-Present Day' exhibition, Art Gallery of Western Australia. (Forlano, 2012)

The various meanings of the work evolve not only as a result of the individual's experience and filter, but also at the various stages of the 'becoming' of the work. Throughout the designing, making and exhibiting of the work, the emotional relationship to the individual evolves, and creates a bond. It has become clear through the narrative, the object is not fixed in what it 'is' and the meaning that it holds is indeed not fixed nor mono-dimensional.

Consequences and Potential Research

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By unpacking the designing process, the shifting relationship of the designer with the object is revealed. The parallel narratives highlight that the object can be described in terms of the emerging outcome of a process and exists out-there relative to the narrator. Alternatively, the object is something to be nurtured or developed but in other moments independent and evolving: sometimes an expression of self and sometimes as an extension of self. As the relationship evolves so does the object's role and its meaning.

Heidegger highlights how much of our encounters with objects or things occur without conscious thought and are taken for granted during daily life. 'The less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship become, and the more unveiledly it is encountered as that which it is—as equipment'[7]. When we stop to reflect upon the object, however, then its characteristics and its connection with self may be revealed. Dillon and Howe [8] have identified how an integrative approach to understanding and evaluating design objects, is required in order to interpret their meaning. They stress the importance of taking both a reductionist approach combined with intuitive holism as proposed by Ahlberg [ibid.8], yet also incorporating structuralist principles as well as hermeneutics. Therefore, the personal constructs, which are enveloped by social and personal factors, are combined with analytic processes and those of meaning making and intuition.

Dillon and Howe's discussion focuses on the design object when completed although they seek to reveal the narrative embedded which includes how the making process may be indicated. Here the process, which enables the becoming of the object, has been foregrounded through the case study. The result is the revealing of the shifting nature of the object through the relationship with the creator-designer. And in turn, how the designer's sense of self is impacted upon. Integral to this process is the temporal dimension of moments during which the relationship with the object (POR*) is unique relative to the other moments. The evolution of meaning for the designer is captured. The intersections of these moments or the accumulation of these moments in relation the object enables an understanding to unfold.

In addition, the length of the moment may be considered. Does the unpacking of this process provide insights for relationships where the moments may be longer? – For example, the passing of objects between family members or across generations. This is a question for further research, but there are indicators that the relationship between self and the object can be explored in a similar way.

Further research on the relationship between the designer and the designed affects the design decisions at the 'intangible' stage is also indicated as a potentially valuable in understanding the person-object relationship and the process of meaning making. If such relationships at the design and making stage, create bonds and attachment to objects, how can the designer devise objects of co-creation (either through the design or making process) that sustain and develop longer term relationships between the object and 'the other' in the post-purchase phase?

'Attachment to a product can mirror person-to-person relationships that reflect the emotional bond between those concerned. The sense of affection, love and passion become more intense when the connection is stronger. Research has shown that people become attached to products that are special to them and thoughts, feelings and behaviors toward the object help to sustain the bond.'[9]

NOTES:

*POR person object relationship

References:

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