

THESIS

THE WORDS WE CAN'T HEAR
DECODING THE LANGUAGE OF OBJECTS THROUGH THE EYES OF
OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

THE WORDS WE CAN'T HEAR DECODING THE LANGUAGE OF OBJECTS THROUGH THE EYES OF OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY

The work presented in this paper investigates the presumption that objects relating to humans are part of a more significant philosophical discussion. Using the philosophical framework of Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) as the theoretical foundation, the thesis explores the acknowledgement that by not thinking about the sum of the material parts of objects and the cultural meanings of their interpretations, one could experience new relationships with his/her surrounding objects. Discussions on post-structuralist language theories in contemporary art address how artists use language and cultural symbols in art-objects, challenging already established cultural meanings. In addition, psychological theories of personification of objects, and how they help understand the life of non-living things, support the idea that objects communicate in non-verbal ways to other objects in their environment without the full awareness of people.¹

Conclusively, the thesis will attempt to translate and interpret the unique relationship of living and non-living objects; how non-verbal code is left behind and by challenging language conventions, one can experience a new relationship with objects outside the cultural norms.

¹ Graham Harman, *Immaterialism: Object and Social Theory*, (UK: Polity Press, 2016) 3.

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THE WORDS WE CAN'T HEAR

Decoding the language of objects through the eyes of Object-Oriented Ontology.

The Meaning of Objects

The meaning of objects is not far from their combined cultural value. Art makers and critics often assign value to objects because of cultural constructs embedded into language over a large period of time; these constructs establish a concrete meaning of what objects represent in a social environment. By having absolute control over objects and their possible meanings, we learn to structure their value and interpretations in relation to living and non-living objects. It helps to understand the knowledge of how objects are conjured into being.² In the process of pursuing a further understanding of the value of objects, I initially overlooked the very notion of affordances or, what the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines as “the properties which define how we interact with objects or how they communicate to people.” Therefore, every single object I have and continue to interact with has been communicating to me because of the meanings imposed on them. We are fully aware if an object like a chair or table serves a specific purpose because of its form and material, or if the clothes we are wearing might send the wrong message to others because of their color or context. These affordances are one reason why it is so difficult to see objects with new meanings, those which would potentially surpass the initial intent of which these objects were meant to become.

To challenge these affordances, I relied on questioning the extensive chain of cultural influences with the driving question of “what if.” This curiosity allowed me to delve into undiscovered interpretations. This felt like a ripe opportunity to explore more artistic work in

² Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska, *The Value of Things*, (Basel, Boston, Berlin: Birkhäuser, 2000) 15.

that gap that lives between the cultural assumptions of the uses and material qualities of objects. With this hypothesis in mind, I explored the work of theorists like Martin Heidegger who claims that when trying to interpret an object, one cannot understand something unless one has an accurate account of what it is one trying to understand.³ Heidegger explains how cultural and social traditions of language misdescribe and misinterpret what it is to be human and the nature of our interaction with objects. Our experiences of living in the material world of objects are highly dependent upon our location, our movement, and our interpretations of the data we are receiving from our senses like hearing, smelling, touching, tasting, and seeing. Overall, our interaction with objects is highly contingent on the pre-existing knowledge and strong cultural influences we may have about these particular objects.⁴ It seems nearly impossible to interpret objects without any knowledge or cultural assumptions that influence us since we were young. As a maker of objects, I am hopeful this impossibility can be overcome by approaching this position from a fresh standpoint and creative openness to experience unseen interpretations of the meanings of objects.

When exploring possible theoretical approaches, philosophies like *Object-Oriented Ontology* (OOO) proposed by American philosopher Graham Harman becomes a crucial theoretical framework to question the separation of knowledge from cultural experiences and ingrained assumptions in language. Harman bases OOO on two major axes.

The first axis concerns the withdrawal or withholding of objects. Objects are present to us, yet they are also more than what is present to us.⁵ When thinking about objects outside the

³ Cummings, *The Value of Things*, 15.

⁴ Sandra Dudley, "Materiality Matters: Experiencing the Displayed Object," *UM Working Papers in Museum Studies*, no. 8 (2012): 1.

⁵ Graham Harman, *Art and Objects* (UK: Polity Press, 2020), 12.

habitual framework of cultural interpretation concerning our anthropocentric needs, one could achieve a third and new perspective that does not withdraw or withhold the meanings of objects. It also adds the crucial twist that the object itself does not just haunt human awareness of the world but is found even in the casual relations of non-human things with each other—which we commonly believe to be inconsequential. Same way you can think that the objects inside your home or office space do nothing else than just exist in their space.

The second axis concerns the connection between objects and their qualities, which OOO positions as unusually loose. This counteracts the tendency to treat objects as nothing more than the sum of their qualities, as if an “apple” were merely a joint nickname for a set of tangible features bound together by habit.⁶ This could be expanded to the idea that the gap between the sign and signifier remain largely unexplored by just assigning names to every existing object.

OOO deals with every type of object rather than reducing them to one privileged type; this is similar to how animals, imaginary creatures, ideas, and even atoms in our body are just as worthy of being part of this object focused philosophy.⁷

Challenging Cultural Constructs

Although OOO does propose a rather radical approach to experiencing the communication of objects, I question how my art-object research challenges to modify the already highly ingrained cultural norms. To challenge these norms, it is imperative artists—and myself—become responsible for providing their audience with inconclusive language clues for enhancing the possible interpretation when experiencing art-objects specifically—leading to a

⁶ Harman, *Art and Objects*, 12.

⁷ Although defined by Graham Harman in his Object Oriented Ontology as everything we know in the universe, I will mainly use the term objects in relation to what is normally interpreted as any common artifact such as, e.g., furniture, home appliances, artwork, sculptures, installations, and other creative work proposed by myself and other artists; Graham Harman, *The Third Table* (Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 4.

better approximation of what the art-object is communicating to its audience. I propose that artists must purposefully remain inconclusive about using clear semiotics yet add clues of relationships between living and non-living objects to avoid cultural norms of use. Object should communicate to each individual in unique ways and not in cultural pre-established forms of language.

Art, objects, and artists exist in a larger ecology built from years of an interrelated symbolic web of scholarship, exhibition spaces, and art market products. Each is a link in the chain of influence that weighs heavily the interpretations of the artwork, bringing the initial meaning further from its source; cultural interpretation has surpassed the intention of the artist and the object itself.⁸ The way we have learned to experience objects is due to the cultural assumptions that emerged from this long chain of institutional interpretations—becoming part of the language itself: that objects only exist to serve us. As a maker of objects, I realized I impose meanings onto the art-objects I create, meanings that matched the cultural norms entirely, as well as the imposed norms of how designers and artists are supposed to make objects and art-objects. I began to question how to potentially break these heavily imposed norms and if it was even possible to conceive this new train of thought. Was it possible to truly meet objects again for the first time, no longer seeing them with pre-existing assumptions, but rather to experience them based on the object's physical, and potentially emotional needs?

Our experience of objects is still dependent on the material world, the location, physical interaction, and the interpretation we regularly receive from all our senses. We interpret our environment unconsciously and are conditioned by the already imposed language of objects. Experiencing new art-objects relating to old ones makes it quite difficult to remove any pre-

⁸ Cummings, "The Value of Things," 15.

existing interpretation of what other possible meanings it might contain. Objects like chairs, tables, silverware, tableware, are such a common part of our physical language, that even the smallest change in their form is capable of shifting the entire interpretation we have of them. What happens when we engage with similar or related art-objects that do not usually relate to our preconception of the existing knowledge of objects?

When delving into the research of contemporary art-object makers, I looked for those whose work challenged the interpretation of the objects they make, by replacing the semiotics embedded in them with unique interpretations of new experiences. Contemporary artists like James Turrell question the perception of objects to the audience experiencing his work. The 1976 to 2013 series *Ganzfelds*, is an excellent example of experiencing art-objects without relating them to any other ordinary object in order to avoid potential misinterpretation of the work. Turrell's work endeavors to strip the audience's personal experience of space and perception; denying the audience the opportunity to make interpretations relating to pre-existing knowledge and experiences. Turrell's *Ganzfelds* accomplishes just this. The term *Ganzfeld* is a German word to describe the phenomenon of the total loss of depth perception as in the experience of a white-out.⁹ One of his *Ganzfeld*'s is the work *Dahtu* (Fig. 1), which is an immersive and overpowering installation which immediately floods the senses of both the body and the mind, creating this disorienting feeling through perfectly timed light changes of color. For some, this utterly new experience of the loss of pre-established senses can create a deep sense of delight, wonder and curiosity, but not everyone perceives this change as enjoyable. There is a certain

⁹ <http://jamesturrell.com/work/type/ganzfeld/>, visited December 31st, 2019.

level of discomfort when experiencing the loss of knowing what is real and where things are; to have that stripped away can be rapturous or distressing.¹⁰

As a graphic designer typographical and illustrative pieces dominate my practice. When I learned about OOO, I sought to branch out of the highly illustrative and typographical work I was accustomed to, seeking more abstract and non-relational ways of making art-objects that would force the audience to experience a loss of perception. During this time, I began experimenting with visual effects and reshaping the form of language, taking the work from a clear interpretation of language towards the discomfiting interpretation of the art-object itself. The art-object *Distant Memories* (Fig. 2) is the digital distortion and manipulation of a typographical print called *Illustrated Feelings* (Fig. 3), which depicts small squares of the immortalization of memories. Each one of the squares in the print contains a digital drawing of a word or phrase representing a specific memory of an emotion experienced in a day. *Distant Memories* is an art-object that offers the audience the experience of a sense of disorientation, forcing them to step into the gradient-like abstract shapes and surrender to the discomfort of uncertainty—the inability to see clearly or to understand what the object communicates. The blur and lack of visual cues forces the mind to make assumptions of meaning, creating an intimately and personal conversation between the art-object and the viewer.

Our experience remains dependent upon our location, our movement, and our interpretations of the data we receive from our senses. These senses may be influenced, however, by our personal or cultural stories, as well as the pre-existing knowledge about particular objects and the environments which they usually inhabit. The physical interaction and interpretation of

¹⁰ Wil Hylton, “How James Turrell Knocked the Art World Off Its Feet,” accessed December 31st, 2019 <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/16/magazine/how-james-turrell-knocked-the-art-world-off-its-feet.html>

all objects determine how we engage with them, what we make of them, and ultimately how they end up influencing us.¹¹ Although all objects hold material qualities—color, shape, weight, texture, material—the way we define them still lies in our sensory interaction with them, cultural stories, muscle memory included. The art-object *Systemic Psychotherapy of a Family* (2019) (Fig. 19) depicts a funeral like scenario where there are figures being honored, and others who are not. The name of the art-object reinforces the idea of unique experiences as the act of going to therapy is personal, and completely unrelated to others—even to members of the same family. The audience is challenged with experiencing the object seeking an interpretation for an emotional connection with what stands in front of them, as the object itself narrates my personal therapeutic process. Could it still be possible that the art-object challenges the emotional experience of the audience in relation to the object itself, rather than the quality and meaning of the objects embedded in them?

The Personification of Objects

The smallest changes in our automatic interaction with objects are crucial for triggering our need to intervene and regain the power we have over them. This power play is deeply questioned when experiencing objects we cannot easily intervene with. How is it that we can experience new meanings of objects in places like museum and galleries, if our way of defining meanings relies on sensory interaction. It is also important to acknowledge that museums create a hierarchical importance of objects. The objects inside have higher economic value, therefore higher cultural authority. Their arrangement and display throughout history have imposed they we experience their meanings. These places are limiting our opportunity to experience new

¹¹ Dudley, “Materiality Matters,” 1.

interpretations, making us rely on the cultural significance we project on their surface.¹²

Although our cognitive abilities make it nearly impossible to think of new meanings outside the cultural norm, we can attribute human qualities by personifying the objects to help us understand new interpretations outside the established use, and material qualities of the objects in our environment.

Through the eyes of OOO and the possible meaning of objects, Disney Pixar is a perfect example of embodying the concept of personification of objects—cars, fish, emotions, non-living, and non-human objects—having lives of their own without the intervention of humans. They effectively—and comically—narrate the possible interpretations of the secret lives of non-living and non-human objects. Films like *Inside Out*, *Ratatouille*, and *Toy Story* tell stories of these objects, from the perspectives of personified emotions living inside the brain of a pre-teenage girl going through emotional hardship, or a rat trying to become a chef, or the toy collection of a young boy who no longer cares for them. The movie *Toy Story* particularly resonates with me and has influenced my exploration of this work. As a toy collector, I have prided myself in the meticulously careful care and preservation of my toys—whether boxed or unboxed. These toys have been safeguarded and handled with the utmost care to ensure that they remain “happy.” Upon doing this research, I have begun to question my previous methods of interaction with my toy collection. I consistently made the assumption that the boxed, neatly organized toys were not interacting with me in any sense. However, I now wonder how the boxed and unboxed toys interact with one another. Has my desire to maintain these boxed toys caused resentment, increasing by the day, due to some toys’ inability to live the lives they want or choose? Are they somehow angered by their captivity and if so, what is the potential result?

¹² Dudley, “Materiality Matters,” 1.

Perhaps when these objects grow tired of the interpretations and restrictions imposed on them, an unfortunate and seemingly random series of events will lead to a master plan resulting in death.

The film *Stranger Than Fiction* is an example of how objects perhaps are part of a bigger narrative we no longer have total control of; seemingly little acts can set a chain of events we no longer control. An excerpt from the movie explains poetically what these forgotten objects might be trying to say:

"Harold assumed his watch was simply on the fritz and never even considered that it might be trying to tell him something. In fact, Harold had never once paid attention to his watch other than to find out the time; and honestly, it drove his watch crazy. And so, on this particular Wednesday evening, as Harold waited for the bus, his watch suddenly stopped. Thus, Harold's watch thrust him into the inimitable path of fate. Little did he know that this simple, seemingly innocuous act would result in his imminent death."¹³

Perhaps if we begin to interact with objects differently, and treat them as if we are listening to what they have to say, we might hear something in return.

Anthropologist Alfred Gell expands on this topic in his book *Thing Theory*, about how objects might be tired of us by us not being able to pay attention to what they might actually mean or want. As a society, it is easy to elevate the meaning of objects into totems that represent the symbol of a nation or clan. The same way the cheeseburger, the ice cream cone, or even the chocolate cake represents part of the American culture. In contrast to other type of objects, something like an inexpensive watch can only exist to serve our needs, because culturally they don't belong to a different hierarchy of objects. Often people physically manifest an affective investment into objects—whether expensive or inexpensive—, conjuring meanings based on shape, form, emotional attachment, and interpretational meanings we have embedded into them. Although in art, it seems to be a constant projection of our mental meanings onto the surface of

¹³ *Stranger Than Fiction*. Directed by Marc Foster. Chicago: Columbia Pictures, 2006.

the objects themselves. “If these objects are tired, they are tired of our perpetual reconstitution of them as objects of our desire and of our affection. They are tired of our longing. They are tired of us.”¹⁴

The Language of Objects

Living in a constant state of dismantling previous interpretations with the objects in my surroundings has been a rather exhausting task. It pushes my pursuit of an art practice wherein assumptions of objects question the meanings of the interactions. To bridge the gap of finding new meanings, using language—symbols and letterforms—as a catalyst for new interpretation is a rather crucial aspect for challenging the inherent meanings of objects.

By using language, we can talk about and attribute 'meaning' to objects in a sense to find something about their material characteristics or functions, but contemporary art-objects have become independent from language itself. Art-objects about which we commonly speak, seem to utter a natural language in graphemic code whose meaning rarely communicates the intended sense.¹⁵ A graphemic code introduced by artists, either by including semiotics—already loaded with meaning and are part of the language—on the art-objects or other areas, e.g., name of the object, exhibition name, name of series of the art-objects. Artists like Cal Lane, and Lorna Simpson, have created contemporary art-objects that defy cultural institutions and how they impose language on us. They shift an overly emphasized language as a structural network of meaningfulness to a post-structuralist ideology.¹⁶ This practice questions the ingrained habit of

¹⁴ Bill Brown, *Thing Theory*, Critical Inquiry 28, no. 1. (The University of Chicago Press, 2001) 15.

¹⁵ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press. 2007), 6.

¹⁶ The Post-structuralist ideology is a movement in the 1960 that emerged in France critiquing its predecessor *structuralism*. In relation to the art world, Roland Barthes theorized that readers and viewers of text and images create their own meanings; according to Barthes, no author or artist can dictate fully how others will decode an existing work. Barthes declares the “*Death of the author*” as way of that the artist has no authentic voice but creates using language and conventions of writing and image making that derive from earlier usages.

reading texts, and visual representations as if they were authoritative sources with fixed, single meanings.¹⁷ Lorna Simpson's *Easy to Remember, 2001* (Fig. 4) represents the visual sound of language.¹⁸ The still image presents fifteen pairs of disembodied lips arranged in a grid humming a Richard Rodgers love song. When looking without accompanying facial expressions, colors, body language at the video presented by the artist, we learn little about the individual hummers and how they respond to song lyrics and melody.¹⁹ A cropped view thwarts our understanding of language and the meanings we carry about the interpretations of the experience.

Cal Lane does a similar semiotic shift in the work *Shovels, 2016* (Fig. 5), originally trained as a welder, she challenges gender stereotypes by combining the "masculinity" of steel and welding with the "femininity" of lace-like, decorative patterning.²⁰ Because it uses common symbolisms like feminine pattern on objects that are predominantly characterized as manly, the art-objects only discusses a shift of the symbolic meaning between what the shovel and lace pattern already represent. Both the shovel and lace pattern must be seen as unified realities to interpret obscured meanings outside language norms. Lane's work focuses primarily on what the object does for the viewer as a result of its effects on language itself, with the meaning and pre-existing knowledge of what the shovel and lace pattern already carry. As the work leaves little to no additional space for new interpretations, I argue that the material qualities and symbolic representation of the pattern make it difficult to decontextualize the sum of their material characteristics and the effects caused by their cultural meanings. Deeply culturally ingrained interpretations of language make it difficult to see beyond their meanings, making OOO a

¹⁷ Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 284–285.

¹⁸ Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 284–285.

¹⁹ Robertson and McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, 285.

²⁰ Cal Lane, biography, accessed January 2nd 2020 <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/cal-lane-shovels>

somewhat negative perspective when looking at objects in general—in some instances, impossible even. The art of unlearning must be a present thought at all times.

Harman's OOO insistence on treating objects as unified realities that cannot sufficiently be reduced either downwards to their individual pieces or upwards to their effects is what continues to ignite my curiosity.²¹ The belief that objects have deeper meanings than the way the human mind interprets them helps direct the idea that all contact between objects—living and non-living objects, as well as non-living and non-living object interactions—remain of indirect and imagined nature.²² As an artist and object maker, I have no interest in reducing art-objects to just the term of their effects and their parts. It is dubious to claim that objects are utterly defined by their context, without any unexpressed private surplus of their meanings. The experience of the object comes first and it endures despite the ongoing shifts in language over time.²³ Experiencing this type of art-object by making them without focusing on the sum of their parts and the meanings of their effects on the human mind, is something I explore when making new art-objects. This is something I try to employ when experiencing new ordinary objects and art-objects in any given context. By remaining open to undefined interpretations, I believe it is possible to see the hidden qualities of objects and how they communicate and exist in its environment without the dominant intervention of our demanding need to make sense of everything we encounter.

Places like museums and galleries dominate our sense of hierarchy and value over art-objects with embedded meanings in the ways we experience them. These places of access to art-objects have overly reinforced restrictive conceptions of experiencing objects; this has

²¹ Graham Harman, “Graham Harman: Art Without Relations,” accessed January 2nd 2020, https://artreview.com/features/september_2014_graham_harman_relations/

²² Harman, *The Third Table*, 4.

²³ Harman, “Graham Harman: Art Without Relations.”

normalized the relationship we have with, and over, art-objects, by limiting our senses to interpret their meaning. The concern to protect objects from perpetual deterioration as a result of proper museum handling prevents us from experiencing an object that, for example, looks much lighter than it is, or tasting something that may be far less sweet than it truly is.²⁴ On our most basic biological level, the meaning we embed in the objects we interact with restores perceived differences from what was sensed. Furthermore, this process allows us to question what could be happening; it becomes a way to remain in touch with a world that had become uncertain or in doubt.²⁵ Artists like Alan Wexler exploit the idea of both “reveal and revel in a persistent condition of puzzlement where accepted ideas and ubiquitous things that once seemed apparent and uncontested become chronically unsettled.”²⁶

Wexler's work *Coffee Seeks Its Own Level* (1990), (Fig. 6) is a piece that personifies the idea of imposing language through self-semiotics and is inspired by the natural phenomenon of water seeking its own level.²⁷ As a matter of efficient analytical perception, we typically restrict casual perceptions to a single sense. An object as familiar as a mug renders the possibilities of other meanings beyond its *mugness*—the perceived ability to drink from a mug is but one alternative. This idea concerning perception, artifacts, their sense, encompass all the possibilities and constraints that come to mind.²⁸ As the four cups are being used by the people participating in the performance and coffee is consumed, the group must drink in unison by raising and lowering the cups simultaneously—making it quite difficult to drink without spilling. The

²⁴ Dudley, “Materiality Matters,” 2.

²⁵ Klaus Krippendorff, *The Semantic Turn: A New Foundation For Design* (Taylor and Francis Groups, Boca Raton, Florida, 2006), 52.

²⁶ Allan Wexler, *Absurd Thinking: Between Art and Design*, edited by Ashley Simone (Oslo, Norway, Lars Müller Publishers, 2017), 11.

²⁷ Wexler, *Absurd Thinking*, 230.

²⁸ Krippendorff, *The Semantic Turn*, 53.

animating principle of this piece is that it is almost impossible to drink in perfect unison, and Wexler is well aware of that. Each individual is conditioned to different external triggers that would make him/her drink coffee at certain times and specific gulps of coffee. Thus, this piece becomes the conduit for the final translation of the interaction of the coffee drinking experience among four people. As the stains are left on the white tablecloth, it offers the accidental topographical map for new interpretation of ideas.²⁹ Analyzing this process through the eyes of OOO, the inference is that the objects involved in the process—coffee, people, mugs, plates, cloth, table—are writing in an alternate language about the relationship between the parties involved. Wexler's *Coffee Stained Coffee Cups* (1991), (Fig. 7) is the representation of what he describes as architectural plans for constructions. Using his subjective interpretation—and bias towards experiencing art-objects through the eyes of an architect—he builds more cups derived from the coffee stains left on the tablecloth from the last performance piece. The coffee stains becoming the plans for creation of mugs, is Wexler's biased interpretation of the language about on how the relationship of non-living and living objects often record their casual encounters.

Both *Coffee Seeks Its Own Level* and *Coffee Stained Coffee Cups* describe in visual elements the process of language, and how language is affected by the clues given to those trying to find a narrative in the process. Yet, is the process of explaining the narrative necessary when experiencing the interaction of new objects? It remains a slippery slope to interpret objects within the constraints of established institutional language, as it is challenging to separate objects from their contexts to experience unseen interpretations. Possibly, both makers and viewers of art-objects must contain language in the form of letters or symbols to communicate more than what is intended. Nevertheless, I remain hopeful about the idea that there is something new to

²⁹ Wexler, *Absurd Thinking*, 230.

explore when finding possible interpretations of objects. Leaving clues in the form of language, letterforms in particular, might help people understand what possible interpretations the object might contain. Since the early 1980s, visual artists have engaged in expanding the application of concepts from semiotics and linguistics in visual cultures. Using visual art as their form of communication, signs and abstract symbols became a theme in which people are entangled in the web of theoretical debates concerning where the meaning of these objects reside.³⁰

First, we can explore how we use words to express their meaning. Curator Russell

Bowman categorized the use of words to express meaning six fundamental ways:

... (1) words can serve as signs, (2) words can function as metaphors (constructing associations or relationships of meaning), (3) words can tell or hint narratives, (4) words can decode the structure of language itself, (5) words can function as titles of captions, and (6) words can be employed for their formal qualities. How words express meaning—the ways in which meaning occurs in written and spoken languages (and there are differences among them)—interconnects with the reasons that artists choose to use words in artworks.³¹

Using text on objects as a form of semiotic interpretation emphasizes meaning to communicate ideas that are difficult to express in images alone; words function primarily as signs when the emphasis is in the denotative meaning of language.³²

Without consciously focusing on the importance of language in the early work produced, I decided to apply once again the use of letterforms in the objects I made, this time in the shape of metaphorical and ambiguous messages that would spark different interpretations. *YOU DON'T OWN ME*, (Fig. 8) uses the language of possession in its name by using the metaphor of a powerplay between the audience and the art-object. Metaphors are a powerful trope to create new realities and experiencing a different meaning of understanding, as the words themselves

³⁰ Robertson and McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, 283.

³¹ Robertson and McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, 289.

³² Robertson and McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, 289.

enable the people reading the phrase to draw on the familiarity of the cultural significance the name already possesses.³³ Regardless of how people experience these metaphors, they are capable of transferring feelings because we draw on familiar circumstances relating to the metaphor itself.

Spanish designer and contemporary artist Almudena Lobera uses metaphors to invite the interpretation of what an object is saying when being interviewed. Her piece *Sixty-Fourth Rest* (2017)(Fig. 9) is a performance-based piece where a plant is interviewed on a kind of television set.³⁴ The questions asked to the interviewee—the plant—are immediately translated by an interpreter who is capable of translating messages through touch contact.³⁵ Although this example does exemplify the idea of the language of objects, it is difficult to immerse fully in the idea of the plant speaking as the translations contain excerpts from different pop-cultural shows and philosophers. It does not contain a unique voice, but rather what the plant would say through the perspective of the philosophical current chosen by the artist.

The idea of the translation between objects remains crucial to how my art practice can evolve. Another significant influence in the interviewing of objects comes from the podcast *Everything is Alive*. This fairly entertaining set of interviews describe in detail—and quite accurately—the lives of different everyday objects we take entirely for granted. Like the story of *Louis, The Can of Cola*, who very bashfully tells a story of how he was forgotten in the fridge since brought home after being purchased. The narrative does excellent work by personifying the can by having him—voiced by a male voice—recall activities that involve the use of a soda can. Louis was forgotten at a party—where he experiences how his family was consumed—then

³³ Krippendorff, *The Semantic Turn*, 99.

³⁴ The set is a reinforcement of the visual metaphor that makes the sum of visual symbols interpret the plant as if it was being personified; it has been given human like qualities like adding a third glass of water.

³⁵ “Sixty Fourth Rest,” Almudena Lobera, accessed January 6, 2019, <http://www.almudenalobera.com/>.

brought home to be put on a freezer, then taken out a few weeks later to go on a road trip, to then be forgotten once more and placed in the fridge, to end up completely alone.³⁶ What interests me the most is not the experiences the Louis-Can has lived, but the tone of voice it uses to portray his story. With a constant defeated tone, one could interpret several meanings when listening to the podcast. One can assume that maybe, its true purpose in life was to be consumed by people, living what could be a short yet fruitful life. This sadness then, could be linked to a dream unfulfilled. The personification of the can of cola feels completely natural, as if we knew how it must be feeling because of how Louis narrates the story. The tone of voice used in the podcast relates to a vast library of similar experiences of conversations with other people—and sometimes, imaginary objects. When we personify, we apply human attributes to inanimate objects, to nature, to animals, or abstract concepts, sometimes complete with dramatic stories about their social roles, emotions, and intentions.³⁷

The personification of objects is a common practice of mine since early childhood. I would imagine personalities and stories to match both the positive and negative relationships I created. I believed the toys who lived on the shelf above my bed would leap off the edge towards their demise if they were not cleaned often from the dust accumulated on their bodies, making some showers far too entertaining when cleaning over 100 toys in a two by two square foot shower. As an adult, I still personify some toys I have collected over the years. I have assigned them the roles of bodyguards by placing them in strategic parts of the house with specific poses denoting signs of protection. Personification of objects often serves as a fuel for imagination to further understand the possible unique stories of objects. Human ability to personify objects is

³⁶ This is a summary of the first section of the podcast interview, accessed January 6, 2020, <https://www.everythingisalive.com/>

³⁷ Chi Luu, “Personification Is Your Friend: The Language of Inanimate Objects,” accessed January 6, 2020 <https://daily.jstor.org/personification-is-your-friend-the-amazing-life-of-letters/>.

quite natural and instinctual. It helps understand natural phenomena happening in our environment.³⁸

The Social Connection with Objects

The OOO insistence of treating objects as unified realities— enhancing human-like features, desires, feelings—is not far from what our minds do when trying to personify objects or understand their meaning. Describing the life of objects is a behavior present in children; they are particularly good at describing natural elements, e.g., clouds, water, wind, fire, with assumptions that these elements are alive and intentional.³⁹ Adults, on the contrary, due to their developed language and knowledge structures formed by consistent the external stimuli of their environments, have difficulty with the anthropomorphism and personification of objects.⁴⁰

Harman's ontology of objects might seem somewhat of an impossibility to the adult's brain, thinking every single object is alive as far-fetched as it is unlikely. However, imagining the life of objects and even having social connections with them, is a human behavior that helps alleviate pain for those who experience lack of social connection, loneliness, and in some cases extreme solitude.⁴¹ The experience of abandonment, rejection or exclusion, whether from family members, friends, or other social groups, no matter the age, can cause a person to seek social connection with non-human agents. Instead, the connection of non-living objects, (e.g., video games, deities, imaginary friends) satisfies the need for seeking social interactions with other

³⁸ Chi Luu, "Personification Is Your Friend: The Language of Inanimate Objects," accessed January 6, 2020 <https://daily.jstor.org/personification-is-your-friend-the-amazing-life-of-letters/>.

³⁹ Pascal Boyer, "What Makes Anthropomorphism Natural: Intuitive Ontology and Cultural Representations," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2, no. 1 (1996): 83.

⁴⁰ Boyer, "What Makes Anthropomorphism Natural: Intuitive Ontology and Cultural Representations," 85.

⁴¹ Nicholas Epley, Scott Akalis, Adam Waytz, and John T. Cacioppo, "Creating Social Connection through Inferential Reproduction: Loneliness and Perceived Agency in Gadgets, Gods, and Greyhounds," *Psychological Science* 19, no. 2 (2008): 114.

people.⁴² This type of social behavior allows for the exploration of the secret lives of objects, allowing me to unravel my unconscious interpretations of the pre-existing established meanings I had imposed on them. Humans have classified the meaning of objects through the following categories of use: language, communication, social use, life cycle, and genesis.⁴³ Although quite different from one another, the thread that ties them together is the concept of meaning and human involvement. When making sense of the meanings of objects, we categorize them into ecosystems. In the same way lakes, forests, or deserts have certain types of flora and fauna, we categorize spaces like offices, classrooms, museums, and homes with their respective conjunction of objects. Larger ecosystems are segmented into smaller ecologies for easier examinations of the classification of the objects existing within them. Overall, the meaning of these objects consists of the possible interaction with other objects, both with its own type of object, but more importantly with objects of other species.⁴⁴

Our contribution when intervening in the lives of objects should be in the role of participant rather than observer. Even when constructing the smallest ecologies, we build them with the intent to intervene in relation to our needs and assumptions we have over them.⁴⁵ As active participants in the life of objects, artists should feel encouraged to use these equivocal interpretations as a path toward creativity, just like children interpret their environment for the first time. Both the artist and the audience are responsible for building new experiences regarding the preconception of language and context. Both *Serendipity* (Fig. 10) and *Chance* (Fig.11) explore the early interpretation of the intervention in the relational life of

⁴² Nicholas Epley, "Creating Social Connection through Inferential Reproduction: Loneliness and Perceived Agency in Gadgets, Gods, and Greyhounds," 114. Accessed January 7, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/40064681.

⁴³ Krippendorff, *The Semantic Turn*, 193.

⁴⁴ Krippendorff, *The Semantic Turn*, 198.

⁴⁵ Krippendorff, *The Semantic Turn*, 193.

objects. By becoming an active participant in their environment, I deduced that graphemic code was left—as a series of clues, or topographic map of ideas for further development—for open interpretation. Four completely separate pieces—wood and foam—, built and produced by different artists, managed to leave clues for additional purposes of artistic and creative production. The black marks on the piece of wood as seen on figure 12, happen to be the exact size in both length and width of a neighboring piece of foam left by another artist (Fig. 13), as if the life of both objects’ destiny was to finally meet. The serendipitous nature of the connection of both objects is but one interpretation. Yet, by being aware that choosing the route of a fateful encounter as the outcome, I remained optimistic that active participation without pre-established assumptions of the knowledge could potentially lead to an unseen form of making. One that removed personal biases of object making and interpreting the meaning of the materials.

It is in our nature to justify the meanings of objects, especially when the objects have been part of language for a long time. Their uses and meanings are largely framed in the structure of language and changing them makes it a difficult task to experience new assumptions outside of established cultural language structures.⁴⁶ What happens when these language structures are challenged? When we show viewers objects and art-objects with small changes in their form and function (e.g., disturbing the angle of tabletops, changing their size or height), this creates potential for a new interpretation of the objects. These questions are further developed with the series of work *Dinner for Two* as part of the culmination of my graduate research. The early material and formal shape explorations (Fig. 14) challenge the use of a table, an object so common that its functionality is ingrained in our muscle memory. We know their height, their weight, and formal characteristics in relation to their environment and our body language. We

⁴⁶ Krippendorff, *The Semantic Turn*, 147.

know that we can sit at them, eat on them, and even write a thesis on them. However, when tables do not function the way they are supposed to, we notice they disrupt an experience we normally would not ever consciously think about. Throughout this paper, I have explored the different ways in which language can be used in relation to objects to express established cultural meanings. Letterforms, symbols, forms, and even context are all part of the language structure. Artists use them creatively to attempt a change in language by remaining flexible in the reconstruction and redefinition of their meanings in language.⁴⁷ The formal explorations of the *Dinner for Two* series uses language—form, material, and text—as clues for new interpretations. Both the name of the series, and the art-object name, suggests the idea of personification of the object. The series name uses language that relates when interacting with other people. It confronts the idea that there is a permanent dining section, but it only allows one person to eat from it. Even the name of each of the art-objects (Fig. 15, Fig. 16, Fig. 17, Fig. 18) hints at a possible romantic relationship gone sour. Both written messages are important to restructure the mindset for interpretation, as the lack of familiar clues produce a sense of discomfort and frustration. In addition to written language clues in the art-objects, graphemic clues are left by changing the stability and functionality of the art-objects in the series. *If Only You Cared For Me* (Fig. 15), *If Only You Loved Me* (Fig. 16), *If Only You Knew Me* (Fig. 17), *If Only You Shared With Me* (Fig. 18) embody the narrative of a dysfunctional relationship between two objects. Whether they are between living or non-living objects, the audience must make their own new experiences without pre-existing assumptions.

⁴⁷ Krippendorff, *The Semantic Turn*, 148, 149.

Concluding Remarks

Interpretations are part of language, and collective meanings are the combination of the assumptions relying on the legitimacy offered by its members.⁴⁸ OOO proposes new ways of interpreting the language of objects. The exploration of the variety of work presented in this thesis paper is an attempt to expand the unknown interpretations of the life of objects. Language must remain fluid and interpretations inconclusive, as acknowledging language itself is not personal, but collective. By removing questions like, what does it mean, or, what is it communicating with its form, we can approach implications that the object is not relating to the sum of its material parts, or the effects it produces to serve our needs. Perhaps, only by removing ourselves as the defining factor of the meaning of the relational context of the art-objects, we emphasize the multiplicity of its interior.⁴⁹ As soon as we stop worrying and overthinking the surrounding context, we are able to pay more attention to the internal diversity of whatever object we encounter.

⁴⁸ Krippendorff, *The Semantic Turn*, 150.

⁴⁹ Harman, *Art and Objects*, 177.

FIGURES



Figure 1, Dhatu, 2009, Ganzfelds Series, James Turrell.

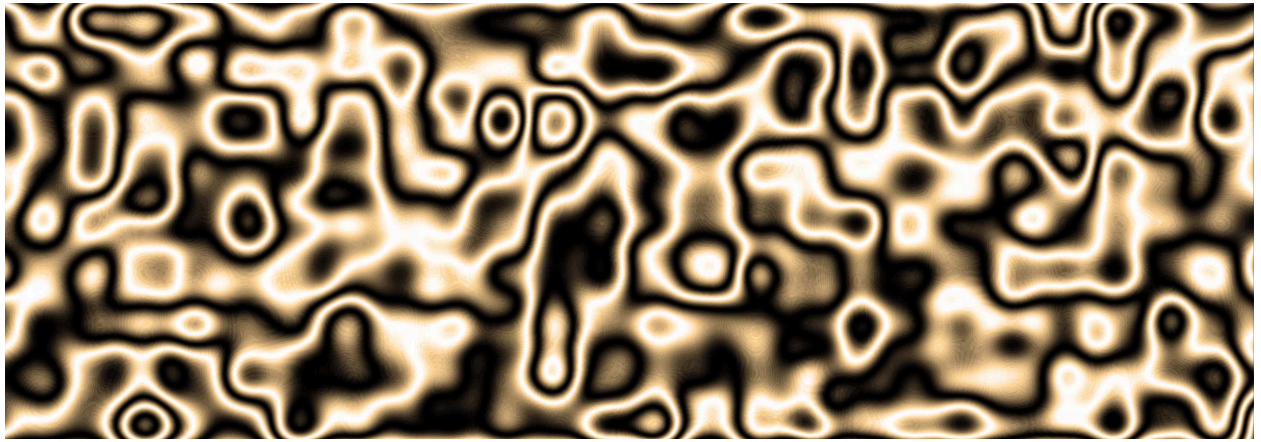


Figure 2, Distant Memories, 2018, Samuel O. Dong Saul, digital image, 3 x 7 ft.





Figure 4, Easy To Remember, Lorna Simpson, 2001, still of video.



Figure 5, Cal Lane, *Shovels*, 2016, Plasma-cut shovels,. 59 × 8 × 3 in, 149.9 × 20.3 × 7.6 cm



Figure 6, Allan Wexler, *Coffee Seeks Its Own Level*, 1990.



Figure 7, Alan Wexler, *Coffee Stained Coffee Cups*, 1991.



Figure 8, Samuel O. Dong Saul, *YOU DON'T OWN ME*, 2019, toner tusche on Mylar. 30 x 55 in.



Figure 9, Almudena Lobera, *Sixty Fourth Rest*, 2017. Still of video interview.



Figure 10, Samuel O. Dong Saul, *Serendipity*, 2018, mixed media, 35 x 55 in.



Figure 11, Samuel O. Dong Saul, *Chance*, 2018, mixed media, 27 x 55 in.



Figure 12, Samuel O. Dong Saul, process image for *Serendipity*, 2018.



Figure 13, Samuel O. Dong Saul, process image for *Serendipity*, 2018.

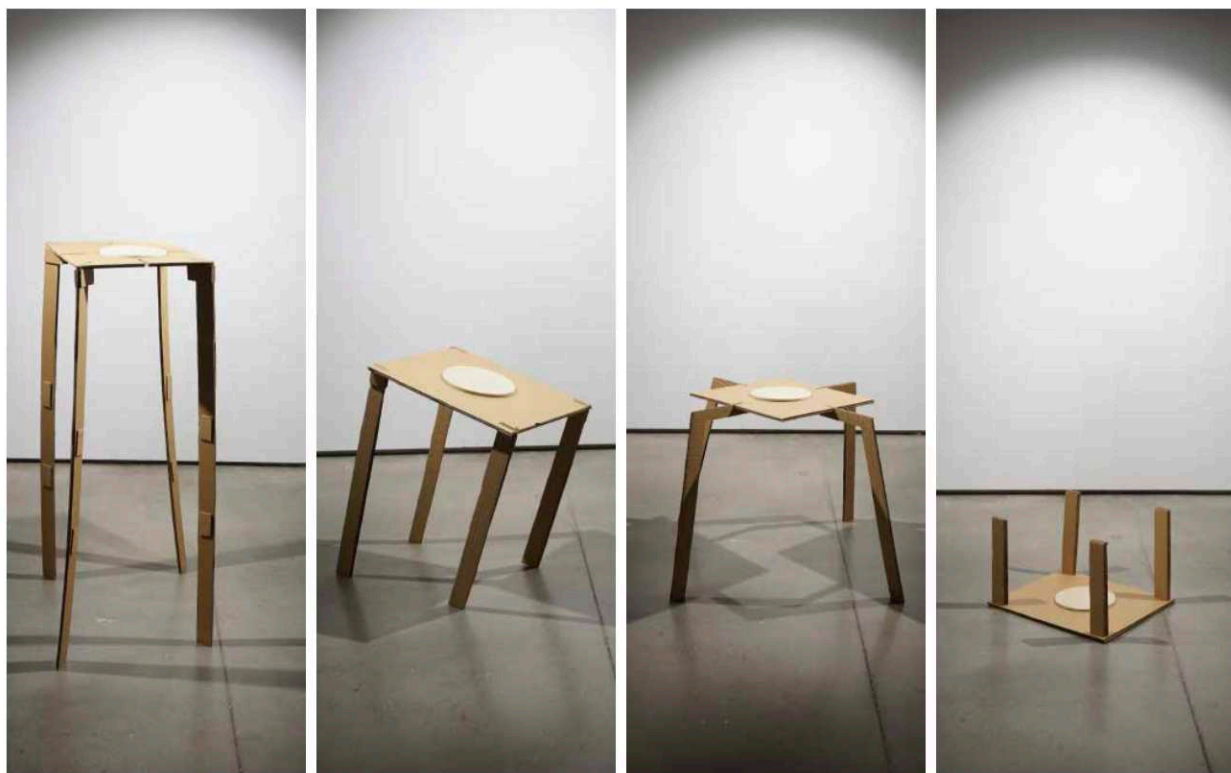


Figure 14, Samuel O. Dong Saul, process images for *Dinner for Two*, 2020.



Figure 15, Samuel O. Dong Saul, *If Only You Cared For Me*, 2020, 20 x 26 x 31 in.



Figure 16, Samuel O. Dong Saul, *If Only You Loved Me*, 2020 20 x 26 x 31 in.



Figure 17, Samuel O. Dong Saul, *If Only You Knew Me*, 2020, 20 x 26 x 31 in.



Figure 18, Samuel O. Dong Saul, *If Only You Shared With Me*, 2020, 20 x 26 x 62 in.



Figure 19, Samuel O. Dong Saul, *Systemic Psychotherapy of a Family*, 2019.

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