

## Objects and Things: Notes on Meta-pseudo-code (Lecture at SMU, Dec, 2012)

The purpose of this talk is simple-- to try to involve you in some of the thoughts and experiences that have been active in my work and teaching over the past few years. I have tried to use some recent thinking and reading as well as some of my experiences over the past few years in Lyon, to better form for myself, and perhaps you, a sense of the activity I engage in as a sculptor. IF I keep myself brief, it is divided into two parts: the first will be a somewhat philosophical discussion of objects, and bodies as they exist as objects, as well as work I have recently done with computer-generated forms and 3-D printing, and the second a direct activity of our bodies, in various situations of movement, which we will conduct downstairs. The second “talk” is intended to parallel the first but from the standpoint of the body itself; it should not be considered subsequent to or an illustration of the first.

First, the title. It stems from a set of email exchanges with Savannah Niles in which I tried to envision certain problems (almost sensations) as possible subjects for coding—in part just to see if it could be done. Essentially this is pseudo code, which is, properly, a schematic plot of the plan of one’s coding a program. The code iterates the proposal of the pseudo code. But it seems that something must predate the pseudo code—an urge, perhaps, or a problem that is looking for a solution. One such problem might be our experience of things. For example: One “problem” might be the notion of “filling up” a space with objects and then emptying it, much like a closet or shelf—the urge of filling and emptying a space. Or perhaps the feeling of a space that it too full, and might burst. It seems a computer program can do things only up to a point—that the notion of, say, the overstuffed closet

or a space that held more disparate objects or unruly objects than it should is elusive, but I was experimenting in my mind with how one would approach it. This very problem is, ironically, the subject of much physical humor—the clowns in the VW beetle, the cad trying to clean the apartment before a date. (Perhaps humor is the mark of a limit of coding, of whatever sort). Of course I don't code, so I was, in short order derided for engaging not even in pseudo code, but something far beyond. Savannah termed this mistaken thinking meta-pseudo code.

In a way I would describe my thinking about sculpture as just this—a meta-pseudo-code about objects and bodies, that is, an attempt to investigate through multiple oblique or peripheral attempts, the nature of objects and the nature of bodies—towards which the outcome of *things made* is perhaps my version of “coding”, albeit in materials and dimensions and within spaces.

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To talk of the object as a body flies somewhat in the face of what we have been told about objects, but not if we regard carefully the nature of objects. Here, I am distinguishing between objects and things (more of this later), and I am also concerned, foremost, with the activity involved in sculpture.

Sculpture might be considered the activity that is involved with using things to think about things—or more specifically, thought about things and their situation in the world conducted through things themselves. Of course this is simplistic, as we know that much is involved in even the most simple things—spaces, materials, subjective experiences, temporalities, culture, etc. And other fields are certainly also involved in similar activity, specifically design and architecture. But sculpture does this in itself and for itself. What is the nature of this thinking about things?

Perhaps sculpture (as described by Baselitz) is more primitive (and less visible) than other approaches to things and objects. For example while we consider drawing to be ordinary to the arts, that is in part because we have identified it with representation in the way it “draws from”. Yet a number of possibilities exist for thingly thinking as representation that may never have been visible, long before the advent of drawing, certainly thoughts about place or things would fall here—not just sensing, but thinking about the sensation itself, as a thing or picture. As Barry Flanagan once noted: “sculpture is going on all the time, everywhere” and that same going-on must have been there before sculpture, perhaps as a meta-pseudo code for sculpture. But back to drawing--a drawing exists not just as a set of marks, but as those marks within a field prepared for a given representation or record—the paper already cleared for vision of a certain sort. It is already a conceptualization or separation of things-as-objects from the world. But if I remove rock x to make room for rock y, who can tell? If a “clearing” has been made, a space, how do I know it was for this act, this thought. Too, though the act of sculpture starts with things, it does not necessarily start with objects, even if we want to identify it as material (iron, stone, earth, air) made separate from its environment in order for us to “use” it. The object appears in part through the act of thinking with things about things.

Things are involved in objects, but objects are not necessarily things. Things are the “world that is the case” for Wittgenstein whereas objects are seen as “within” the world, within a world-picture. Unlike things, objects are identified within a discourse of language, uses, and experiences (not necessarily verbal) whereas things merely are. We could say objects are “learned” from out of the things that exist As such, objects are both simple (complete)

and complex (made up of things). They are not necessarily coexistent with material things, or co-existent with names of things, or images of things; thus, the cup (thing) is a vessel (object) but a vessel is not necessarily a cup—here I take the experience of vessel as being an object that holds, a condition that various “things” can fulfill, such as a concavity in a rock. But the fact of there being a concavity does not necessarily make the object “vessel”—though it does engage the thing in the possibility of being a vessel, which is of some importance. Thus when W in his *Tractatus* talks about objects as “simples” that are involved in the construction of propositions (pictures) he is not specifically involved in an atomistic view of objects. What constitutes a picture?—its marks, its surfaces, its materials, its images, its uses.

Here, as an aside, I would recommend highly Errol Morris’ new book *Believing is Seeing*, which is as provocative a discussion of photographs as objects as I have come across.

--The body--

There is much current discussion within philosophy as well as other fields of the notion of embodied experience, or embodied knowledge. The suggestion, which I think I take in its most radical form, is that there is a set of actions that we are engaged in all the time that are not conceptual in nature, maybe not even mental, but might nevertheless be called “thinking”—it has been called pre-conceptual, tacit, intuitive, bodily coping, material consciousness, etc. Its philosophical substrata are deeply within Wittgenstein, Kant’s thoughts on Aesthetics and Judgment, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, among others. Richard Sennett in *The Craftsman* associated this “thinking” with intimacy with materials and things, or the expertise of craft. But we don’t have to resort to the notion of expertise (which is practice appearing as knowledge) if we consider that the notion of the body coping with “things” is in actuality a spectrum, less or more approximate in its

predictive results as time and experience goes on. “...it is a form of embodied intelligence or cognition that is “motivated” by the situation. (Reitveld, 2008) That is—motivated by states of affairs, by things, or more properly by objects and bodies (others) and our own body urges. I would further say that this notion describes a complex and shifting state of affairs or *affordances* between objects, bodies, and the world. The “organism’s possibilities for action in a situation” according to Reitveld, but I would also hold the object’s possibilities for action (behavior), if we view body, object, and world as a constantly sifting network and divorce intention from action. Just as the body (organism) accumulates experiences (knowledge) afforded by its movement through the world of things so to we should consider similarly other organisms and even co-called inert objects or materials—rocks, the ground, light, a block of wood. The sense of this is as a “distributed cognition”—meaning that the object itself doesn’t just represent but in fact is a cognitive locus of thought—it acts out, as it were, ideas, particularly of a qualitative nature. A whole range of bodily experiences and thought arise in this way through the world of things and their affordances: hardness and softness, obduracy and frailty, thickness and fluidity. The object is a “co-agent” and actant within bodily thought and action. We could consider this a species of computation, perhaps, if we make the metaphor of computation large enough.

The “thinking” afforded by things and circumstances can be in this way considered a parallel stratum of knowledge to that of conceptual knowledge, where both go on all the time, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in conflict. The sense that this is “aesthetic” knowledge stems primarily from Kant, certainly, and others who have emphasized its language of taste and judgment, but aesthetics in an immediate sense. Judith Lipton has an interesting piece on a 17<sup>th</sup> century cook book, and emphasizes the

relation of (practical) taste to moral judgment, particularly in the idea of “fit” or correctness, as well as the materialism and timeliness of taste description and judgment (warm to the touch, the variances on “enough”, a “slow fire”, “bruise ripe Gooseberries”, water that is bloodwarm) as well as the visual discernment of haptic states. This type of knowledge is at once simple (elementary, as reliant on a single perceptual experience) and complex (global, “encoding” diverse data such as material, time, temperature, amount, etc.) Thus—“melt the sugar until it streams from the ladle” attaches all of these “measures” together in one act. Now this is a procedure, but an object of a certain nature does the same thing. Thus a rock in its obduracy invites use in situations requiring resistance and duration, rock of a certain form (square) affords stacking, stacking the building of walls and cities, etc. In early experience this linkage is elusive, but given multiple experiences with rock, perhaps through the residues of generations, which are visible in object-instances, experience becomes intrinsic as well as the prehension of possibilities. One could say, with Wittgenstein, that it now comprises the grammar of the thing and therefore its potential life.

I do not mean by this discussion to proclaim, though, some kind of “naturalism”, though admittedly the references of the things I make are increasingly to natural things. All objects of whatever form or provenance are actants in the sphere of this body knowledge and open my future possibilities. Many “traditional” objects no longer possess such agency—it is not a question of the agency of the maker/user here, but the agency of the thing itself. This is an important question for one who works with the body or figure itself, as the body-object is no longer the same as it was a generation ago, its previous network of relations shifted, some maintained, some idle. The world that we encounter through the

things we encounter--*their force on us*--is immediate to our life and *its* form. Through their thingness, their active being lies ahead of us, as our future thought and possibility.

From the Far Field, Theodore Roethke

*Fingering a shell,*

*Thinking:*

*Once I was something like this, mindless,*

*Or perhaps with another mind, less peculiar;*