



Object Research Lab

Relational Thingness

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By Yvonne Dröge Wendel

Object Research Lab – A Dialogue From The Lab

In the Object Research Lab, situated high up over the rooftops of Amsterdam, exchange takes place between artists, archeologists, art objects, pre-objects, amateur objects, design objects, philosophers, sociologists and designers. Researchers bring their respective skills and vulnerabilities in order to find new ways of thinking with and about things and formulate the necessary questions regarding (the future of) things.

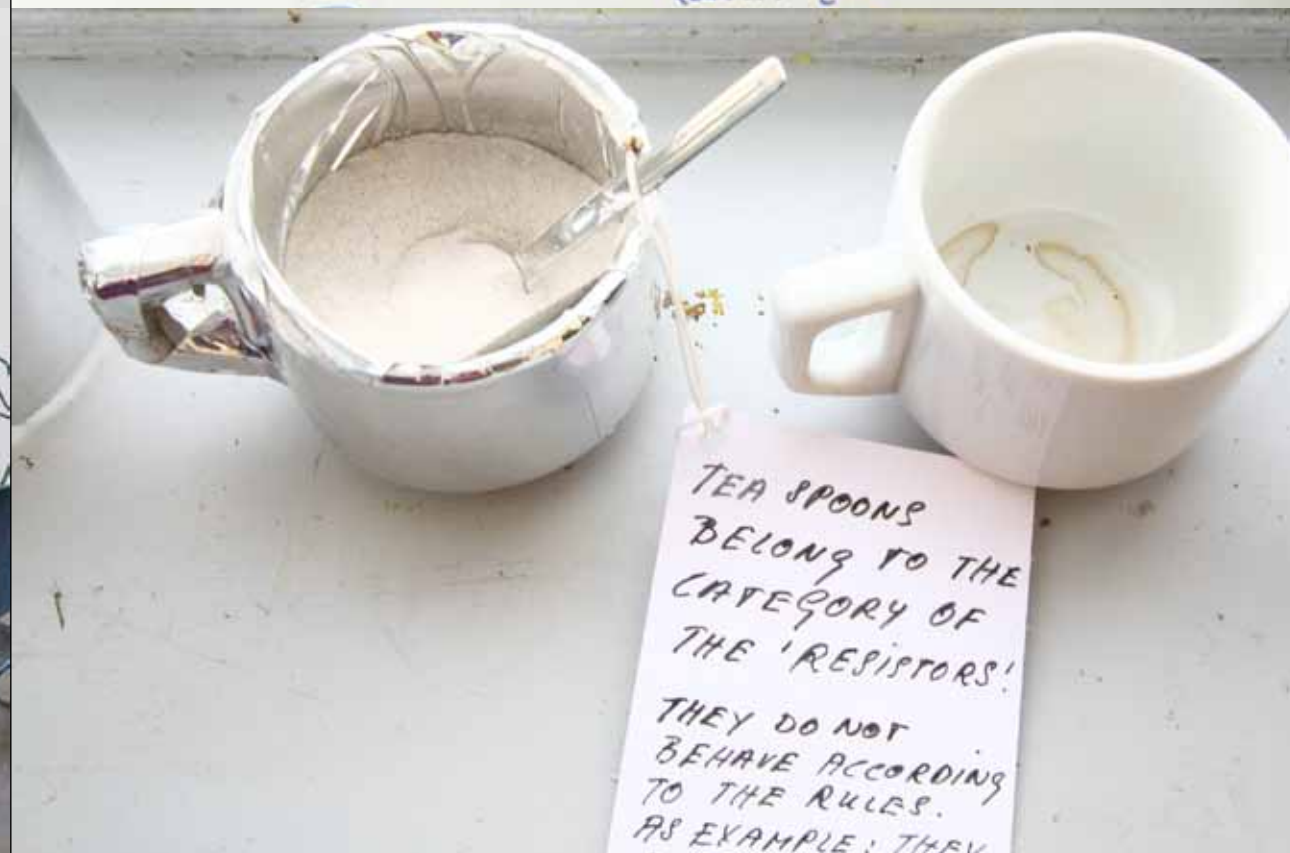
people
objects
words



Three researchers sit at a table in the Object Research Lab on their tea break. They sit with three-dimensional questions and elusive solutions that always seem to surround their investigations as they attempt to make sense of their world of work – their object research.

Researcher 1: So once again, what is a thing? What is the essence of things? Or perhaps I should ask: what does it take to be a thing?

GET AS MUCH MATERIAL KNOWLEDGE AS YOU CAN
USE ALL THE TOOLS YOU CAN. (what is the language of the material?)
a person can be a tool (eg: translator) what material knowledge does the OBJECT require?
ATTEMPT A SERIES OF (COMPLEX) PROCESSES
to see how material ^{innovative} ^{difficult} ^{transforms} ^{behaves} ^{talks}... [DON'T FORGET TO LISTEN!]



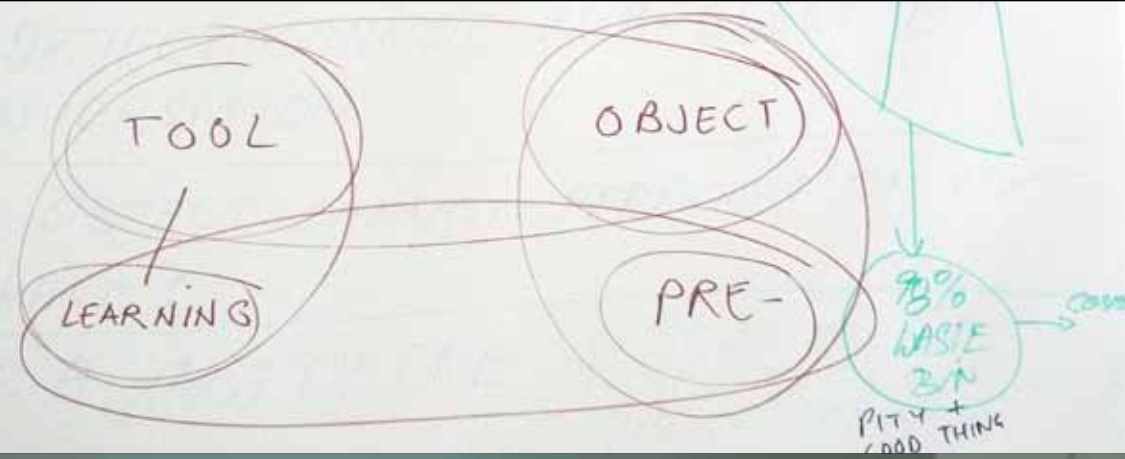
Researcher 2: We can probably agree that a search for the essence of things, such as the teaspoon in front of us, is in fact a search for its relationships.

Researcher 3: I certainly agree with that as I have serious doubts about any kind of essence or essential 'substance' of things other than relationality.

Researcher 2: So for example... the characteristics of this spoon arise out of its relations of resemblance and difference with other phenomena. The spoon resembles a knife in the sense that we can both hold them in our hands -unlike a car or a house-

↓
HE MADE HIMSELF A TOASTER

SET CONDITIONS → MAKE PERSONAL RULES



and are meant to deal with food -instead of clothes or dirt-, yet they also differ as the spoon is used for scooping and a knife for cutting food. We only know what the properties of a spoon are because of the way it relates to other things and practices.

Researcher 1: So that means that a thing differs from another thing, as soon as it is related to different phenomena. For example, the role, properties and function of a knife used in the dining room, are very different from those of a knife that is used in a bank robbery. The range of relationships change and therefore the object itself. But how far should we take this line of thinking?

Anyway, it is clear that the essence of things is not fixed, but determined by relationships.

Researcher 3: That's a tricky question though as the existence of the essence of a thing is still a contentious issue. But I tend to think that "there is no there there" of the 'the thing in itself', but rather shifting, situated event qualities that manifest in thinginess, But it's a complex discussion ...

OTHER

BROADS CANNOT
BRING OUT THE
MERCEDESNESS
OF THE MERCEDES

IT AFFORDS
AFFORDANCES



9 UNLEARNING TOOL

TRACED BACK
TO THE PERSON

UNEXPECTED TACTILE EXPERIENCE

AN OBJECT CANNOT REPRESENT A



Researcher 2: This, however, is not to say that things, in turn, do not exert any influence on their relational environment.

Things invite affordances and sometimes compel.

Researcher 3: Sure, they provoke and 'prehend' as Whitehead suggested. Even this spoon prehend its relations as it provokes relational activities. So the tea prehend the shape of the cup and the cup prehend the tabletop through its relation to gravity, and the table prehend the weight of the cup and so on....

Researcher 2: and some things are by nature compelling.

Researcher 1: Perhaps all things are compelling or provocative in small ways, at atomic levels as well as behavioral levels.

Researcher 3: Moreover, things generate bonds between phenomena. A revolving door, an example used by Latour, unites the desire of receptionists and cashiers not to be disturbed by drafts and cold with an opposite desire of large groups of people to enter the public building without continually having to close the door behind

MATTER
 SKILLS
 — REQUIRES NO SKILL
 — YOU HAVE TO HAVE BODY



them. The revolving door thus consistently avoids a conflict situation and ensures stability.

It is, however, often difficult to properly see what an object is, or indeed, with which phenomena it has relationships and how it exerts influence on its environment. For us, a revolving door is taken for granted, and as long as it functions properly, we are only barely aware that it ensures a convergence of conflicting desires.

After skill
 "boundless"
 has to be made of red
 Joxiel - kills humans
 Ultimate object feasts on dead bodies
 rare earth magnets
 - electric blanket
 condensing coating
 U+W+S
 Intensive



Researcher 1: ... or feelings and prehensions ...

Researcher 2: You know, when something breaks down, the Latourian revolving door for example, many of its entanglements become visible. Suddenly, it appears that the functioning of the door not only results from the interests of receptionists and customers, binding them, but also depends on the expertise of the technical services, the availability of the materials from which the door was made, the costs of the repair and, for example the financial reserves of the door-owning-company.

Materially engaged =
Socially engaged



Researcher 3: ... the hands that picked the tea leaves and the airplane that shipped it ... the designer of the cup ... that tree that provided the wood of the table, the rain that grew the tree ...

Researcher 1: This also relates to the idea of contingency, right? How things and events can always be otherwise ...

Researcher 2: Sure, there is a kind of contingent impress of what might have been but is not that nonetheless effects the perceived relational activity. We can imagine being

TO FORM =
TO BE FORMED



compelled or provoked by one of Yvonne's blob/things to pick it up. Our immediate experience is haptic and visual, we feel the texture of the fabric, see the stitching on the blue green form, feel its weight. We may not have heard the traffic outside or smelled the coffee brewing at that moment but they are part of the affective tonality of the experienced event.

Researcher 3: So, on the one hand, a thing is influential to the degree to which it is embedded in our lives and in our relations with other things and people. The introduction of a new product, such as the mobile phone, is considered successful when



TRACE HOW
YOU
CONSTRUCT



people feel they need the product to function properly. The object is entwined with peoples' daily practices and routines. Also, we notice that the more something is interwoven with the world, the more taken for granted and natural it becomes to us, and the more difficult it becomes to perceive its impact ...

I'm thinking of the revolving door. On the other hand, the more an object can escape our expectations, the more it can offer resistance to our interpretations, the more autonomous it becomes. In short, when an object generates disorder, when it frustrates, brings about the unexpected, it becomes stronger, more essential and more independent.

The researchers finish their tea from porcelain cups. They get up and go through a door marked, 'Object Research Lab'.

Object Research Lab is a project by Yvonne Dröge Wendel. All photo's were taken during the first working phase of the Object Research Lab (M4 guest studio in Amsterdam, 2009/10), Lunch with Objects (Pompgemaal, Den Helder, 2010), Relational Thingness (Stichting Outline, Amsterdam, 2010) by Lutz Baumann, Yvonne Dröge Wendel and Nina Rave.

Invited guests and co-authors were: Emilie Gomart, Dieter Roelstraete, Clare Butcher, Klaas Kuitenbrouwer, Willem van Weelden, Sher Doruff, Hermann Pitz, Ronald van Tienhoven, Robert Steijn, Frans Poelstra, Christel Vesters, René Welker, Maartje Hoogsteys, Tine Melzer, Kasper Andreasson, Sophie Krier, Fiona Candlin, Noortje Marres, Lucy Kimbell, Jurgen Bey, Michael Portnoy, Ann Meskens, Maartje Hoogsteys, Nikolaus Gangsterer, Zoe Laughlin and Alexander Kraemer.



The ‘dialogue from the lab’ developed during the first working phase of the Object Research Lab that took place in 2009/10 at the M4 guest studio in Amsterdam.

Text by Maartje Hoogsteys and Sher Doruff, partly extrapolated from labconversations and partly inspired by Actor-Network Theory and Speculative Philosophy.