Glittering Ugly Objects

In recent years, aesthetics has reentered architectural discourse under new guises and with renewed importance. Influenced by various factors—a disciplinary return to objects, a continual interest in affect, and novel theories of aesthetics, to name a few—this new focus seeks to detach theories of form from recent tropes of architectural form-making in order to align formal aesthetics with politics. Crucial to this effort is an understanding of how objects (architectural forms as such) connect to larger social, political, and ontological structures. To this end, I will posit a theoretical structure that connects objects and their qualities to "spheres" of identity, contemporary capitalism, and cultural patterns of behavior. Architecture informs these larger configurations through aesthetics; and more specifically, the aesthetics of formal articulation, which enables architectural objects to solicit subjects into new forms of engagement. Engagement is political in the sense that it can alter the experiential and behavioral norms of particular cultures, which greatly impacts how individuals interact with the material and social worlds they inhabit.

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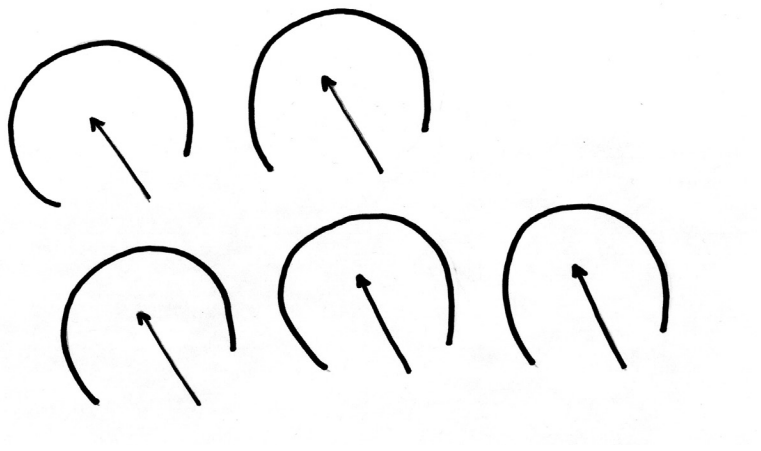
The connections between objects, qualities, and social structures are constituted in "worlds." Below, worlds will be defined both spatially (how objects are distributed in physical space) and subjectively (how they affect subjectivity). I will assert that we live not in a world but amongst *many* worlds. That is, worlds are not exhaustive, hermetic totalities, as in everything on the planet Earth; they are temporary and temporal connections between subjects and objects distributed in space and time. Worlds involve human subjects making aesthetic judgments about what kinds of objects belong together and what types of behavior those groupings invite. Worlds are not defined by proximity, but by aesthetics.

Furthermore, worlds are designed. Although architecture has a rich history of "world-design" in the form of utopian fantasies, it has scarcely engaged the type of world-making common in other domains, such as that of contemporary capitalism. Increasingly, corporations are directing resources away from manufacturing toward marketing, public relations, and design: a shift from the production of goods in the traditional sense to the production of the "worlds" in which those



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goods exist (Lazzarato 2004). These worlds consist of overlapping links between dispersed subjectivities, objects, and qualities that focus the attentions and passions of a group. Today, companies do not satisfy existing market demands so much as they create customers in advance of their products. If architecture is to engage the world-making forces of contemporary capitalism, whether with complicity or in resistance, it must understand design as a means of producing new worlds and altering existing ones. Both approaches assume worlds and the subjectivities they produce to be multiple and diverse, not singular and universal.

Lastly, the power of objects in world-making stems not from their function, implied meaning, or any other form of abstraction, but from their look and feel; that is to say, from aesthetics. The aesthetics of objects have the power to alter the ethos of a group: the customs, beliefs, and learned behaviors that influence how individuals act and how they relate to society. Architecture's political power lies in its ability to increase an individual's sense of access to the physical world. Freedom, in this sense, is not freedom *from*—as in freedom from oppressive power structures—but freedom *to*—as in freedom to engage material culture, thus creating a direct link between objects, aesthetics, experience, and politics.

SPHERE CITIES (ON WORLDS)

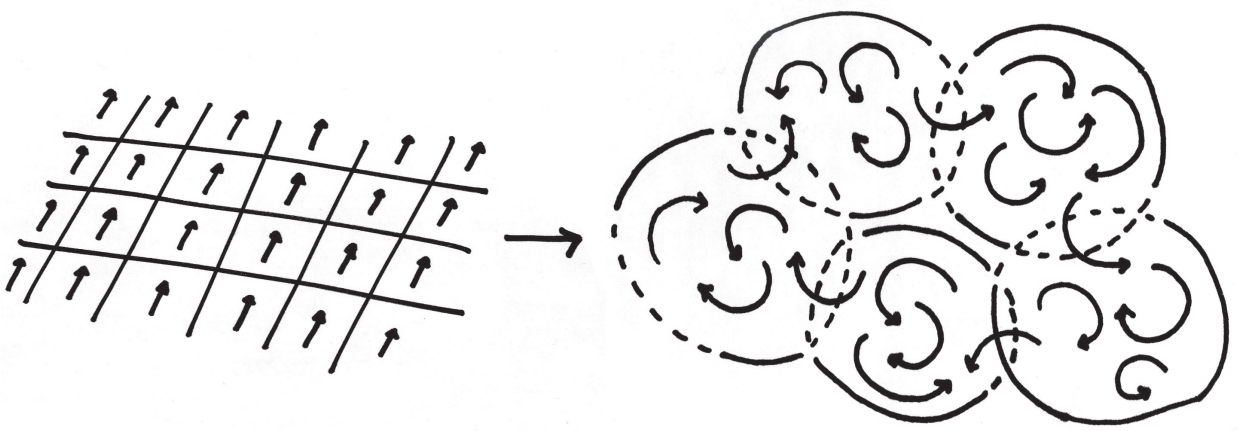
Emmanual Petit offers an account of contemporary cities that supports a notion of multiple, co-existing worlds. He describes how new concepts of the city go hand in hand with new conceptions of human individuality (Petit 2012). For example, modern and postmodern thinkers see the city as a vast, horizontal field that supports the functions of the collective over the needs of the individual. This leads to the typical modern city where interior and exterior boundaries are erased and the functions of society are carried out in the open expanse of the grid. Postmodern theories of difference, which embrace the complexities of urban life that defy the tenets of social or democratic collectives, are read textually against the horizontal city (Petit 2012). Breaking from such "horizontalism," Petit forwards an alternative concept of the city based on German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's theory of "spheres," where human space is depicted as a series of stacked, partially-isolated cells (Petit 2012).

Departing from notions of Cartesian space, Sloterdijk describes human spatiality as akin to the structure of foam, where multiple spheres of habitation, which are both physical and psychological, co-exist. An early influence on Sloterdijk's "sphere theory" was German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who in a lecture

Figure 1: Author's redrawing of Heidegger drawing

Sloterdijk attended drew a diagram of his famous concept “Dasien” that consisted of five half spheres lined up in a grid with arrows pointing toward their centers (Figure 1). Heidegger was illustrating how human consciousness, Dasien, is always heading toward some interior. Sloterdijk, however, interpreted the drawing as an accumulation of Dasiens, and therefore an aggregation of being. In so doing, Sloterdijk moved away from the Heideggerian notion of one authentic form of Being, to a notion of multiple, co-existing forms of being supported by separate interiors or spheres (Petit 2012). According to Petit, this philosophy means the individual subject “can have multiple avatar-identities instead of only one (authentic) selfhood” (Petit 2012: 31).

Recognizing the novelty of Sloterdijk’s ontology, Petit transforms it into an entirely new concept of the city as an aggregation of partially isolated volumes. If the modern city’s grid-structure directs individuals toward the self-sacrificing social subject in service of the collective, then the “city of spheres” offers up many possible subjectivities constructed by separate spheres, or what I call



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worlds. Petit describes this shift from fields to foam as follows: “One imagines that the field-condition of the contemporary city can reflect the multiplication of identities and act as a matrix within which many different spheres of subjectivity can be nested and volumetrically superimposed” (Petit 2012: 31). In keeping with Heidegger’s language of diagramming we could illustrate this change by moving from a horizontal grid of identical, aligned arrows toward a series of interlocking spheres with contained arrows that occasionally slip into adjacent spheres (Figure 2). Addressing architectural history in relation to his new concept of the city, Petit recounts projects that create pockets of urban space that are physically embedded in the city but detached from its ideologies. Many of these projects use the geometry of the sphere to poetically express their isolation from the surrounding context as insulated utopian bubbles.

Petit’s ideas are mentioned here for two reasons; first, as a convincing argument for numerous worlds and second, as an illustration of a common limit to architectural thought. In regards to the latter, when architects make worlds they tend to equate the world’s boundaries with the physical extents of a single project. Although Petit points out that Sloterdijk’s spheres are psychological rather than metric, he nevertheless refers to projects whose boundaries are isomorphic

Figure 2: Author’s diagram illustrating shift from modern city to city of spheres

with the worlds they create. In his examples, physical location inside the sphere is what determines how objects and subjects cohere into worlds. Below, I will offer an account of worlds that are aesthetically defined, rather than physically. Such worlds are characterized by sensible links between objects, subjects, and qualities dispersed in space and time.

In an essay titled "From Capital-Labor to Capital-Life," philosopher and sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato offers a definition of "world" that is distributed and temporal (Lazzarato2004). According to Lazzarato, contemporary capitalism has evolved from producing products in the traditional sense to producing the worlds in which those products exist. These worlds are not bounded spaces, such as giant retail stores designed all the way down to the smallest detail; they are diffuse networks of beliefs, passions, and intelligences that make up a company's clientele. The means by which companies produce these shared networks are through its "machines of expression"—marketing, advertising, and design—which seduce clients in advance of their products. In other words, clients don't precede products; they are created in advance by a corporation's fine-tuning of its consumers' sensibilities. Therefore, in Lazzarato's worlds, subjects and objects are not connected through physical proximity, but rather through aesthetics. Corporations construct aesthetic affiliations between objects, qualities, and styles of life—patterns of speech, ways of dressing, and types of behavior. Perceiving these affiliations and finding them desirous leads an individual to become a customer. Thus, corporations construct worlds by building passionate connections between individuals and objects that are spatially and temporally distributed.

THE MAGIC OF OBJECTS (ON AESTHETICS)

In Lazzarato's dispersed, aesthetic, desirous worlds, consumers assume a privileged role. Their purchasing power turns into market share and profit for a company. However, it is crucial for the arguments of this essay to assert the equal importance of objects in these worlds. Objects are not blank, hollow shells on to which the consumer projects value through subjective desire; rather, objects possess powers independent of the subject—powers that, when perceived, alter the subject's sensibility. Objects hold subjects under their sway, pulling them in, and changing them. This power is magical in the sense that it is both there, as in present in the qualities of the object, and not there, as in something exists outside the object that is not immediately attainable, and which draws us in (Thrift 2011). Two points follow from this: first, there is an autonomy to objects that derives from, but is not reducible to, their qualities, and second that objects and subjects mutually constitute sensible worlds.

This magical power of objects is perhaps best described as "style." Typically, one might consider style to be a label that we, as humans, invent and apply to a class of objects by identifying qualitative resemblances. Style in this context, however, is something that belongs to objects themselves, whether we are there to observe it or not (Harman 2005). The style of an object derives from its qualities but it is not equivalent to their simple accumulation; it is a unity that exists beyond explicit attributes. An artist's style, for example, is not captured by an exhaustive listing of every physical trait of every painting or sculpture they have created; it is "not a mere concept abstracted from numerous singular cases, but an actual reality that none of its manifestations can exhaust" (Harman 2005: 55). Artworks possess a unifying force that a human perceiver can never fully access. In his book Guerilla Metaphysics, philosopher Graham Harman explains

this through the hypothetical discovery of a lost Charlie Parker track. Those who know Parker's music could identify the artist at first listen, regardless of its particular rhythms, pitches, and timbres. In this example, the style of Parker's music is an animating force that exists deep within the object, animating its qualities.

This is a critical point for the design fields in general, and for architecture in particular, for it allows us to direct our focus toward the design of objects, rather than theories of human access to them. Other approaches to architecture concerned with the relation between subjects and objects, such as those in the phenomenological tradition, begin with a universal, often moralistic, definition of human experience to which objects must conform; that is, they begin with the subject. Christian Norberg-Schulz, one of the earliest and most influential architectural phenomenologists, identifies formal essences that assure the structure of architecture resonates with that of the lived world. For example, the tectonic expressions of floor, wall, and ceiling aim to affirm the human perceptual structure of ground, horizon, and sky (Norberg-Schulz 1996). As essences, these formal principles are universal and thus resistant to change. This leads to negative attitudes toward formal invention, which is seen as a dangerous seduction or an "ecstasy of newness" that weakens tradition, identity, and existential experience (Pallasmaa, 2012). In the phenomenological paradigm then, objects conform to the experiential needs of "man," universally and existentially defined. Put another way, objects follow subjects.

The relation between magical objects and subjects is different. As stated above, style is both present and withdrawn in any encounter with an object. Style engages the subject, exciting and fascinating them, yet remains partially inaccessible. In this pull toward the unknown, the subject is transformed. Thrift describes style as "a modification of being that produces captivation, in part through our own explorations of it" (Thrift 2011: 297). Objects and subjects are entangled in worlds; involved in bi-directional forms of becoming where each maintains partial autonomy and is changed by the other. Approaching objects as magical promises a fecund, speculative architectural practice where objects are designed with strange qualities that do not fulfill predefined experiential criteria but create entirely new ways to sense the world; objects don't fulfill our experiential needs, they change them.

ETHOS BENDING (ON POLITICS)

Magical objects become political when they alter the ethos of a group. Gregory Bateson introduced the term "ethos" in the early twentieth century to refer to the specific and minute ways of life that define different cultures. It stems from Bateson's anthropological belief that it is possible to: "abstract from a culture a certain systematic aspect called ethos which we may define as the expression of a culturally standardized system of organization of the instinct and emotions of the individuals" (quoted in Highmore 2011: 128). As a concept, it diminishes the sovereignty of individual choice by granting influence to the behavioral norms imparted by cultural groups. To a large extent, we do what we know. As an anthropological term, ethos refers primarily to relations among people, but I will add to this "system of organization" objects and space. The way in which we interact with objects is largely determined by how we believe they can be engaged. By observing patterns in our everyday experience we grow accustomed to particular subject-object relations that are solidified through habit. Additionally, there is spatiality to ethos. Inside each of Sloterdijk's spheres there

is an ethos. As stated above, spatiality is not necessarily metric. Sloterdijk borrows the term "nearness" from Heidegger to refer to the ways in which subjects draw things near to their consciousness regardless of physical location; one can just as easily recall something far away as they can miss something under their nose (Petit 2012). To connect these various threads we can say that worlds are made up of patterns of subject-object relations that determine how we act. And further, that these worlds are spatial, and that spatiality can be perceived regardless of physical proximity.

It follows that political action in regards to ethos and worlds does not follow a discrete political doctrine, but rather directly engages and alters these sensible worlds. It is a politics dedicated to "opening up the affective, sensorial tuning and retuning of the social body" (Highmore 2011: 136). Highmore uses the terms ethos and "social aesthetics" interchangeably, and in so doing aligns himself with Jacques Ranciere for whom aesthetics is a "distribution of the sensible": "the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience" (quoted in Highmore 2011: 128). With the addition of "ethos" to my earlier points about the qualities of consumer objects, we now have aesthetics working at two levels: that of discrete objects and that of cultures and groups. An architectural practice that wishes to engage politics as a matter of aesthetics must address these two levels by coupling obsessive attention to the designed object with its myriad of idiosyncratic, concrete traits and speculations about how those objects might enter into and alter the ethos of a group.

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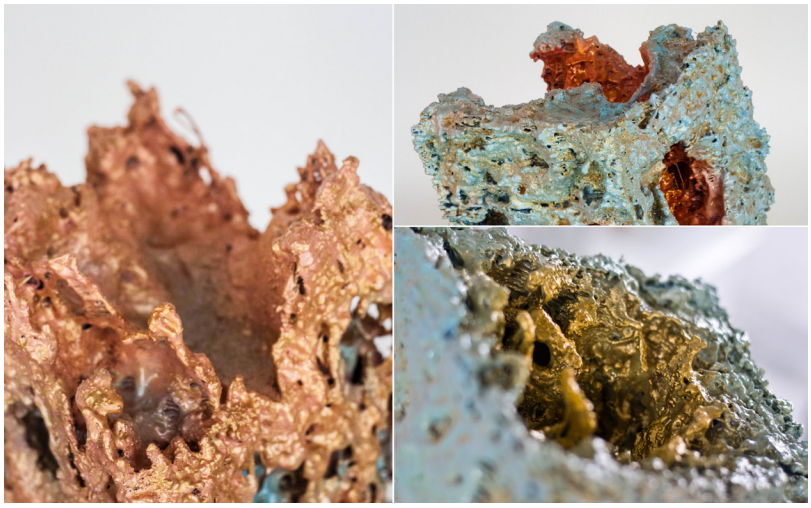
Figure 3: SIFT Studio, Artifacts, 2014

GLITTERING, UGLY OBJECTS

Up until this point, I have attempted to describe a theoretical structure by which an architect can understand the relationship between the objects she or he designs and broader social and political configurations. It is important to note, however, that architecture is not a social science. We do not do field work or produce metrics that determine the exact effects of our architecture. At best, we can pair careful observations about the world with grounded, disciplinary knowledge to offer conjectures on the changing nature of architecture. Design is a means of activating such conjectures through objects. Not as a proof of concept—again, there is no science here—but as a means of turning thought into objects, which

then take on a life of their own. Objects are more than inputs and outputs; they give us more than we put in (regardless of how proud we might be of our theories of them!). What follows is a description of a recent project from my firm (SIFT Studio) titled Artifacts, which is informed by the ideas of this essay, but, hopefully, not reducible to them.



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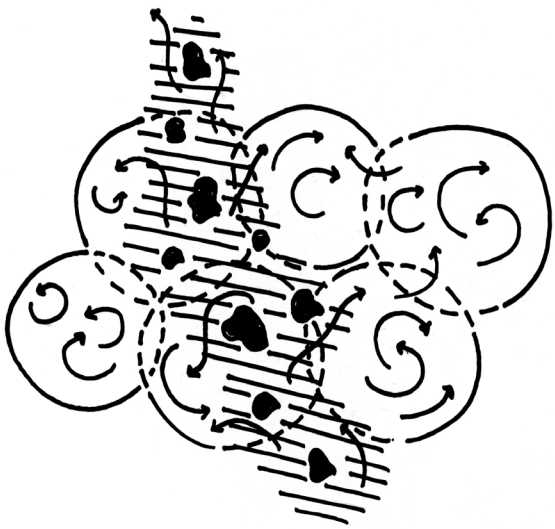
In response to the two levels of aesthetics mentioned above—the socio-political and the concrete object—this project attempts to engage consumer culture through *glittering ugliness*. An intentionally odd pairing, glittering refers to qualities of surface while ugliness reflects the objects' form. Contemporary consumerism is all about surface. As the marketplace of commercial goods grows increasingly crowded, exorbitant amounts of resources are being shifted into the production of minute differences in aesthetics, or the look and feel of objects. The plastics division of General Electric, for example, has over a million different plastic finishes and invests millions of dollars into technological research aimed at producing infinitesimal adjustments to the surface qualities of their products (Postrel 2004). Plastic is not merely plastic; with GE's technology it can change color, range in texture, and emulate metal, stone, or marble, which allows this mega-corporation to distinguish their product lines from all others. In today's consumer marketplace, the underlying form of products is relatively stable—a toothbrush is a long, skinny handle with bristles at the end—but the styling of them is infinitely variable—drug stores can fill whole aisles with different toothbrush models. Artifacts reflects this contemporary commercial obsession with surface through an excessive layering of material qualities. Each object is initially smoothed by a plastic coating, and then painted with primer, a gradient of two base colors, an iridescent glaze mixed with metallic flecks, up to four different colors of air brush paint, and finally coated with thick resin that provides a wet, glossy finish. As a generic finish, the surface qualities of Artifacts might easily fit on the shelves of a high-end design store. However, their debased form undercuts such a fixed association.

Formally, Artifacts relates to the aesthetic discourse of art rather than commerce. Specifically, the discourse that stems from Georges Bataille's notion of the *informe*, or formless, which was the inspiration for an exhibition at the Pompidou in 1996 curated by Rosalind Kraus and Yves-Alain Bois (Bois and Krauss: 1999). Although a lengthy description of this discourse is beyond the scope of this essay, it is appropriate to briefly summarize Bataille's thoughts on form. The opening

Figure 4: SIFT Studio, Artifacts, 2014, surface details

page of Bois and Kraus' exhibition catalogue includes a quote from Bataille, "affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit" (quoted in Bois and Krass, 1999: 5). For Bataille, any effort to idealize form was "man's" attempt to cover up the base nature of all matter. Although man aspires to perfection and virtue, he and the entire material world will eventually fall from the noble to the profane, from the clean to the carnal, and from the high to the low. "Formless" is the name Bataille gives this downward movement; it is a process rather than a quality.

Bois and Krauss use this process-based notion of the formless to curate a body of work that reveals and revels in the base qualities of matter. Much of this work expresses a tension between the physical processes of material formation and ideal geometries. Lucio Fontana's *Cermaica spaziale* of 1949, for example, is a cubic sculpture made from lumpy, crudely-formed clay. In this sculpture, Fontana intentionally disrupts the sculpture's evolution from passive, moldable material into ideal form. This leaves the viewer in a suspended state between understanding matter as a real, physical process and seeing the cube as an ideality to which forms should aspire. I call this in-between-ness "ugly," for it is the presence of something that should not be there: an "object that has gone wrong" (Cousins 1994: 61). In other words, the viewer perceives the movement of the sculptural formation toward the ideal, only to have it negated by the material matter-of-factness of clay (this is not a perfect geometry; it's just a lump of clay!). Artifacts expands this tension between ideality and matter by pairing it with colorful surface qualities. The co-presence of these two qualitative states allows Artifacts to enter into multiple aesthetic spheres without settling into any one. They are both glittering and ugly.



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To end with a speculation of how glittering, ugly objects alter worlds, I will return to the diagrammatic language of Heidegger used above. If the city of spheres is drawn as a series of defined interiors that support diverse identities, then glittering, ugly objects might enter into those spheres—granted access by their qualitative resemblances (they too are colorful and shiny)—but resist disappearing into their background of objects (they stick out because they are ugly). Familiar qualities, such as those that resonate with commercial products, provide access points for subjects, while the strangeness of their form challenges experiential

Figure 5: Diagram of glittering, ugly objects interfering with established worlds

expectations and alters aesthetic norms. When aesthetic resonances exist between multiple objects they band together to create secondary aesthetic territories, which run interference with preexisting worlds and alter the subjectivities contained within (Figure 5). These groups of qualitatively similar objects can result from the sustained efforts of a single architect or a group of like-minded architects invested in similar aesthetics.

CONCLUSION

This This paper outlines a theoretical structure for worlds which involves aesthetic affiliations and experiential patterns between subjects and objects that are physically and temporally distributed, but spatially perceived. This structure draws from the logics of contemporary capitalism, not in order to emulate and advance such practices, but to understand how to engage and alter them. If corporations are in the business of producing worlds, then architecture should be in the business of producing alternative worlds that disrupt the laws and logic of capital and open aesthetic culture to new audiences. This leads to a project of resistance, defined as the production of counter-worlds that overlap and disrupt capitalism's own mechanisms of world-making. Glittering, ugly objects aim to produce such counter-worlds.

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