

# An Hour Is a Vase: Meaning in a Post-Authentic World

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The cultural anthropologist Igor Kopytoff describes a method of observing cultures that relies on a kind of 'biography of things'. "Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such a thing?... How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?"<sup>2</sup>

The idea that objects have a 'life' parallel in kind to our own, a unique narrative that encompasses creation, demise, and the path between the two, has been central to our subscription of meaning to the material world. Original works of art are valued because of their unique existence in time and space and common objects attain significance through a relationship that develops over repeated use. Authenticity, as the pedigree of these biographies, is the measure by which western culture establishes the worth of its artifacts.

This century has seen the idea of the 'pedigreed object' challenged by modern technology. Mechanical reproduction and mass distribution interferes with authenticity. When multiple equivalents exist substantive duration ceases to matter, jeopardizing the object's biography. The commodities of modern production suffer a crisis of biographical identity and this is due, by and large, to the intrinsic nature of their production and distribution.

The denial of origin is implicit within contemporary production processes. There are no originals and therefore no copies but rather manifestations of a set of technological variants carried out identically ad infinitum. When combined with the constant availability afforded by contemporary distribution, the mass produced object exists in a perpetual present; springing *ex nihilo* into the world with no past and no inherent or potential future.

The Styrofoam cup, for example, has no original, it has no past and no future beyond its use in fulfilling its role in delivering a commodity - in this case holding a drink. When this particular cup is discarded another identical cup stands ready to offer the same commodity. Indeed there is no particular cup; all Styrofoam cups are one cup - or rather no cup - as they all exist in anticipation of the immediate that will signify their use.

The situation is similar in architecture where the measure of significance has also been guided by the authority of origins and continuity. "To dwell in the qualitative sense is a basic condition of humanity. When we identify with a place, we dedicate ourselves to a way of being in the world. Therefore dwelling demands something from us, as well as from our places. We have to have an open mind, and the places have to offer rich possibilities for identification."<sup>3</sup>

The 'pedigreed house' as a uniquely conceived and executed response to the idiosyncratic potential of a particular set of circumstances is the spatial equivalent of the authentic object. Its origins are the thoughtful hand of the architect and the skillful body of the master builder. In its sensitive relation to site, climate, culture, and function it builds a temporal narrative with us, revealing itself differently through the various stages of our lives. Its role, as with that of the pedigreed object, is to 'discriminate, classify, compare and sacralize'<sup>4</sup> and like the pedigreed object it is fundamentally challenged by contemporary technology.

The tract suburban house and standard apartment suite in which the majority of us reside are the architectural equivalent of the Styrofoam cup. Although the production processes in architecture have not really changed all that much and all buildings no matter how repetitive are hand-crafted things, the tract house and apartment suffer from the same ramifications of technology that have affected our objects. Like more commonly understood commodities, they offer technological availability. "Something is available in this sense if it has been rendered instantaneous, ubiquitous, safe, and easy,"<sup>5</sup> and this availability allows the commodity to be "used up without preparation, resonance, or consequence."<sup>6</sup>

The tract home and apartment offer the commodity of space as an abstract three dimensional grid. Our buildings "stand as a metaphor for the whole society's desire for independence from the natural setting: temperature, humidity, air exchange, and lighting are all controlled mechanically, independent of season, wind speed, or whether one is on the north or south side of the building. Neither material nor design change as the location is moved in latitude by thousands of miles. (In physicists' jargon, the building is

invariant under ninety degrees rotation, displacements in space, and translations in time).”<sup>7</sup>

Like the Styrofoam cup, the tract house and apartment are caught in a perpetual present. They have no past and no potential future. Every house comes to be like every house as people move every five years and purchase on the basis of an inevitable resale. They are one house - or rather no house - and although not literally discarded they are as thoughtlessly used up by one person after another.

Designers find themselves caught between the pedigreed and the perpetual. We find ourselves on both the difficult road of the authentic as well as the omnipresent path of technology and its promise to make life better by making it easier.

A recent response to this dilemma has been to argue for a return to the importance of making. It is an attempt to revive the authentic by making the act of creation explicit. In the excellent article *Releasing the Form to the Making: Womenswork is Never Done* Kim Tanzer argues for a thingification of technique by which she suggests that the designer may find meaning through the rituals of everyday practice.

“.... Peter Eisenman has explicitly designed methods which produced forms. For him, the performance of the method is as important as the form produced. Daniel Libeskind expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote, ‘I think the objects in architecture are only residues of something which is truly important: the participatory experience (the emblem of reality which goes into their making). You could say that it is the experience that I would like to retrieve, not the object’.”<sup>8</sup>

One criticism of these approaches is that they assume that authenticity is instilled in the artifact through a significant experience for the designer. Tanzer states her goals as being to “recover the joy of the everyday” and to “loosen our collective fixation on the fetishized end form.”<sup>9</sup> While both of these admirable goals seem to answer to the concerns raised by the dilemma of commoditized availability, their manifestation in ‘the thingification of technique’ address only the creation myth within the search for the authentic.

As with the Arts and Crafts Movement the approach focuses selectively on the historical precedent of the artisan. It denies the essential importance of the context beyond the artisan’s studio and the fact that those who make only play a small role, however personally significant, in the biography of objects and spaces.

A more profitable approach might be to expand the horizon of investigation beyond the historical paradigm of production. Rather than trying to recapture the authentic from the grasp of an increasingly perpetual present, perhaps there is an alternative that renders the dilemma moot.

A model for this approach can be found in Walter Benjamin’s essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. His brief history of the development and

impact of mechanical reproduction on art culminates with photography whose medium renders inconsequential the dilemma between original and copy. The print, simultaneously singular and serial, denies the idea of the origin(al) from which multiple reproductions are derived. “From a photographic print one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense.”<sup>10</sup>

Benjamin’s argument, first published in 1936, offered a way of transcending the problematics of the authentic by means of a new type of production ‘the work of art designed for reproducibility’. Its applicability to the current situation, however, is limited to its intention as the production paradigm of culture in which it is so deeply imbedded would appear to no longer hold true.

Social critics have observed that monopoly capitalism has shifted the locus of control away from production and into consumption. This control is achieved primarily through the control of demand and socialization by the symbolic code. The result of these conditions, according to the writer Sut Jhally, is that “control over demand and symbolism, rather than contradictions in production, becomes the vital focus of advanced capitalism.”<sup>11</sup> It is to an examination of consumption as the driving force of contemporary culture that the essay now turns.

Physical things are the constituent elements of a production culture. In a society organized by consumption things assume a secondary position, becoming only the means to an end which is the act of consuming. Thus the constituent element in consumption is not a physical entity, the object; but a temporal one, the event. In a recent television interview, executives from Pepsi defended the lack of nutritional value in their product by arguing that it was not a food at all but a form of entertainment. Its value lay not in its physicality but in the opening of the can and the subsequent drinking.

The triviality of this example begs the question of how the value of an event might be measured. As authenticity is a measure of the worth or importance of physical objects, consequence could be said to define the importance of events. Within the common definition of consequence we would likely agree that drinking Pepsi is inconsequential and has a status similar to the perpetually present object. Being shot, on the other hand, is certainly of consequence to both parties involved and although a rather extreme example, should serve to illustrate the features of the artifact within a consequential event.

In a shooting, significance resides not in the material manifestation of the gun or even of the bullet but instead in the experiential realm of being shot. The gun and bullet facilitate an event, they are the armature around which two individuals become related through an action. Implicit in this idea is that objects only present the potential for an event and do not guarantee a consequential experience. In other words the person using the object is at least as responsible for the event as the object. This shifts the focus away from an object’s genesis and the relationship to its maker, and towards the object and concurrent relationship at the time of

use. This subtly recasts Tanzer's argument from a 'thingification of (production) technique' to a 'thingification of use' and places the 'recovery of the joy of the everyday' into a much broader and perhaps more appropriate context.

The example also reveals that consequence is inseparably related to function. Purely in terms of their physical attributes a gun and a bullet are not entirely unlike a stapler and a fishing weight, but it is around the former rather than the latter that the event may coalesce. The potential of the event emerges directly out of the utility of the object and is not something extraneous that can be grafted on. Beyond the extremity of the current example, however, it is also apparent that significance is not guaranteed just by functional use, and that an object designed for consequential consumption probably embodies its utility in a particular manner.

Taking the example to its conclusion it is evident that there is nothing more consequential about being shot by a hand-crafted pistol inherited from your grandfather than with a production line machined revolver bought new this morning. Thus the consequence of event transcends the dilemma of authenticity that existed within the production paradigm.

However, rendering the object's pedigree irrelevant may not necessarily relieve us of the challenge of modern technology. Is not the violence and horror that is the event of a shooting mollified by television, video games, and the habitual reporting of the daily news? If so, commodified mass experience challenges the consequential in the same way that the commodified object subsumes the authentic. As Milan Kundera writes, "the bloody massacre in Bangladesh quickly covered over the memory of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, the assassination of Allende drowned out the groans of Bangladesh, the war in the Sinai Desert make people forget Allende, the Cambodian massacre made people forget Sinai, and so on and so forth until ultimately everyone lets everything be forgotten."<sup>12</sup>

And yet in the microcosm of a shooting, the event is shockingly significant for the individuals involved. This observation reveals an essential aspect of the consequential event - it is personal and particular. Thus the statement 'of consequence' actually means 'of consequence to someone' and even more specifically, 'of consequence to me' as participant of the event.

The 'me' that participates in a consequential event is constituted as a body and it is the essential physicality of this 'mineness' that assures this act of consumption will be more than just a manipulation of form-sign code. Charles Levin argues that meaning is "not just a matter of systems of signs, but of inchoate bodily states and fluxes of interaction... The fact of being a body is inescapable, it cannot be deferred, lost in a chain of references, or divided into signifier and signified. Neither *difference*, nor indeterminacy, nor the ideological constitution of the subject, nor the social or linguistic construction of reality, can succeed in disguising the biological status of our existence."<sup>13</sup>

The nature of the relationship between significance and bodily experience is explored by Marcel Proust in his idea of involuntary memory. Recollection of this particular kind is comprised of relating a present felt experience to another similar experience in the past which brings to the surface with it a series of related sensations and emotions. For example, as the narrator of *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* was walking in a courtyard he stumbled, and, in recovering himself, stepped with one foot on a flagstone that was lower than the one beside it.

"Merely repeating the movement was useless; but if... I succeeded in recapturing the *sensation which accompanied the movement*, again the intoxicating and elusive vision softly pervaded me... And, then, all at once, I recognized that Venice which my descriptive efforts and pretended snapshots of memory had failed to recall; the sensation I had once felt on two uneven slabs in the Baptistery of St. Mark had been given back to me and was linked with all the other sensations of that and other days which had lingered, expectant in their place among the series of forgotten years from which a sudden change had imperiously called them forth."<sup>14</sup>

In her book *Memory*, the philosopher Mary Warnock argues that in this situation, "because what we grasp is the past, and yet our knowledge and our deep happiness are part of the present, we have found a way to overcome the gap between past and present. We have achieved a universal and timeless understanding of what things are like."<sup>15</sup> This linkage of past and present through involuntary memory constitutes a type of knowledge, not simply knowledge *of the past*, which can be readily manipulated and commodified by contemporary society, but knowledge *caused by my past*. It is knowledge that is private, contingent, and essentially emotional in character, and although its object, as with all knowledge, is truth, it is "a truth which reveals what things are like, rather than simply what occurs or what is the case."<sup>16</sup>

Proust wrote, "An hour is not merely an hour, it is a vase filled with perfumes, with projects, with climates."<sup>17</sup> To retrieve a fragment of time is to retrieve something complete in itself like a single complete chord played by an orchestra. It is at the moment of experiencing two such fragments of time together, the past and the present, that "the self which is continuous throughout life is revealed."<sup>18</sup> It is from this indisputable assertion of our own continuity in time that a possible strategy for making objects and architecture in a 'post authentic' world emerges.

In the traditional production paradigm of culture, authentic artifacts through their assured continuity in time and space, offered society an essential view of itself. Umberto Eco argues that, "Human self consciousness can find itself only in the world that it itself constructs,"<sup>19</sup> and this act of objectification is an inseparable part of our humanity. The contemporary 'crisis of authenticity' does not imply the loss of this ability to objectify as much as the need to reformulate

the conditions under which it may occur. In a culture of consumption the event assumes priority over the artifact and it is through the experience of consequential events that our humanity is revealed.

In light of these ideas, consequentiality, as our measure of the significance of events, must now be recast. Consequential events are more subtle than first described. Although the defining characteristics of privateness and particularity remain unchanged, it is not necessary that they be shocking, tragic, or provocative. It is also not necessary that they subvert modern technology. An event of consequence is constituted by an unmediated connection with one's past. It is found through the experience of simple, even trivial, occurrences.

Consequence is also more elusive than first described. The connection of past and present through involuntary memory is an extremely fragile event. It is a tenuous and largely indeterminate situation that momentarily alights within an individual. As such it is fundamentally challenged by kitsch, the production of prescribed, ready made meanings; and habit, the draining of significance through repetition and redundancy. Constituted as nostalgia and sensationalism respectively, they both offer only a commodified version of a consequential event.

The role of the artifact in this emerging idea of consequence is also somewhat tempered. With the means of production and distribution rendered irrelevant and the rising supremacy of the 'thingification of use' over the thing itself, the artifact plays the less central role of catalyst for an experience in which it is only tangentially responsible. Although its utility is still important, the artifact must efface itself during use to allow the potential for consequentiality to emerge. Thus objects and architecture must possess a kind of humility in their role as armatures to an event, and this attitude needs to extend to their genesis. As such design becomes more like choreography than sculpture, and in the performance that is the consequential event it is in the

improvisation between pre-ordained steps that true significance may arise.

## NOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> Kopytoff, Igor. *The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process*, 1986, p.67.
- <sup>3</sup> Norberg-Schulz, Christian, *The Concept of Dwelling*, Rizzoli, New York, 1985, p. 17.
- <sup>4</sup> Kopytoff, p. 68.
- <sup>5</sup> Borgmann, Albert. *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1984, p 41.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- <sup>8</sup> Tanzer, Kim. *Releasing The Form To The Making: Womenswork Is Never Done. On Making*.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Work Of Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction. Video Culture; A Critical Investigation*. Visual Studies Workshop Press, Rochester, 1986., p. 30.
- <sup>11</sup> Jhally, Sut. *The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning In The Consumer Society*. Frances Pinter, London 1987, p. 12.
- <sup>12</sup> Kundera, Milan. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Penguin Books, New York 1986, p. 4.
- <sup>13</sup> Levin, Charles. *Carnal Knowledge of Aesthetic States. Body Invaders New World Perspectives*, Montreal, 1987, 115.
- <sup>14</sup> Marcel Proust as quoted in Warnock, Mary. *Memory*, Faber and Faber, London, 1987, p. 91.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- <sup>19</sup> Eco, Umberto, *The Open Work*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 140.