

Five takes on the (anti)object

Aris Kafantaris

Five takes on the object

Object and vision

Object and cognition

Object and communication

Object and augmentation

Anti Object

“Baudrillard argues that the process of social homogenization, alienation, and exploitation constitutes a process of reification in commodities, technologies, and things (i.e., “objects”) come to dominate people (“subjects”) divesting them of their human qualities and capacities.”

INTRODUCTION

This essay is an attempt to approach the concept of the anti-object tangentially, from four different directions that could also be serially connected; it is a flexible but rather self-referential method. It does however have an advantage, since it allows for the exploration of a relatively unfamiliar subject by approaching it through familiar territory. In my case this territory is popular culture, augmented spaces, history of art and a hobbyist-level grasp of cognitive science. It is, perhaps, a dialectical approach akin to having a Socratic dialogue with oneself. At the center of the discussion lies, of course, the anti-object; but until the very end, the discourse will take place around, rather than inside the conceptual sphere of the book. A major inspiration for this format has been 'Maison Domino 100 theses'¹.

INSTRUCTIONS

The essay was written in journal format, organized in 4 chapters and 18 episodes. It can be read as a continuous text in the order that it was written, or on an episode by episode basis. Each episode spans one A4 page and is a standalone text: reading them in random order works for most combinations.

¹ A rambling, inspiring project first published in January 2015 and since disappeared from every corner of the internet. I could not locate the author's name by the time of writing this essay.

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5. Anti Object

1 OBJECT AND VISION

If we define an object as a material entity that can be compartmentalized, perceived and understood in its entirety by an observer, then objects seem tied to image. If we attempt to imagine² a non-pictorial object, we soon realize that it is not possible. An object qualifies as a concept too though –while the opposite does not hold true–, therefore an interesting starting point for this exploration is to ask the question: *how do we form object concepts in the absence of vision, and how does vision give birth to objects?* The only requirement for the formation of a concept seems to be a systematic language.

² I was very tempted to use the word “visualize”

Episode 1. FIVE BLIND MEN AND AN ELEPHANT



Do we form concepts through vision?

There is a famous Indian fable from the 14th century, called 'five blind men and an elephant', that subsequently entered Buddhist lore and reached Japan, among other places. A Jain version of the story says that six blind men were asked to determine what an elephant looked like by feeling different parts of the elephant's body. The blind man who feels a leg says the elephant is like a pillar; the one who feels the tail says the elephant is like a rope; the one who feels the trunk says the elephant is like a tree branch; and so on. The story has been repeatedly used in theological contexts to explain the limitations of our perception when it comes to a larger truth that escapes our full understanding. It is however interesting to probe the literal implications of the story: without vision, it is extremely difficult to have a total impression of an object, an overview. This might seem like a self-evident observation, but let us consider the consequences. Out of our five senses, it is only vision that offers a – supposed – total overview. While a blind person can easily compartmentalize a small object like an apple, when it comes to larger entities the concept formation is much more relational. A hill, or a tower is experienced as an environmental condition: a breeze, the sounds that are distant and from below etc. Objectification –or rather, object formation– requires overview and is especially difficult if we take the visual world out of the question. Blind children are tactually aware of only a small area of an object at any given moment: they need to assemble several things together in order to achieve the gestalt. Seeing people, apparently, conceive the whole thing first and discern the details later³.

³ "Education of the Exceptional Child: History, Present Practices, and Trends"

Episode 2. SUPERMAN AND SUPER VISION



How does the nature of vision affect our concepts?

Let us imagine the opposite to the example of the five blind men: someone with godly, omnipenetrating and far reaching vision. The only reference we have for such entities comes from the world of fiction and popular culture; this does not make them any less revealing of our attitude towards human nature and perception. Recognized as the archetypal super-hero, Superman presents a revealing historical and cultural case study. Superman essentially transcends most typical human traits to rise as a paradigm of quasi-godly perfection. He is all that we cannot be: fulfilling Icarus' ill-fated dream he flies, like Prometheus and the demi-gods of antiquity he is immune to death and decay, like the denizens of most panthea he is super-strong and fast and lastly, he has a seemingly secondary but fundamentally important power: supernatural vision. While the comic books would not go as far as to study the philosophical implications of super-vision, these are profound nonetheless: Superman is free from the shackles of human object-focused vision, quite simply because he can see *through* things. The superhero vision reveals structure and disintegrates things into their components, perceiving simultaneously the general and the particular. If anything, that constitutes an ability even more profound than flying, which had we hypothetically possessed, it would alter the way we form concepts. Perhaps the essential attribute of a superhuman being is not supernatural power, but supernatural perception; a godly gift indeed. Even more interestingly, the hero is gifted with microscopic and telescopic vision: modes of perception that humans conquered through scientific extrapolation and which altered the world perception of entire civilizations. Aristotle's heavenly spheres and medieval theories of epidemiology were the logical outcomes of human vision's limited mode of operation: our tendency to recognize self-consistent object-concepts, often at the expense of the context, as well as the content of the examined idea. The object is mainly a visual construct, but its implications are deeply rooted in human cognition.

Episode 3. PICASSO AND BATTLESHIPS

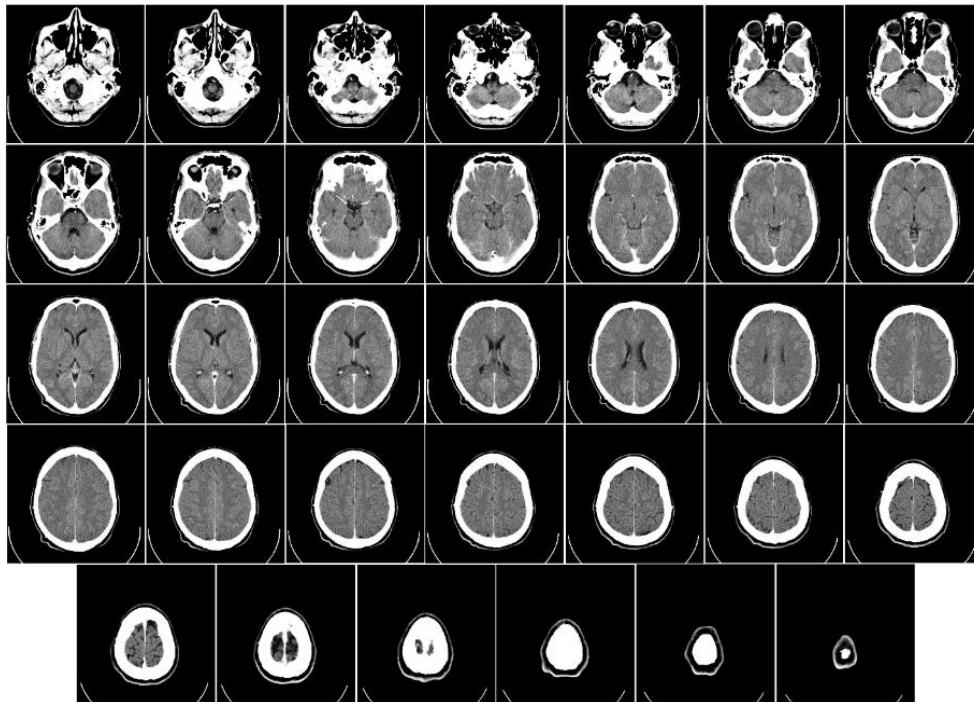


Can vision be fooled?

Not only does our non-superhuman vision confine itself on surface-readings of reality, feeding our brain with “express-concepts”, but it can also be fooled rather easily; especially if it cannot parse, or delineate the limits and outer structure of the object at hand. Barely a century ago, the study of this phenomenon gave birth to camouflage⁴. Pioneered by zoologists and painters, camouflage gradually developed during and between the two world wars, and it held two main but distinct functions: concealing or breaking an object. Our brains –well versed in pattern recognition– rely on outlines and consistent geometries in order to recognize physical objects. Therefore, the first of two types of camouflage is not surprising: by matching the surrounding tonality and pattern scale, it is a “hiding through similarity” mechanism. The second type though, despite being seemingly counter-intuitive, is the most interesting one because it is revealing of the way we form concrete visual representations: by employing stark contrasts and countershading, it does not obscure; rather, it confuses and dissolves. Most typically employed during the First World War in the form of “dazzle camouflage” its goal was to break up contours and surfaces thus blurring the limits between separate objects and the environment. While making the treated ships more –not less– conspicuous than before, it made judging distances and aiming at them considerably more difficult –not unlike the function of the Zebra’s stripes. It is debatable whether it was a mere coincidence that at the same time, cubist painters were trying to explode and re-assemble three dimensional space onto the canvas and dissolve previously recognizable objects into each other and the background. That didn’t stop Pablo Picasso however from claiming that cubists invented camouflage. As if our easily fooled sense of vision were not enough, it appears that people also react to what they see before they are even conscious of having seen something; a phenomenon known as *déjà vu*.

⁴ “a technique serving the disintegration of consistent objects.”

Episode 4. DÉJÀ VU



Is seeing always a deliberate act?

Déjà vu⁵ is an interesting side-effect of visual information taking multiple paths and shortcuts inside our brain. While the particularities of said information itineraries are the subject of multiple –and rather technical– scientific papers, a simplified version would be as follows: when we see something, the eyes dispatch the raw optical signal to the back occipital lobe at the very back of the brain, where the visual cortex is. This is where the information that we see is finally interpreted by the brain, kick-starting cognitive processes. A parallel route however, sends this same data to the amygdala: the place where emotions, learning processes, and memory –especially involuntary emotional reaction– are triggered. It is through this parallel processing that interesting discrepancies like déjà-vu occur, since our brain mounts an emotional response, or even summons a mock recollection to a stimulus that we have effectively not seen⁶ yet. Several neurological mechanisms have been observed that generate reactions to visual stimuli before the visual cortex has even started processing the meaning of said input; the proposed reasons for this interpretational mechanisms range from its downright dismissal as a “design bug” of our neurological hardware, to a survival mechanism that allowed early hominids to react to hazards a few split seconds faster, thus saving them from potentially fatal encounters with predators. While this might have saved our ancestors from crouching tigers, it now defines the way that we process images in a context unchallenged by natural selection. In other words, we are biologically hard-wired to seek and recognize objects before we have the chance to think about them⁷.

⁵ a feeling that one has seen or heard something before.

⁶ Effectively it is seen since the eyes have processed it, but before the information has reached the visual cortex we are ignorant to the content of our visualization

⁷ A topic thoroughly studied by Gestalt psychologists.

Episode 5. NON VISUAL OBJECTS

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Do non-visual objects exist?

While the question can be answered in several ways depending on the angle of inquiry⁸ let us try to reply through common sense. The Cambridge free dictionary describes an “object” as *“a thing that you can see or touch but is not alive”*. Merriam Webster’s similarly agrees that it is *“something material that may be perceived by the senses”*. Therefore, metaphorical and technical uses aside⁹ it appears that the object is primarily a physical thing and that physicality is mainly perceived through vision and touch. With the possible exception of “objects” in object oriented computer languages where the term is semantically extended, it is impossible to imagine an object that is being perceived by someone as something that is not connected to a particular, stable and recognizable visual image. In turn, it seems that objects are thus spatial constructs, even when tactility and visibility do not complement each other, like objects in visual interfaces i.e. spatially concise and consistent entities that are not physical, or objects as experienced by blind people i.e. spatially concise and consistent entities that have no visual cue connected to them, simply because the blind person’s brain has no such input and does not know how to interpret such information, even when it receives it.

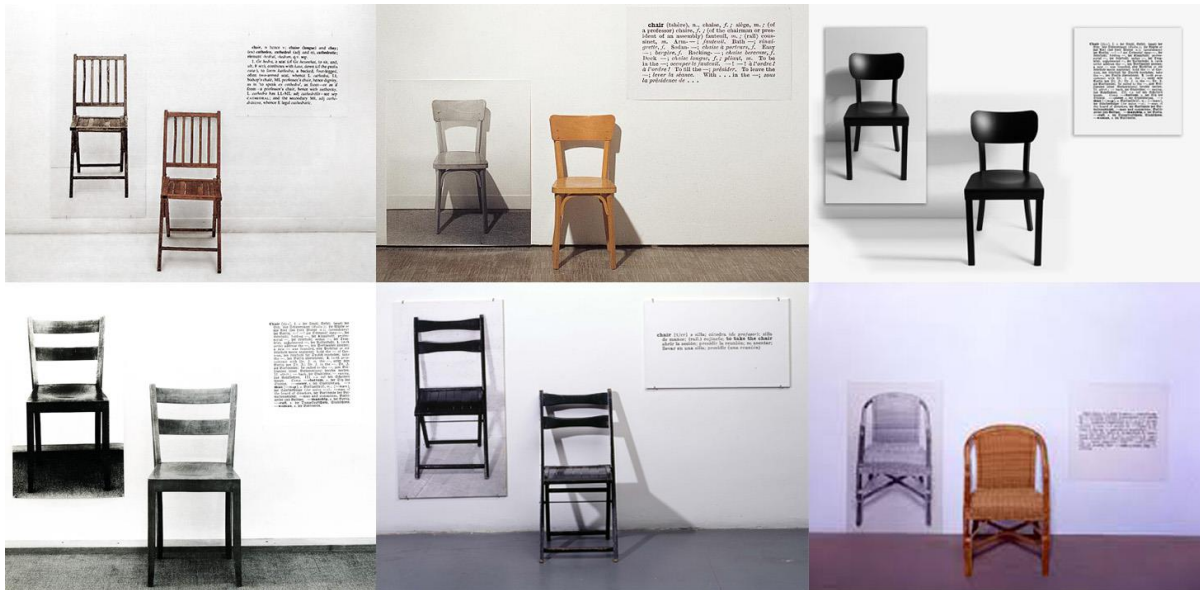
⁸ cognitive science, linguistics, phenomenology, gestalt psychology, etc

⁹ Subject and object in a grammatical context, the object of inquiry, the objective or an object in an object oriented computer language and so on

2 OBJECT AND COGNITION

As we saw –pun not intended–, people perceive objects overwhelmingly through vision and vision evolved to be the main sense through which to make sense of the world. But the journey of the object towards our consciousness passes through several levels of interpretation and understanding; what we would call a cognitive process. As was hinted in the super-vision and Deja-vu examples, the very nature of our vision seems to define the way we think on a deeper level. The link between vision and cognition is especially interesting since this is where concepts are formed, after the initial stimulus has been received and understood.

Episode 6. ONE AND THREE CHAIRS



How do we recognize and categorize an object?

One and Three Chairs, is a work by Joseph Kosuth first exhibited in 1965: a chair, a photograph of this chair, and an enlarged dictionary definition of the word "chair". Considered one of the first manifestations of conceptual art, the artwork departs from the material components that comprise it: what the artist sold was the idea. Every time it was exhibited, they would pick a different chair, and photograph it in-situ, the only constant being the dictionary definition and the booklet with the artwork "source code"; essentially a set of instructions. While being a strikingly visual –and visually recognizable- work, what it really does, is undermine the idea that vision, or more accurately visual perception, is a rigid process working on identities. The chair changes every time, its picture too. The only constant is the definition, but that too, is not enough for someone to recognize a chair if they have never experienced one. Therefore, Kosuth's work poses the fundamental¹⁰ question: what is a chair, as far as our brain is concerned, and how is codified? What connects an object as a concept with its countless visual manifestations? The answer to that question might hold some clues as to what consists an object, and conversely, how to break it apart into an anti-object.

¹⁰ So fundamental that it dates straight back to Plato and the allegory of the cave

Episode 7. CATS AND ROBOTS

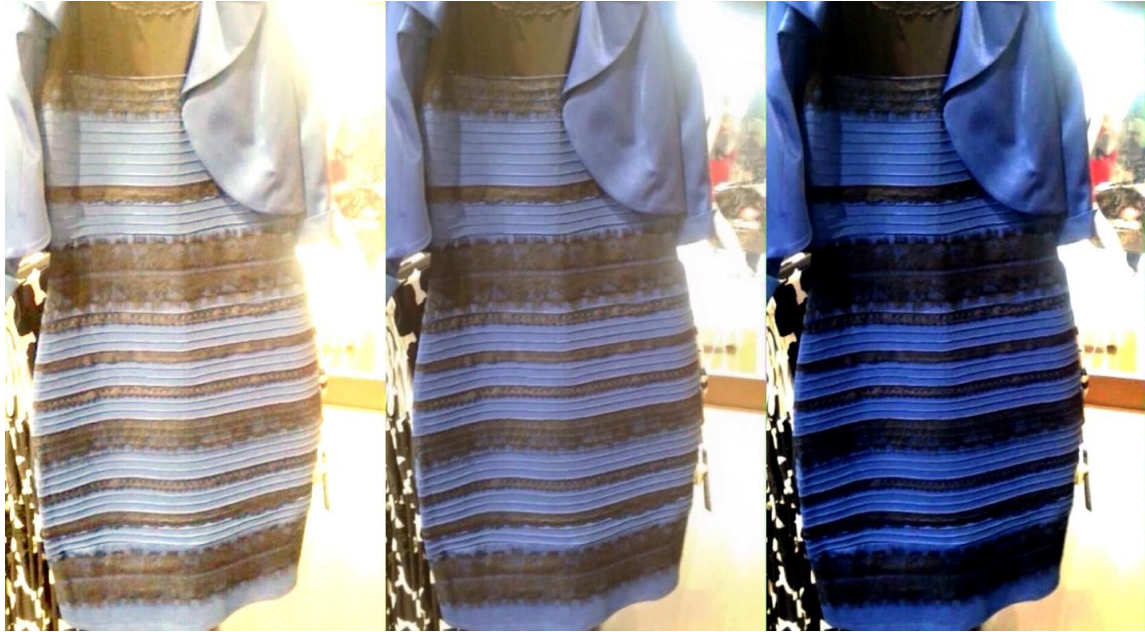


Can an object be a self-standing, independent entity?

In 2012 for the first time in human history, a computer network created a concept based on random, unsorted visual input. A neural network of 16.000 processors at Google's X-lab unit browsed ten million YouTube video thumbnails for three consecutive days and discovered, among other things, *cats*. Unlike most previous attempts with neural networks where the computers are "trained" with hints as to what they are looking at¹¹, the network had no cues. It munched through the raw data and worked in a way similar to our brains: it built clouds of visual associations that solidified and coalesced around concepts. This is not mere pattern recognition; it is a precursor to formation of ideas. It also gives us a clue as to how our brains do understand a chair and do not confuse it with a stool, or a table for example: a network of millions of associations fuzzily approximate the concept, but never concretely/rigidly plot it or shape it. Plato's "ideal chair", if it exists, is as fuzzy and intangible as a cloud. Objects seem to cognitively exist only in conceptual relation to other objects, even if they are commonly perceived as water tight, autonomous entities.

¹¹ I.e. tags marking unsorted pictures. This amounts to feeding a computer vision algorithm with random pictures, accompanying the ones showing chairs with the tag "chair". Based on purely visual patterns and cues, the algorithm will learn how to find chairs, most of the time.

Episode 8. THE BLUE AND BLACK DRESS



How much does our perception depend on context?

From Twitter to Youtube, millions of internet users participated in the collective hysteria caused by one picture, in February 2015: the blue and black –or according to the other half of the world, white and gold– dress¹². The reason why there was such a divide among healthy, unbiased observers has to do with the way our brain translates visual stimuli into color information. While there is an objective, scientific way to classify color by measuring the wavelength of light, the reality of color vision –and vision in general as explained in the next paragraph– is heavily contextual. We do not see color quantitatively but qualitatively, in direct relation to the color of the light that provides with illumination. In the case of the dress, the ambiguity of the picture led the brains of half of the observers to attribute coloration to the material, while the other half to the illuminant, therefore entering automatic “color correction mode”.¹³ What is of more interest however, is the passion that the debate over the picture evoked: in lack of logical arguments, commentators relied to their sense of vision, i.e. the most concrete measure for reality. The result was that by defying someone’s unquestionable –from a personal point of view- perception on the color of the dress, we defy their most basic cognitive ability: that of separating reality from fantasy. Consensus on the nature of objects is a measure of sanity; when that consensus is corroded due to the fuzzy and relative nature of our (visual) perception, the very foundations of consciousness are shaken. Does an anti-object corrode our grip on reality?

¹² I am on the white and gold camp, even though we were proven wrong.

¹³ Digital cameras offer white balance correction for precisely that reason: when we observe a blue-lit space under fluorescent lamps we do not see the tint. If however a photograph i.e. an accurate and objective recording of wavelength, is taken without white balance correction, it will look bluish.

Episode 9. GESTALT WITH A GRAIN OF SALT



How vulnerable is our cognition to the quirks of visual perception?

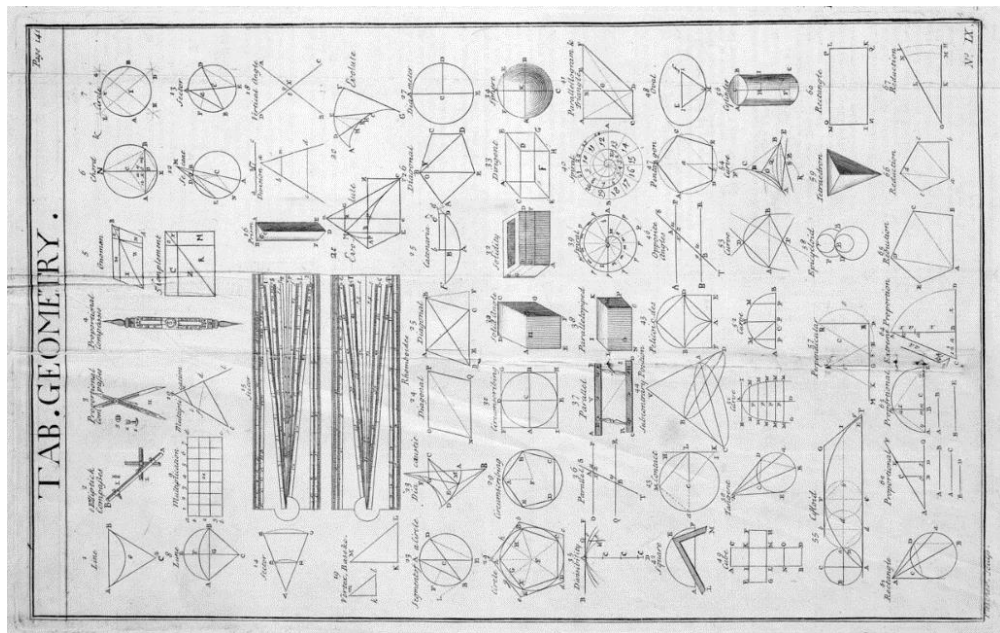
The fundamental implications of visual perception to consciousness and cognition were already being noticed in 1910 when a new school of Psychology was born based on the assumption that visual processing is the key for understanding the human mind: *Gestalt Psychology*¹⁴. While it is usually associated with optical illusions where Schroedeger-like sketches alternate between bunnies or ducks, or more Freudic creations where bearded heads transform into naked women, the underlying premise went much deeper. Gestalt psychology attempts to explain the laws of our ability to acquire maintain meaningful perceptions in an apparently chaotic and ever-changing world. Its central principle is that the mind forms a global whole with self-organizing tendencies, or in an often misquoted line from its founder Christian von Ehrenfels: "The whole is other than the sum of the parts". The totality of a concept that we form from visual perception supersedes its components; when we have overview, our brains first compose the general idea and only then break it down into its components –not the opposite. This ability is what allows us to rapidly process an environment saturated with stimuli, and pick up useful concepts out of the noise; conversely, it can also be fooled into conjuring perceptions that are based on false premises – wholes that are based on mismatched parts. Gestalt systematized descriptive rules that showcase how we filter these stimuli and bundle them into “wholes”. It is, however, this descriptive quality of Gestalt psychology that has earned it criticism from field like computational neuroscience, which try to explain the exact mechanisms of visual information processing within the brain. The postulates of the gestaltists, though, remain useful. It is quite apparent that parts can be considered objects, but how about a “whole”; Is it an object as well or something else altogether? Gestalt suggests that we can dissolve objects by muddling the relations between the parts, or the opposite: generate them by suggesting relations that might not even exist in reality.

¹⁴ Interestingly, “Gestalt” in German stands for “Design”

3 OBJECT AND COMMUNICATION

So far we have explored the bilateral relationship between objects and subjects, and the way in which visual information is perceived and converted into concepts. Objects however, as well as the concepts tied to them, are mobile constructs. Even entities that cannot be perceived as consistent objects at first, have to convert into ones in order to be communicated through a variety of media that range from verbal language to Gesamtkunstwerke like Opera. Media tend to enhance objects, since communication requires the existence of recognizable, rule based patterns of compression and decompression of meaning. But most importantly, objects are to a great degree shaped by the means of communication that carries them through a language based society.

Episode 10. EUCLID AND THE PARALLELS



Are objects defined by their medium?

Let us consider mathematical constructs; not the abstract ones though, but rather the geometrical ones which do have recognizable visual representations. Geometry literally means “measuring of the earth”, and is generally believed to have originated as agrarian societies required consistent ways to delineate plots of land. The birth of geometry, as the birth of any formal system, gave rise to a multitude of intangible but very real and at the same time ideal, objects. Geometry also allowed for the first time the accurate and unambiguous communication of spatial entities such as circles, squares, triangles and infinite lines, even though these entities rarely coincided with the “fuzzy” observable world. Since these objects were understood to describe the three dimensional reality we inhabit, their study was considered the highest intellectual art, oftentimes even above philosophy. For more than two thousand years however, a dark shadow was being cast on mathematicians’ grip of reality which was related to an unsolvable flaw in the language that supposedly described the world: out of the five constructive axioms on which Euclidian Geometry was built, the fifth one, was neither self-evident –therefore not a real axiom– nor verifiable via the other four. The Parallel postulate, which states that there is at most one line that can be drawn parallel to another given one through an external point, could not be proven for the simple reason that it does not need to hold true. When several mathematicians in the 19th century embraced the speculative scenario of infinite parallel lines going through a point, or even none at all going through it, they discovered Non Euclidian Geometries: Spherical and Parabolic worlds with very real and practical manifestations, where space behaves differently and our familiar immutable objects change properties. Triangles can have three right angles on a sphere, and heptagons can tile the plane seamlessly in a parabolic surface. Objects are defined by the system that describes them and that system shapes our perception in turn. Breaking out of the confines of the medium to re-evaluate the object is extremely hard; for Euclid and the parallels it took two thousand years.

Episode 11. GARDENING AND POLITICS



Can an object stand for something other than itself?

While geometrical constructs stand in for themselves, i.e. a circle is always representing a circle, in several other media and formal languages the objects acquire symbolic usage. Such an object exists in several modes at the same time: its actual physical and perceivable reality and the message that it carries through the symbolic interpretation. The enrichment of an object with symbolic layers and connotations relies almost entirely on the cultural context and the medium of communication. In 18th century England, the otherwise neutral language of Geometry took up symbolic layers as it fed into the newly recognized art of Gardening, or as we would call it today, landscape design. Several parallel philosophical and geopolitical shifts turned the English Garden into a communication platform for the democratic ideals of a rising landed-bourgeois class, juxtaposed to the formality of French gardens which were deemed to represent the will of absolute monarchy. Even geometric abstractions were politicized, while aesthetic debates were tackling the question of which formal system is a better representation of nature: the abstract rationalization of mathematical primitives or the chaotic and informal shapes that actually arise in the structure of living creatures and natural phenomena? The pavilions found in 18th century landscaped gardens in England look like decorative follies, but as architectural objects they presented very specific readings to those who understood their language. Simultaneously, the garden itself had its shape and limits broken up, as to not be identified under the terms that delineated the Cartesian objects of human rationalization found in French Baroque gardens, such as flat lawns, square lakes and perfectly aligned spherical topiary. The element that held the Garden together was the symbolic layers and the symbolic consistency of the sequence of objects that it contained. Can we 'break' an object by obfuscating its symbolic layers or stripping it off of them? Are there perhaps objects only held together by these symbolic layers, without any other intrinsic meanings? If yes, then it follows that their reading relies entirely on the medium that carries them.

Episode 12. MONET IN THE SKY WITH DIAMONDS



How does one communicate a shifting object?

Our various media can carry concrete, abstract and symbolic objects. But what happens when an object does not stay in one stable condition? Most objects shift –especially physical, tangible ones– and their change of state is an essential part of their nature. The word communication can easily be substituted by the word representation; in order to communicate a concept or an object, it has to be represented in an appropriate medium, symbolically or otherwise. This has the interesting implication that representational means have had to change in order to accommodate object properties that they were not able to adequately communicate. Language, being the ultimate symbolic system of representation is more adaptive than other non-language based media, like painting. In the context of the birth of photography in 18th century Europe, several artists were trying to increase the communicative power of painting, which was being threatened by the seemingly objective representational force of the photographic image. The dissolution of representational painting ironically started as an attempt to better grasp the objects depicted, by codifying change and the passage of time. When Monet painted the Cathedral of Rouen, he was breaking down the unity of the single painterly object in order to capture in a fuller, transitional manner. In the process he changed the medium of painting and set off a course that would lead to the deconstruction of spatial properties and abstraction¹⁵. Therefore not only do media affect our perception of objects but the opposite is valid just as well; media change in response to the objects that they need to communicate. Interestingly, the invention of cameras did not bring an age of factual objectivity in visual communication; photography was morphed and shaped in order to accommodate its objects, finally shaping those objects in return.

¹⁵ Abstract expressionism, cubism etc

Episode 13. SIMULACRA AND ZOMBIES

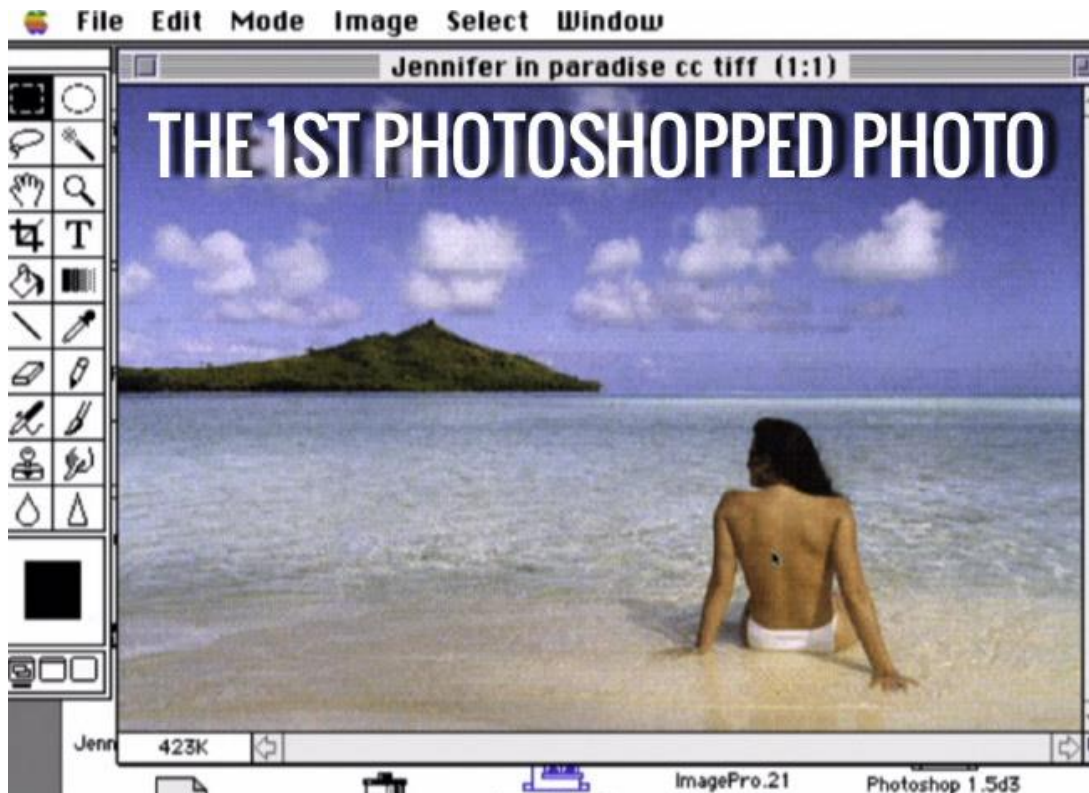


What is the relation between an object and its copy?

The relation between objects and their mental representations is a question that divides cognitive science and remains unresolved as of 2015. What is undisputed however, is that mental representations of objects have a life of their own and can evolve independently from their original sources. This relationship acquires an extra level of complication when representations are of a second degree, i.e. mental images of a representation of an object. French philosopher Jacques Baudrillard called these constructs simulacra: mental structures that were derived out of mediated representations of something that might, or might not have originally existed. Copies of copies. A way to imagine them is also as a kind of mediated zombies: a transformation of the original into something that bears a recognizable resemblance to the prototype, but is wholly different. It is apparent that in this process the communicating medium shapes the mental object potentially more than its prototype does. Advertising, publishing and any sort of visual broadcasting, tells us Baudrillard, spawn countless simulacra that lead a semi-autonomous life in our heads. A very typical example – which is also developed in *Anti Object*- is the way modernist architecture was represented by photography in the 50s: a resplendent image of timelessness that became stronger than the prototype in its ability to affect reality. Modernist architecture was as much a pictorial message as it was built space, if not more. To paraphrase Marshall Mc Luhan, this is a case when “the medium is the object”¹⁶.

¹⁶ Original quote: “the Medium is the Message”

Episode 14. HAPPY BIRTHDAY PHOTOSHOP



Are we becoming immune to image-objects?

In an astonishing reminder of the pace of technological advancement, it was announced that Adobe Photoshop celebrates its 25th anniversary. If Baudrillard reveled in the ability of media in the 60s and 70s to create plasmatic representations, he would probably find the contemporary birthplace of Simulacra to be the indispensable piece of software by Adobe. In the last decade, “photoshopping” has become a verb of the English language and the discussions around the software are turning increasingly philosophical and political. The proliferation, or one might say democratization, of powerful image editing capabilities is stripping visual representations from any claim to reality. From false body images to misleading architectural renders and retouched warzone correspondences, Photoshop is made to be one of the arch villains of the 21st century, a falsifying agent that distorts our view of the world. The medium is the message, but what happens when the medium is so pliable that the message loses its credibility? There are indications that we are experiencing an auto-immune response. Humanity is gradually reacting differently to image, either embracing the relativity by not caring about the external truth, or by doubting visual information altogether and focusing in real, “first hand” experiences. Objects seem to be headed in two directions: pure, sensorial experiences that denounce the ability of image to properly communicate their content or hyperreal, hybrid objects where the boundaries between representation and reality are rendered meaningless. The latter was thought to emerge through so called virtual realities –all the rage in the 90s- but what is happening instead is much more nuanced, and multifaceted: augmented realities.

4 OBJECT AND AUGMENTATION

Objects can exist within a simulation and therefore be virtual; it is rather challenging however, to make any utterance about “virtual” realities that would not ring like a tired trope. At the height of its popularity in the early to mid 90s the topic of immersive virtual worlds was dominating the imagination of writers, film makers, game designers, engineers, philosophers and behavioral scientists. Soon enough the discourse hit a technological and financial wall, only to resurface two decades later with a vengeance. What has been happening in the last few years is an increasing enrichment of a digital layer covering all of human activity. Cities are running on information flows and real-time analytics, while locative technologies living off of our smartphones keep us plugged into that invisible layer that despite being non-physical, is absolutely spatial. What is the meaning of an object in a context where reality is a mashup of physical “stuff” and data overlays? While augmentation is a very old concept when it comes to spatial conception and linked to notions of ritual and play, it is through mobile networks that it has finally invaded our quotidian lives. Augmented environments are more than they look, or perhaps, present totally different aspects depending on the level of augmentation and the user’s perspective. In an environment that objects are literally and measurably defined by relations –like Bruno Taut once said– and spatial boundaries relativized, is the object going to die a final and irreversible death? It is difficult to say, because the intermingling of physical space and non-physical layers began millennia before the invention of digital technologies. Most religious spaces have since time immemorial displayed invisible boundaries and spatial separations that drew upon divine powers, consecrated or unhallowed places. These were often enhanced by trance-inducing substances, populated with deities and their messengers in waking dreams; the psychotropic experiences however are strictly personal and no two people can share them. Theater took over and offered glimpses into alternative worlds and spaces collapsed and condensed through scenographic conventions so that they fit on a stage; a sort of mass hallucination. Richard Wagner perfected that art.

Episode 15. WAGNER AND THE VIRTUAL VALKYRIES



Are there objects that are neither purely physical nor purely virtual?

When Richard Wagner wrote two (now famous) essays on Opera in 1849 he employed the term “Gesamtkunstwerk”¹⁷ or “Total Artwork” in English to denote a total synthesis of the arts. What he also created was the first comprehensive virtual environment in the history of multimedia¹⁸. By changing the seat layout, creating forced perspective through layered arches and hiding all distracting elements like the orchestra within the architecture, Wagner wanted to wrap the viewer into an immersive cocoon that presented an alternative reality, cutting off any distraction. These theatrical conventions created a shared space and a common experience that was albeit perceived individually, but it also helped crystallize a hybrid sort of object. Actors, props and stenographic elements were of course descriptive, but also enhanced by layers of information –such as music, sound effects, lighting– that offered the audience understanding as to their significance and dimension in the play. In an admittedly stretched application of the term, in the theatrical space of Wagner’s Bayreuth Opera, since one and a half century ago, audiences can witness “augmented” objects: objects whose nonphysical –but objectively perceived- layers are essential to their understanding. The most critical implication of augmented objects however, becomes apparent when they are no longer confined by the theatrical scene, but spill out into daily life. This sort of non-technologically augmented objects and environments have also existed for millennia, within what Dutch anthropologist Johan Huizinga calls “The magic circle of play”.

¹⁷ The term Gesamtkunstwerk was readily adopted by architects, if only to signify something rather different: architecture as a collaborative effort between all visual arts and related crafts. Thus an opportunity to conceive architecture as an immersive experience was lost in translation, with the emphasis put on craft and construction.

¹⁸ In their “History of Multimedia” Randall Packer and Ken Jordan start With Richard Wagner

Episode 16. THE MAGIC CIRCLE OF PLAY



Can objects have several different states at once?

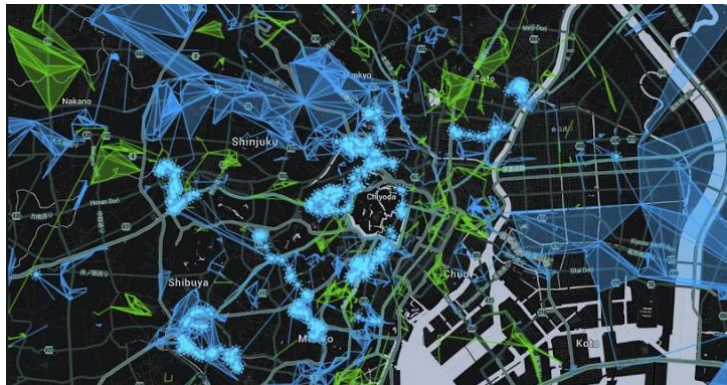
Despite its supernatural ring, the term “magic circle of play” is part of a very scientific approach to the social dynamics of play and games, coined by anthropologist Johan Huizinga¹⁹ almost a century ago. An amazing –indeed almost magical– transformation happens when humans gather together to play; both social²⁰ and physical space acquire new attributes, rules are suspended and participants enter a new shared altered reality. It is both a protective layer that allows socially divergent i.e. playful behavior within the confines of the circle and a separating one, delineating what is virtual –play space– versus what is real and should be left out of the game’s conventions. Out of the three layers comprising the magical circle of play²¹ it is mostly the spatial one that directly affects objects and, well, space. A gaming board can turn into a battlefield, a plastic gun into a lethal weapon and a tree into a castle. These transformations are very real: they are abided by and affect the behavior of everyone involved; therefore, the social mechanics of play allow for another kind of enhanced, or augmented objects that do not need to rely to any technology in order to transgress their literal dimension and acquire new attributes. The most interesting dimension of Huizinga’s circle however might be its ability to be flexible and under the right conditions, permeable. When the circle expands to include cityscapes and involve passerby, strange phenomena take place: the games that require such expanded circles are called “pervasive” or “ubiquitous” and they have a real transformative power over physical space and objects. When architecture turns into a playscape, object boundaries are broken and re-drawn according to the rules of the game; and even more interestingly, several of these playscapes can spatially and temporally overlap. The implications of such a disruptive mode of behavior would perhaps not be so significant had those games only existed in the imagination of a few dedicated hobbyists, like they did until about fifteen years ago. But cheap mobile locative technologies have turned those layers into something objectively observable, something that can be –and is– designed: effectively, we are all carrying the magic circle in our pockets.

¹⁹ Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture

²⁰ Social space is a sociological term defining modes of use of physical space. In a commonly used categorization it is separated into Realms: the Private, Parochial and Public Realm.

²¹ Social, Temporal and Spatial

Episode 17. SMARTPHONE WARS



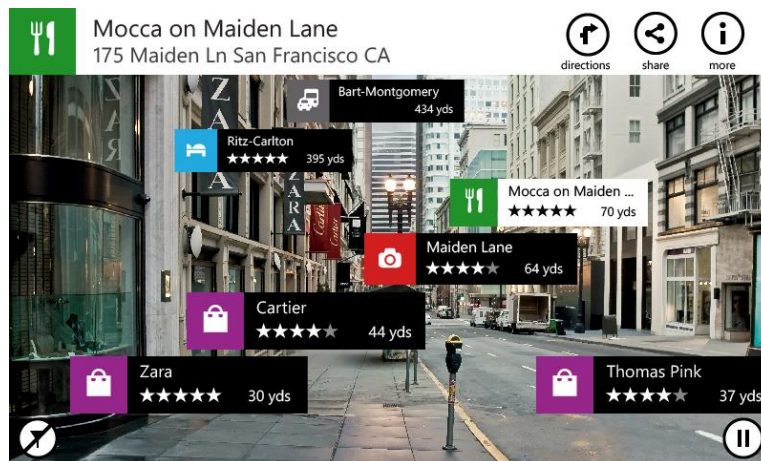
What if we had the agency to change objects at will?

The Mobile Internet Revolution started in Japan in 2001 with the introduction of I-mode. With mobile internet usage having overtaken land-based connections in 2014²² it is changing the way millions of people go through their daily routines, communicate with acquaintances and experience physical space. Mobile internet by itself would perhaps not be such a disruptive technology had it not been paired with geolocation, or what is more commonly called locative technologies. The abstract virtual spaces dreamt up by techno-savants in the 90's have collapsed upon the physical world, anchored into place by pins and tags. Our urban culture is becoming more data-driven by the day, as the innumerable flows of information that connect and regulate everything from traffic lights and garbage disposal systems to weather stations and stock exchanges, are becoming indispensable tools to understand an increasingly complex world. The overused term "smart city" is often employed to describe this new data-driven reality. To this, add the ever expanding social mesh that brings the majority of humanity together into a cloud of friendships, connections, ratings, critiques, followers and followings. Locative mobile technologies are gradually tying all this otherwise spatially abstract data into physical space. Google maps, when accessed from a smartphone, is fundamentally unlike any map ever existed before. It is not even a map in the traditional sense since it has stopped being a representation: it exists as an added layer of an augmented cityscape, where things actually happen, outside of physical space but still firmly located in it. Objects exist in several digital layers apart from their physical, spatial reality. Some extreme implications of this trend can be glimpsed when Huizinga's magic circle of play becomes a measurable, share-able and alterable part of the actual city; when walls, roads and sidewalks become playscapes which draw upon and feed back into the data layer that runs through cities²³. It remains to be seen whether these technologies will evolve into a new appropriation of urban space where users can actively affect it, or the opposite; an increasingly monitored and controlled environment where location specific data will allow the regulation and monetization of quotidian components of urban life. For sure though, augmentation does not require special glasses or holographic projectors. We live in an augmented environment already, where the "object" is much more than what it reveals through physical appearance.

²² United Nations International Communication Union statistics

²³ Ingress is the most mainstream game in this category. It is run by google and spans the whole world, in real time.

Episode 18. IT DOESN'T MATTER



How much does “matter” matter?

It would be an exaggeration to proclaim that the proliferation of immersive technologies will eventually turn physical objects inconsequential –a popular fantasy during the height of what is now called cyberpunk in science fiction genealogy–. If anything, the direction of current technology i.e. locative augmentation shows the opposite: a turn back into the physical by placing and visualizing data back into the everyday lived space. Speculative architecture, usually born in academic amphitheatres and drawing rooms had all but quit contemplating questions of designing purely virtual spaces, where all the rules –even those of physics– could be re-written²⁴. Research turned instead into ways of incorporating data flows into architectural designs and turn them responsive to real-time changes in environment and usage. This does not necessarily mean kinetic structures –which are included of course– but responsive environments either through electro-mechanical means or purely digital, as in the augmented playscapes. These ideas are not that novel, however. From Archigram’s Instant city to Cedric Price’s Fun Palace, the idea that physical objects –in the context of urban space– are not limited by their material makeup but have performative aspects that sometimes surpass any other in importance, has been constantly explored. Architecture that reacts to user needs and adapts to changing requirements by itself has been the holy grail of a whole generation of architectural researchers, only to be buried under the weight of postmodern theory in the late 70s and re-emerge with the largely unexpected advent of the World Wide Web. Matter does matter, since after all, architects design mostly physical things: “objects” that can be touched, seen and photographed. However, more and more of what makes up our physical space and defines our experience of it exists in a spatial, but immaterial realm. Whoever is tasked with designing objects and releasing them into the world –be it from disposable coffee cups to airports– cannot afford to ignore this dimension any more, if they want to have any agency over the object itself.

²⁴ Virtual spaces are making a comeback as well though, with the drastic increase in quality and drop in price of immersive equipment such as the Oculus Rift.

5 ANTI OBJECT

What is an anti-object?

Reading Kengo Kuma's little blue book is not unlike the five men touching the elephant in the Buddhist fable: it takes time, to explore the concept part by part and then try to assemble the mental image out of a feeling for the parts. This is why, in the course of a few months, I put together this episodic text in order to better delineate the subject matter, part by part, and assemble it when I think that a consistent image has formed. But such is the nature of the concept of anti-object – never mind the fact that the book is also the graph of a very personal trajectory – that Kuma san's *Elephant* and the pachyderm assembled in my head are homologous, but different beasts.

Is anti-object about tricking visual perception?

The answer is mostly a negative one. However, I cannot deny seeing such a line of thought in the early works presented in the book i.e. breaking the dominion of singular objects by the straightforward method of obstruction. Kiro-san observatory²⁵ denies overview by hiding the architecture in such a way that only parts of it are visible at any given time. Our mental reflexes of grasping the whole and then looking for the particulars are thrown off balance: *the whole is a mountain*. Architecture is buried out of sight, never perceptible in its entirety²⁶. I risk diverging slightly from the book's content as far as projects are concerned, but I cannot avoid seeing the patterned stone cloud that is Lotus House – another relatively early work – as a camouflage of the second type: not one that mimics and hides but one that breaks outlines and surfaces into starkly contrasted particles, that deny our mental faculties the overview of a singular shape and a clear structure – not unlike Picasso's Battleships. Anti-object is not about visual tricks, but when it comes to visual perception, there seems to be a clear idea underlining most of the projects in the book, one that was prefaced by Bruno Taut's endeavor in Atami: one identifying quality of an anti-object is that it does not reveal its inner structure through image. What you see is less than what you get; in order to be understood it has to be experienced, because its components are relational – views, spatial associations, temporal variations and interactions with fleeting substances such as trembling sheets of water and branches swaying in the wind.

Is anti-object about re-wiring our cognitive response to architecture?

I believe it is. Kengo Kuma does not only seem to try and disrupt the way we look at architecture, but also the way we think about it. Concepts are fuzzy things, held together by a cloud of associations which we keep forming and re-forming throughout our lives; while definitions are useful in the context of a formal language, this is not the way our brains work. Therefore, I thoroughly enjoy discovering through Kengo Kuma's descriptions all the meta-layers of his subtler designs, such as the Noh Stage in the Forest and the inversed Chofu

²⁵ And also Canal Museum which is not mentioned

²⁶ Unless of course one has, Superman's super vision.

theatre. These projects are complex but not complicated; they do not rely on cerebral explanations and complex symbolisms or post-rationalizations. What they do, is reverse commonly accepted relationships such as audience versus actor or building versus garden/landscape. The user of such spaces will hopefully create new associations, linking fuzzy clouds of ideas and preconceptions into new continuous entities. Compartmentalized modes of thinking about architecture and space might start cracking up, not through intellectual engagement with the architectural (anti) object but mainly by experiencing it. If our cognition functions in a relational way, why can't architecture attempt the same thing?

Is anti-object about communication of architecture?

Absolutely yes; an entity that cannot be visually delineated in its entirety, directly challenges traditional media of dissemination of architecture. Like Kengo Kuma mentions in the book, Le Corbusier –and for that matter a large number of modernist pioneers like Mies and Neutra– exerted their intellectual influence through the power of image. Julius Schulman's famous picture of the Kaufman house by Richard Neutra –the poolside scene with the reclining woman during dusk– is a very typical example: the picture of Kaufman house turned into an icon so strong, that ended up feeding back into and dominating its source. When we speak of Kaufman house, it is a dusk scene by the poolside that first materializes in the mind's eye. Eventually, the architecture was largely recognized and understood through that particular picture. Through this process, architecture photography unavoidably creates these glowing, eternal entities that are self-reliant and disconnected from the flow of time; entities whose communication power is great, but eventually their ability to inform us of a wider context is diminished. The singularity of icons in architectural photography does not only deprive architecture of its temporal dimension; it often insulates it from exchange with whatever may be surrounding it. Architecture however, is not a crystallized still; it moves in tandem with the environment and reacts to daily and seasonal transformations. An anti-object needs to be experienced; it does not lend itself to photogenic reductions.

Is anti-object about augmentation of physical space?

Astonishingly –even though it was not written from that perspective– it is. I was very surprised to read about the inclusion of screens and hidden cameras in Kiro san's observatory with the aim of inverting the role of observer and observed: an application of multimedia in architecture that while not being very high tech –to its advantage I may add– created an augmented environment that transcended the physical reality of its space and created very real, new associations. Kengo Kuma does not mention the cameras in his lectures any more, and I do suspect that they might have fallen victim to neglect like so many other electronic components of architecture²⁷ but the idea is still valid; what is more, thanks to locative technologies, this same idea can be realized through mobile interfaces via an app, without requiring anything to be installed in place. In that sense I believe that this often overlooked component of Kiro san was very ahead of its time. Yet another project that I had not seen presented outside of the little blue book draws upon the concept of data layering onto physical space and non-visual augmentation: Electronic Memorial Space in Takasaki, Gunma.

²⁷ The shutters in Jean Nouvelle's Institute of the Arab World being the textbook case of such neglect

In the book it is described as a sound garden focused on a visitor's itinerary through a subjective space, not unlike some of the later English landscape Gardens albeit different in origin and scope. There are many more allusions to non-physical layering in space –such as the Biennale pavilion– throughout the book but I do get the feeling that during the time that these experimental project were attempted, multimedia technology was not advanced enough to accommodate these ideas to their full extent and potential.

An anti-object is by its very nature a difficult to grasp and describe concept. It seems to define itself mostly through negations i.e. what it is not, rather than what it is or can be. I do believe though that the Kuma's narrative prose weaves a story that is compelling –if not always easy– to follow, shifting from philosophical treatise to history of architecture and from semi-biographical tone to that of an architecture monograph. It actually seems like the book itself defies strict categorization and exists between and in relation to a cloud of associations: Kuma's lectures, discussions with his staff at the KKAA practice, realized projects and ideas as they are crystallized on several books, reviews and interviews. I cannot resist the self-referential urge to consider the little blue book itself is a kind of literary Anti-Object.

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18/12/2015