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Holistic Products: Designing With Time, Gifts, and Ritual

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May, 2016

As submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine
Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Jeremy P. Zietz

Director:

Heath Matysek-Snyder

May, 2016

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia.

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Abstract

By Jeremy Zietz

As submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University

Major Director: Heath Matysek-Snyder

The notion of “you are what you buy” is an updated adage from “you are what you eat”. It makes a connection between our everyday objects and their effect on our lived experience. Looking at our relationships with our things as a type of contract, we must be intentional to shape these object contracts for our own good and health. Instead of our society’s design talents being put toward a consumerist agenda, designers must direct research and development which addresses the effects of our products holistically.

Various concepts have emerged in my creative practice which demand a deeper research and development. These are concepts of little interest to the corporate product developer, as they appeal to agendas beyond profit. Just as the slow food movement responds to fast food and “Big Ag”, the concepts of time, gifts, ritual emerge as virtues which demand

development in our products. These concepts are not an answer to consumerism. However, they are tastes that have fallen off of our product diet. I point to various works works of art and design, of my own and others, which seek to renew the vastness of our potential experience with everyday objects. Instead of choosing from the corporate offering, we may take a more critical view of design which looks at our holistic experience with our products.

Holistic Products:

Designing with Time, Gifts, and Ritual

Your Are What You Eat

You are what you eat. It's the age-old adage often traced back to Anthelme Brillat-Savarin in 1826. He meant for it to be taken literally, relating food to your bodily health. This truism has evolved. It has come to be interpreted, and mean different things to different people. It has been taken literally to relate to our nutrition, the Christian belief of transubstantiation, or simply the more general notion of "what goes around comes around". In order to be healthy, what do we think of as good food today? Naturally, food we know to be nutritious is good for you. It makes you *better*. Some might widen the definition of good food to what is fresh, organic, or locally grown. Some would go further, to say that the best possible food would be medicinal, socially bring people together, or even be sacred.

With today's local and organic food movement, the idea of "you are what you eat" stands well as an analogy to our *things* as food, and our spaces as bodies. While a modern consumer may quickly deny being defined by their possessions, today's consumer is deeply impacted by the careful and precise role of design in our everyday life. So much of

our lived experience is engaged in a designed product or service experience. These designed experiences have become so immeshed into the fabric of our every moment, that our daily life has become more about curating from offered product experiences rather than creating our own. In his 2006 book, *Buying In: What We Buy And Who We Are*, Walker suggests that our things are like our food, and that in effect - *we are what we buy*.

Accordingly, modern customers are called *consumers*. (Walker, cite)

By now, more people understand the comprehensive role of design in our life. The value of the design process has been increasingly lifted and celebrated in the media, and companies increasingly boast their design-centric cultures. Designers today are seen as champions of a human-centered design process which work to deliver better experiences for what people buy. We pursue the effects of design every day, and surround ourselves with products and services which respond to our needs.

We also see how quickly consumers can change their habits, turnover their products, and adapt their product experiences. In the space of just a few months one might shift how they listen to the news by downloading podcasts instead of listening to the radio. In a moment, one might make their kitchen “smarter” with the *Amazon Dash Button* which orders pre-programmed products through your wireless network with the push of a button. With one run to Lowes (and only about \$100), a family could change their evening activities by starting convenient backyard campfires in a portable firepit. In our industrialized society

we expect thoughtful design experiences. Products and services have been driven into our daily life at such a fine scale that it seems every moment has an offering for us. Of course, new nooks and crannies will continue to be discovered in our days, and new spaces will be found to slide in new forms of value that we hadn't dreamed of before. The cycle will continue. This is one of capitalism's greatest and most celebrated attributes: monetizing what the market demands. Additionally, our product experiences are no longer isolated. These experiences are linked back-to-back in a network of relationships, creating systems of experiences. The more these designed experiences pervade our everyday, the more clear this analogy to food becomes, the more we are what we buy.

Menu of Objects

How do we begin to reconcile the effects of these experiences? This play on the old adage of "you are what you eat" goes further than an anti-consumerist catch phrase. It begs the question: How do we as individuals evaluate this menu of objects before us? As we acknowledge and pursue the affects our things have on our lives, how are we being critical about our home's diet of objects? What dish, what ingredient, herb, or remedy has been forgotten or is yet to be discovered? Put another way, what tastes are being catered to or pushed upon us?

Just as a public health evaluator would consider the big picture of the American food supply and all its disparities, designers of our things must also evaluate our “goods diet” by considering those who produce the lion’s share of our things - multinational corporations.

The Market Is Not A Level Playing Field

Let’s take a step back to briefly review some factors of our American economic context. For starters, businesses must be profitable to survive. It wasn’t that long ago that John Elkington, a sustainable business consultant, coined the term “people, profit, and planet” in 1994. Also known as the *Triple Bottom Line*, this marked new spectrums of social and environmental performance that companies should be evaluating in addition to financial profits. For example, rather than a company simply figuring how much profit they may gain by shifting their manufacturing to China, this optional value set would also factor the decision’s impact on the welfare of workers involved, and its ecological impact through new shipping routes, material sourcing, and more. In recent decades, Life-Cycle Analysis tools for products have quickly matured, but are still in their infancy. In short, new products coming onto our market are still driven by profits. Our corporations, which dominate nearly all of the available stuff we can buy, are only just beginning to consider more than making money.

Another key aphorism is that the American economy is not a level playing field. Like Corporate Farming, or “Big Ag”, which has immeasurable power and advantages in our

food system over small farmers, we must consider the makers of products and objects. Neighbors on the list of top selling companies to food and beverage companies like Tyson Foods, PepsiCo, and Nestlé, are their kindred manufactures of things: Wal-Mart, Procter and Gamble, Apple, Unilever, etc. While Adam Smith's early ideas of the free market and the self-corrective "invisible hand" still predominate political rhetoric, more accurate descriptions of our modern economic system have coined terms like "*Crony Capitalism*". It is intuitive and tempting to assume that products we've come to know have arrived on the market simply because society has asked for them. To think that companies are simply supplying what the market demands is a far too condensed and distorted view. In *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy* (2001), Thomas Frank identifies how a form of 'market populism' has taken hold where the desires expressed through the marketplace are validated, and anything outside of the market is unfairly regarded as suspicious or false. My intent is not to prove the systematic difficulties of the small business owner, uncover methods of corporate tax evasion, or depict case studies of divisive advertizing campaigns. My assertion is that one should not assume that the market will automatically render a "balanced diet" of products for society's long-term health. If that were true in the food market, we would not have obesity, coronary heart disease, and diabetes epidemics. Chain restaurants would offer more than iceberg lettuce. We must break away from the assumption that consumers are exclusively controlling their diets. The marketplace is not a direct reflection of what consumers want or need. In fact, corporate design cultures already embrace this idea.

“People Don’t Know What They Want”

Steve Jobs, the late CEO and Founder of Apple Inc., became a poster child for a more intuitive and risky side of product innovation. Jobs summed up a common corporate belief well himself: “A lot of times, people don’t know what they want until you show it to them” (cite BusinessWeek article). Famous for relying on his gut rather than market research, especially in Apple’s early days, Steve Jobs was an iconic example of *creating demand* through technological and design innovation. Apple famously created new categories of products that simply did not previously exist. Products, like the iPod, were disruptive to the marketplace, and shifted our object paradigms. A product like the iPod shows that people may want more than what they demand, or can express to makers and manufacturers. This intuitive side of entrepreneurship is an important part of framing our product diets. It shows that with the right combination of factors, paradigm shifts can happen. Almost like a chef creating a new dish, people can realize a new way of interacting with objects that they hadn’t previously wished for or expressed. While some makers respond to consumer market research and answer demand, others chart new territory, develop new technologies and take risks on hunches. Design prototypes are taste tests for new objects we may not know we crave.

Expressions of Counterculture

Designers and consumers must consider the disparities between how a society expresses its product needs, and how the market is able (or unable) to respond. Our lopsided market is not without its counterbalance. Indeed, it follows a bell curve model with leaders and stragglers, early adopters, the mainstream and the underground. The market is not homogenous. Rooted in the Arts and Crafts Movement, our handcrafted goods have a palpable presence in the marketplace but are too often inaccessible to the general public and sold at high-end luxury good prices. The response of the DIY movement of the early 21st century is only one embodiment of society's rejection of consumerism, and our own inquiry into correcting the imbalance. Consumerism is being counteracted on a myriad of fronts. Locally-made or sustainably-made goods are supported by those who can afford them. Whether it be driven by politics, environmental sustainability, worker's rights, or simply lifestyle values, our society is full of sub-cultures responding to the corporate influence on our market. They are moving into tiny homes, living slowly, and being highly critical of what they put into their bodies or what they buy. The term "mindfulness" has become buzz-worthy over the last decade as yoga sessions and workshops on "Decluttering your Life" are offered at luxury retreat centers like *Kripalu*. Alternative ways of living and buying have created their own smaller mainstream and have in part created a new aesthetic of luxury lifestyle goods. To me, these expressions of the high-end market are fascinating statements that only further highlight the disparities in our available goods. It's true that our society, and our markets, are actively engaged in making products

which are better for society. Innovations in these areas largely relate to ecologically sustainable products which emphasize fair trade, and have even become fashionable.

Critical Design

In framing this bias in our goods, I wonder what categories have been forgotten or uncultivated beyond the sustainable and fair. What product designers are working for long-term “public health” outcomes? As the designer Anthony Dunne writes in *Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects* (2001), designers are perfectly positioned to create alternative visions to those put forward by industry.

“...all design is ideological, the design process is informed by values based on a specific world view, or way of seeing and understanding reality. Design can be described as falling into two very broad categories: affirmative design and critical design. The former reinforces how things are now, if conforms to cultural, social, technical and economic expectation. Most designs fall into this category. The latter reflects how things are now as being the only possibility, it provides a critique of the prevailing situation through designs that embody alternative social, cultural, technical or economic values.

As a type of critical designer, I sometimes think of my art and design practise as if it were an R&D lab which develops concepts in categories of little interest to corporations. Why

should only products which would render immediate sales be researched and developed? What greatness should objects aspire to, or where do our possessions fall on a spectrum which plots their healthiness? Surely, these things shouldn't be limited to only art galleries, museums, or religious sanctuaries. If we think of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, one might consider how it may relate to objects, and a supposed hierarchy of object healthiness. At the top of the pyramid would live the most aspirational and transformative objects, and basically good things at the bottom which are made sustainably and fairly. What objects would be at this pyramid's pinnacle? This pyramid represents what I consider to be a holistic way of looking at designed objects. The inquiry within my practice is what lies in this holistic spectrum of object health for individuals, and for a society.

I dream of what our society would look like if our creative professionals were more evenly distributed about this pyramid rather than largely being employed to an industrial agenda. My obsession lies in how consumerism has biased innovation in the everyday object, and seeks a counterpoint. It is not to say that all new shiny innovations are evil, but to use a similar creative approach and process to explore new categories. While Toyota invests millions into a forward thinking, but impractical and inoperable concept car of the future to debut at the Detroit Auto Show, my practice is interested in exploring another corner which at times may be equally as quixotic. The bandwidth of meaning which our objects can provide for us has been severed by corporate biases. What should be brought back into

the modern consumer's view is the vastness of our potential experience with everyday objects.

Positive Psychology & Shlain's Internet

Deepening the discussion about objects and our health is filmmaker, writer, and internet pioneer, Tiffany Shlain. Looking at the internet as an object, Shlain has set out to “grow up the internet”. She maintains that the internet is a reflection of our own character and that it may take on an even greater and purposeful perspective. Through the work of her production company, the *Moxie Institute*, Shlain relates her work to the developing practice of “positive psychology”. Presented by Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman in their 2004 book, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, positive psychology identifies 24 positive character strengths which can actively be developed, rather than using a more reactive, conventional and pathological approach.



24 Character Strengths identified in positive psychology, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, 2004

These include virtues like curiosity, perseverance, and humor. In her 2014 short film, *The Science of Character* (cite), Shlain uses these character strengths to popularize the idea that we can neurologically improve ourselves by slowing down and focusing on strengthening some of these attributes, and live more intentionally. In another somewhat slapstick film, *The Making of a Mensch* (cite), she points out the Jewish concept of mussar, which is “about creating rituals and practices that help you better control or develop certain qualities” which are seen as all valuable and apart of who we are. Tiffany Schlain demands we take control of our use of the internet, as we’ve created it in the first place. She has a

positive message which has become a viral sensation. Shlain's vision for the internet is one where we make it into something which is better for us; we self-improve the internet as it grows. Her message strengthens the idea that we are what we create, and what we create is a reflection of our society and its health.

Product Relationships as Contracts

Endless approaches may be taken on making our objects better for us. In my work, several distinct themes and inspirations have emerged. A key to each of these is an overarching principle: that our relationship with an object can be seen as a contract. Especially with objects involving use, there is a deal, an interaction, a relationship between the thing and its user. This contract is often what inspires its acquisition. The deal with an alarm clock is that you tell it what time to sound, and hopefully, it wakes you up when you'd like.

Objects are welcomed for their effects on our lives and behaviors. However, there may also be aspects of the contract which get modified or are loosely written, or where the fine print is overlooked. Objects we use every day can pose or introduce new effects we hadn't anticipated or may not even detect, whether delightful or painful. In my practice, it is most important to acknowledge this fine print, an object's nuance or long-term effects. As I approach various themes and explore concepts, it is through this lens of a contract and relationship that I evaluate and attempt to understand my work. With each theme, comes a certain clause in the contract.

A primary theme that reoccurs in my study of conceptual work is the use of time, and how time is represented in these object contracts. I will describe the relevance of time in our product contracts, and provide specific examples which show how time is treated in my work, as well as relevant works of others.

The second theme I'll discuss is how objects take on attributes of a gift. In its truest form, few things are as counter-consumerism as a gift. Gift attributes are a common lens through which to look at both product designs, and artworks. More important than hypothetically positioning my work in a gift economy, is how an object attains a gift status in our capitalist economy. As if a true gift is a living thing or a form of energy, I wonder how a gift is fed, what initiates the gift, or what diminishes it.

In the pursuit of understanding objects in terms of long term health, like that of healing foods, the use of ritual has also emerged in my work. My work often has become an inquiry into how habits transcend into this higher form of meaningful activity. Ritual may involve our daily life at home, celebrating a cultural rite of passage, or a sacred religious transformation. In particular, I'm interested in how ritual is used as an expression of intention in our everyday life.

There is a link here between ritual and holistic designs and a final theme: the sacred. While it seems impossible to set out to design a sacred object, I've found the idea of a design

object becoming sacred impossible to ignore. Grappling with this territory or classification must come with a vast anthropological lens. As it pertains to the corporate world and profitability, it seems that the sacred categorically cannot be guided by any corporate agenda. Like a gift, it also is a corporate antithesis. The grey area between where we know something to be, or not to be sacred is a curious thing which arises in my work. Sacred objects, in their many forms, are some of our most culturally significant objects. I seek to understand this more deeply through my work and question how an object comes to be sacred - especially in considering non-religious objects.

These themes are not a comprehensive or final list of inspirations for my work, nor do I see them as succinct answers to a healthier society. They are starting points which drive and inspire my making process, and inform how I navigate my creative practice. The questions these ideas raise are intentionally vast. In many ways, to pursue making even one such holistically designed object can seem like a quixotic and unattainable venture. However, I maintain that great agency can be found in this pursuit as it makes for a practice which is reflective of society, forward thinking, and which may inspire useful product experiences that we haven't yet imagined.

The Contract: An Intentional Object Relationship

How we each curate our product diets is unique and can be highly nuanced. Any Experience Designer (Interaction Designer, User Interface Designer, or Human Factors Engineer, etc) would agree that they propose the relationships we have to our things. They write the contracts. Each of these burgeoning professions of our day mark the granularity at which companies are refining our relationships with products. These professions map and anticipate the myriad ways in which someone uses or misuses a device, or the nature of our connectedness with our things. Mapping the consumer experience of a product has become a tool to anticipate and react to any given decision the user may make. The job of these specific types of designers is to understand how the object fits into the user's life, physically and emotionally. They nuance the contract, they assemble the dish. After all, guiding these relationships with products is a tenant of design. It is why designers exist, and why these fields have dramatically grown. It is not a new idea.

Just as in legal agreements between two individuals or entities, contracts can be flexible, broken, and rewritten. It's a way of describing how products place a certain demand on their user or suggest a response. Consider a smartphone, a device which is commonly humanized and personified. The iPhone's "Siri" can remind us of important dates, or pester

us to stay engaged with the phone's apps. Apple has quite literally designed a relationship with your electronic device. In an analogous way, someone may acquire more houseplants as a way to force themselves to spend more time at home by needing to look after them. Consider also having cup of tea or coffee. Depending on the size of cup, your whereabouts, the process of brewing or steeping, and other factors, you and the involved objects have written a contract which will guide your experience to be relaxing, stimulating, reflective, or engaged with a task at hand. One may add a clause or amendment, so to speak, to the use of their smartphone by adding a new app which restricts time spent on Facebook by automatically shutting down the app after a preset time limit. Especially when objects entail use, we're constantly modifying and tweaking how and why we use objects, how they may be linked together.

Critical Designs & Value Fictions

Returning to the notion of critical design not beholden to the marketplace, many artists and designers have proposed rejections or alternatives to a status quo product relationship which, as Dunne puts, aims to make products "smaller, faster, different, better" (Dunne, 62). Both famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright and Andrea Zittel, a contemporary artist and designer, use domestic spaces to affect our lived experience. Through her *Institute of Investigative Living*, Zittel has explored highly specialized and confined spaces which forcibly limit or guide her experience. The institutes's statement:

The A-Z (Andrea Zittel) enterprise encompasses all aspects of day to day living, home, furniture, clothing, food all become the sites of investigation in an ongoing endeavor to better understand human nature and the social construction of needs.”
(Morsiani, 17)

A seminal work of Zittel’s, her 1996 *Escape Vehicles* were small pods, as if to be mini mobile home trailers whose interiors could make a tailor-made retreat. As its exhibitor MOMA summarizes, the work “implicitly argues that artists can participate in their societies rather as designers and architects by producing works with practical and benign applications in daily life”. *Time Trials*, made in 2000, features a different kind of small space whose specific purpose is to augment our sense of time by making a physical space for specific tasks and break the user out of a conventional pattern.



Frank Lloyd Wright - *Falling Water*, 1935



Andrea Zittel - *A-Z West*, 2010



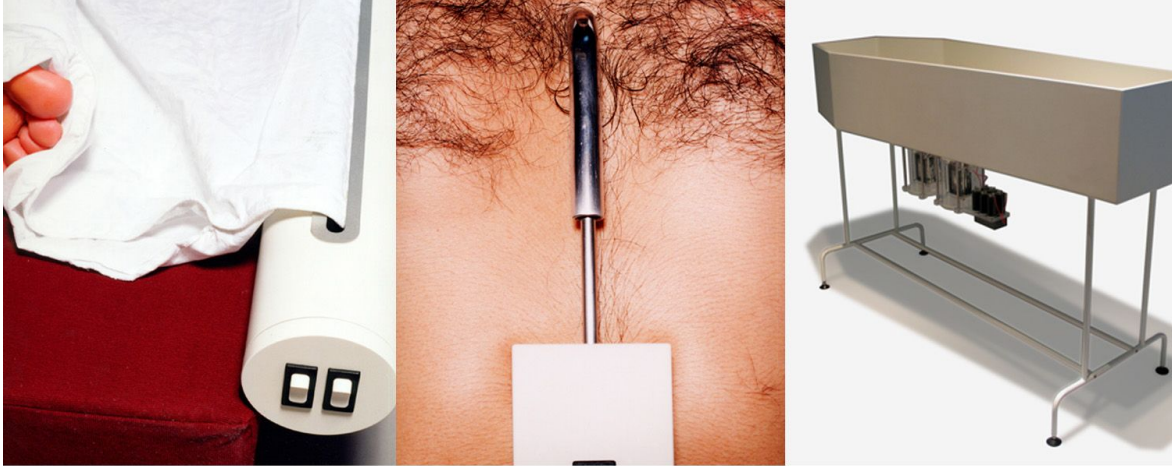
Andrea Zittel - *Escape Vehicles*, 1996



Andrea Zittel - *Wagon Station Encampment*, 2004

Similar to Zittel's work, there are designers and artists who propose specific "value fictions" (Dunne, 63) where a type of contract is based on fictional or supposed social and cultural values. He writes, "the aim is to encourage the viewers to ask themselves why the values embodied in the proposal seem 'fictional' or 'unreal'. The idea is to... stimulate discussion and debate amongst designers, industry, and the public about electronic technology and everyday life. This is done by developing alternative and often gently provocative artifacts which set out to engage people through humour, insight, surprise, and wonder." (Dunne, 67) Dunne points out that simply by making an object seem like a product that could exist using the aesthetics of design or technology, that the work questions what is produced in reality. Perhaps never intended for production, products are introduced with alternative values, which turn the market and industrial value sets on its head. Noam Toran's piece, *Accessories for Lonely Men* (2001) explores a series of eight product designs that create incidental pleasures for those who live alone. One in the series,

Sheet Stealer mounts to one end of a bed and slowly winds up the bedsheet through the night leaving the sleeper to reclaim it when they've woken from the cold. A more intimate product, the *Chest-Hair Curler* once placed on the chest starts to rotate gently as if to play with the man's chest hair. Akin to Toran, James Auger and Jimmy Loizeau use value fictions to write another kind of contract with death. The *After-Life Project* (2009) re-designs the coffin. It proposes to harness the chemical potential of the body after its biological death through the application of a microbial fuel cell, harvesting the body's electrical potential in a dry cell battery. They not only aim to "instigate a metaphysical dialogue to examine the cultural shift from belief systems upheld by organized religion..."(Dunne, 70) but also to prove life after death - life being contained in the battery. These are not products in the sense that they are for production, but they are products for the mind. Informed by these value fictions, they imply that new kinds of contracts may be proposed through design that may not fall into the corporate agenda.



Noam Toran - *Accessories For Lonely Men*, 2001 (*Sheet Stealer, Chest-Hair Curler*) Auger/Loizeau - *After Life Project*, 2009

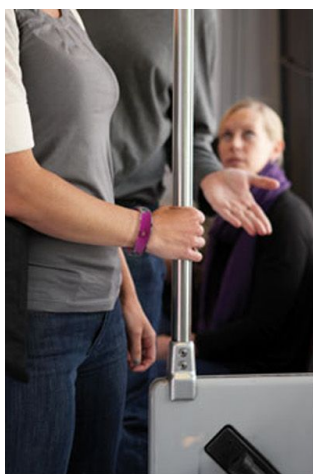
On a different front, IDEO is a global design and innovation firm known for applying “design thinking” to big business opportunities. In a sense, they represent that which moves the masses, innovates right in front of the bell curve, and are at the center of the product design innovation spotlight today. Rooted in product design, the firm has designed products in virtually every category: consumer food and beverage, retail, computer, medical, educational, furniture, toy, office, and automotive industries. They were part of designing Apple’s early products in Silicon Valley, and now employ over 600 creatives in offices around the world. As a hotshot firm, they’ve worked for too many Fortune 500 companies to count. Their current CEO, once a product designer himself, Tim Brown is best known for “writing the book” on design thinking called *Change By Design* in 2009. The book celebrates design as a tool of societal and business betterment. How does a firm on this scale, so deeply enmeshed with the corporate culture, use their “change by design” mantra outside of the marketplace? IDEO, and many of their similar and competitive firms,

publish an abundance of concept work to display their design and trend-setting chops.

Going back to Steve Jobs' mentality, this one way in which the design field "shows people what they want". They paint a picture.

Designs On-, a design journal of IDEO's started in 2013 is a platform firm uses to publish ideas which respond to macro topics and trends like aging, global warming, and food. Like Zittel and Toran, these concepts fall outside of the marketplace. These projects don't have clients, or intentions of production, and so imply value fictions through contracts of their own. Through *Designs On-*, IDEO too has redesigned the coffin. IDEO's *Living Coffin* is a concept which responds to the emotional challenge of grieving by transforming a burial site into a living memorial by way of a biodegradable coffin. Once the coffin biodegrades, it provides food for a planted maple tree along with the body of the deceased. A burial ground of *Living Coffins* transforms the cemetery into a city park. Another work, *Bracelet*, is an answer to the simple difficulty of identifying expecting mothers, especially in their first trimester. Connecting to the craze of Lance Armstrong's *LiveStrong* bracelets, IDEO proposes that expecting parents wear a color-coded bracelet to identify themselves as expecting parents in order to elicit common courtesies and congratulations. Another concept, *Timeless Beauty*, comments on anti-aging products by proposing one replace their hair, face and body products with water. The repackaged water humorously promises that after a nine-week "cleanse", a natural balance of oils is regained with only the ingredients of time and water. Given the author of these concepts, and their clientele, it's difficult to

view a work like *Timeless Beauty* as anything but cynical. In many ways, *Designs On-* can be seen as the inner-mind of designers in the centrifuge of corporate design, or a series of humorous and artful inside jokes. In essence, this portfolio could be seen as what IDEO's designers wish their clients would have them do. Though, these project don't pay the bills. Designers make a sexy rendering, write a thought provoking blurb, and "design on".



IDEO, Design On-, *Bracelet*



Timeless Beauty

A most simple and poetic final example of an alternative product proposal is from ceramacist, Chris Staley. Through the most basic and exemplary presentation, Staley's work also ties to the example of the intentional cup of tea. Appropriate for pottery, a medium so rich in history in both modes of ritual and design, Staley presents a signature tea cup along with a ceramic sculpture. Inextricably linked on their platter, the pair are used together with the teacup driving the contract. The drinker remains with the object for the duration of the tea's consumption, the caffeine stimulates how it does... the object

transforms, inspires. Better yet, the sculpture is revisited time and time again, cup after cup.



Chris Staley, *(Untitled)*

I deeply consider what requests my own work makes, how it may respond or change, and what input its user may have. Imbedded in the themes to follow are value fictions of my own. With each piece comes unique levels of feasibility, producibility, or fiction.

Pertaining to this fiction, Dunne warns that “designers need to explore how such design thinking might re-enter everyday life in ways that maintain the design proposal’s critical integrity and effectiveness, while facing accusations of escapism, utopianism, or fantasy.”(64) It is important for my work to be discussed outside of art, flirt with

production, and challenge fantasy. To picture the work in the everyday is a way it challenges - though it may only remain as fiction.

Time: Implications of Object Lifespans



Attributed to George Tate - *Blanket Chest*, 1765

A Blanket Chest from 1765

As someone trained in fine furniture making, I have always loved strolling through antique markets and decorative arts museums. It's amazing to see old hutches, chests of drawers, tables, and sideboards expertly done and still working with even more character than when they were made. In particular, blanket chests are fascinating in their design, construction, and how they were often embellished. "Hope Chests", or "Dowry Chests", are a special kind of blanket chest meant to hold a dowry, a token gift that was bestowed upon a groom (or his family) upon the marriage from the family of the bride. These were often a collection of linens and home dressings. It's remarkable to see how this furniture, like the

blanket chest pictured above, engaged in this ancient tradition. The most prominent script on the chest is not its maker's mark, but the year of its making, and the initials of the wedded couple.

To boldly carve the year and the owner's initials on the face of a piece of furniture is an act worth considering. I wonder if the recipients of the chest supposedly made by George Tate thought of it as an heirloom? What also draws me to chests from this period is that they weren't all made as "fine" furniture, they weren't all fussed over with tremendous care for detail. As these traditions with chests were also carried out by middle class folk, most blanket chests may not be considered as valuable as a sideboard or dining table (pieces which were more visible to guests). Dovetails of such chests are often cut with visibly over-reaching kerfs from where the saw left over its mark, and scratches from the marking gauge chattered nearby the joinery. To me, these are beautiful gestures of process that are no longer known by today's consumer - these marks and processes have been removed along with the dates, and names and replaced with brands. Unlike today, where the making of a comparable solid wood chest would require skills of a specialized furniture maker, these chests were made by furniture makers, cabinetmakers, and carpenters alike. I wonder if George Tate anticipated that this chest would last more than 300 years, nevermind it ending up Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. I bet he would be delighted, but given its construction and craft, not surprised.

The chest was intentionally made for multiple generations and thought of as a gift for generations Tate would never meet.

By comparison, personalizing products today is quite a different thing, like Apple's free option to have your device laser engraved. I don't know of anybody who intends to pass their iPod onto their grandchild. Perhaps it has something to do with Apple's own boasting claim: the iPod was designed to last just 4 years. (iPod Classic, 2006) Apple's spokeswoman is most likely referring directly to the model's battery life, a most common factor of a device's lifespan. Though, since Apple has released a new iPod model nearly every year since its original release in 2001, it seems these MP3 players may have been planned to be obsolete even sooner. In simply taking on this one factor of lifespan, it renders a radically different type of contract and set of values. If that chest were made only to last for 10 years instead of 300 years, I imagine the effects it would have on the responsibility one takes for its provenance. I believe this responsibility is directly related to our visceral connection to objects and their potential meaning.

Inversely, what would the same iPod look like if it were designed to last for decades. How would we innovate differently if our contracts with objects were written for much greater time spans? Truly, the world needs more technology professionals, like Saul Griffith,

working on this very idea.¹ The exercise is challenging and provocative, and is telling of our context of planned obsolescence.

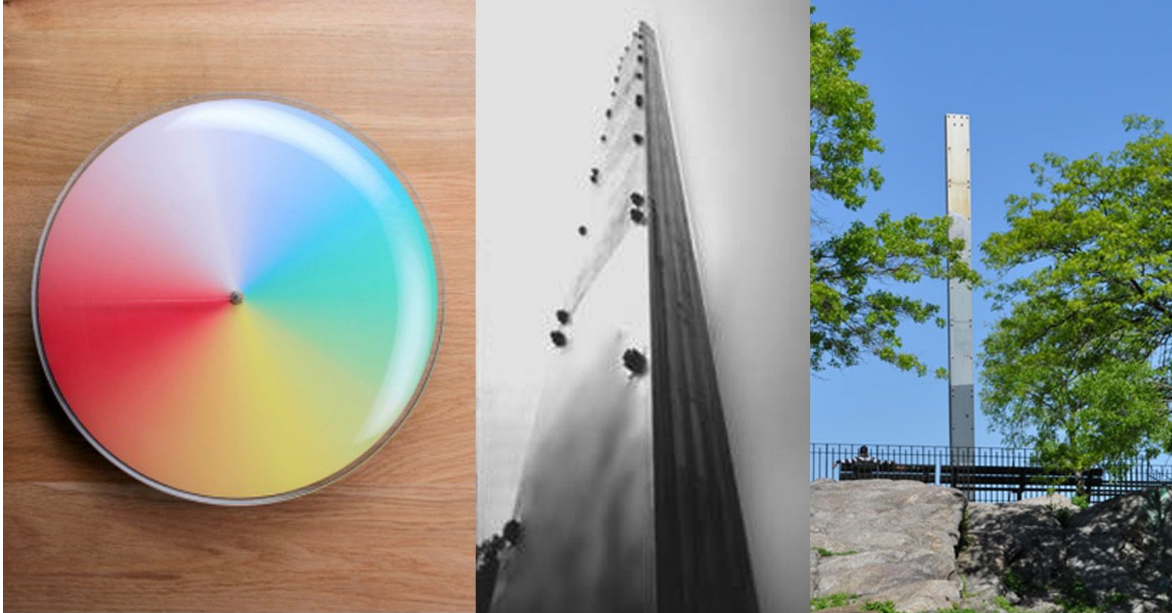
With the lifespans of our everyday things shrinking there is an effect on our product diets. While there is no easy metric for measuring this effect, it has undoubtedly shifted our tastes. Common objects with longer lifespans today have a diminished appeal, or are simply too expensive for the average budget. Today's minimalism is more of an aesthetic than a core value. The marketplace presents products that are at very accessible price points but often don't last for more than a few years. The message in a contract like this is: Don't bother with making an investment or fussing over what happens down the road - get what you need now. This message proliferates product languages which dismiss responsibility of the long-term, while restricting languages that push our understanding of how products can grow in meaning over many years. Thinking of long-product lifespans as a value fiction, new opportunities in design emerge - tastes we may have lost an appetite for. Simple implications arise such as: designing for many successive users, multi-generational products, ecological lessons, honoring ancestors and family histories, and considerations beyond oneself in general.

¹ *Known for developing this very idea of "heirloom" gadgets, Saul Griffith is someone who has their hand in just about every aspect of the global DIY movement. Literally deemed a genius from the MacArthur Foundation, Griffith is doing a bit of everything: from developing versions of wind turbines that are more like kites, to developing open source software for 3d printing technologies, to writing comic books that teach kids how to build stuff. Certainly, more technology professionals working with the value set of Griffith's would tip the scales away from the corporate agenda.*

Contemporary Responses

One artist dealing with time as a medium is Terry Fugate-Wilcox, whose 40-foot public sculpture, *3000 A.D.*, is comprised of two metals, aluminum and magnesium. Inspired by scientists' discovery of ancient metals found in an Egyptian tomb which had fused together over thousands of years, Wilcox has calculated that this public work will truly become a homogenous monolith of one alloy in 1,495 years. Rather, as writer Jad Abumrad puts it, 72 generations. Able to withstand 200 mph winds, as it's imbedded into the bedrock below, the piece points to our massive relationship with time and puts into question the lifespan of every other building and structure around it.

Working on a more commercial front, industrial designer Scott Thrift released a crowdfunded product design now sold at the MOMA store. Proposed as a gift of time, *ThePresent* is a clock with one hand instead of two, which does one 360 degree rotation just once a year instead of every 12 hours. Doubling as a color wheel, the hand draws its way through iconic colors associated with the seasons of the year. Thrift presents an alternative contract with *ThePresent* that acknowledges that a 12-hour clock has an implication for one's pace. He proposes a slowing effect by simply shifting the timeframe of this familiar semiotic language of our common clock. In this palpable form available for purchase, the value is not fiction, it is realized.



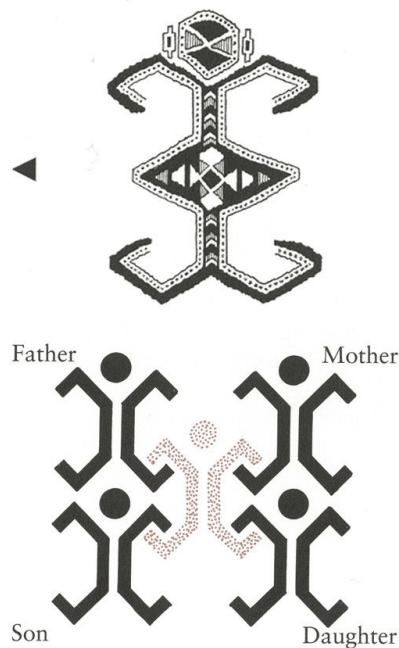
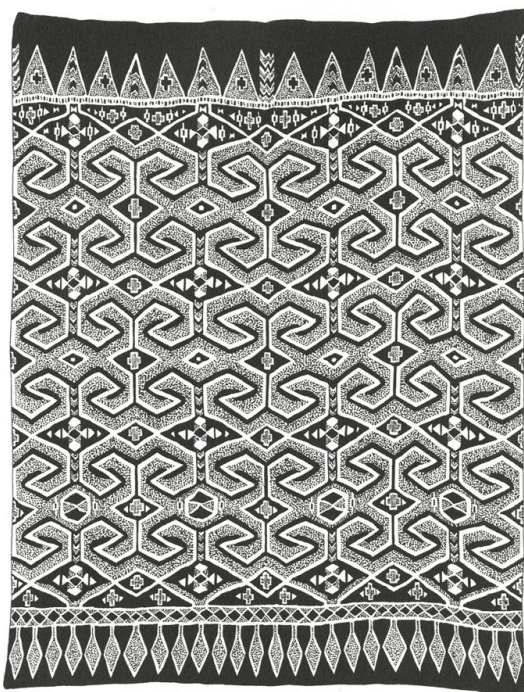
Scott Thrift - *ThePresent* (Annual Clock), 2014

Terry Fugate-Wilcox - *3000 A.D.*, 1998

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

Thinking of only contemporary expressions of time through objects can detract from our perspective. Even dowry chests of Colonial America pale in comparison to the perspective of ancient objects. We must, as Isaac Newton recounted, “stand on the shoulders of giants” to see further. We may look at the anthropological study of ancient products and objects through a design lens. There is a great deal to learn where entire fields of anthropology dedicate themselves to uncovering how ancient cultures came to make their objects, and how their own value systems and beliefs were imbued in what they produced. The analysis of marks and pattern making alone was fit for the career of anthropologists like Carl Schuster, Edmund Carpenter, Mark Siegel Tuch. In a compilation work of Schuster's, *Patterns That Connect* (1996) he attempts to decode systems of mark making which told

stories of time's vastness. Some of his conclusions found groupings of marks, notches, and drawings which used pattern to convey genealogies and family trees. These not only expressed a form of community togetherness, but also commonly made reference to figures seen as an original deity or parent ancestor. Other groupings of objects exhibited systems for expressing specific family trees and kinship charts. These directly took census of specific family members and lineages. Most interesting to Schuster, were the uncanny likenesses found in myriad disparate cultures studied around the world, from indigenous nations in the Americas, to the ancient Magdalenian (modern-day France), to the tribes of the South Pacific, and beyond.



Indonesian textile depicting geneology. The “continuum of human figures finds its most plausible explanation as a symbol of the endless continuity of the genetic process... At least in principal, this endless network of arms & legs superbly illustrates the idea of descent & relationship.” *Patterns That Connect*, Schuster. 1996



Left: Example of “Y-post”, a form frequently found throughout the ancient world seen as an image of a tree with the branching of the human race. Middle: Maori staff as mnemonic device - series of engraved knobs successively touched in ritual as an aid to memory when reciting geneologies. Right: New Caledonian door-posts said to represent the ‘ancestors’ of one side of a family. (Schuster, 1996)

Use of systems within ancient pattern used to indicate marriage & decent. (Schuster, 97)

Any Experience Designer today would be amazed to find that these intricate ramiform (branch-like) shapes and notches were carved into structural doorposts and sticks to depict family trees and lineages. Another grouping of Schuster’s are ancient “heavenly ladders”. These series of ladders compiled by Schuster were often treated as functional interactive totems which eventually would bring its climber to their maker at the top of the ladder as they enter the space above. Time and ancestry seem to have been embedded in the most simple everyday items. Though it may be difficult to relate to objects from vastly different times and cultures, it drives a point that the most common items can contain a set of ideals

larger than ourselves. Designers and artists today may embody this perspective held by the ancients which looked to their deep past and made gifts for future generations.

Stories in Sticks

When a tree is cut down and reveals its naked death-wound to the sun, one can read its whole history in the luminous, inscribed disk of its trunk: in the rings of its years, its scars, all the struggle, all the suffering, all the sickness, all the happiness and prosperity stand truly written, the narrow years and the luxurious years, the attacks withstood, the storms endured. - Hermann Hesse, "On Trees"

I've always seen trees as storytellers. The sun warms it just visibly enough over time to draw one closer. Wood is just soft enough to gain a patina so particular to its user without changing its grain or breaking it altogether. Its grain can't resist but embody its lived experience, trapping forest fires and early winters within its pores. The technical study of the grain, known as dendrochronology (in latin: *dendron* - tree branch, *chronos* - time), is the scientific method of dating based on the analysis of patterns of the tree's growth rings. Its darker rings are known as *latewood*, cells which grew more slowly in colder months. *Earlywood* grows faster in the warmer spring months and is therefore lighter in color and less dense. From early childhood we're taught that the grain lines represent years. We don't need to do a core sample study on a 2000 year old Sequoia to understand this

concept. It's quickly intuitive to see a stump and count the absent tree's age or think of what year it became a seedling. Brian Nash Gill, an artist and printmaker, playfully makes his prints using this iconic stump image of the tree's cross section as his printing platen. Trees, through their cells, are natural timelines, mnemonic devices of memory, and storytellers that even breath and move long after their harvest.



Timeline illustrated on California Redwood cut down in 1800's

Bryan Nash Gill - *Locust*, 2009

Particular to common hardwoods is their relatable lifetimes. While some tree species may grow many thousands of years, common deciduous species like Oak, Cherry, Maple, Walnut, Poplar, have shorter lifespans. For example, oak trees for commercial purposes are commonly harvested between 60 and 120 years depending on the characteristics of its stand (Baughman). It's also not uncommon to work with lumber of oak trees which were more than 200 years old. This is a wondrous timeframe, relatable and graspable while still mostly out of reach of the human life expectancy. It's as if they are our older, wiser

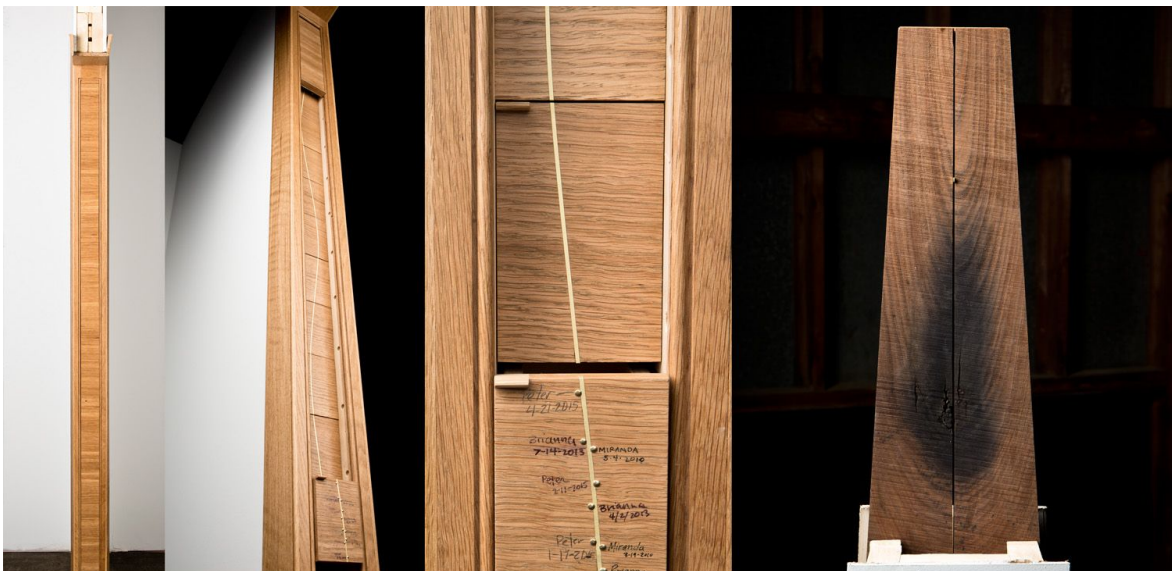
fellows. It is no wonder why tree's through history have been anthropomorphized in myths, have been called wise in folk and fantastic tales, and seen ubiquitously as a central life-giving form.

From these perspectives, dealing with time as a counterpoint tool to our product diet today comes as low-hanging fruit to a woodworking artist. Wood was already a perfect medium for its product health attributes, as it may be locally sourced and is a renewable resource. This fruit only seemed natural to take in earlier works of my own where I explored three key pieces which would inform future works: *Family Growth Chest*, *300 Year Mantel*, and *42 Year Clock*. Looking back, it was as if making work in this way was working a cultural muscle which had atrophied. Dunne's wariness of critical design work being mistaken for escapist or fantastic still feels real to me, and is something which still nags the idealism in my work. In the end, the statements or questions expressed in these pieces are simpler than they once felt while taking in these complex backgrounds of ancient objects and contracts. *300 Year Mantel* reinstates the mantel as the center of the home as a place of history and a shrine made of our most precious or sacred family photos or objects. It juxtaposes them in time with an oak tree as its measuring stick. *Family Growth Chest* leverages the vernacular ritual of marking a child's height in a doorway as they grow in the home, formalizing the ritual and furniture piece as a permanent fixture. *42 Year Clock* is a take on Thrift's annual clock, and is another play on grain and time which sets the annual clock movement in motion so that its ticker literally but invisibly moves at the growth rate of the wood it's

mounted in. These formative pieces were initial inquiries into making a new set of assumptions with our products. Each piece assumes a specific amount of time, which has trickling effects to their users I couldn't resist exploring.



300 Year Mantel, 2015



Family Growth Chest, 2015

42 Year Clock, 2015

Gifts: Keeping The Object in Motion

In my study of how objects relate to this counterbalance of society, it is imperative to include the ideologies and theories of gifts. Artists and economists alike get a seemingly rare treat in both developing theories of gifts, what they express, and how they come to move and survive. Perhaps it is because the gift is even more reflective of a society than other forms of economics; it is more comprehensive as it moves from the smallest gesture to enormous transactions. Gift qualities can so vividly describe a creative process and for ages has been linked to how a genius idea or poem arrives from outside oneself. Like ritual, a gift is an embodiment of a virtue of wholeness and intention, which is why a gift can speak volumes about the character of a society or any one person.

Especially in recent decades, the theme of the gift has become central to understanding artistic practice and its relations of exchange. Mauss' famous work, *The Gift* (1950), has become a pivotal work in not only framing the mechanics of gift giving and economies, but also in contextualizing its inverse: the commodification of artistic practice. Mauss' study was not only in how so-called archaic societies contributed to their greater collective with gift giving, but he also emphasized the reciprocal nature of gifts. In other words, Mauss recognized that gift economies still often came with their obligations, and

reinforced social structures and hierarchy. In a comparative essay, Roger Sansi offers a few helpful linkages in *Art, Anthropology, and The Gift*. (2015) Sansi astutely connects Mauss's work to other great works on gift theories like Marilyn Strathern's, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (1988), and Alfred Gell's famous work, *Art and Agency* (1998). A central idea which both Strathern and Gell forward is that, through gifts, people give themselves to other people. As Gell outlines, they become "*distributed objects*" (9). It is this continuity between people and things, that in a gift exchange, will personify the gift entities. Like a type of internet, gifts reinforce interconnectedness, and invent a way to re-embody ourselves into a shareable thing. This implies that when a distinction between an individual identity and that of one's social body; that the social body is divisible and transferable through entities, objects, and instruments.

Lewis Hyde also connects gifts, food, selves, and objects by excerpting this ancient Vedic sanskrit text:

O wonderful! O wonderful! O wonderful!

I am food! I am food! I am food!

I eat food! I eat food! I eat food!

My name never dies, never dies, never dies!

I was born first in the first of the worlds,

earlier than the gods, in the belly of what has no death!

Whoever gives me away has helped me the most!

I, who am food, eat the eater of food!

I have overcome this world!

He who knows this shines like the sun.

Such are they laws of the mystery!

~Taittiri-ya Upanishad (Hyde, 2)

In Hyde's 1983 book, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Hyde brings an iconic gift to the conversation which illustrates its foremost qualifying trait: its constant motion. Hyde tells a story of the tribal peace pipe of the indigenous peoples of North America, and the birth of the pejorative and racist term, *Indian Giver*. He describes a common tale in Colonial America, where an Englishman on the westward frontier would enter into a friendly tribe's lodge and be offered a smoke only to be so delighted to accept the pipe as a gift for his own to keep. The Englishman then would be caught in consternation when expected to return the favor by offering the pipe to yet another visiting friendly tribe. Hence, "Indian giver" became a perverted term, but is more delicately described by Hyde as one with "a more limited sense of private property." Through a kind of non-fiction parable, Hyde illustrates the cardinal property of the gift: whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again, not kept. A Christmas present ceases to become a true gift unless you have given something else away, even better if to someone else. Unlike other forms of property, the gift keeps going.

Rather than taking gift theories to mean we must evade our monetary system and go “off the grid” of the marketplace to a pure gift economy, I’m interested in imagining ways to expedite an object’s transformation to a gift status. Surely, George Tate was paid monetarily to make the blanket chest. Then, the chest was a commodity. While it may be more utopian to avoid any form of commodification of objects, I doubt the subsequent generations who received Tate’s blanket chest ever thought much about it as a commodity. To them, it had transformed and crossed over into gifthood, maintained its motion, and in some way was a disembodied ancestor.

This moment of transformation can be encouraged and developed through the design of our objects. Setting the gift into motion can be imbedded into the design process, like a forester who plants trees for generations long after their own. It is as if Tate’s chest knew, through its date, that it would be looked back upon, that many more than that one dowry would be given within its panels. Of course, the object cannot move or give itself. The gift depends on its giver. However, through the use of a specifically written product contract, an object may encourage or invite the gift’s movement. We may hold our objects more accountable to holding us accountable. Like a sourdough starter that must be fed and begs to be proliferated, we may design this gift function into our things. As we reviewed, objects can become gifts by using time, that they would be sent into the future or collect from the past. More of our things can act as time capsules that share stories that maintain a

larger frame of time in our minds. Rather than shrinking time by rushing us along, our products can take the long view with us.

In addition to working with time, there are other ways our things may transform into gifts. Designers can develop new ways in which objects resist private ownership. Similar to how people today can easily accommodate travelers for free on Couchsurfing.com, Little Free Libraries circulate books in neighborhoods, or open source web development is changing notions of virtual property, more of our things can remain *in common*. To return to Hyde's illustration, the peace pipe begs to be continually passed around and shared. In a sense, this was apart of its design as a useful, well-crafted thing. With such an emphasis today on private ownership and plugging into networked devices, more opportunities lie in what can be passed around, shared, and given away.

Just like food can be described as a type of transformative life force, gifts also are seen as a type of energy. Through using these theories of gifts collected from cultures not faced with our particular corporate imbalance, they can add to our approach for designing better, holistic objects.

Ritual: A Design Tool of Intention

Wishbones, Trees, and the Tiny Toy Jesus

In a time where pop stars are made on YouTube, fashion trends shift on a daily basis, and online dating is becoming status quo, the newly coined study of memetics can seem brand new. In fact, having only recently been coined in Richard Dawkins' 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, it is new. Of course human behavior which goes "viral" is not.

As we sit down to a Thanksgiving dinner, the bird's legs are untrussed, the breasts are carved, the dark and light meats are carefully arrayed, a peculiar moment arrives. The bird's wishbone emerges. The ritual isn't necessarily obligatory in most families. It's often a fun and a spontaneous extra. It's now a ritual where someone gets their secret wish - only instead it doesn't have to be your birthday. Why has this curious little clavicle ritual remained as an iconic American pastime? There is something to be appreciated in this little moment we've kept for so long. This act has enough meaning and pleasure all on its own for us to simply take the wish. What makes it curious is that the ritual has survived being detached from its origins. The tradition no longer requires its roots with the Etruscans of ancient Italy who believed their chickens could convey divine messages and grant good luck.

Whether a somewhat niche ritual like finding the lucky toy baby Jesus in the New Orleans' King Cake, or even the ubiquitous Christmas Tree, it's easy to find these curious objects of ritual which have been cultivated to mean something new again. The Christmas tree means something very different today than its roots, which are debated to be from early European paganism, or even from earlier tree worship practices of the ancient Egyptians, Hebrews, and Chinese. While the wishbone, the toy Jesus, and the Christmas Tree each have their roots, which are visible at varying degrees, these traditions and others point out that it is in our very nature to constantly evolve our ritual acts and their meanings. They have been fit for today, and their use today is an expression of its value in *today's* culture, not just its historical context.

New ritual objects like the wishbone are being invented and tried on for size every day. Some catch on and seem to capture the Zeitgeist of the day, become viral or ride a memetic wave. It's even what many corporations and crafters alike aspire to, that their made objects would become apart of our daily rituals. Unlike its similar form of habits and customs, ritual is aspired to because it speaks to our deepest and most intentional selves. Rituals are expressions of our widest view. The actions within them are often emblematic of our own aspirations and developments. Just because someone might enjoy grinding coffee each morning does not alone make this a ritual. So, what then elevates one of our regular acts to being a *ritual*?

As-If

Routine, in fact, is at odds with ritual acts. To help us explore this, Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh introduce the great Chinese leader and philosopher, Confucius. In their 2015 book, *The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us About The Good Life* (cite), they point out that Confucius, and his disciples who compiled the ancient texts of the *Analects*, asked different kinds of questions. Instead of big questions like “*Do we have free will?*”, Confucius emphasized the profoundness of the daily: *How are you living your life on a daily basis?* (Puett, 25)

Puett points out that the vast majority of our waking hours are spent doing everyday activities, and that this is Confucius’ starting point.

If we are feeling a bit down, taking a moment to say hi to another person can interrupt a cycle of negative emotion. If we are greeting someone we’ve had a conflict with, we can share another, more civil side of ourselves and momentarily break the pattern of disagreement...But when we go through life performing most social conventions by rote, they lose their power to become rituals that can profoundly change us. They don’t do much to help us become better people.” (30)

To Confucius, rituals are transformative because they allow us to become a different person for a moment. Using the example of playing hide-and-seek with a child, Puett calls out the role reversal that happens when the parent playfully allows their child to find them. Each break away from their routine: parent becomes the vulnerable child, child becomes the empowered parent who makes the discovery. Pointed out in “as-if” scenarios, Puett highlights how such simple acts are forms of the as-if rituals carried out by Confucius. Even saying “please” and “thank you”, or “I love you” are forms of slipping into a momentary ritual space where one person becomes the other, or acts as-if in that moment they do love each other fully at every moment.

Other examples, like child’s play, or talking to a therapist, are forms of as-if rituals which try on alternate realities. Through role-playing kids learn immensely in a safe environment about fear and anxiety, or what it feels like to be a hero. In another sense, a therapist helps their client create an alternative reality which helps break patterns that dominate their life and help construct a very different way of relating (38). Like the value fictions of Toran, or how Shlain intends to “make a mensch”, these are suggestions of what Puett and Gross-Loh translate as “the malleable self”. We are transformed through the pretend, the unreal, the conceptual. Ritual is a mechanism of the everyday which allows us, in the smallest moments, to change.

When discussing a specific ritual which spoke to the spirits of the deceased, Confucius pointed out to his followers that the ritual's efficacy came from their full participation *as if* their ghosts were present, whether the spirits were participating or not. Like a child simply going through the motions of “please” and “thank you”, the act must be full. Therefore, more important than the uniqueness of our designed experiences, is whether or not they support intentional as-if ritual spaces.² A design may be unique and still fail to support ritual.

Indeed, the placemat in the table setting, the wishbone, or the closet one hides in during a game of hide-and-seek, are all in some sense objects engaged in everyday ritual. As constant inventors of ritual, we've actively created and maintained these rituals and many more. The ritual of marking your child's heights in the doorframe to capture their growth was done first by somebody long ago. Without being traced to any known religious tradition, in some way, it went viral. Through my work, I wonder what rituals may be performed if given the right support and tools. Vast amounts of everyday experiences are stones unturned; experiences which may benefit from a tool, a facilitator of ritual. It is my

² *As it concerns my approach to my work, it similarly is less important for the experience to be made completely individual, or like no other. While the Family Growth Chest would render completely unique markings on its face over time, the tradition overall is common. It is taking the time to make the mark, or the act of tucking away an artifact in its drawer that is more its aim, a common act its users share. It creates a space as if to honor that time, that age, and that place in the home.*

own view that in our great human history, ritual is at an all-time low and the opportunity has never been greater to invent and cultivate new rituals.

Sacred: The Object's Highest Aspiration

Studying what makes something sacred is an elusive and lofty pursuit. To even think of creating a sacred object seems quixotically aspirational. It is the ultimate break from the corporeal, as the word is conventionally reserved for that which is deified and holy.

Returning to my earlier analogy to Maslow's pyramid, and holistically healthy objects, truly sacred objects undoubtedly would occupy the top of this pyramid as our most culturally significant objects. Similar to true gifts, the sacred also goes beyond what money can buy. The word is entrenched in the longest standing traditions and customs we have, particularly in religion. Disputes over sacred objects continue to be cause for unjust violence on the greatest scale. The word's attachment to religion especially seems to have placed it so far out of reach for our increasingly opening, multi-cultural, multi-denominational, agnostic, spiritually-minded society. It is not only religions that crowd the word, but also museums. As religions elevate their arks, scripts, and ceremonial vessels, museums protect their ancient busts, relics of war, Warhols and Pollocks.

Understandably, the most culturally significant objects will have institutions to protect them. However, I do submit more clearance to be made around what our society deems to be sacred, that it may be more accessible and makeable.

Iconically religious objects still merit much study when exploring the sacred. While I'm not interested in creating religious objects, I believe it is through religion's deep ties with

ritual that they have produced such potent sacred objects. Most interesting to me is where religious objects have made their way into our common households. It's as if in some kind of democratic way they have leaked from the inner chambers of exclusive religious spaces. For example, take the mezuzah in the Jewish tradition. This terrifically small and emblematic object says a great deal in the Jewish home in a small package. Nailed into the sides of the home's various thresholds, the vessel is typically just a few inches long, and holds a tiny scroll which bears a prayer written by a qualified scribe (called a *sofer stam*) with indelible ink. The mezuzah offers an opportunity for a small ritual upon entering the home or a room: the expression of prayer through reciting its verse, or by simply touching the mezuzah's case with a finger as a thanks to God. Like many related rituals which surround the home's threshold, the mezuzah stands as an example of a sacred object in a small form. It's a small gesture, a small object, and is delivered in the most everyday fashion.



A mezuzah affixed to a door frame on South Street in Philadelphia, 2008

My point is not that we should recreate more types of mezuzahs, co-opt its function, or to challenge religion at large. However, given the depth and meaningfulness of even the smallest acts of ritual, the same shift of scale can translate to small forms of sacred. When thinking about how a small act like saying a prayer by touching a mezuzah, it reminds us of that vast potential in our everyday things. I also believe, and remind myself in my own practice, that the notion of sacred is constructed by us. Sacred objects are kept sacred by us, wishbones continue to be broken by us, just like we also we make a new version of the iPod next year. Just as we are constantly creating and evolving rituals, we may also evolve our sacred objects, especially that which is in our personal everyday experience.

Sketches & Prototypes

While rituals may gain potency from the routine it breaks away from, not everything can be sacred. Though, we can still dramatically widen our view of our objects, their timelines, and how we choose to experience them. I've enjoyed coming to know people who have designed their own rituals with objects. For example, I met a social worker who journals her burdens from a day's work only to disintegrate the journal's papers in a water tank which would later hydrate her garden. For her, this ritual is a tool to preserve her personal life and sustain her career. I also met a young man who every week lights a candle and pours a glass of water for his deceased mother. This ritual invention is his mourning process which honors his mother and keeps her in his mind and heart. I even think of my own mother, who constantly references the date she almost died in a car accident. The date has found its way onto notes to herself and passwords, and act as renewed affirmation of life. Like Confucius found himself reflected in each moment and interaction, we too can step outside of the rote and design meaningful rituals with our objects "as if" Steve Jobs didn't have to design it for us. Already fluent in the semiotic language of useful everyday objects, designers can be tasked with unlatching from their corporate design agendas. While I adamantly support DIY ideology and encourage anybody to make gifts for the future, develop rituals, and invent sacred objects for themselves, I believe designers can do more to envision counterpoints to corporate values. Instead of only innovating in the

marketplace, designers and makers can explore new concepts which take a longer view, and consider a more holistic approach to creating objects.

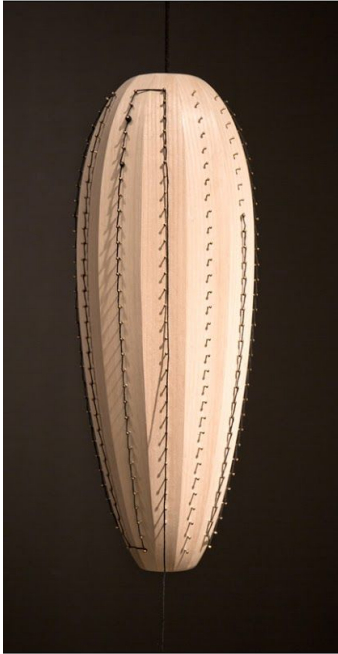
While I approach these ideals in my own work, they continue to feel like just the beginning of a journey, a niche, and even can become unwieldy in this greater context. The breadth of my challenge to creatives also implies there is no one solution, product, designer, or body of work that can present an answer on its own. Reacting to corporate consumption is not new. It's that these ideas simply need more research and development. My work rethinks just a few moments in our everyday experience with this greater perspective of time, gifts, and ritual.

Instruments of Ritual

My latest series, *Instruments of Ritual*, builds on the notion of designing objects for ritual use. The work comes in a digital age where true ritual seems at an all-time low. Using the language of vessels, the pieces offer an invitation to enter an alternate ritual space, and pull you out of the rote. The ubiquitous pod-like forms are design sketches and prototypes assigned to tasks which are often overlooked, or yet to be discovered. The vessels are an ongoing response to how objects comes our aid in difficult times of loss, how we count and mark time, how we stow away our personal sacred things, or how a thing becomes ancestral. The series seeks to widen the spectrum of object design through the use of everyday ritual.



Jeremy Zietz - *Instruments of Ritual*, 2016



Untitled (Calendar)



100 Year Ark



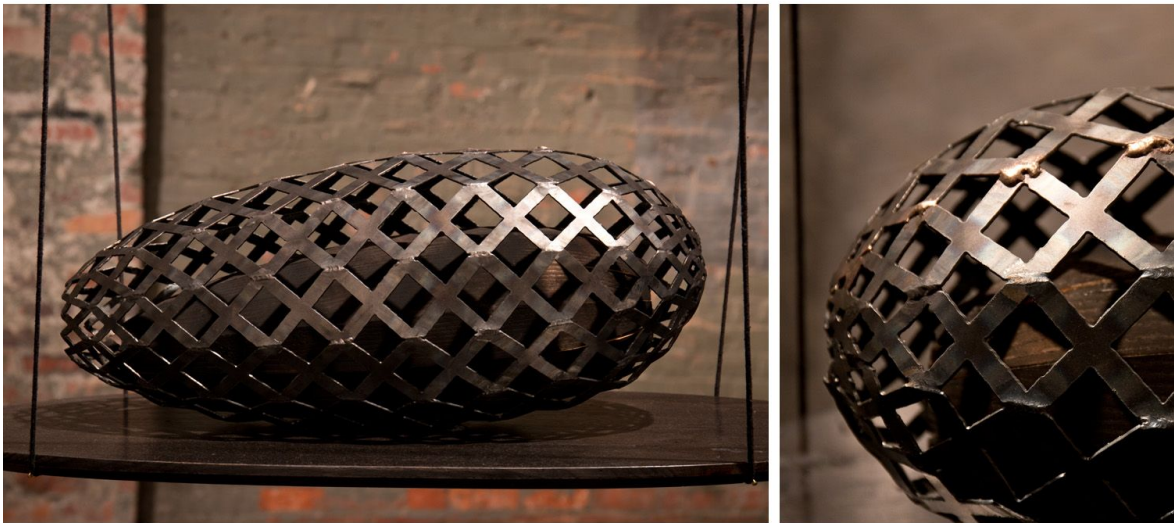
Untitled (Wrap)

The nine vessels each show their own “value fictions” and “as-if” rituals. As an installation, the individual fictions cross-pollinate and allow the viewer to imagine and

compile unique uses or rituals. While some pieces are explicitly containers, others hang as surfaces to mark upon. *Untitled (Candle)* is suspended with an unlit candle and kindling trapped in its open lantern form. The candle intends to exploit the entire wooden structure and sits with potential ritual energy. *Untitled (Burned)* lies nearby already having been through an unknown transformation by fire. Also in metal, *Untitled (Wrap)* looms as an imprint of its original form no longer with us. *Untitled (Match)* shows the same form but split into two perfect halves. A nod to process, the halves are stitched together by a string with a match knotted to its far end. The match stands as an invitation to say goodbye to the vessel and its contents with the perfect fire. *Untitled (Vessel)* stands out as the only piece in the series with a distinct lid to its vessel. The lid is kept in place by a network of glass scaffolding which seals the container. The vessel's contents are protected by its preciousness, though this unique time capsule requires no special tool to break and enter when the time is right.



Untitled (Vessel)



Untitled (Burned)



Untitled (Candle)

Also a sealed vessel, the *100 Year Ark* anchors the series. Pivoting from the pod-like form, the cabinet's face frames 100 years using the rings of a tree a natural ruler and a holly inlay which weaves through its timeline. 100 years stands in as a lifetime, and therefore transforms the cabinet into a body and poses its future as an ancestral piece. As a wall cabinet, *100 Year Ark* pulls the entire series toward the everyday and into the home. It is furniture. It hopes to make the larger series more relatable, and invites the viewer to broaden their idea and usage of furniture. Each piece suggests a use that transforms it, as if it were customized for a specific need.

The rituals embedded in the series assume their own alternate values, and therefore employ their own value fictions. They're set in a alternate "as-if" space where the corporation has

no place or interest. The space is where the object's user takes the long view to honor a moment in time, creates a specific ritual to deal with a hardship, or makes a gift for someone they'll never meet.

List of References

List of References

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VITA

As a product designer, strategist, and woodworker, Jeremy uniquely blends his backgrounds to drive designs which explore intersections of handcraft and consumer change.

While working at Continuum, a global innovation and design firm, and design firms alike, Jeremy worked at the intersection of product strategy and design execution translating abstract values to real product solutions. Jeremy is also classically trained in fine furniture making, and has spent years in the relentless pursuit of craft excellence. From directing The Naked Table Project workshops in sustainable table-making, to crafting one-off pieces which reimagine user behavior in the home, Jeremy continues to scrutinize each piece's position in its life cycle, and in the life of its user. As a language, furniture continues to offer a fertile platform for Jeremy's work in cultivating valuable traditions to our social fabrics, and our environment.

Jeremy has created award-winning designs and worked in a diverse range of industries - from medical devices to consumer electronics, toys, furniture, athletic equipment, packaging, and more. Jeremy has trained at places such as: The Ohio State University, Continuum Innovation & Design, Vermont Woodworking School, ShackletonThomas

furniture & pottery, the Center for Furniture Craftmanship, and Virginia Commonwealth University.