

**Ira Livingston**

**Thoughts and Prompts on Transobjects:  
Sculpture and Jewelry as Speculative Non-Fiction**

They made small objects  
Of wood and the bones of fish  
And of stone. They talked,  
Families talked,  
They gathered in council  
And spoke, carrying objects.  
They were credulous,  
Their things shone in the forest.

They were patient  
With the world.  
This will never return, never,  
Unless having reached their limits

They will begin over, that is,  
Over and over

--George Oppen, *Of Being Numerous*

Guidelines for the treatment of sacred objects  
composed of wood, hair (human or otherwise)  
and/or horn, include: offering smoke,  
water, pollen, cornmeal or, in some instances,  
honey, chewing gum, tarpaper  
and tax incentives.

--Heid E. Erdrich, from "Guidelines for the Treatment of Sacred Objects,"  
in *National Monuments*

Consider what value, what meaning is enclosed even in the smallest of our daily  
habits, in the hundred possessions which even the poorest beggar owns: a  
handkerchief, an old letter, the photo of a cherished person.

-- Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*



"Pink Combs and Brushes" (objects confiscated from migrants by US Border Patrol agents in Arizona; photographed by Tom Kiefer, janitor at Customs and Border Protection Center, 2012)

### A Dedication

The games of make-believe which the children played in the playhouse were a kind of freely invented answer to everything experienced in the "house in earnest" where life was lived in sorrow and anger. What Virgil called *lacrimae rerum*, the tears of things, can be absorbed and re-experienced in the playthings in the playhouse-- or in the words of the poem.

--Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*

When Marcellus Blount died in 2018, his older sister Valerie recalled how, when they were children and he got upset, she used to console him with make-believe "rabbit stew": crumpled-up bits of newspaper in whatever pot or bowl was at hand. This became such a stand-by that just asking whether he wanted some rabbit stew could sometimes be consolation enough.

You can hear in the story a kind of "screen memory" of the origins of Marcellus's lifelong devotion, as a scholar, to poetry and language-- unreal things that, in the right hands, can be made into real vehicles for love and healing. In fact, what Valerie told was the story of how

material objects transformed through love and make-believe can pass along their efficacy to pure speech acts that perform the same magic-- as her telling the story did.

The make-believe had an efficacy that actual rabbit stew would have lacked. How? By providing a momentary existential interruption: *Is the love I am being offered real? Are my tears?* For just an instant, it levels the playing field and allows one *to choose* love and play and delight and consolation. This was the choice Marcellus always made, often against all odds.

The efficacy depends on the at-handedness of the newspaper and the pot, and on how quickly and easily the bits of newspaper can be prepared and assembled, even by a child; how magically the little bit of labor (as gratuitous and lacking in utility as physical labor as it is vital as affective labor) transforms the newspaper and pot into a vessel filled with *love meant for you alone* and always at hand when you need it.

This is the magic we hope to access here.

Sorrow is real. Fantasy is real. Love is real.

for Marcellus



## 1. Introduction: Trans and Objects

This essay is mostly about objects *in the narrow sense*: discrete, local, material things that aren't alive (at least, not in the usual sense) and, because of their discreteness and locality, are exemplified by small things that can be held in the hand. A fleck of dust is too small to be exemplary, and a highway is too large and sprawling, although both are obviously objects.

This "narrow" or "midrange" view of objects is not simply an unfortunate bias of our own limited perspective as humans. In fact, we are such creatures ourselves, living in the middle of the size range between subatomic particles and the universe. We are rejecting universality here, or if you like your glass half full, *embracing the midrange*. Because we have evolved to handle objects (such as early tools and magic/art objects made by humans made human by making them), we have a *handling intelligence*. This is why you might think about something by turning it around in your mind, or why you might say about something overwhelming, "I can't handle it." This is why, in turn, objects in the narrow sense are exemplary *things-to-think-with* or *core metaphors*: because of their particular importance to us in having co-evolved with them. Although we use the term "objects in the narrow sense" for convenience's sake, we do not consider these to be merely a subset of a larger (philosophical or psychologically defined) category of objects, especially since, in evolution and cognition, "objects in the narrow sense" came first and remain that upon which (and sometimes against which) we engage objects in general.

But the focus here is also not on thinking with objects or using them as metaphors except in the sense that these activities feed back into *making them*. The particular focus is on making small material objects-- such as jewelry, talismans, art-- and including things crafted or purpose-made as well as found or repurposed things. Along the way, the focus also shifts up repeatedly to *monuments and statues*: these push the upper size limit of exemplariness as objects, as well as providing a kind of counterpoint to the consideration of smaller objects and jewelry, but they offer insights that can be downloaded into thinking about and making smaller objects as well.

All along the way are prompts that marshal concepts into the service of object-making. This essay is supposed to function, directly and indirectly, as a generator for making objects. I don't expect that anyone will follow through with all the prompts, which would require something more like a semester-long class or perhaps a whole career, but I hope that, even if you are not a jeweler or sculptor or designer, you will engage the prompts not just as rhetorical questions but as occasions for you to think your way into them, or to write up ideas that you don't necessarily intend to go on and make as an actual object.

While jewelry and monuments represent the lower and upper size limits of exemplary objects, I have trouble holding myself to this range, as you will notice: this constraint is *a prompt* for me rather than the definition of a field. My own work has been as a theorist, and in writing and drawing. The advantage of being almost a complete outsider is that I have theories and questions and prompts but no prescriptions. I offer no template but only try to meet you halfway, between

knowledge and know-how, in the space of the prompt. The object of this essay is to kick the ball into the reader's court.

Along the way we will also consider what objects might be *in the broadest sense*, such as via philosophy and psychology. This broader definition of objects includes not just material things but humans and other creatures, texts, ideas, fantasies, systems, categories-- ultimately anything that can be a grammatical object to a grammatical subject in a sentence.

We will take these meandering scouting missions into more abstract realms to bring back specific resources for the making of objects in the narrow sense.

*Trans* means *across*; it carries the sense of *movement* and *change*-- as in *transition* and *transformation* (two terms important to psychology, as we will see below). As such, it carries a sense of *non-locality* in tension with the narrow sense of objecthood. Of course, to say it "carries" that sense is to bring it back toward locality again. This is as good a place as any to start: with the sense of transobjects simply as objects carried across space and time.

We also do not consider the use of the term *trans* in the contemporary sense of *transgender* as a subset of a larger and more abstract sense of *trans* as *across*. The practices and theorizings of transgender are *primary* and make transness thinkable and workable and makable in ways that contribute both directly (as we will see) and indirectly to this project. *Trans* poses the question-- and poses answers to the question-- of how gender in the "large" sense as social systems and categories and sets of relationships interacts with things that are more discrete and local such as bodies, body parts, clothing, accessories, specific ways of walking and talking. In the process, space is opened up for rethinking and reembodiment that deserves to be called *liberatory*.

Okay, but can *making small objects* be liberatory? I suppose it depends on how good at it you are! I'm not going to be answering this question, not because it's too vexed-- because, god knows, I never met a vexed question I didn't like-- but because the focus of this text is not on writing but on making things as a way of asking and thinking through this question. And, I should add-- though it is a subtle distinction-- my happiness that thinking and theorizing can be done through objects comes, in the first instance, not necessarily from a love of thinking but from a love of objects. In the words of Barber Jay (and we could apply the same to sculptors), "all barbers are philosophers, but not all philosophers are barbers."

## **2. Defining Transobjects**

Sometimes, *naming* is *thinking*. Categories that can be named-- such as by nouns like *transobjects*-- are sculpted by adding and/or subtracting.

What I am calling *transobjects* are objects that could exist in more than one different future; that could participate in the making of alternate futures. Depending on what they do, this participation might be found in how their constancy as objects coexists with their chameleonlike

adaptation to their surroundings, in their meaning-making, and in even their magic. This is a place to start. I will be sculpting this idea, adding and subtracting, as we go. Of course, because there are always multiple possible futures, all objects are transobjects. Thinking about something as a transobject means considering what it might be in possible futures that are different from each other.

One could put this in broader terms and think also of objects that mean different things or have different values at the *same* time but in different places, to different people or in different contexts. Any object that has a use value or a sentimental or symbolic value as well as a monetary or exchange value would be a transobject in this sense; any object that exists in different worlds as it moves through space and time, or through different social contexts. Again, this would include all objects.

Perhaps because of the amount of specificity my brain requires, this broader definition is too baggy for me. I need to think-- or at least to start to think-- in terms of specific futures, such as Future A and Future B, that one could imagine around a given object. Think of an amber ring that might one day become the beloved personal memento of a departed loved one-- or the means by which prehistoric DNA is reconstructed to revive a dinosaur-- though, come to think of it, the two are not so different.

It might be helpful to think of transobjects as the opposite of what in science-fiction are called *novas*, that is, the invented objects (or technologies, creatures, ecologies, and so on) around which alternate worlds are built. Transobjects, on the other hand, really exist or could exist without having to imagine anything counterfactual: for example, one could imagine a future in which New York City's Triborough Bridge is worshipped as a piece of mystical conceptual art without changing the bridge itself. But *novas* are not usually limited by definition to being discrete objects, so the bridge worship (rather than the bridge itself) might also be considered a *nova*. Having imagined an alternate future for the bridge might lead you to propose altering it, making it more like a *nova* in itself by taking some steps toward recontextualizing it in that direction, such as by affixing a bronze plaque explaining its mystical significance, gathering a group around it to perform rituals, attempting to claim tax-exempt status for your bridge cult, or even just writing out the explanation of your beliefs (I've done the latter, at least: see Livingston 2018, 105).

This sequence is typical: first you imagine different futures for an object, and this can lead you to begin to alter the object to approach or evoke or to resist or to participate in those futures. This connects the notion of transobjects to activism.

One exemplary transobject is the statue of King Ozymandias that the narrator of Shelley's famous sonnet finds in pieces in the desert, with the words engraved in stone, "Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair." In the future imagined by the king, the statue and words would have served to enshrine his status as the enviable founder of an eternal empire. Instead, as the empire foundered and became unviable, and as the statue fell, the object and words came to

testify only to his *hubris*, to the fleeting nature of power and-- as the obliterating sand sweeps in-- to the transitoriness of all ecologies.

Most of the objects in museums-- including all the premodern objects and all the other things made with no idea of being put in museums-- are transobjects, like wild animals in zoos, all the more tragically than the statue in the poem. For objects that once played key roles in living social dynamics, with their resonant webs of values and meanings and practices, sometimes charged with religious or magical significance, *museumification*-- which involves "appreciating" them as "art" or as "cultural treasures"-- means stripping them of the other kinds of value they embodied when they lived at the hubs of social networks.

Prompt: Look at Shelley's poem, then write a short poem of your own (or a prose poem or prose paragraph) about a small object that is used by a person in one timeframe and then, in some different future, put into a museum (say, as part of some historical or anthropological exhibit), where it is encountered by a narrator or interlocutor who reports to a narrator (as in the poem), and where its meaning is drastically different. If you're inclined, you might try to copy and adapt Shelley's set-up or even syntax quite closely.

And yes, a few of these prompts are for writing rather than making objects. But if what you write-- in this case, for example-- lends itself to being realized in the form of an installation-- e.g., a vitrine with your object in it-- go right ahead!

Thinking in terms of transobjects-- and the transitoriness of all sets of relations-- means that we should also think of how objects might-- in one way or another-- be *liberated* from museumification, or from other ways they have been domesticated as art or as artifacts.

Aside: Texts and Drugs as Transobjects. While this essay focuses on exemplary physical objects in the jewelry-to-monuments size range, *texts* and *drugs* loom large in an "expanded field" of transobjects, since both of these function very differently in different contexts as potential doorways to alternate futures for their users.

Much of my writing about William Blake is driven by the desire to decolonize his works from their having been taken over by literary criticism and art history, and to restore them to something more like the DIY religion that Blake spent his life building. The name often applied to DIY religion is "outsider art," and truly imagining a Blakean religion means, at some level, imagining a future in which religion and culture have been turned outside-in. I say "at some level" because I don't really imagine such a future as a science-fiction author would. I just try to engage the works, here and now, as sacred texts. Does this help build a different future, or does it just tend to make me more of an outsider? In any case, the as-yet-unfulfilled project of reclaiming Blake for religion made some headway in the

1960s, especially as it was combined with the use of psychedelic drugs, which continue to be used in religious and spiritual practice. It was Blake who wrote that, "if the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear as it is, infinite," Aldous Huxley who used the title *Doors of Perception* for his account of tripping on mescaline, and Jim Morrison and The Doors who took their name from the book. These iridescent threads continue to be woven through the fabric, and one can imagine a future-- or even live more in an actual present-- where the fabric is more widely and wildly iridescent with them.

So: sacred objects can become desacralized, aestheticized, anthropologized, museumified, and so on-- but they can also be resacralized-- never exactly as they had been, but anew.

Likewise, lowly objects-- ephemera, fragments and trash-- can be sacralized. For example, the sculptor Noah Purifoy, building on a longstanding tradition of African-American "outsider" art and DIY religion, established an Outdoor Desert Art Museum (near Joshua Tree, California) inhabited by his assemblages (especially of debris he collected from the Watts Rebellion of November, 1965). The ten acres transform what might be a *museum* into a *pilgrimage site* and enable its visitors to inhabit, at least for a few exhilarating hours (or maybe a lifetime if you have a full-fledged conversion experience), a future where the walls between art and religion have come tumbling down.

Prompt: Begin by imagining ritual contexts that would sacralize or resacralize objects. What would it take to do so? What aspects or features of an object make it available to participate? Go on to sacralize or resacralize an object. Then desacralize a sacred object, or de-aestheticize and/or de-museumify an object.

Prompt: Deify. I've often thought that Bob Marley in particular achieved a kind of global status better described as sainthood than celebrity. Perhaps all celebrity could be redescribed as such. How would you reimagine a set of celebrities as a pantheon of deities? Who, for you, act as a set of personal bodhisattvas? How would you picture your pantheon, perhaps by photoshopping, and in what capacity would you include yourself in the picture? How and when do you come to them, and how and when do they come to you? What particular relief, empowerment, healing, enlivening, *affective labor* does each provide? This prompt simply applies to humans what you might also apply to objects as such (more on this below), but in this case, note that the emphasis is on assembling a set or small team, which comprises a range of different "superpowers" (if you want to think of it that way).

### **3. Objects: A Philosophical Excursion**

In psychoanalytic theory, an object is whatever psychological investment (*cathexis*) or erotic interest (*libido*) or some other instinct (such as hunger) can attach to: a target of attention that is



sustained enough to make it come into focus. In other words (in psychology, anyway), this investiture makes the object an object: as Freud put it, "the object of an instinct is the thing in regard to which or through which the instinct is able to achieve its aim" (LaPlanche and Pontalis 274). It need not be a discrete physical thing but could be a whole category of things, a kind of experience, an identity-- a kind of music, a certain feeling that I am constantly seeking and/or avoiding, a fantasy or an idealized vision of myself or someone else.

How does the *object-for-me* relate to the *object-in-itself* or the *object-for-others*?

My own sense is that the "object-in-itself" is mostly a philosophical red herring: nothing that exists can be inert, self-enclosed and singular. As if you could somehow subtract it from the universe in which it exists!

Prompt: Little red herring tokens (e.g., made out of red-enameled metal) could easily be designed as jewelry, but "red herrings" are identified as such in order to be set aside, to mandate that one *not* focus on them. Can you think of any way to design an object that calls attention to something *in order to set it aside* or mandate that attention *not* be paid to it?

Furthermore, then, the purely instrumentalized "object-for-me," as in the Freudian account, tends to be defined too starkly in opposition to this "object-in-itself." It seems like a good idea to mistrust things defined against other things that don't exist.

When you think in terms of ecology and evolution, recognizing every thing as being what it is by virtue of the complex webs of relationships in which it is situated, things look different.

Imagine, for example, that I am exclusively your prey-- namely, that I am that most purely instrumentalized object through which your hunger is able to achieve its aim, with little or no regard for who I am for myself or for others-- except insofar as such regard might help you prey on me all the better. The exception is telling: the more important I am to you as prey, the more it will behoove you to get to know me, to imagine yourself in my shoes. *Empathy serves hunters and prey alike*, which may well be why we evolved the capacity for it. But regardless of whether you and I as hunter and prey go down the road of some kind of "consciousness arms race," we are both going to be shaped by our relationship-- me by the motivation you provide for me to run, fly, camouflage, relocate, get smarter, get inside your head, or otherwise evolve (and by the way, *thanks*). One would do well to recognize, furthermore, that *hunger has also instrumentalized you*. It would be reductive to call it "your hunger" for the same reasons that the "id" (meaning "it") was named by Freud to distinguish it from the ego ("I am"), but also for the same reasons that statements such as "men are driven by their desires" function as a way of refusing to look at how those desires are, in turn, shaped and directed.

We are often fooled by a longstanding ethical hierarchy in which the lowest rung-- usually identified with a state of nature-- is the unconscious selfishness or pure narcissism that goes

along with instrumentalizing or "objectifying" everything and everyone. The poster children for this category are infants characterized as acting from pure id who will need to be put through a long process of socialization to enable them to develop reality principles, superegos or self-consciousnesses as add-on layers. Perhaps the most reductive version of all-- which purports to reach back long before there were infants or even humans at all-- is the notion of the "selfish gene" that, in its relentless drive to reproduce, instrumentalizes everything, including all the creatures it has designed to do its bidding as the "lumbering robots" who carry and transmit it.

I won't explore at length here the philosophical arguments against this narrative (you could also call it a *paradigm* or a *master trope*). But just as a quick way of turning it around for a moment (it has so much inertia that it will spring back), rather than starting with the notion of selfishness and fantasized godly omnipotence, try starting with *pantheism* instead: everything is a deity-- or more humbly, if you prefer, everything is *a subject*. In fact, the sovereignty *routinely* claimed by human subjects tends to be more deific than the magical powers my deities evoke!

What in psychology is called a *transitional object*, such as an infant's favorite blanket (more on this below), does not merely exist to serve the infant (that is, it is not merely the exemplary instrumentalized object) but has magical powers for the infant (it is also a kind of deified subject). Consider-- as sociologists, bless their hearts, have quantified-- why so many people talk to their food (*mmm, my little cupcake, I'm going to eat you up*), subjectifying it rather than objectifying it. On the other hand, why do people tend to talk to their own beloved offspring as if they were food (*mmm, my little cupcake, I'm going to eat you up*)? How do you explain that, in spite of Woody Guthrie's song "Little Sugar" (in each chorus of which the singer proposes to eat the baby's toes, then feet, and so on), all of his eight children survived infancy?

The notion of narcissistic and self-deifying selfishness as a baseline (with full recognition of others as the supposedly evolved and enlightened state) leads us to think that various kinds of dehumanization must work via by the default assumption that the despised group is subhuman or nonhuman. On the contrary, studies suggest that forms of dehumanization such as white supremacy and misogyny operate because white men in particular understand *and resent* that people of color and women *are* human, which is precisely what charges the drive to discriminate and debase. Even in the case where, for example, the default assumption of a cop is that a black man is dangerous, notice that the assumption grants its "object" an excessive degree of agency and power, authorizing an excessive response. I found revealing the story of a man who cruelly and relentlessly trolled a woman whose online moniker was "fat feminist": he did so-- as he admitted later when she contacted him, when he had improved his own life and had a change of heart-- because he thought that she "seemed happy." Misogyny in particular-- as in the especially virulent form of violent and lonely men who believe women have rejected them-- both objectifies *and* subjectifies, in the process granting *excessive* agency and power to women.

We could call these scenarios *regressive*: those in their thrall seem to be stuck at an earlier stage of psychological development in which, for example, the mother is split (for the baby) into a *good breast* (always instantly and magically available when wanted) and a *bad breast* (that

frustrates, not just by being passively unavailable but by actively thwarting fulfillment). But one does not proceed in linear fashion through the stages: they remain layers of our deep selves (in the depth model) or, better, as nodes of our networked selves (in the breadth model). Note that pathologized regression refers to the linearized depth model; in networked and nonlinear models, healing will be about *balancing*. Likewise, one might call regressive the granting of excessive subjectivity to objects by fetishizing them in one way or another; for Freud as for Marx and in the modernist paradigm generally, fetishizing is pathologized. Fetishizing investment in objects is pretty easy to de-pathologize if we're talking about sex toys or crystals or religious icons, but what if we're talking about, say, *guns*, which for their adherents seem to have magical powers to ward off evil and to confer, in the process, a sense of magical omnipotence to their owners? Here we have to take care not to throw away the baby (the so-called regressed or fetishizing attribution of agency to objects) with the bathwater (the damage done by such objects). The baby is un-throw-outable anyway: "regressed" attachments will remain important nodes through which our selves are wired. The counterargument here is that guns were never "merely" objects: guns *do* kill people; they have agency designed into them to produce an empowered subject on one end and an abjected object on the other. Another way of saying "designed into them" is to say that this is precisely *their intent*. They are, in fact, malevolent little deities who promise their owners protection and even omnipotence but bring cruelty, death, and heartbreak. The deification or at least subjectification of objects works *against* guns that subjectify and objectify with such binary cruelty, something they share with white supremacism and misogyny. And yes I just made the argument that guns are evil.

Consider the history of conflicts between white scientists and Native Americans over the treatment of ancestral bones and other remains and artifacts. Native American cultures and social relationships among humans are often mediated by relationships with the bones and artifacts, which therefore have particular meanings and values as well as agency or sacred subjectivity. Scientists have typically characterized these investments in objects as unreasonable-- as regressed, fetishizing. This characterization is a good example of *othering*, the psychodynamic process whereby one attributes to another what one disavows in oneself. Here, scientists have disavowed the way they themselves value and use these objects not just selflessly to "advance science" but to build careers, get money and status. Or to turn the tables, imagine the outrage that would follow if someone proposed to take your grandparent's wedding ring-- or, say, the Mona Lisa-- for scientific tests that would dissolve it. It's an easy argument that both art and jewelry have "merely symbolic value." Oh, and I will also be taking your guns (in which your unreasonable symbolic investment is wreaking an awful lot of real havoc, unlike the bones), and I will also be taking all those curious, elaborately marked pieces of symbolic, magic paper you always carry close to you in a leather pouch. Come to think of it, I wonder if Native Americans would consider a deal whereby they would give their ancestral remains to scientists on the condition that, first, all guns and money be destroyed and recycled. (Who should I talk to about this?) Bones, guns, and money: what is their intent, what do these things want from us, what particular magics do they perform, what do they demand of us in return?

I have indulged in this longish detour into ethics to level the playing field a bit among subjects and objects; in the terms of philosopher of science Bruno Latour, we are all "quasi-subjects and quasi-objects," all *actants*-- which I translate as *players*. This betweenness is part of the transness of transobjects.

Even when we are considering objects in the narrow sense, we are concerned here with them in their multiple sets of relations: these include their relations with themselves in their own pluralities-- that is, their multiple parts in relation to each other-- and with you, me and others. Again, the network of relationships among all these relationships is what shapes the transness of the object.

Aside: Absent Objects.

Does the tree that nobody hears falling in the forest make a sound? What about the birds, disturbed by its falling, that fly up from the woods; the hunters that shoot at the birds; the child who hears the gunshots and begins to cry; the mother who comes running into the livingroom to comfort the child; the phone that she lets ring in the kitchen as she does so; the caller half a world away who listens to the phone ringing for a while, then hangs up, feeling acutely the presence of an absence that seems like an uncanny echo of the sound that nobody heard?

Likewise, if you have a fantasy that you have shared with nobody, and if it has any real importance and meaning to you, then of course it plays a role as a kind of "silent partner" in your other relationships and your life, even if nobody-- including you-- recognizes it. By the way, though, some of us *have* noticed the faraway look in your eyes, and we have felt some growing distance between us that we couldn't attribute or name, which, if you must know, is why we have begun a secret affair with your best friend. Wait, sorry, where was I?

Prompt: how is absent presence and present absence "carried" by objects in the narrow sense? Can it be designed into them? How can the viewer (or possibly the user) of an object be made to feel absent presence and present absence in or by an object?

(By the way, though this prompt consists of three short questions, it might turn out to be the most transformative and generative *for you*. Maybe its potential is the absent presence in the words of the prompt. Can you sense it?)

#### 4. Transitional Objects

The *transitional object*, as defined by psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, is (at least in the first instance) *developmentally* transitional: the most common example is the beloved blanket from which the infant refuses to be separated. It is "between the thumb and the teddy bear"; that is, a

stepping stone between something the infant does not differentiate from itself (this would include not just the thumb but the breast that magically appears when the infant cries) and something understood as external and separate (however it may still be invested with the infant's needs and desires).

Again, it is important to set aside the "overcoming selfishness" developmental narrative ("first the universe was all me and gradually I came to recognize that some things have independent existence"), since *both* "objects" and "me" emerge in the process. The transitional object is a stepping stone on the way to *me* and *you* as well as *it*.

The transitional object "comes *from without* from our point of view, but not so from the point of view of the baby. Neither does it come *from within*; it is not a hallucination" (my italics). Like all objects that are the objects of desire, fear, and so on, the transitional object is, in Winnicott's powerful formulation, "both found and invented."

According to Winnicott, the infant "assumes rights" over a transitional object but the object is less a thing and more an entity with unique power "to give warmth, or to move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own." That which we would likely consider a passive property of the object, something it merely *has*-- the texture of a blanket, say, or the movement of a mobile that hangs above a crib, or even the sound of a rattle-- is better understood as something it *does*: I reach out and it responds; it plays with me, or holds me, or caresses me, or excites me. A transitional object, typically, "is affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated"; "it must never change, unless changed by the infant"; and "it must survive instinctual loving, and also hating." Its persistence and survival are also things that it *does*: in the face of being loved and hated and mutilated, it offers no reproaches but only unconditional love; it demonstrates "object constancy." And ultimately, "its fate is to be gradually allowed to be decathected, so that in the course of years it becomes not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo." Rather than being lost and mourned, "it loses meaning, and this is because the transitional phenomena have become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between 'inner psychic reality' and 'the external world'"--"that is to say, over the whole cultural field."

Transitional objects give way, developmentally, to our engagements with toys and games, with artistic and sacred objects (staying with the narrow sense of objects), and (to broaden it) to the use of drugs, religion and art in general, and all culture-- all the made world-- and then (broadening it further) to all the world insofar as it is invested with human needs and desires. One might, for example, include a scientist in relation to an object of study, or insofar as our investments in other humans are not categorically different from other object investments, our human relationships: all of these have important transitional-object dimensions as well.

Again, if you are inclined to maximize the extent to which the significance of a transitional object is granted to it by a subject (whose agency makes it into an *object-for-me*) and to minimize the extent to which agency could be regarded as residing in the object, consider how the significance of oxygen or photons was granted to them by living creatures such as ourselves: we've built (*found* and *founded*) our bodies and worlds around them-- but there are, after all,

other creatures, anaerobic and/or blind, who ignore them altogether. Even so, their properties-- or, better to say, their capacity or even their eagerness to enter into various relationships-- are *theirs*. Photons want to meet you! Absolutely free! Call this number!

Winnicott and others make particular distinctions between the relationships with objects in the narrow sense and with other humans. This distinction is developmental in that infants and children seem to go through distinct phases of becoming interested in objects in the narrow sense, as distinct from other people. Even so, the investment in objects is no different *in kind* than the investment in other entities and other humans. In each case there are reciprocities and asymmetries.

To understand the importance of the transitional object as a stepping stone, consider *the capacity to play*, that which the use of a transitional object in the strict sense helps to build-- and arguably the capacity at the heart of all learning, intimacy, trust, healing, creativity, thought, friendship, love.

Think of two people playing. They could be playing anything from Hearts to *Hamlet* to handball. You might imagine a rudimentary interaction between infants (say, hitting their hands together), an improvised game of make-believe between two children, or a rigorously rule-bound interactive engagement with some room for improvisation (sports, collaborative performing and music, even simple conversation), and so on. Even or especially with two people playing, *play cannot be binary*; it requires mediation in the form of *thirdness*. This is why two people who feel too defended or vulnerable or awkward to talk comfortably with each other might still be able to play some more defined game. The thirdness refers to how it enables the players to interact at one remove-- to its *obliquity* or *transversality* to the other dynamics, which is what makes play possible. And note that *this thirdness is a characteristic of all transobjects* and part of their transness.

In play and games, the stakes are taken down a peg: I can lose the game but not be existentially destroyed (as when I feel that my actual self is on the line in an interaction). We might act out various psychodynamics via the game, but usually these can be disavowed as necessary-- or, by the same token, can be avowed with less blame and shame (*oh no, you killed me!*). Children who could not begin to respond to questions directly about their traumatic family situations (as is definitive for trauma) might still be able, with a therapist facilitating, to enact scenarios with wooden blocks or scribbles on a piece of paper by which they can go some way to conceptualizing and reconceptualizing those situations and even beginning to work through them-- to re-metabolize them psychologically, to *get leverage* on them. This last image may show most explicitly the function of thirdness since leverage does, in fact, require three points. One might call such play *symbolic*, but beware of implying some systematic set of one-to-one correspondences ("this wooden block stands for daddy," etc.): the whole point of imagined entities and propositionally played dynamics is likely to be that they do *not* correspond with discrete people: there might be good mommy and bad mommy (and these may or may not precisely correspond or add up to mommy herself), additional magical helpers, disruptors and demons (that are only partially the child's own; dysfunctional families breed them). Of course, there are many games in which each player *is* represented by an avatar, or board games in which

each player is represented by a single playing piece. One might say of games more generally that, by the same token (sorry, I just love that joke), one is often effectively *one's own avatar*, as can be seen when one is playing a fiercely competitive game and, between plays, chatting in a friendly manner with one's opponent. Even in these very common situations, far more important than the way the player may be symbolically represented in the game (but often harder to assess) is *the disjunction* between the person and the avatar or token: this is what gives a game the thirdness that makes it possible-- and its potential leverage.

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When my father died (I was ten), I spent days, weeks, maybe longer, playing cards with a family friend. What about playing cards was therapeutic? It may have been the comforting constancy of the rules or the fact that a game comes to an end but one can always play again. The player of a game is like the artist who has an enabling level of safety and control on a piece of paper or a stage or a screen (a "playing field" or "playground") that is unavailable in the world at large. Of course, no particular cards represented me or members of my family; no particular sequences of play represented real-life events; even the overall dynamic of me playing with/against my friend was not the vehicle for something I was trying to work out, such as my anger or sorrow or my drive to feel that I could master my emotions (okay, maybe a little of the latter). Most important, here, is that the plain old 52-card deck was adequate for the purpose-- much in the way that oxygen and photons are adequate to the organisms that use them: ready to be both found and invented.

One might try to assess the adequacy of cards-- for games and possibly for grieving-- as deriving from a certain *optimal combinatorial complexity*; that is, from the possibilities for game-making that come from having four suits distinguished by color and shape and from each comprising 13 cards hierarchized and divided into two types (the more abstract numbered cards and more entity-like face cards); from their size and shape (making them shuffleable and dealable); from their having a back and a front. One might seek to extend (or even to try to quantify) the analysis of optimal complexity to other games and forms of play: the pool table, balls and cue sticks (and the various games that can be played using them); a field, the use of a ball, and the organization of players into teams; even musical ensembles with various numbers of different instruments (and the way that the differences among the instruments and their sounds and ranges are organized).

Notice that each of these things-- pool, ball games, and playing music in ensembles-- are activities I might have done instead of playing cards. As seen above, the transitional object (if I had been younger, I might have turned to a blanket or teddy bear for comfort and constancy) gives way to play and culture as the fields in which our individual and collective psychodynamics can be played out.

Prompt: what is the minimal and optimal complexity for a piece of jewelry, for a game, a poem (pick one)? How many features-- for example, shape, color, texture, kinetics-- does it have to have in order to be *adequate*-- and *for what*?

What do minimalist or maximalist aesthetics enable it to do? As with games-- and with their associated game boards and pieces-- one might consider examples along a spectrum from the elegant (Eastern?) minimalism of the game of Go, to the formalistically managed (Western?) complexity of chess, to the maximalism of real-life, multimedia role-playing games. Does some common optimal complexity inform them all?

The notion of a qualitative and even quantitative description of a minimal/optimal complexity necessary to build on-- to generate new and evolving layers of structure and dynamics around-- out of which to make games and worlds-- goes against *reductionism* (the breaking down of the complex into its simplest possible elements) or to be generous one might say that *it's the flip side of it*. Complexity, or some particular quantum of complexity, is primary.

Prompt: The Future of Cards / Cards as Transobject.

If the familiar 52-card deck was adequate for my grieving already-- if in fact there were nothing too particular about playing cards (if we had had a pool table, I might have played pool for hours on end instead), then how would you design a Grieving card game? Or would you?

It would defeat the purpose to use heavy-handed symbolism (the idea is not to *represent* the grief but to *do something with it*) as the point is *not escape but obliquity and thirdness*: to process but at one remove-- maybe in some way that doesn't even have to be recognized as such (maybe better that it is not?) or that can be disavowed if things get too close to home. Understanding these constraints, how would you design the cards, the rules and the play? How many people, optimally, would play the game? What kinds of plays (such as bidding, drawing, melding, taking tricks, etc) and what arrangement of the playing surface would best serve to leverage, loosen, metabolize grief?

Prompt: What kinds of cards and card games might one design to perform other specific kinds of affective labor? You must specify the kind of affective labor that you hope to be done, but I suggest that this specification might be deferred until you begin to design, and it might change as the design evolves from what you thought was your original intent.

Two students, Jaguar Mary and Pietro Parada, in the course of the "Poetics Lab" class at Pratt Institute, created a wildly successful poetry-and-narrative-generating card game in which five players were dealt cards with an assortment of images on them. In order to play a card (anyone may play at any time), you must say a sentence based on the image on the card, building a poem/narrative in which the first card begins the narrative, each sentence follows from the previous one, and the fifth card played concludes the narrative or poetic "arc" (after which a new sequence of five is begun). If the players don't believe a card/sentence effectively begins, follows, or concludes a sequence, they may challenge it and require that another be played. The first to play all of their cards wins, and even though this



constraint doesn't seem to focus players much on winning, it does function brilliantly to motivate play and keep it moving forward at a good clip. Key to the success of the game is the evocative specificity but ambiguity of each image (some abstract but strong patterns, some fragments of realistic scenes, and so on): like the game rules, the images are chosen and cropped to offer an optimal dynamic of *constraints* and *improvisation*: a "sweet spot" for narrative/poetic generation. When I watched it being played, the joyful and infectious energy and open engagement of the groups playing the game was obvious: this was the real affective labor of the game. The poems/narratives were ephemeral; they were not recorded-- but after all, isn't *joyful opening* also the goal and affective labor of some of the best poems that *have* been recorded, rather than just sitting on a page and mugging for posterity's camera?

One might also identify the work done as a therapeutic effect or even as magic. In any case, in your own game, consider also how to optimize complexity and how to design in the obliquity.

How would you redesign tarot cards (they seem already to be a redesign of the regular deck or vice versa)? What makes them so evocative; why do they have so much "velcro" for use in divinations or, at least, as generative ways of thinking through things?

How would you redesign the sticks or dice or coins one throws when practicing divination with the *I Ching* (the ancient Chinese *Book of Changes*)? Here we get back to our primary concern of designing small objects. Of course you should think about what you are redesigning them *for-- to do what* (or let this evolve as you tinker with them). You can find lots of information about the *I Ching* online; again it is naive (and an Orientalist notion) to think that the *I Ching* is about simple prognostication; it is much better described as a philosophical text. And while one might be inclined to consider its formalist set of diagrams as an example of elegant Eastern minimalism (especially when compared with the more maximal iconography of a tarot deck), notice how closely its eight trigrams that combine to sixty-four hexagrams might be compared with four suits of thirteen cards that comprise a 52-card deck. For the purposes of this prompt, you might do some research and incorporate as much of the *I Ching's* philosophy as you can, or do almost no research and simply use its formal elements (the idea of a smallish set of diagrams such as trigrams and hexagrams being generated by throwing dice, coins or sticks) as jumping-off points for your redesign.

Prompt: On the other hand, rather than redesigning a new deck of cards or set of dice/coins/sticks, how would you use the current 52-card deck (or the traditional *I Ching* hexagrams, if you prefer) to create new games for different purposes, different kinds of affective or cognitive play or prognostication? How could card games (with the plain old 52-card deck) be used meditatively, or as part of some other kind of spiritual practice? Or is it possible to design a game to generate

narrative or poems, like JM and Pietro's game, but without the redesign of the deck so vital to their game? Notice that, as soon as you think of using the deck as-it-is for different purposes, you may well go down a road that leads you to redesign it after all, all the better for its new purpose.

Prompt: Play With Objects. How would you design objects in the narrower sense-- not games but something more like jewelry or tools or small sculptures-- optimally for specific kinds of affective labor? (The "fidget spinner" comes to mind here.)

## 5. Transformational Objects

Considering playing cards as grieving-- or as performing other kinds of affective or cognitive functions-- leads us beyond what can be considered transitional objects in the strict sense.

Psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas defines a *transformational object*, in the first instance, as "an object that is experientially identified by the infant with the process of the alteration of self experience." Whereas Winnicott had emphasized the object as a first possession, Bollas emphasizes that infants *give themselves over to it*-- the way that (later) viewers may fall into reverence of an art object that speaks to them.

Because you cannot remain as you are-- especially when convulsed with conflict and contradiction among your various needs and desires and emotions-- and because you also cannot take yourself apart and put yourself together again in a new form, you need a third thing that stands somewhat aside from what you are and what you would be-- a repository for some crucial piece of your agency, maybe something that knows you and where you're headed even as you flail about in the middle, a point that is "outside" enough for leverage to be exercised between the two. Think of Superman's phonebooth; the props around which an actor builds a role; the accessories that you feel anchor your gender or ethnic identity-- or more aspirationally, that function as a climber's axe or piton that you drive into the cliff-face above you to pull yourself up.

The transformational object, like Winnicott's transitional object, opens out developmentally onto "the whole cultural field" (Winnicott) and onto the way we engage sacred objects, art, and other cultural productions. Bollas focuses on the subject's "symbiotic relating" to an object in an "aesthetic moment" such as "when an individual feels a deep subjective rapport with an object—a painting, a poem, during an opera or symphony, before a landscape" and when "the person experiences an uncanny fusion with the object." Clearly, for Bollas, the "anticipation of being transformed by an object" depends on one's horizon of expectations as one approaches it, and thus on how one has categorized the object as potentially transformative. The anticipation is "itself an ego memory of the ontogenetic process"-- that is, of the process of self-creation and transformational evolution-- which "inspires the subject with a reverential attitude toward the object, so that, even as the transformation of the self will not take place on the scale it did during early life, the adult subject tends to nominate the object as sacred."

Bollas, then, understands the uncanniness of the engagement with art and sacred objects (and by the same token, the reverence we may feel towards them) as a kind of echo of earlier transformational experience in which the infant's entire self is in the process of being transformed. It may be a diminished version simply because our selves are more established and thus our capacities for reinvention more limited, or (to take it a step further in this negative direction) the uncanniness and reverence can mark or perform not just diminishment but an *active defense against more thoroughgoing transformation* in the way that aestheticization is a way of neutralizing the power of art, making it "safe."

It needs to be said that art does not operate in just *one way* (such as by aestheticization) and that art and sacred objects need not be characterized in one way, such as by their capacity to evoke reverence-- which is not necessarily the exemplary way of interacting with art.

Consider the important distinction that some sacred objects are designed *to ward off* spirits. Such objects are called *apotropaic*, which means *turning away*: dreamcatchers and bottle trees, evil-eye charms, yarmulkes. On the other hand, some sacred objects are made *to summon* spirits, often to intervene in some way: ouija boards, body-part charms (to invite healing powers), candles (to summon a range of magical interventions).

Prompt: What is it about each of these objects that makes them *apotropaic* (warding off) or *summoning*? After brief research into a variety of such objects, design your own apotropaic object and summoning object.

Art wavers on the edge of the summoning and the apotropaic. Insofar as it functions to ward off, it may not just work to damp down potentially unruly religious experience (this is why museum guards warn me away from paintings when they see me standing too close and nodding my head as if receiving instructions from them) but also often to depoliticize (as in the modernist injunction that high art must "transcend" the political). One way the edge of summoning and warding off works is by *innoculation*, whereby a little bit of summoning is done, but in order to ward off or otherwise protect. One may well ask whether museums admitting and displaying political art-- say, *pussy hats* (look it up)-- is innoculating, but it doesn't make sense to ask whether you're politically serious or you came to the demonstration just to have fun wearing a pussy hat and hanging out with your peeps, because the whole point is that these are *mutually reinforcing*. As Emma Goldman put it, "if I can't dance, I don't want to part of your revolution," or, as per Public Enemy, you gotta "party for your right to fight." Mutual reinforcement (in this case, anyway) is *summoning*; inoculation is *summoning in order to ward off*.

So far, we have considered aestheticization mostly as rendering "safe" in a neutralizing way, but safety can also be both apotropaic and potentially summoning. Riding a roller coaster is a "safe" way of experiencing fright and thus may function as a defense against more ego-shattering fright; that is, as a way of pushing away and not feeling the more extreme version-- but it also might be marshalled to lead the rider to confront deeper fears. Defenses do not banish troubling or dangerous content permanently from consciousness but work *to save* such content for possible readmission if that may become possible. Like play space, psychotherapy is a "safe" place in

which to replay and re-enact-- and potentially to re-metabolize, to leverage-- entrenched childhood psychodynamics; in Freud's terms, the difference between *repetition* and *working through* can be a subtle one. In related ways, a relationship with a longterm partner can be a space to repeat *and* to work through, or sex may be such a space, or other kinds of play.

All this goes towards stretching Bollas' notion of the later engagements with art objects as diminished echoes of an infancy in which our selves were more thoroughly being invented via engagement with transformational objects. A later engagement may not only serve to remind subjects of their ongoing capacities to interact with objects and to be transformed by them: it can keep the door open, it can open the door, it can even be the door.

Prompt: Why is the doorstep such a maligned object? Holding open a door should be symbolically revered! Is there some way of correcting this? What objects perform *opening*, how do they do so, and how can you do so? The key on a necklace is popular form. What else can you think of or invent?

As a child, I loved finding Lake Superior agates in gravel pits and beaches and along roadways; I felt had a wavelength with them ("symbiotic relating" or "uncanny fusion"). I never cared for amassing a collection; I gave almost all of them away, and though many hundreds of agates have passed through my hands, I've never bought or sold one. I see now how much my myth of myself was established or reinforced in finding agates: I simply follow my eye and hand, which are drawn (as if on their own) to beauty and value and meaning easy to overlook, and which is just laying there to be picked up and given away. I see how this myth or "ego ideal" informs what I try to be as a writer and teacher. I see how looking for agates (with its sense of the world as offering free treasure along every roadside) contributed to my evolving attachment to the visual world generally; the way I can be buoyed up by it; the way its constancy, fullness, aliveness, complexity and panoramic surroundingness *holds me* in a way that is both calming and exciting; how simply walking through the world with eyes open yields what in Daoism is called *vital nourishment* for my ongoing well-being (or as Jim Morrison put it, "the whole world's a savior; who could ever ever ever ask for more?").

A few years ago, my first trip to Florence, I stood with the statues in the Medici Tomb, so generous in whispering their wisdom to me-- wisdom that had been encoded in their orchestrations of textures and folds of fabrics of stone, textures and torsions of flesh of stone, the stone gazes of the figures-- and I felt that I never wanted to leave there. As I stayed there, I imagined the planet changing outside, human civilization falling into ruins, and eventually the walls of the tomb falling in around us, and when I finally emerged, an hour or so later, I felt everything, including myself, had been transformed.

I've had what might as well be called religious experiences engaging various otherwise aestheticized or museumified objects. More generally, objects talk to me; I learn things from them. They talk to me because I make things and think about what things mean; in other words, *because they can see that I'm interested*. They talk to me in the same way that food talks to cooks, and I listen in much the same way that you can see a cook take a bite and look off obliquely, as if receiving a transmission from outer space: *Hello! Za'atar?*

I have written about some of these experiences, but mostly what I have learned has been silently metabolized into what I make or think. It has acted as a catalyst, or has filtered all the way down to alter my DNA as a maker and thinker. The more something matters to you, the more engaging it can be, the more life-changing, even in the empirical sense of *I looked at a thing and then spent a month or a year thinking and writing about it*-- and everything I did after that point was-- subtly or conspicuously-- different than everything I did before. How could it not be? If you are capable of deciding to spend a month or a year thinking and writing about something, designing various iterations of it in multiple modes-- even something as apparently random as a momentary interaction on a subway platform that you found intriguing, or the arrangement of objects on your desk, then by definition it will be transformative for you.

Can you cultivate being open to things mattering to you if you are not a maker or a thinker? Of course not! Fortunately we are all makers and thinkers. And by *we* here I mean all living things, understanding *mattering*, *making*, *thinking*, and *living* in the broad sense.

## 6. Transsystems

Like games (which lend themselves to being described as closed systems) but even more so, open/complex systems are the dialectical or diametrical opposite of objects (in the narrow sense) insofar as they are, first and foremost, dynamic and not discretely local. They are ongoing orchestrations of stuff constantly flowing in and out of them (like whirlpools or flames, but also like living bodies) and they also relativize the discretion and locality of all their components by wiring them into the web of relationships by which they are comprised. It is often said that complex systems *create their own components*, or say instead that *they co-evolve with their components* (just as happens when you design a game, its rules, its pieces and its playing field by toggling your attention back and forth among them as you go). Such systems are better described as *events* rather than *structures* (which is why this paradigm is sometimes called *post-structuralism*.) For example, think of the body as a continual negotiation between *me* and *not-me*, not simply by a structure that has a *me inside* and a *not-me outside*, but via breathing and digestion, throughout the body in the immune system, at the cellular level (where cells are constantly disintegrating into "not-me" and raw materials are being manufactured into "me"). One can think of institutions in this way (by the people who flow in and out of them), language, ecologies. Even things that seem much more solid and inert-- more like objects in the narrow sense-- such as buildings or rocks, turn out to be more dynamic than they may seem at first glance: buildings have to be continually maintained or they will disintegrate (usually much faster than you would imagine); rocks are frenetically buzzing hives of activity at the atomic and subatomic level.

Prompt: Maybe any object considered as an event is a transobject. About a piece of jewelry or another small, non-utilitarian object, ask yourself *what does it do?* How does it interact, and with what? How are its "properties" (features that it "has") describable as *what it does?* Like a house that may be made of bricks or wood but is in an even more primary sense made *of rooms*, how is a piece of jewelry describable as not made of physical things as such but as an organization of-- *what?* Attention? The way it plays with and against the body? How does

what it is and what it does play off of systems such as gender and sexuality, culture and semiotics?

Think of how much as a maker of things one wants them to be received as events ("wow, those earrings are really an *event!*"). But to say a piece of jewelry is an event doesn't have to refer only to splashy and loud pieces but also to the piece that subtly orchestrates everything (I'm thinking of the jar in Wallace Stevens' poem "Anecdote of the Jar") or subtly throws a wrench or a question mark into what has been otherwise orchestrated.

What are some of the ways one can optimize-- or even, but not necessarily, maximize-- the *eventness* of an object?

Open or complex systems are always nested in the middle of other systems; a system is metasytem to its subsystems and a subsystem to its metasytem; these form not a neat series of levels but an entangled hierarchy. One might call *the system itself*, in relation to its sub and metasytems, a *cissystem*. Cisgendered people are not called upon to explain why their gender matches the sex they were assigned at birth because an elaborate sex-gender system operates to *naturalize* their particular constellation of sex and gender features. Just so, cissystems can operate in ignorance of their sub- and metasytems. But naming cis-systems is a step on a slippery slope to recognizing that *all* systems are *subcismetasytems*, which is just a way of saying *there is no such thing as a cissystem*. Rather, *all systems are transsystems*.

This essay is about objects, not systems: most of my other work is about systems, so I refer you to that. But there is something you get from understanding *transsystematicity* that goes toward the understanding and making of transobjects.

There is ultimately no distinction between the object and the set of relations-- the entangled hierarchy or webs of relations-- in which it is what it is and does what it does. The more discrete and local node of a network is not distinct from the network; it is what the network is made of, and vice versa: just as even a network that covers the globe is local at every point of its distribution. This is why a transobject-- the making of it or the use of it-- is something that changes you neurologically.

Expanding outward from neurological remaking to the potential remaking of social contexts and the made environment, what would it take (for example) not just to remove white supremacist monuments but to remake them? Throwing red paint is a gesture in this direction, but I'm thinking of more radical interventions and remakings that expand the binary choice of keeping such monuments or removing them (which often seems like a choice between continuing to enshrine white supremacy or forgetting/erasing its history).

Prompt: Consider the larger-than-life-size bronze statue in front of New York City's Museum of Natural History, which shows Theodore Roosevelt mounted proudly on a horse with a black man and Native American man walking alongside the horse: this is more than just a monument to a white supremacist, it is a

visualization and enshrining of the very principles of white supremacy. Removal would be a good step (note that, since this essay was first written, the statue has been removed, thanks to longterm activism by Black Lives Matter and other groups), but what if you wanted to do more (and you had a bronze foundry and a big budget at your disposal)? How might you change the positions of the four figures (don't forget the horse) and/or add other figures around them (maybe even lots of figures, because our budget is huge-- in fact, in the future I have in mind, the budget for the National Endowment for the Arts dwarfs the military budget)? What if you wanted the monument critically to *historicize* white supremacy (literally to contribute to *making it history*) and thereby or in addition, to enact its overthrow or displacement?

Imagine radical interventions into other particular monuments that glorify white supremacy, misogyny, war. Do sketches, renders, and/or mock-ups. Remember, our budget is *astronomical*.

If you want to make this a writing project, imagine a brainstorming meeting of the Replacing and Remaking Monuments Commission (RRMC): this enables you to propose and debate various possibilities ranging from silly and counterproductive to effective. If you're inclined to science fiction, imagine a future in which monuments have been radically remade-- for example, in which three lovers meet at the Lincoln Monument, which now also includes marble figures of Octavia Butler, Judith Butler, and Albert Hoffman.

What would have to happen -- what social and political and ideological changes-- to make such radical interventions possible? On the other hand, how does the removal of monuments contribute to social change? In what ways are the two mutually reinforcing? How can we move this whole discussion and process from the *apotropaic* to the *summoning*?

Prompt: Object Histories.

Experiment with recording object histories, much as a doctor or bureaucrat might administer an "intake interview." Do one of these for one of your own objects, then interview someone else about an object they've brought. If you're so inclined, do one for a fictional character in a movie, novel, or story (I'll be doing a version of this below). Then, if you're so inclined, I recommend experimenting with doing another one of these where you answer the interview questions from the point of view of the object, as a set of narratives told by the object.

First, select a small object, one portable enough to carry without much trouble. It should be one that you use or have used as a transitional or transformational object in some sense. This means that it should *not* be a memento or keepsake-- that is, not something that merely marks a memory without being itself one of the

principals, players, participants. Think about its history and write out responses to whichever of these questions seem relevant:

How did it come to mean something to you? How did its meaning change and evolve, and how can this evolution be *periodized* (divided into distinct phases)? Name and describe the phases. Then try to talk about the transitions between the phases. Can you trace the steps in whatever happened to change it, how it lost one kind of significance, how it gained another?

In what specific physical characteristics does its "aura" consist?

What agency did/does the object exercise, and how? What affective labor did/does it perform for you (does it make you happy, soothe you, reaffirm something for you, disturb you, rouse your anger)?

What do you know of its prehistory? What did it mean when it was first being made and when it was first used; how was it valued; how did its raw materials come to be what and where they were (this could even include geological and even cosmological narratives if you're so inclined); what networks and supply chains and economic logics had to be in place to assemble it? Did its makers foresee the uses to which it would be put, or did its users remake it?

But don't get too bogged down in considering (1) its prehistory, (2) its making, (3) its first life, (4) its second and other lives-- except as these may inform the following questions:

(5) What futures can you imagine for it? How can it become something else for you or for others? And perhaps most importantly,

(6) when you consider the "DNA" that makes it what it is, can you imagine other objects with which that DNA might be shared, that is, offspring between it and some other kind of object? Or to explore this question from another angle,

(7) how can you imagine altering the object itself either to enhance what it already is and does, or to repurpose it, to sacralize or fetishize it or to de- or re-sacralize/defetishize it?

You have to risk destroying something around which you have built your identity if you want to evolve or reinvent yourself. If actual reinvention is involved, this will seem shocking, like sacrilege, like painting a moustache on the actual Mona Lisa, or (say) like carving Walter Benjamin's essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History" across the stone faces of Mount Rushmore and inseting thousands of diamonds into the engraved letters (I've always thought that was one of my better



ideas). How much the world would have to change before this project could be done!

(8) So, finally, not for the faint of heart, take one of your nearest and dearest things and, after taking photos of it (or not, as you think best), alter it either to enhance what it already is/does, or to repurpose it, to re- or de-sacralize it. Or sell it unceremoniously on the internet. Or design a ritual for saying good bye to it and bury it or destroy it. Or place it in a time capsule along with your Object History and bury it (which, of course, differs from the former burial in that this one is designed to be found at some later point), making sure your Object History has enough historical content for someone in the distant future.

If you don't have the heart to actually do these things, imagine how you *might* do them if you could, and document that in writing, photoshopped images, and so on. Baby steps!

## 7. Jewelry as Science Fiction and Vice Versa

First, an aside: in light of the title of this section, and so as not to disappoint, I'd better say upfront that none of this is about Tolkien's Ring novels. I haven't read them, and so (judiciously) I have refrained from any analysis of them.

### a. *The Matrix*

When I think of the road ahead forking into two very different futures, I am inclined to think of two sci-fi future worlds: (1) a capitalist utopia that is actually profoundly dystopic, and (2) a post-apocalyptic, post-capitalist world that is dystopic but promising.

*The Matrix* (1999) manages to combine these two futures: (1) the computer-simulated or virtual world known as the Matrix, and (2) the much grimmer physical or actual world in which humans are farmed by machines to generate electricity while being held immobile in giant structures and kept pacified by being jacked into the matrix and believing they have real lives. The actual world is also the home of Zion, where humans who have been un-jacked from the matrix (and some who were never jacked in) live under the radar of machine domination and wage a mostly guerilla war against the machines. The warfare between the two worlds is essentially a war between two futures: one in which humans remain pacified slaves of the machines, and the other in which they have awakened, understand that the human world is in ruins, work to subvert the machines and have a chance at rebuilding a human world. In case you didn't notice, this is a lightly science-fictionalized version of our current predicament in late capitalism.

Movement between the two worlds is fraught: there is a kind of "blood/brain barrier" between them. There are two kinds of movement between the worlds: (1) the convulsive process of being unplugged and realizing that, for your whole life, you had been living a lie in the Matrix, and (2)

the voluntary jacking-back-in by those who have been liberated but go under cover into the matrix as saboteurs. Although nothing "really" moves between the two, the implanted nodes and the wiring by which one jacks in or out might be considered transobjects in some sense. I haven't seen that either has been rendered as jewelry, although (as you can find on the internet) the back-of-the-neck node in particular has been done repeatedly as a tattoo.

Because we are constantly programmed to think of the virtual world of the web as magically floating (as a "cloud") in some other space distinct from the "physical plane," most people don't think of the actual vast server farms (mostly nondescript buildings in out-of-the-way places) sucking up massive amounts of actual electricity and producing lots of actual carbon emissions. Meanwhile, though, the mass of all the photons and electrons that comprise the multiple library-of-congresses-worth of data every day that is trafficked on the internet, if assembled into one discrete and local object, would add up to something the size of a strawberry.

Prompt: When I heard this, I wondered why the writer, to help readers visualize the mass, had selected the strawberry, with its voluptuous surface upholstered with tiny seeds. Can you speculate as to why the strawberry was chosen? Which of its features make it capable of representing the smushed-together internet information?

What piece of jewelry or ritual object would you design, of the same mass, to embody "all the information trafficked on the internet in a single day"?

To displace or deconstruct the Cartesian mind/body duality behind the physical/virtual distinction (here I am following N. Katherine Hayles), we can redefine the virtual not as a disembodied sphere separate from physical space but as *physicality suffused with information*. You might start here by thinking of the way our DNA is encoded by four proteins curled into tiny twisting ladders.

Prompt:

Objects such as digital phones and watches and music players, hearing aids and pacemakers-- and an ever-increasing range of other "smart" objects and expanding "internet of things"-- connect a more discrete object with variously distributed and otherwise less object-like webs (that may at various points even pass as relatively "disembodied" waves through the air), from local webs to the global internet.

Why are most of these objects not very interesting as jewelry or as objects to be worn or carried? They have been relentlessly sold as magical and may have seemed so at first, but does the magic continually wear off and we get jaded as our desires are tied to the product cycle? It seems to me that it is also because the magic has generally been attached to the Cartesian paradigm or master trope of

disembodied and "clean" information (that is, the same reason we don't think much about actual server farms when we think of the "cloud"), and that this trope has been increasingly rendered into the now-dominant Apple aesthetic whereby the physical object itself is anorexically thin and sleek and as close to featureless as possible via a design mandate to combine, condense and simplify "physical" features or, whenever possible, to move them onto the screen.

I see now more of why that "voluptuous" strawberry-- as a physicalization of information-- seemed so compelling to me.

How can you imagine making particular smart objects voluptuous or otherwise maximalist rather than minimalist? Go ahead, make some.

And please don't tell me that you're worried about compromising the user-friendliness or the austere, form-follows-function logic of the object! The iPhone (for example) is famously a shitty phone; the antiquated handsets of old rotary phones are much better adapted to the human ear and mouth. In other words, functionality is already being sacrificed for the Cartesian/modernist design paradigm, or to put in a larger sense, we are already adapting our bodies and brains to the machines more than vice versa.

#### b. *Driftglass*

I want to finish by considering briefly two exemplary transobjects, both pieces of jewelry, that figure prominently in Samuel Delany's 1971 sci-fi short story collection *Driftglass*. Notice too that the title of the collection also names an exemplary transobject-- one that has undergone what Shakespeare called a *sea change*.

The first is a ring in the story "We, In Some Strange Power's Employ, Move in a Rigorous Line."

In this story, set in a not-so-distant future, almost every place on Earth that people live has been wired onto the power grid, and far-flung crews with giant cable-laying machinery are mandated to find and connect all outliers. When a crew of cable-layers clash with punk-primitive holdouts living on a mountainside, the leader of the holdouts is killed, and the narrator-- one of the cable crew-- takes his ring: "I kept it. I didn't take it off. I wore it. For years. I still do."

He describes the ring as follows:

Take a raw, irregular nugget of gold-- . . . --a nugget three times the size either taste or expediency might allow a ring-- . . . --punch a finger-sized hole so that most of the irregularities are on one side-- . . . --off center in the golden crater place an opal big as his-- *my* thumbnail-- . . . --put small diamonds in the tips of

the three prongs that curved to cage the opal-- . . . --and in the ledges and folds of bright metal capping his enlarged knuckle, bits of spodumene, pyrope, and spinel, all abstract, all magnificent.

Although the narrator is an agent of the Apollonian control grid, the ring serves to mark his simultaneous and ongoing identification with the forces of the Dionysian id and defiant wildness, risk, freedom, and primitive but anti-familial communalism represented by the holdouts. The ring's aesthetic is maximalist, primitive, baroque. It is not simply a memento of his encounter with the holdouts but affirms his identification with them, *performs it*, acts as a reminder for him as well. It is a "cognizance" (a medieval emblem of belonging) that attests to and performs not just his wildness but his ability to live between these worlds, *his dual citizenship*. As a transobject, the ring is a kind of passport or even time machine between alternate pasts, presents, and futures (the narrator could have been a holdout himself-- or perhaps still is in some sense): it is exemplary in that *it goes some way-- even if only some small way-- to reconfigure the relationships among past, present and future*.

*And furthermore, the ring is the story and the story is the ring.* They are both cognizances of this dual citizenship; we recognize each other as dual citizens through them, and we become more fully who we are-- or who we are capable of being-- through our recognition of each other.

Prompt: Cognizances of Identity. What jewelry and/or other accessories make your gender intelligible or complicate it and queer you, more than just by signalling to others, but by making you feel like a member of that category or someone who rejects or questions it? And what about objects that perform this with your ethnicity or other key aspects of your identity? And on the other hand (though for some of us it might be the same hand), what objects help you *disidentify*?

*How* (the key word here for a designer) do they perform their functions for you, for others with whom you identify, others with whom you disidentify (that is, others who, like you, disidentify from some other identity formation) and for others *from* whom you disidentify? Note: if you are a white, straight, cisgender man, these questions may be more difficult for you, so of course you will get extra credit for any answers you are able to give (kidding!).

If someone not of your identity group used the object, would they be identifying with you in some mainly positive way, appropriating, or some combination of both? What would be the effect of that disjunctive or dysphoric performance for various audiences?

How could you tinker with or redesign the object to enhance, complicate, or alter its identity performance, and yours?

And remember: it goes both ways. Back in the early 1990s, when my friend Judith-- now Jack (hence the pronoun *he*) was coming out of grad school and preparing for job interviews, he feared that he was too butch in the man's suit that was the only kind of professional attire he could pull off with aplomb, so he decided to try to femme it up a bit with a pin worn next to the lapel-- a lizard made of multicolored glass jewels, if I recall correctly-- and we agreed that it was perfectly ambiguous, giving those who needed a familiar heteronormative point of reference (the word *cisgender* didn't yet exist!) something they could choose to read as feminine. I didn't have the heart to tell him (even though it was a complement) that as far as I could tell, anyway, that jeweled lizard did nothing to feminize him: *he masculinized it*. I, for example, wouldn't have been able to get away with it: I wasn't macho enough!

The other conspicuously featured piece of jewelry in *Driftglass* is a necklace in the story "Starpit." The title refers to an outpost on the edge of the galaxy, most of which has been colonized by humans. Some few mutant humans known as "Golden" are able to travel to and return from other galaxies, even though the vast majority of humans are driven mad-- neurologically destroyed-- by traveling into intergalactic space. Although it is not mentioned in the story, the idea that we-- along with our neural nets-- are sustained by actual webs of relationships in actual space is not just a science-fictional nova but (at least statistically) a fact long ago quantified by sociologists, at least in one well-documented way: the less densely populated the area, the higher the suicide rate.

The necklace is a self-enclosed mini-eco-sphere or "ecologarium" on a chain; it is given to the narrator by a Golden. The globe teems with microorganisms, sustained by ambient light. It comprises "some blue liquid, a fairly large air bubble, and a glob of black-speckled jelly in a transparent globe, the size of an eyeball; it was set in two rings, one within the other." When the narrator looks through the tiny brass eyepiece, he sees "over a hundred lifeforms with five to fifty stages each: spores, zygotes, seeds, eggs growing and developing through larvae, pupae, buds, reproducing through sex, syzygy, fission. And the whole ecological cycle took about two minutes."

The mini-ecologarium is designed to be worn and studied and to demonstrate and remind the wearer (1) that an ecology comprises a single organism, and, as the narrator realizes at the story's end, (2) that reproduction is not primary but "adjunctive, a vital reparative process along with sleeping and eating, to the primary process which is living, working, growing." And then, as happens with the ring at the end of the other story, "I put the chain around my neck."

One key to the didactic aspect of the ring-- or one might also say, of the story-- is that Golden don't reproduce-- making them, variously, like gay and lesbian people, but also like artists and writers and cultural producers generally (insofar as culture is understood as extraneous to the business of reproduction)-- but that this enhances rather than diminishes their importance to the sustained life and evolution of the system in which they participate.

The resonances between the ring and necklace in the two very different stories make them seem like incarnations of the same set of ideas.

Like the ring, the mini-eco-sphere is garishly large for a piece of jewelry. Both are aesthetically maximalist-- the ring on the primitive side and the necklace on the steampunk side, but both sides *of the baroque*. Notice too how the ring's roundish opal, set off-center in the roundish depression (itself set off-center in the ring) is echoed by the globe of blue liquid in the eco-sphere with its off-center air bubble, set inside a second gyroscopic ring. And notice how each of these nested centric/eccentric designs are peppered and populated with small, lively bits (glinty bits of semiprecious stones, microorganisms): eccentricity at the larger scale and edge-of-chaos multiplicity at the smaller scale.

Delany's stories are themselves extraordinary transobjects-- garish and flashily populated and eccentric spheres-within-spheres.

We have here what might be a set of possible protocols or even "DNA" for making objects, to be taken as literally or figuratively as you like. I don't mean to say that all jewelry should be maximal, fractal, eccentric, or didactic-- just as I didn't mean to imply earlier that every single object should be voluptuous. But each of these is worth experimenting with.

Prompt: (1) Make some maximal, eccentric, fractal, multiply nested, voluptuous and didactic jewelry or small object. Then (2) write a story about it, and then (3) remake the object as it evolves in the writing of the story. Repeat as often as desired. You could toggle back and forth in your mind between object and story as you go, but it is every bit as valid to focus exclusively on the object, not thinking about the story at all, and then, only after you've made the object, use it as a prompt for a story-- or vice versa (starting with the story), if that's more your style. Or, again, depending on your inclinations, either the actual object or the text might be realized in a rudimentary way, or might remain in your head. This nonlinearity or openness of process also applies to theory and practice: the point is mutual reinforcement and summoning, not where you start or which you emphasize.

Maybe the main point here is *nestedness*, the question of how something is set into, or set off from, another thing. Transobjects are nested in the stories, just as transsystems are nested in other systems and other systems are nested in them. Objects are immersed, nested or set into lives and life stories and in worlds and ecosystems (complex networks of relationships) and lives, stories, worlds and ecologies are nested and set into objects. The asymmetrical (eccentric) but mutual relationship between stories and objects, objects and lives-- and how each of these exert spin or leverage to articulate and rearticulate the relationships among pasts, presents and futures, even if only in small ways-- is what they are and what they do.

In being displaced or deconstructed-- more specifically in the physical sense by being rendered fractal or eccentric-- the object/story binary is made into a kind of motor for the production of objects and stories, which is why the study of *objects in stories* and especially in *speculative fiction* is exemplary and how it can function-- as this essay aspires to do-- as a generator for making objects.

## 8. Appendix: Transference, Transversality, Transgender

### a. Transference and Transversality

The key psychoanalytic term *transference*-- introduced by Freud but developed by many others since-- refers to the process whereby unconscious desires are mapped or played out onto objects (in the broad sense). Unconscious dynamics tend to be repeated and acted out without being recognized as such (because, hello, they're *unconscious*). In fact, acting them out-- with roles attributed to the people and relationships onto which they've been mapped (*the objects* in the broad sense)-- tends to function as a way *to not recognize them*. You experience your own unconscious coming at you from the world, from your relationships; life keeps asking you the same questions.

The term *transference* is mostly used (with the definite article: *the transference*) for the way patients attach to therapists, projecting their conflicts and desires onto the therapeutic relationship, where-- partly because the boundaries of that relationship keep it relatively safe-- *repetition* and *acting out* can be pushed in the direction of *working through*: unconscious conflicts and desires can be replayed and recognized-- or in any case, leveraged, displaced, opened up.

In the caricatured version, the patient comes to see the therapist as a parent or lover figure; treatment involves prying this projection (or one might say, this *gambit*) from the reality of the relationship. But the term evolved considerably over Freud's career and subsequently, notably through the recognition that transference is not simply projection and the therapist is not simply a screen. The therapist participates actively in the relationship via *countertransference*: the extent to which the therapist's unconscious desires and conflicts dovetail with the patient's. While the therapeutic relationship is necessarily asymmetric, if the therapist's identity is not to some extent also at stake (subject to being remade) in the relationship, there will be little leverage to move the patient.

Transference is also involved in all relationships with objects in the sense that unconscious desires and conflicts are mapped onto them, and even *in the wild* (outside the circumscribed space of a therapeutic relationship), relationships with objects (as we have seen) can be the occasion not merely for repetition but for developmental transition and transformation. Again, this is at least partly because of the relative safety of the relationship with the object-- that is, for the same reason that art, ritual and play can be the site for working through otherwise recalcitrant and unconscious dynamics. Of course one might ask what agency the object has, versus what is simply projected onto it by the subject, but the same question applies to subject-subject relationships. Rather than fall into the subject/object trap (or the trap of the *object-in-itself* versus the *object-for-the-subject*), a better question might be: what opportunity or opening does a

particular object give a subject, and how, *and vice versa*? (By the way, these are real questions, and I suggest you take time out from reading, think of some likely examples, and see what insights the questions can generate about them. And by the way, if you haven't done this, don't blame me if you find no big insights here: *you thought I was going to do ALL the work?*)

The problem with the classical understanding of transference is not just its often too-limited notion of projection but that working through the transference, as classically imagined, tends to reproduce the hierarchical aspects of the therapist/patient relationship, re-installing patriarchal and Oedipal power relations and authority structures. Philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Felix Guattari called out these "mommy, daddy and me" structures.

Guattari addressed these problems in his notion of *transversality*. The term differs in applying to groups rather than individuals, but like *transference*, it refers to the way that unconscious desires and conflicts (of groups) are played out, and how to use that playing out as an opportunity to transform the groups and their members.

Transversality in the group is a dimension opposite and complementary to the structures that generate pyramidal hierarchization and sterile ways of transmitting messages. Transversality is the unconscious source of action in the group, going beyond the objective laws on which it is based, carrying the group's desire. (22)

Transversality operates diagonally across the vertical and the horizontal. The vertical, in an institution, is represented by the *org chart*: the hierarchical (usually pyramidal) structure or chain of command. The horizontal is the organization of individual levels of structure into units such as departments (in academia, *disciplines*). If structure is understood as being continually generated and re-generated out of events and relationships, and if this ongoing process manifests what seem like insurmountable inertias and resiliences, it is also always the site of various fractures, vulnerabilities, openings, bottlenecks and impasses and aporia, emergent centers of gravity, and so on. The transverse is thus *post-structural*: the leading edges of the structure's evolution are where it is breaking down and being re-generated. These leading edges are not exactly the liminal or marginal, since systems tend to produce and contain liminality as a form of damage control, but the places where the liminal and marginal push back to define and redefine structure; a kind of melting/freezing interface where structure is constantly being unmade and made.

Transversality operates against the impoverished notion that there is one kind of power and a single hierarchy structured into vertically arranged layers according to who has more and who has less of it. Understanding that there are multiple kinds of power doesn't mean denial that there is privilege but (quite the opposite) the recognition that it is *constellational*.

Constellationality-- expressed (for example) as the tendency for power asymmetries to cluster-- tends to make entrenched powers even more resilient but it also means that they can be leveraged, and that axes of power and subjection necessarily intersect in individuals, in individual components of systems and in whole systems. Thus transversality entails the plurality and constellationality of the individual: *the individual is also a group*.

Guattari cautions that the fact "that one or several groups hold the key to regulating the latent transversality of the institution as a whole does not mean that we can *identify* the group or groups



concerned" (19; my italics): accordingly, "it is essential to distinguish the real power from the manifest power" (19). To translate this into institutional terms: sometimes ad hoc groups are created or dissolved, sometimes new units or even layers of structure are created or merged or eliminated, and in each case the danger is not that groups will be ephemeral or, on the other hand, that they will harden into bureaucratic structure, but that, in either case, whatever transversality they enable-- which is always post-structural anyway-- will be lost in the process.

Guattari also warns of attachment to the fantasy of an evolved-and-enlightened group: "the therapeutic endeavor is still constantly in danger of foundering in the besotting mythology of 'togetherness.'" The precarious and convulsive processes that work to "bring to the surface the group's instinctual demands," and which "force everyone" at all levels "to confront their own being and destiny" make the group necessarily ambiguous. "At one level, it is reassuring and protective" and seems to be "lending eternity at interest"-- that is, offering the fantasy of an endlessly stable life for the group and the individual attached to it-- but at a high price. On the other hand, transversality "can only be seen clearly in certain groups which, intentionally or otherwise, try to accept the meaning of their praxis, and establish themselves as subject groups-- thus putting themselves in the position of having to bring about their own death" (22). This is not an invitation to suicide but a recognition that transversality is not static: it is to be sought in shifting constellations that have finite lifetimes.

In spite of these cautions and dangers, Guattari is upbeat: "It is my hypothesis that there is nothing inevitable about the bureaucratic self-mutilation of a subject group, or its unconscious resort to mechanisms that militate against its potential transversality." A group's evolutionary potentials "depend, from the first moment, on the acceptance of risk-- which accompanies the emergence of any phenomenon of real meaning-- of having to confront irrationality, death, and the otherness of the other." (23)

Guattari illustrates transversality via the image of a fenced-in field of "horses with adjustable blinkers." When their eyes are completely covered they will have repeatedly traumatic encounters with each other. When they can see only straight ahead they will move and interact more smoothly but narrowly and with glancing collisions. The options open up if they can have full peripheral-- transverse-- vision.

Group dance practice such as *contact improvisation* enacts a literal version of Guattari's image, opening up the vocabulary and grammar of physical interactions (which include people playing off of each other even when they are not in contact), and enabling but not mandating ways for more coordinated structure to emerge organically. The transformative effect of such practices can often be experienced (and empirically observed) in the way that they open up classroom discussions that follow them: expanding kinetic/social repertoires underlie, enable and inform intellectual exchange as well. Try it!

Since the individual is also a group, transversality operates in the active linkage, in both directions, between the constellation of components that makes up the individual and the constellation that the individual makes with the group. I have proposed elsewhere that this linkage is *meaning*. The life of the group-- the leading edge of its evolution-- is not where we must change to accommodate the group or it must change to accommodate us but where we have

that choice *together*. These are the places that we look for together in therapeutic practice as well as in the classroom, where we do our best to remain, and which involve taking both risks and care.

In a couple, for example, the notion of transference might lead us to examine how and where my interaction with you provides an opportunity for you to project and repeat/re-enact your unconscious desires and conflicts-- and accordingly, for me to conform or remain at odds with these (and vice versa), keeping us stuck in dyadic power struggles. Tuning into the transversality instead, we look for specifically *where* and *when* and *how* our relationship insists that we re-negotiate who we are individually and together-- and notice that this is not exactly a negotiation between two people, since "who we are together" exceeds us both, as the place where our unconscious desires and conflicts are played out. To the extent that this is possible, it will be convulsive and contradictory but it will necessarily involve pleasure and learning. How can we find this "sweet spot"? It is not simply an average or compromise between your desires and mine; not simply where they reinforce each other, and it doesn't remain in the same place. When it disappears-- and people are triggered, shut down, etc-- where and how do we find its trail again?

These principles inform the way Poetics Lab works: the artists, designers, writers, architects, and theorists who participate are each attached to our own disciplines and practices; these are always constellations of practices (since we are not caricatured savants who can only do one thing; we are each groups) but each is limited. I love writing and drawing and my comfort zone is large in these areas, smaller when it comes to movement and sound (which I can enjoy even when I feel awkward), but when it comes to using digital technologies (for example), it doesn't take much before I start feeling frustrated or stupid or simply not having any fun. It was a challenge for the digital artists/designers to figure out how to engage analog types like me without triggering too much of their frustration and unpleasure as it was for me to figure out the same with writing and drawing exercises.

As a theorist, I've had to get over my understanding of theory as a body of knowledge or even as a know-how (as something to "apply") and allow it to be, instead, *a prompt*. What you do with a prompt is not apply it but use it as a catalyst to make something happen. Likewise, artists and designers have to get over our own exclusivity (which tends to focus on mastery of craft, virtuosity, aesthetic standards) to find projects made *better* by a heterogeneous range of abilities, such as the "Entity World" project described in the "Prompts" essay in this series.

#### b. Trans and Transgender

Transgender is one of those places where the transversality of the gender system is activated; call it gender's leading edge or subduction zone. This is not to say it's abstract. Like all transversality, it is a specific historical phenomenon, no less than gender itself (also a surprisingly recent term in its current meanings: *gender* 1955, *transgender* 1965, *cisgender* 1991). Gender practices have very long histories, but as in all evolving entities and systems, the recent names (which also include *homo-* and *heterosexuality*, *masculinity* and *femininity*-- all 19th-century terms) apply to constellations of sexual and social practices and identities, along

with anatomical features, economic relationships, cultural signifiers that have drifted and shifted into new patterns from time to time and place to place.

The leading edges of a system are its contradictions.

The notion that gender-crossing deconstructs or destroys something essential about binary gender difference seems to be the greatest fear of many transphobes (whether religious fundamentalists or trans-exclusionary feminists)-- and the fondest desire of many of the rest of us who find in trans what Kate Bornstein calls *A Queer and Pleasant Danger*. At the same time, some LGBTQ people fear that gender crossing tends to *reinforce* dominant notions of masculinity and femininity.

So which is it, deconstruct or reinforce? I'm going to give you a minute to think about it.

A generation ago in the US, gay and lesbian marriage activated a similar contradiction: does gay/lesbian marriage function as damage control, working to domesticate queer people into couples and nuclear families, and further to exclude those who aren't brought into the fold? Or-- as its most hysterical detractors feared-- does it work to destroy the institution of marriage and the gender system of which it is the lynchpin?

Which of these happened or is happening?

Of course, the idea that gender-crossing reinforces gender binaries is complicated by trans inclusion of nonbinary genders. Even so-- to take it to the next level-- does inclusion of nonbinary remain stuck in a conserved binary between the binary and nonbinary, not to mention the binary that sets self-focused gender (whereby my gender is mine, regardless of who my partners may be) against the relational or object-focused sexual/social identities of gay/lesbian/straight? Or does it complicate these binaries, working to pluralize and level the playing field of gender into micro-genders? And if the latter, is this a liberatory process, or does it enact neoliberal notions of identity and consumerist notions of choice and marketplace?

Finally, does trans work to bend the medical establishment to honor people's gender experience and to support bodily reinvention, or (in the process) make sexuality and gender all the more hostage to insidious biopower wielded by the state and corporations-- in what Paul Preciado has dubbed *the pharmacopornographic era*?

In embodying these contradictions, trans has the potential-- with all the risks involved-- to illuminate the gender system ("there is a crack in everything; that's where the light gets in"). Trans people are positioned to know things about the gender system by being both inside and outside it. This insider/outsider position is arguably the precondition for all knowledge and transversality. Accordingly, trans is also conspicuously not "the same" across different socioeconomic and ethnic contexts, or across national and cultural contexts. Trans is necessarily intersectional. The fracture that is both inside and outside the system is attached to the fracture or interface between the system and others.

In the concluding chapter of *Trans\** (billed as *A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*), Jack Halberstam finds a provisional punchline in *The Lego Movie*, wherein the Lego characters, who stand for endless recombination and freedom, battle oppressive corporate forces

represented by Lord Business. The ultimate weapon of the Lego characters is the "piece of resistance" which turns out to be

a cap for the superglue weapon that Lord Business seeks to unleash upon the restless world under his command. This piece-- part phallus, part vessel-- prevents the flow of glue and protects the world of components from becoming a concrete land of fixity and stasis (132).

And how do we keep this freedom from being captured by a capitalism characterized by its drive to ongoingly disrupt and revolutionize the mode of production and to offer assorted recombinations of features in a kaleidoscopic product cycle it merely *sells* as freedom?

Well?

In the process, we learn that gender-- whether understood genetically, anatomically, hormonally, socially, culturally or otherwise-- is *a prompt rather than a script*. The play between *parts* (that is, roles, in dynamic relationship with others); and *parts* (pieces, bits of bodies, accessories) is indeed a *play*. And as we have seen, such prompts and play require the embrace of constraints and freedom, risks and safety-- usually a convulsive process, an arc that may be comic/tragic/ both/neither but cannot be understood as an arc alone but also, amid the countervailing forces, a necessarily transverse constellation.