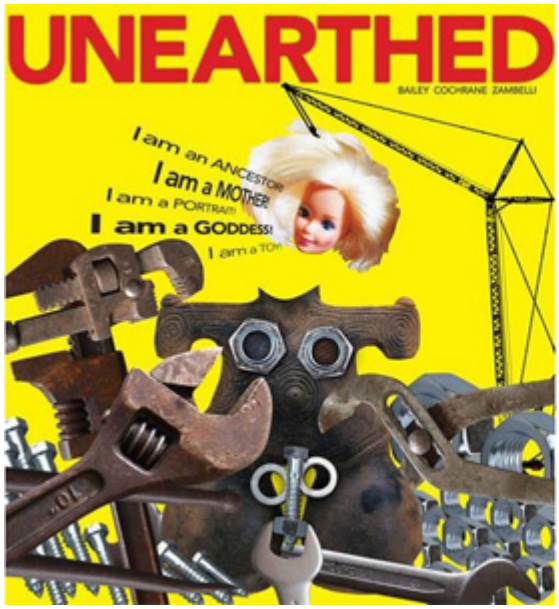
THINGS — BEYOND OBJECTS







Two new books add depth to my long-running ruminations on the character of things.

Nonobject, by Branko Lukic and Barry Katz, was published this week by MIT Press [Link]

It’s a rather beautiful book about Branko’s design work. Barry (and Bill Moggridge in his foreword) provide fascinating commentary.

The nonobject is *inbetween*, relational, interstitial, combinatory. What if the designer started not from technical and economic viability in the world of industrial manufacture, nor from people's needs and desires (in what is commonly called human-centered design), but from the space between? This design work on the *nonobject* would be about how people get on with things.





Branko’s nonobjects are presented in the book as artifacts, though most are imaginary or “conceptual” (for example, made from “thinium” – the perfect material). Many are ironic – a light switch becomes a philosophical gesture (let there be light!); a toilet is made of cut-crystal; here is a collection of clocks that don’t tell the time (at least don’t perform as chronometers); an umbrella that doesn’t deflect but captures rain.

Oxymoronic one-legged chairs attest to controlled imperfection. Exaggeration – cutlery with infinitely thin handles. Metaphor (an assertion of identity in difference): books that are fluid – quenching our mind’s thirst. Some are quite cynical, defiant: there’s a collection of artifacts designed entirely according to an aesthetic of 90 degree form – a rectilinear bicycle (though without square wheels!).

Shades everywhere of surrealism – “ceci n’est pas un pipe”.

Irony, metaphor, exaggeration, oxymoron: these all are, of course, tropes. Design here is truly a field of rhetoric: an argument for … Well what? I’m not sure really.

Many pose questions of the form “what if …?” If biodiversity were applied to

consumer electronics … . They are counterfactuals. (I posted some comments on fakes, authenticity and counterfactuals in this blog – [Link] [Link]). I do like this. There is indeed alterity implicit in any form (we can even invoke Adorno's negation of the negation!) Barry's commentary revels in these kind of references.

I have some concerns, because the irony wears thin. The book is really quite elitist and sometimes almost arrogant in the eclipse of any kind of politics of industrial design (just who is all this for?). All the (non)objects are photographed according to that clean minimalist aesthetic that focuses attention precisely upon the object *made aesthetic*. There's a meta-irony here – here is a book about nonobjects that presents us with a beautifully fetishized collection of utterly alienated beautiful objects, museum pieces in the cool clean light of the vitrine, looking like the great icons of modern design.

But I am left with a fascination for the argument of this rhetoric of things – that we should think not of objects, but of fields, of connection, of mediation, of in-between, of tangible intangibles, where figure and ground collude in the forensic doubting that asks – just what are we dealing with here? [Link] [Link]; see also my recent remarks on Kenya Hara's Ku (Emptiness) [Link]. And yes – the very notion of human-centered design raises the key question of just what we understand by humanity. Human and object are not so distinct as commonly held.

This comes across also in the book of the exhibition – *Unearthed* – edited by Doug Bailey, Andrew Cochrane, and Jean Zambelli for the Sainsbury Center for Visual Arts [Link]

Prehistoric figurines – just what are they?




Home for Destitute Lads
The Arts of the First Farmers



Again – we are presented not with objects, but with possibilities, questions, arguments, connections, processes. Interminglings through material, making, metaphor. Toys, dolls, miniatures, models, fetishes … . The book ranges far and wide in its associations.

Both these books about objects are collections. They are wonderful experiments in pragmatology – explorations of objects as *“things”* – collectives, gatherings, assemblages.