

WOW HUH

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- [Fall 2013](#)

Hardware
by Ryan Lauderdale

When I say the word object, the first thing that comes to my mind is a vase. It could be a vase from ancient Greece or Pottery Barn. To me, a vase is the quintessential vessel of human culture. I am sitting in a lit up hotel room in Las Vegas, a city where gaudy is an understatement. On the machine laminated curved shelves that frame an overpriced glass and fluorescent snack fridge sit two simple, cruddy black vases. A vase in this world serves no real utilitarian purpose. Like the generic abstract paintings that hang on the wall, they are only really here to make me feel comfortable and to give the room some “life”. Perhaps it is their ancient familiarity that puts me at ease. Their rounded shapes and curves counter the synthetic, neon lit world outside. They make everything feel a little more human.

Decorum is a strange, often useless world. Yet, it is so intrinsically tied to our human expression. It has the capacity to represent who we are, and even more so, what we want to be. Our living rooms act as personal mood-boards. Through a carefully curated collection of objects and knickknacks we put forth a vision of our identity, our personal material brand. Often we are buying into some prefabricated brand, maybe one lifted from the pages of Dwell magazine or even Walmart. Regardless of intent, the objects we display are representations of us. We know them. They are familiar as family. They lie still on our shelves and coffee tables like little idols to human aspiration.

A basket, a vase, a mannequin, a tie... They all fundamentally exist within a human-centric condition. Remove them from the living room or store shelf, and they still emit a wholly human representation. Their form and function is almost completely indebted to human uses. But what of the hook from which that basket hangs, or the glass and metal armature that supports the mannequin? These live in a ligament-like world connecting the tissue of the human world with a sprawling and unstable environment. This in between object world is one designed to be invisible and largely forgotten once it leaves the architect or designer’s studio. It is the behind the scenes world of armatures, ergonomics, and display structures.

Artist Hannah Levy uses the term “design purgatory” to describe these overlooked objects, cursed to live below the radar and gaze of their human creators. Levy finds herself attracted to forms that, once removed from their intended environs and functions, begin to lose the human conditioning that initially defines them. Medical equipment, safety bars, gymnastic devices and pool handrails can all be freed of the bondage of their human servitude. Once free, these objects immediately seem to lose their obvious semantic connections. They become epistemologically disconnected from the human mind. What was once the metal structure of a shopping cart starts to seem increasingly alien and non-human.

In Levy’s *Untitled* stainless steel and vinyl piece (2013) there are two figure-four handrails that no longer are tied to the edge of a pool. Instead they rise up from a concrete floor. Their ergonomically designed use is thwarted, and they turn inward becoming more of a blockage than a helping hand. The vinyl that covers them gives them a prosthetic new skin that further complicates definition. One of Levy’s classmates called them “dog heads,” seeing them first as an outline of a cartoon dog. Undoubtedly that same classmate has used this poolside object countless times. In this context, however, the human to object connection has become oblique.

What is key in Levy’s work is how she provides these objects with the potential to take on new meaning, giving them license to express unknown aspects of their virtual selves. Something like a grab-bar is inherently tied to the binary of human/object. The object is formed and exists only in regards to its ergonomic relationship with the human body. Levy removes the human body from her work and provides new synthetic bodies, usually cast polyurethane foam or rubber that interacts with these forms to create new differential assemblages. This move displaces the object from direct human



Emptied mall display



Grab bars and return carts – image courtesy of Hannah Levy



differential assemblages. This move displaces the object from direct human knowledge, yet the essence of the object still remains. Somewhere in the stillness of viewing, a strange familiarity with the object exists. It is more felt than understood, an unspoken and purely intuited connection that reveals a different side to what is already known. It is here that the human viewer begins to peek into the virtual potentials of these objects.

Anne de Vries' work breaks with preconceived notions of functionality. He is specifically interested in the interaction of ergonomic material with human flows and how this systematic relationship reflects patterning seen in other realms such as data networking. Open and closed aspects of flow through an airport corridor change the condition of objects like handrails. In this environment they can function both as directing traffic and also limiting passage. De Vries' work embellishes these shifts in potential by further modulating a handrail's linear flow and installing them outside the usual reach of human interaction. The artist is pushing the differential gas pedal and demonstrating how new potential tendencies could arise through these modified situations.

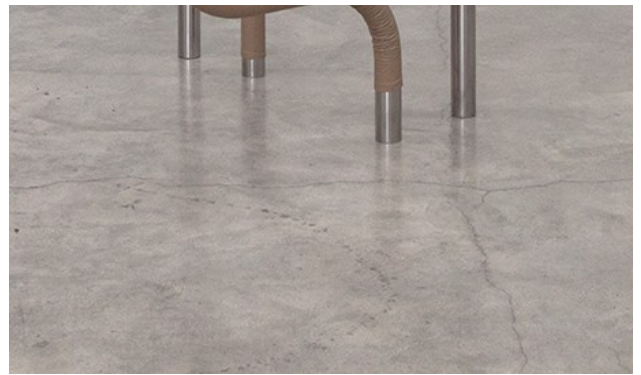
De Vries' work *Free Slide* is one of the more reductive in his catalogue. At first glance it looks like a miniature assembly line structure. Skateboard wheels are attached to the side of a handrail making the entire structure seem like an odd transport track. The slippage of the handgrip and roller wheel hybrid pushes the perceived functionality into a second, totally opposite state. This is further modulated as the rail bends back onto itself at the floor, all the while being blocked by a large support fence. With only a few simple modifications we are shown a shift in the object's internal potential. Its functionality becomes hybrid and mutant.

Both of these artists frame material-centric worlds by stripping our notions of what these everyday objects are and what they do. Yet, they also take things further and give speculative examples of how these things might undergo a virtual morphogenesis. This is the point where material systems can merge, mutate or change states. It is where objects can breed and evolve into entirely new things.

Levy's piece *Basic Essentials* presents a simple combination of shelf and vegetable. Normally these objects would be viewed discreetly and disconnected. In this piece, however, Levy simulates the two items materially evolving towards one another. The shelves begin to curve upward, their laminated skin echoing that of the vegetable. The vegetables conversely become a molded solid form, each changing color as they seem to disappear into to their shelf. Asparagus and shelf morph into synthetic versions of themselves, one fake fiber and one fake stone. As they merge, both become plastic and more materially similar. They are seen paused in the midst a transformative event, bonding into a hybrid singularity.

Similarly, Anne de Vrie's *Steps of Recursion Tuned* speculates a moment where objects and those object's function are frozen into a jpg-like snapshot. Shoes are interesting as they are like a second flesh made to supplement the foot. A stair similarly supplements the human traveler as it is like a reversed shoe for an uneven ground. Where the shoe pushes down, the stair pushes up and connects the human with the terrain. It is a meeting point of ergonomic layers, bumpers that pad the friction of human body from ground body. De Vries collapses these layers and events into one unified entity. The human and ground bodies are removed to reveal the ergonomic purity of this merger. What remains are strange stepped footprints frozen in plastic snapshots and elevated off of a display apparatus that also appears as a modulated handrail. This fossilized event where shoe combines and melds with stair illustrates a very simple and everyday perturbation taking place between two systems.

Looking out my window at the pollution that fogs the mountainous rim of the Vegas valley, it is clear that humans create and affect the material world around us. When we are gone these things will remain, they are real. Throughout our history we have imagined reality only through our own sense of self. Even in this essay I have countless anthropomorphized the material world in a limited attempt to describe totally non-human attributes. But the material world's inner workings are far beyond the grasp of my knowledge, its mechanisms behaving in impenetrable ways. The awareness of this could be a step towards a more expanded human consciousness. Imagining the limitless morphogenic potential within the material world humbles us. We see that we are only cohabitates within various interconnected systems, many of which are unseen and unknowable. Even those forgettable things we design live a life fully outside of us.



Untitled by Hannah Levy



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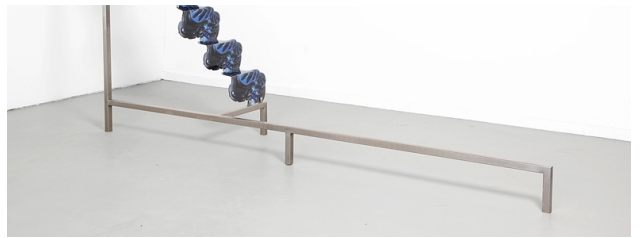


Free Slide by Anne de Vries



Basic Essentials by Hannah Levy





Steps of Recursion Tuned by Anne de Vries



Steps of Recursion Tuned (detail) by Anne de Vries

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