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Generic Objects

1.

By generic objects we don't mean objects that affect a kind of generic quality – brilliantly commonsensical and ordinary objects that come from the rarefied space of the designer's studio, and draw their value from that space. We mean really generic – milk crates, plastic buckets, shipping containers, wooden palettes, traffic barricades, decorative concrete blocks, urban trash cans and dumpsters, rubber tires, scaffolding, Scotch tape. It's not that any of these aren't designed, but rather that they are designed so incredibly well as to function with unparalleled efficiency within the systems of circulation for which they are intended. Their most telling quality is that they have slipped below the threshold of what would otherwise mark their identity as designed artifacts.

Functioning within the large field of conventions inevitably established by global markets and transnational productive systems, generic objects are designed with such programmatic exactitude that spaces accommodating authorial expression are reduced to make room for qualities that foster efficient and competitive performance in commercial processes. The more extensive and decentralized the circuits of production and distribution in which generic objects participate, the more numerous the universal norms by which they are informed. The space for authorial display or geographically specific markers is compressed to a minimum, when not eliminated altogether.

2.

Generic objects are synthetic genetic objects: a genome or a strict chain of codes, a tight script of metric chromosomes, cuts across them and the systems to which they are attached. The shipping container, for instance, like the bucket and the milk crate, is marked by multiple conventions, by a global consensus – a genome – established between all the parts of the system in which it functions. This guarantees compatibility at every interface. The weight and structural resistance of metal used for the container, the dimensions of the cranes and of the storage facilities in ships, the width of the trucks, the width of the interstate highway lanes used by the trucks, the walkways in the storage areas of ports, the width and reach of forklifts – they all work together. It's an alliance that generates, in proportion to the efficiency of the system, an internal violence – a force, like that of genetic coding, which imposes morphologies, from the minutest detail of the object to the very edges of the system. Everything is determined by everything else.

In the generic universe every artifact plays a double role: it's a fount of exigencies, putting its demands to the rest of the system, while at the same time it is irrevocably shaped by the enormous pressure that the remaining elements of the system exercise over it. Object and system are co-extensive. The illusion of the individual artifact and the crystallized complete system dissolves into an active and shape-producing field of exchanges and relations, internally held by the tension of provisionally optimal or near-optimal solutions but intermittently bombarded by demands that come from the outside, demands that it must address: new codes or laws, increased volumes of traffic, technological advances in other fields, administrative and marketing decisions, climate, regional conflicts, and so forth.

What we have, then, is a group of objects determined by a metric regime that they themselves empower, a genetic pool and the shapes it produces through relationships of mutual reinforcement, affected occasionally by exterior demands (which then translate into alterations in the system, into new information). In this sense, every aspect of the generic object has its own dimension of necessity. And every object is an elastic surface: if it receives a blow, it channels it to the entire system, and the blow is manifested in the individual objects that make up the system. If the resistance of the container's metal changes, then the gripping power of the crane has to be altered. The shape or weight required by these objects, for instance, produces invisible expansive waves that mark the global landscape of trade. The process dictates compatible features to all the elements with which the object engages. Likewise in the opposite direction, a massive change at the global scale of trade sweeps down as a series of awesome waves that alters the shape of the individual elements.

3.

One of the visual "frequencies" transmitted by generic objects metonymically signals the massive and elastic systems to which they belong. These are systems to which we often remain physically, if not cognitively, blind. A run-of-the-mill shipping container, once deprived of its emblematic status on the sales catalogue page and the corporate website, becomes inseparable from the systems of distribution, transportation, and storage for which it was undoubtedly designed and manufactured – even when other uses may be possible. One conceives

the container, within the stacks in ports and storage yards and on ships, as a small but essential and interconnected part of an intricate web of lines bustling with activity – lines that mark not only the routes of global/national/urban transportation of which it is an obvious part, but also the exchanges of capital that produce and benefit from these routes. These lines also link back to the factories that produce the goods stored and transported by the container, as well as to the offices that draft marketing plans for these goods and to the retail stores where they are sold. These lines to the factory, the ad agency, and the points of retail sale are, in turn, plugged in to lines that lead back to the farms, forests, mines, and rigs that generate or collect the raw materials necessary for the production of goods. And if we are imaginative enough, these lines can be linked to lines that map out the systems that allow the raw material to emerge in the first place. Every container plots a massive arabesque of relations as it dissolves into it and relinquishes the illusion of its singularity.

And this complicated weave of interpenetrating lines is crossed by other patterns, such as the one that tracks the fuel production necessary for the factories to be fired up and to keep the transportation vehicles moving. And woven into it are the patterns of war that keep oil economies in place, and the patterns of intricate investment and political maneuvering that keep those wars going. Even where murky zones appear in this complicated tapestry, they too are abuzz with obscure and connected activity. Discreet realms – the military site, the factory, the boardroom, the advertising firm, the port, the shopping mall – all collapse into one another. Or, more accurately: the idea of a world of discrete realms collapses altogether. Adjacencies become interpenetrations. The container languishing on a dock can beam us, if we zoom in just right, to a woven substrate of invisible materialities, to an intricate matrix of flows and forces that spreads out like a chemical LSD sky before us. It may not be there, *but it's there*.

4.

Generic objects encourage us to consider the field over its individual elements. The singular seems superfluous in defining generic objects. Surely, a bucket is a bucket – irreducibly particular. But a bucket is a generic object only in the presence of another bucket (or, at the very least, in its implied presence). Generic objects draw on the dense fields of repeating specimens

for their very definition. It is in the presence of other objects of their kind that they actualize their individual capabilities. Coupling and stacking and nesting are, after all, relations between multiples; instant replaceability implies equivalency and sameness among a large quantity of identical artifacts. Generic objects are defined by and live through a *monstrous contiguity* that mocks atomized conceptions of the world. Fields find meaning and function in ways that their individual components may not.

5.

Within their systems of circulation, generic objects are alien to the way a city produces meaning. Plastic crates used to distribute milk are abstract and autistic objects, blind and rigorously inelastic artifacts that unwaveringly respond to a set of specific demands. They are collections of data, programmed to function with the utmost efficiency, and nothing else. Though the crates surely carry the potential for a social function, they have been optimized to such a degree that their relation to the human is reduced to a single value or dimensional datum, inscribed by the weight of a gallon of milk or the storage capacity of a delivery truck. Milk crates in this environment are surfaces radically devoid of meanings, figures of such alarming blankness on a symbolic plane that their emptiness overwhelms.

Milk crates invariably leave full and return empty. They are part of a loop that, as a continuum of contiguous, melded information units, can remain active forever. If the world stood still, the loop that milk crates sketch out in the city would continue to flow, defying entropy and apocalypse. If one crate exits the loop, due to loss or damage, another simply takes its place. The loop is like a tide cycle or a whirlpool. Its indifference, its inwardness, the silence generated by its centripetal flows, should terrify us. It is monstrous in the way its energy absorbs all forms and meanings. As objects move in this flow, their contours, weights, surfaces, articulations, and inscribed data (date of production, type of plastic, percentages of recycled material, ownership markings) dissolve. It's as if they move under such pressure that they are rendered liquid-like and incorporated into a perpetual spiral of activity.

6.

Generic objects accommodate the temporal modes of the situations in which they find themselves, and two modes of time are in play

here: our segmented, finite, and familiar one; and that of the flow. These two modes of time, in turn, make two scales of perception visible. Generic objects integrated into the cycles of the flow tend towards invisibility; the articulation of their qualities remains hostage to and stalled by a movement exceeding that of everyday life in scale, duration, and inflexibility. All the elements caught in this flow dissolve in a confluence of obscured characteristics. Typological markers melt into pure metrics. The possibility of holding on to a familiar trait is rendered impossible by the abstracting impulse of the flow.

As soon as this object exits the flow, however, it is transformed. If a truck takes too long to recover emptied milk crates, the crates are exposed to forces external to the cycle. Someone steals one to carry the mangoes he will sell on the side of the road to earn his rent money. Once outside its "natural" flow the object becomes visible, familiar, autonomous, gains an identity, reveals potentials that hadn't coalesced until then. Its time and ours synchronize. In such a situation, we can finally think of what to do with the generic object, how to manipulate it, make it serve new functions.

But these statements need to be qualified. They tie things up too neatly. The responses to the generic object extracted from its system are as varied as they are contingent on particular geographies and behaviors. The nature of the extractions and the places where the loop registers loss are not insignificant with regard to the way generic objects will be "re-drawn" away from their startling blankness.

7.

As a palpitating lattice of activity laid over the city's orthogonal spread, the flow moves with the ineluctability of a stampede. And as with a stampede, individual elements are picked off. The rear of a supermarket becomes a site where the herd suffers losses. But it's not the rear of every supermarket. It depends on the neighborhood. Geography and economics, specific demands and patterns of behavior, all matter. Where privation is greater, the voracity swells, the losses multiply. In affluent areas one instead usually finds the predator is satisfied. The flow itself, with its endless supply of replaceable parts, remains coldly indifferent and unaffected by these variations. It is indifferent because it reserves the right of reclamation, always threatening to pull stray elements back into its current.

The collection of points where individual specimens are extracted or expelled from the flow, diagrammed, produces a littoral – pockets of activity closely bound to their systems of circulation, both in terms of physical proximity and in the understanding of the object's function. When there, generic objects are suspended on a middle ground in which they are regarded as somewhat less abstract than when in the flow, yet neither are they regarded as elements inserted into rhetorical relationships with the broader culture or design disciplines. The object's alarming blankness is only slightly dissipated by the introduction of a calculus that links real needs to functional potentials.

8.

In the littoral, which usually materializes in economically depressed neighborhoods, the individual's engagement with the generic object is modulated by need. The pressure of hardship demands appeasement. A contextual strain takes on a constitutive role by exerting pressure on the potentials in objects. If rolls of toilet paper need to be transported, then surely the nesting potential of the buckets used for the task will remain invisible.

If generic objects are patterned information, then in the littoral that information is processed with the efficient satisfaction of a particular goal in mind. The processing is endowed with a discriminating filter that necessity provides. Objects are treated as pure resource. They retain an abject rawness. This inhibits deployment of the artifact in rhetorical terms. What the object or usage of the object may mean, what values it may embody, what criteria it may be judged by – these are matters sacrificed to the necessary resolution of an immediate predicament. It's almost as if the prerogatives are no longer those of the individual: the situation determines the possibilities for engagement. If there is something like a liberated sweep of the generic object's potentials in the littoral, it is rendered available and substantive only in relation to the range of hardships that it meets there. The object's set of freed potentials is an inverted diagram of the needs that structure its context.

Under these circumstances, objects are still not integrated in any fundamental sense, but remain in a condition of partial concealment. The individual's gaze is pressed too close to them to obtain a full picture. The field of vision is filled by one or a limited number of the objects' qualities or potentials. Need pushes the individual up against the objects' potential for satisfying it. If, after being laid off from the supermarket, a person has to urgently figure out how to carry all his cleaning supplies from parking lot to parking lot as he washes cars, the milk crate's metric precision in relation to the delivery truck will be relegated to a blurred edge of his field of vision, if not simply ignored altogether. Need determines what is useful or adequate at that

moment. For an individual whose predicament is how to survive, a bucket is simply a body of condensed physical qualities, a bunch of physical "morphemes," a complex library of connections, information to be applied, and always in light of a problem demanding an immediate solution. Interpretation and consideration of the object as such is minimal. Hardship engenders urgent relationships based on functionality, it unbinds an ineluctability that – like the ineluctability that renders the crate-in-the-flow an indivisible assemblage of information – possesses the individual to drag generic objects to the ravine of survival. Impossible to plot within moral and rhetorical universes, the object's use is justified solely by its effectiveness in alleviating need – the very need that determined the scope of engagement that was possible with the object in the first place.

9.

Imagine two adjacent spheres – one the flow of generic objects; the other the realm of human activity in the city. Occasionally, their edges make contact and the flow releases elements. This is how we come to see, just outside a bodega, a group of milk crates captured by human need and intuitive ingenuity. They've become chairs in a domino game, a display structure for a handful of sugarcanes, a base for the cooler of the water vendor at the stoplight, the "mobile unit" of a car washer working in the empty lot next door. The transient nature of these activities always threatens to return the object to urban drift along with the leaves blowing on the sidewalks. The abbreviation of the object in the littoral finds a counterpart in the provisional quality the object takes on as solution or appeasement of a need. If another object appears that provides a better solution, the original one will be discarded. The object is always recognized as a temporary substitute. A rock that serves as a doorstop finds a homologue in a bucket full of water. A kind of non-rhetorical analogy occurs. The preferred object is the result of a comparative operation that pivots on the *performance and potential of objects*, and not on their physical or conceptual similarities; that is, on typologies of use and not of form. In fact, since both rock and bucket are structured by abstract forces – natural processes in one case and super-optimized industry on the other – they find themselves in this context without any affective mnemonic dimension or symbolic baggage. It is their mobilization as pure

information that allows them to be interchangeable.

10.

All this is not to say that solutions aren't repeated, that a bank of local knowledge doesn't accumulate and grow in the littoral. It is to say, rather, that the transfer of solutions out of their immediate moment, that of linking necessity to potential, is incidental, even if highly significant. Contingent relationships are stabilized as recurring solutions, folded into a common repertoire. Future users can draw on it. This is where experience, repetition, and habit enter the frame and fortify the temporary repertoires of new activities for generic objects.

11.

In summary, the generic object finds itself in at least three situations: first, in the flow for which it is manufactured; second, in the littoral where need determines use and the generic object, due to the very conditions in which it functions, escapes rhetorical manipulation; and third, in a space of symbolic production, for example, within culture or design disciplines. Different criteria are prominent in each situation. The first and second situations, flow and littoral, seem

determined by a certain ineluctability – the flow by the autism that propels the avalanche of optimal production; the littoral by the forces that cut through the individual in precarious situations. In both cases, the milk crate is treated less as an object per se than as information. In a cultural environment the milk crate is understood as a sublimated representation of the other two situations.

A relation to the object is, then, to be determined by the situation in which it is encountered: a prohibitive and prohibited one in the flow; a performative one in the littoral, guided by need and survival; and a rhetorical one in cultural spaces.

12.

In the last of these situations, in cultural spaces and within design disciplines, when the question arises of what to do with generic objects, analogy (in a rhetorical sense) has proven the easiest answer. Turn the bucket over and it becomes the lampshade it always looked like. Cut holes out of the shipping container and it becomes the shed it always suggested. But these easy analogies (*easy* because they lack that *leap across deep divides and the magic of conjoining apparent incommensurables* that rich analogies thrive on)

always attempt to extract the generic artifact from its condition as nondescript and anonymous. They project a designer's intention onto a thing that was circulating in the world fine without it. The appeal to the obvious, to what the object already suggested, is a thinly veiled pretense to rescue the generic from its dreadfully flat world of sameness by pulling it onto the lifeboat of differentiated artifacts.

13.

The easiest analogies treat the generic less as resource than as topic. The mundane artifact is infused with the designer's "intelligence." And the designer is celebrated for his or her resourcefulness, DIY ethics, poetics of the quotidian, critiques of the commodity system, imperative to recycle, and sympathy for the demands of sustainability. The rapport established by these analogies, however, while supposedly doing the opposite, narrows the view and hinders the object by subsuming its productive potential into a set of familiar typologies. It treats the object as *only* its meanings and manifested physical traits. What is most interesting about the generic quality is that it clarifies objects as compressed and manipulable energy and information, free of the magical cloak of meaning and added value with which the fairy dust of sanctioned creativity wraps them.

14.

It may be more interesting to place these generic objects in scenarios in which they are confronted with "deformative" forces – forces that will "torque" them. These twisting forces can be perceived when unexpected protocols are applied to a situation, by plugging in a vector usually absent from the contexts in which generic objects function, or by plotting generic objects within the coordinates of a program that is alien to them. It's not, then, a matter of working against the traits inherent to generic objects, of making a bucket or a milk crate do the work of established furniture and architectural typologies as an ultimate horizon of productivity. On the contrary, it is the inherent capacities of the objects that give discipline to the experiment. What possibilities does the stackability of the bucket or the container open up when an unexpected demand is put to it, when a tiny catastrophe makes it swerve off course? What does its modularity permit beyond the functions and contexts it was designed for? What can be done with the object's portability, with the fact that it's structured to couple with a large array of other artifacts, just as the container couples with cranes in ports across the planet?

What are the unintended consequences of the artifact's design, and how does one smoke them out and allow them to reveal their potential? How can new options be inserted into the seemingly closed systems in which these objects function? How can these systems be rendered sites of potential and unexpected plasticity? How is topographical instability introduced into a flattened pattern of uses? What can be done about the fact that these objects are already being put to unexpected uses in which their function is less optimal than their original designed intended? Can additions, joints, inserts, or deformed clones be produced that enlarge the range of their functions and generate new systems for which they can become basic building blocks? One begins to look for ways to tap into these objects' pregnant infrazones for latent potentialities. One attempts to tease aberrant forms from the objects' "natural" tendencies through uncommon modulations. One feels for malleable segments or "holes" in the pattern of the original design processes, and applies pressure there.

15.

To consider the generic in this way, we may need to temporarily padlock the studio. We may need to turn a bucket over or bore a few windows into the walls of a container. It is the work one is supposed to be doing. But it comes at the cost of ignoring what is truly amazing about the generic: that it functions in relation to a series of forces; that it is always part of a field of interconnecting vectors; that to think through it is to think in terms of large, nearly unfathomable landscapes. The generic is globalization's inevitable "aesthetic" – the quality that is dominant in the objects that seem most at home in it, most comfortably bound to massive and invisible materialities and networks.

The scuffed bucket in which we keep our clay-stained baseballs is like Calvino's suburban trash can: the mirage that it is a self-contained artifact, dumbly sitting there, independent from the world swirling around it, quickly evaporates.[1] The object begins to unfold as a pattern constructed of a series of relationships that bind it, irrevocably, to infrastructural circuits, economic pressures, and social contracts. In Calvino's trash can the city's entire system of garbage collection and management – not to mention the amounts of energy, accumulated knowledge, and economic demands that lead to its particular morphology – is inscribed. It was inscribed even when the object was still a shiny new waste receptacle on the vendor's shelf. Bound up in it, like virtual ribbons of data, have always been all the networks and vectors that it will course through – all the systems of design

and production it results from, all the systems of distribution and storage it is made to lock into. Understanding how this is already so fantastically complex, so much better than producing a new lamp or a new shed, or turning out a new variant on a typology in the way it has been turned out so many times, one looks to apply new pressures and invent unexpected scenarios until “aberrant” and novel functions in generic objects are set free.

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Ernesto Oroza lives and works in Aventura, USA. He earned a degree at the Havana Superior Institute of Design. Oroza is author of the book *Objets Réinventés. La création populaire à Cuba* (Paris, 2002). He was visiting professor in Les Ateliers, École Nationale Supérieure de Création Industrielle (ENSCI) in Paris (1998), and professor at the Polytechnic Institute of Design of Havana from 1995 to 2000. His work has been exhibited in museums, galleries, and cultural spaces such as Haute Definition Gallery, in Paris, The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), in New York, and Laboral Centro de Arte, in Spain.

1
See Italo Calvino's essay dedicated to his trash can, "La poubelle agréée," in *The Road to San Giovanni*, trans. Tim Parks (New York: Vintage International, 1994), 91–126.