The object transformed
With an introduction by Mildred Constantine and Arthur Drexler

Author
Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.)

Date
1966

Publisher
[publisher not identified]

Exhibition URL
www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1954

The Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition history—from our founding in 1929 to the present—is available online. It includes exhibition catalogues, primary documents, installation views, and an index of participating artists.
THE OBJECT TRANSFORMED

with an introduction by Mildred Constantine and Arthur Drexler
Acknowledgments

The exhibition “The Object Transformed” was shown at The Museum of Modern Art from June 28 through August 21, 1966. On behalf of the Museum, I wish to thank the lenders: artists, collectors, and galleries for their cooperation and for permission to reproduce their work. I also wish to thank Massimo Vignelli for the design of this publication which reflects his sympathetic response to the exhibition.

M.C.

Photograph Credits

Rudolph Burckhardt: 17, 26-27.
James Matthews: 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 21, 23, 25, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35.
The Museum of Modern Art, Department of Film: 7 (no. 6).
L’Oeil, Paris: 5 (no. 4), 22.
Rolf Petersen: 34.
Alfred Stieglitz (from original negative): 6.
Sunami: 5 (no. 3), 16.

© 1966, The Museum of Modern Art,
11 West 53 Street, New York, New York 10019
Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number:
66-28128
Designed by Massimo Vignelli/Unimark International
Type set by Graphic Arts Typographers, Inc., New York
Printed in the U.S.A. by Clarke & Way, Inc., New York
The utility of any artifact presumably depends on how well it performs a specific function, such as picking up dust or conveying us from one place to another. But vacuum cleaners and automobiles, apart from the efficiency with which they perform their functions, are also generally recognized as emblems of a way of life involving powerful emotional commitments. Quite often the social distinctions we observe are the true objects of manufacture and in this sense the individual vacuum cleaner or automobile is only a passing manifestation, proving the owner's identification with a particular group.

The strength of such emotional commitments is often deplored by those concerned with "good design." To the esthete and the design technician, the most relevant issues are those pertaining to performance characteristics and the consequent choice of appropriate forms. That the dominant forms of modern industrial design have been largely geometric is usually explained in terms of functional suitability, although, in fact, geometric forms have a strong emotional appeal, associated not only with painting and sculpture but also derived from the values established by what used to be called "moral philosophy."

Esthetic predilections would seem to be inescapable, but for even the most dedicated enthusiast of good design certain kinds of objects elude esthetic criteria simply by being what they are. Toilets, for example, are in fact no less eligible for rational design analysis than any other artifact; and yet to most of us, it seems safe to say, no matter how elegant or sculptural or rational a toilet may be, it is difficult to take its design altogether seriously. Weapons, on the other hand, are often superb examples of form perfectly adapted to function, with a concomitant esthetic excellence. But few of us are ready to appreciate the esthetics of weapons without reservation, because they are objects whose very purpose seems to deny the value of such excellence. Our attitude toward function, in other words, is not neutral. Some objects are made worse by being made better; it would be fatuous to pretend that excellence of design could make a well-upholstered chaise and an electric chair equally worthy of admiration.

Most objects occupy what may be called a
psychological temperate zone. They make few emotional demands on us. They are neither so trivial as to merit removal and destruction, like packing crates, nor so significant that they impinge on our consciousness by being explicitly beautiful. Undemanding objects are often particularly agreeable; the wine bottles, guitars, and pipes seen in cubist paintings are attractive partly because they have a certain friendly appeal, different from mere inoffensiveness. Most such objects seem to belong to categories of use pertaining to pleasure and renewal: eating, drinking, making music. The telephone, when it is not presented to us as an instrument of efficiency, is sometimes advertised in a similar context of relaxation—but the association is not altogether convincing.

The emotional content we associate with any object depends on more than the object alone. Hidden associations may be revealed when one object is related to another, or otherwise taken out of its familiar context, or when even a single detail is removed or altered. If the resulting visual metaphor is sufficiently powerful, even the most ubiquitous artifact may be transformed into an object of emotional rather than practical utility: a work of art. These abrupt reversals or transformations of psychic energy were exploited with unrelenting humor by the Surrealists. René Magritte's painting of a room, dominated by a comb and bar of soap, ordinary in every respect except for their monstrous size, challenges our indifference to such commonplace objects, partly because the change of scale makes us assume the existence of giants, and partly because the objects seem to have taken over the ordinary world. Salvador Dali's images of limp, perhaps melting, timepieces, on the other hand, do not imply misshapen human beings but rather suggest a poetic metaphor on the nature of time. Morris Graves's fantastic drawings of chairs (p. 16) distort furniture styles in order to comment on European politics just before World War II.

Complex associations can also be exploited without changing the object itself, or indeed without the object being actually present. In Joan Miró's Portrait of a Dancer, the dancer is not pictured but is implied by the conjunction on a background of a...
real feather and a real hatpin; the title acts as a catalyst producing a third reality. Marcel Duchamp achieved an even more drastic manipulation of association by placing a urinal upright on a pedestal and giving it the title *Fountain*. Knowing that the object is not what it is called can be especially important when our associations are contradicted by a sustained pattern of behavior. An example is the famous sequence from the film *The Gold Rush*, in which Charlie Chaplin carefully prepares and consumes with great pleasure a meal consisting of a boot. But the sequence of moving images on the screen, however engaging, does not physically involve the viewer. This involvement is produced by Michelangelo Pistoletto’s painting, on a mirror, of a man with his back turned to the viewer (p. 34). The “unreal” man and the real viewer find themselves part of the same image.

However forceful pictorial images may be, they cannot compete with the violence done to our perceptions by transformations of actual objects. Meret Oppenheim’s cup, plate, and spoon covered with fur (p. 13), and Man Ray’s tack-studded iron (p. 28), force us physical associations of singular incompatibility. The effectiveness of these objects depends to some extent on our recognizing the originals within the transformation; knowing that they are, or were, an authentic cup and iron is necessary to a just appreciation of their new effectiveness.

In recent years the useful object has again been of compelling interest to artists and designers, but not everyone who has found a point of departure in an object has retained the object itself. The soft typewriter of Claes Oldenburg, for example, and the leaning chairs of Lucas Samaras, are not actual objects that have been transformed. They are rather portraits, or perhaps caricatures, of the originals. The transformed objects chosen for this exhibition have in common the fact that they were once of practical use. Each of them functioned with reasonable efficiency, and the transformations were not intended to enhance the objects in any conventional design sense. An exception is Bruno Munari’s clock (pp. 30-31), in which discs of colored plastic replace hands and numerals to make a kind of picture in motion in which time is deprived of its
5. Marcel Duchamp: Fountain. 1917. Readymade. Urinal, 18" high x 15½" wide x 12" deep. (Illustration of lost original)


urgency. The philosophical overtones of this transformation depend on heightening the familiar elegance of that industrial precision which invests a real clock with solemn authority. More often, a transformation removes an object entirely from the realm of design, sometimes with extraordinary fervor. A book, for example, is usually a carefully made object we are conditioned to handle with respect. Three examples of transformed books in the exhibition upset this response by acts of destruction. Lucas Samaras covers a book with pins and nails and inserts between its pages a razor, a knife, scissors, and a broken pane of glass (pp. 26-27); seldom has a book been more dangerous to open. Jasper Johns presents us with an open book (p. 24), but its pages are congealed in colored wax, and the print is all but obliterated, concealing the information we suppose the book to contain. Our desire to separate its pages is frustrated by its being enclosed in a glazed box, apparently to preserve it for posterity. John Latham's book (p. 25)—actually one book and parts of others—has burned and folded pages, and is forced open by a closed volume wedged between them like a hatchet; one book destroys another.

Household furnishings are almost as emotionally charged as books. Two of the four examples in the exhibition are chairs. One by Les Levine (p. 20) is completely concealed under a tautly stretched skin of shiny plastic, under which the splayed legs and arms of a captain's chair seem to be struggling to emerge. Fabio de Sanctis' chair (p. 19) is swathed in painted fiberglas, its baroque folds and dripping paint combining to suggest the decomposing shroud of a mummy. A similar entombment is produced by the copper plates nailed over a table-top radio by Tony Palladino (p. 33). The transformation of these three objects is brought about by covering them with an extraneous material which destroys their usefulness but presumably preserves the objects themselves. The mattress by Ralph Ortiz (p. 23), however, is transformed by outright destruction. Gutted by fire and doused with water, and resembling a mass of gray seaweed, it is perhaps the embodiment of a nightmare.

Less violent, and sometimes amusing, are those transformations which neither add, subtract, nor obliterate, but merely deform, like Janet Cooper's cluster of sagging milk bottles (p. 14) and Bruno Munari's gesturing forks (pp. 10-11). Of comparable humor are Man Ray's pipe with a permanent bubble (p. 18) and Preston McClanahan's glass overflowing with permanent foam (p. 21). Both transformations introduce images which suggest an ephemeral use while at the same time making such use impossible.

Even such relatively frivolous inventions have overtones of grim absurdity. Like many ideas and images current in the theatre, the transformed object is an apparition of everyday reality. For the twentieth century, it may be the most appropriate kind of still life.

Mildred Constantine
Arthur Drexler
Department of Architecture and Design
The Object Transformed
Bruno Munari: Untitled.
Drawing.
Habbah: Untitled.
1966. Silver forks and spoons, 24" long. Lent by Galerie Iris Clert, Paris
Meret Oppenheim: Untitled.
Janet Cooper: No Deposit, No Return.
1966. Glass milk bottles, 8 x 8". Lent by the artist
Karen Karnes: Untitled.
1965. Ceramic pitchers, 9½ x 22⅔ x 12¾".
Lent by the artist
Morris Graves: Roman Nightfall Piece.
1938. Pencil with pen and red ink on buff paper, 26⅞ x 21". The Museum of Modern Art, New York, purchase, 1942
Robert Rauschenberg: Bed.
1955. Combine with pillow and quilt, 74 x 31''.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Leo Castelli, New York
Man Ray: Ce qui nous manque à nous tous.
1925. Clay pipe and plexiglas bubble,
5 3/4 x 9 x 4 1/4". Collection Mr. and Mrs.
Burton Tremaine, Meriden, Connecticut
Fabio De Sanctis: The Designer’s Rest.
1963. Fiberglas and enamel paint on wood, 37 7/8 x 
22 3/8 x 20 7/8”. Collection ‘Officina Undici’—
(Fabio De Sanctis), Rome
Les Levine: Untitled.
1965. Thermo-plastic over captain’s chair,
$36\frac{1}{4} \times 21\frac{5}{8} \times 26\frac{3}{8}$". Lent by the Fischbach Gallery,
New York
Preston McClanahan: Untitled.
1966. Brandy glass and urethane foam, 8¼ x 7½ x 6¼". Lent by the artist
Wolfgang Paalen: Nuage articule.
1938. Umbrella covered with sponge, 20½ x 31½" (photograph only in exhibition).
Collection Madame Geo Dupin, Paris
Ralph Ortiz: Archeological Find #3.
Jasper Johns: Book.
John Latham: "Portraits of Illustrious Personages of Great Britain by Edmund Lodge. MDCCCL."
1962. Three books on board, 6 x 12 x 9". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Arthur A. Cohen, New York
Lucas Samaras: Untitled Sculpture.
1962. Book with pins, knife, scissors, razor, foil, and piece of glass, 5\frac{1}{2} \times 11\frac{3}{8} \times 8\frac{7}{8} \text{"}.
Collection Philip Johnson, New Canaan, Connecticut
Man Ray: Cadeau.
c. 1958. Replica made by the artist after original of 1921. Flatiron with tacks, $6 \times 4\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$". The Museum of Modern Art, New York, purchase, 1966
Kusama: Dress.
1964. Flannel, macaroni, and silver plastic paint,
52 x 35 x 2". Lent by the Castellane Gallery, New York
Bruno Munari: L'Ora X.
Olen Orr: Grand Union.
1965. Wax on paper bags, 25 1/2 x 15 x 13 3/8".
Private collection, New York
Tony Palladino: Radio is Dead!
1960. Copper and nails over table-top radio, 16½ x 13 x 9¾”. Lent by the artist
Michelangelo Pistoletto: Man with Yellow Pants.
Tony Palladino: S-Public Shelter.
1960. Paint on metal, 14 x 21".
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Ivan Chermayeff, New York
In dimensions, height precedes width and depth. All works are illustrated with the exception of catalog numbers 2, 3, 4, 9, 30.

|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|


| Iraqi, born 1928 in Bagdad. Studied painting and sculpture (primarily in metal). Left Middle East in 1955 for Paris, where he began working with materials such as chewing gum, pasteboard boxes, and papier mâché which “lend themselves endlessly to multiple transmutations.” Lives in Paris. |                                                                                                                                  |


| Japanese, born in Matsumoto, Japan. Has participated in group shows in United States, Japan, and Germany since 1955, and has had one-man shows in United States and Japan since 1952. |                                                                                                                                  |
JOHN LATHAM.


LES LEVINE.


MAN RAY.


PRESTON McCLANAHAN.

15. Untitled. 1966. Brandy glass and urethane foam, 8 ¼ x 7 ½ x 6 ¼”. Lent by the artist. III. p. 21.

BRUNO MUNARI.


MERET OPPENHEIM.

20. Untitled.

OLEN ORR.


RALPH ORTIZ.

22. Archeological Find #3.

WOLFGANG PAALEN.

23. Nuage articule.

TONY PALLADINO.

24. Radio is Dead!

25. S-Public Shelter.
1960. Paint on metal, 14 x 21". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Ivan Chermayeff, New York. Ill. p. 35.

MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO.
Italian, born 1933 in Biella, Italy. Studied in Turin. Worked until 1957 with his father as a restorer of paintings. Has had group and one-man shows since 1958, including a one-man show at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1966, and Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "Recent Acquisitions," April 1966.

26. Man with Yellow Pants.
ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG.

LUCAS SAMARAS.

FABIO DE SANCTIS.
Italian, born 1931 in Rome. Architect and interior designer. Studied architecture at Rome University. Designed Mogadishu Airport, Somaliland, and at present is building a hotel group and villas at Monte Argentario in the district of Grosseto, Italy.

UNKNOWN.
American.

27. Bed.
1955. Combine with pillow and quilt, 74 x 31". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Leo Castelli, New York. III. p. 17.


29. The Designer's Rest.

30. Untitled.