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# Det åskådliga och det bottenlösa

Tankar om konst och humaniora  
tillägnade

Margaretha Rossholm Lagerlöf

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## Further reflections on the performative experiences of artefacts for everyday use

*Torsten Weimarck*

The article may be seen as a sequel to my paper delivered at a conference on art historical subjectivity and methodology in Stockholm 1999, initiated by Margaretha Rossholm Lagerlöf. – Now I will try to move that analysis a little step further by discussing some problems concerning the more explicit *performative effects and experiences* of everyday technical objects and their occasionally strange visual expressions in relation to their evident role as handy utility articles or equipment. *Performative*, because I am especially interested in the *effects* upon the user or beholder, and how the expressions are transmitted into, and re-used, in an individually experienced universe.

It is well known in traditional aesthetics as well as in modern everyday experience, that an artefact, a building or spatial environment, intended for certain practical or social purposes, may even have other, sometimes quite different, visually and sensuously expressive qualities. They are connected to the physical and material characteristics of the objects, and sometimes apparently have little or nothing to do with the said functions of them. These sensuous qualities are often assigned to commodity aesthetic contexts of market competition, which, to say the least, could take on very peculiar visual characters. This is all obvious as long as we are talking about pieces of sculpture, design or handicraft by classical *virtuoso* artists as well as modernist or post-modernist star designers.

However, my focus now is not on those levels of intended aesthetic, decorative or fashionable qualities of objects, designed for artistic display or some visual entertainment, but rather on performative effects on the beholder by ordinary articles of everyday use and how the individual can experience or make use of such artefacts in his or her personal universe. Mostly, these processes are not quite apparent in work, neither when we are consciously perceiving an object, let alone when we are more aimlessly moving around in

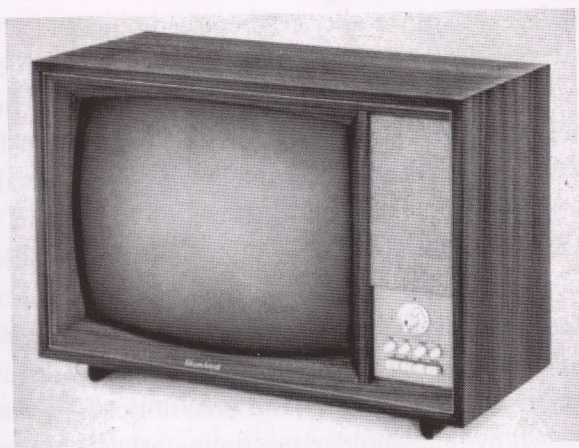


a visual environment, which may appear mostly technical or neutral to us, and when we, with more or less diffuse attention, perceive all the diverse formal expressions almost as a sort of *visual droning*. Sometimes we may experience a spatial environment in the form of a peculiar, sensuous mood, a certain, more or less trivial atmosphere, sometimes intensified up to a level of an irritating visual noise, partly concealed, but emanating from objects and environments. At the moment of perception these seem to have only a second-hand and more accidental connection to their practical or social functions, or to their more apparent qualities as commodity aesthetized objects.

At that particular level of sensuous communication, the object, first and foremost, appears as an objectively existing, physical thing, whose material qualities are visually mediated as well as individually experienced in a continuous flow of what might be characterized as our visual metabolism with the surrounding world. These physical qualities of expression may hardly concern the otherwise apparent utilitarian purpose of the object, but are tied to the shape and character of its form, material, colour, smell, weight, sound etc., and even to the visual appearance of the technological solutions and constructive details. As long as the object seems to express its practical, symbolic or decorative aim we may often not even notice how some transformations may be staged by the beholder, producing other performative levels of expression: there is an intrinsic tendency in all media to conceal itself *as media* and to transform its expressions and messages into a *second nature* of the apprehended object.

This intricate state of things may be concretized and elucidated by looking at such an ordinary object as – a TV set. This may be said to have two, principally different basic channels for visual transmissions: on the one hand, the mass media programmes of the separate TV-companies, on the other, the visual expression of the *device itself*. This expression is often more apparent when the TV is *not* on and being used in the intended, technical-communicative way. But then, what type of messages emanate from the design of such a mute machine, for the moment switched off and visually more silent, a machine which otherwise has quite a persistent, often vociferous manner of communication? – The switched off, mute and darkened object has now another, visually evident, rhetorical appearance, which nevertheless all the time seems to bear the turned on signal: *QUIET PLEASE: WE ARE ON THE AIR!* – What type of communication is this about and how is it possible to understand and

interpret these visual messages, which are continually transmitted in a partly imperceptible way? You may say that they are primarily transmitted *mimetically* (in a pre-Platonic sense) to the user as a sort of language of performance. It appears as a visual murmur, because it is rationally untranslatable, but it seems often to transmit some more or less important elements of complete current, group bound codes, without which you cannot find yourself socially and existentially comfortable.



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TV set *Standard*, designed by Norwegian designer Torbjørn Rygh 1962, contemporary photograph.

I will argue in favour of an understanding of these more invisible levels of object expressions as a sort of a sensuous – that is aesthetical – *language*, mimetically transmitted, which the beholder, willingly or not, is using in order to understand the world and her- or himself, thereby creating an individual truth of experienced life reality. That which is received, more or less unconsciously, does not, of course, consist of any statements or factual messages or



advice, but of a couple of expectations, possibilities, inclinations and codes, or visual systems of conventions: a pictorial equivalence to the grammar of verbal languages, but with much freer both morphology and syntax. It tells you how to do, or what is possible to do, how to understand and combine, how to perceive and experience, and how to form associations and fantasies. It contains a number of ways of seeing how reality can be illuminated and understood, and these are often expressed in some visual attitude, a style, or life style, a *vogue*.

Sensuous knowledge implies that there is a certain inclination and attitude to the object at an organic level of perception, that is the physiological level of our body which is directly in moving contact with the muscles, fibres, nerves, bones, organs, intestines etc. Of course the *practical* knowledge is sensuous and corporeal too, but then there seems even to be a certain connection to the rational faculties of the brain, which is hardly, or only indirectly the case when dealing with that sort of daydreaming, sensuous knowledge, to which I am referring here. The practical hands-on knowledge seems in comparison with this to be much more instrumental and directed towards certain aims and individual needs.

To make it quite clear, the aesthetic – sensuous – cognition constitutes a socially produced, corporeal knowledge, which offers a set of possible emotional feelings, of cognitive or bodily movements, a knowledge, which have been sedimented in almost physical ways of bodily reactions that are nearly impossible to resist: it is the physical response of the organs, which are continually demanded of us by the social, mental and existential situations we happen to be involved in.

In fact, this method of transmission of physical expression and sensuous knowledge was in Archaic Greece called *mimesis*, a term and concept that over the centuries has got a much narrower meaning of *figurative representation or imitation*, especially of the superficial, visually or audibly recognizable appearance of an object. In ancient times – that is before Plato – *mimesis* seems mainly to have been connected to mimicking *body movements* in the education of children, performed as dancing and singing, more or less closely associated to exercises and initiations in order to prepare the children for the adult world. The transfer of knowledge was performed physically through the exemplary power of highly differentiated body movements of the older generation, whose examples of *ways of being and doing* were more or less play-

fully imitated by the children. The basic meaning of *mimesis* is mimicking a physical movement and behaviour, and thereby creating a shape *in your own body* of an example that you have in front of your.

So, the communicated message concerns emotionally experienced elements of attitude, style, basic valuations and that system of language or code, which in this special social context is used to express it. It is a language before language, before the use of language. It is like the moment of the expectant, slightly noisy, playful, monotone tuning of the instruments of the orchestra before the concert, when the language of the music is tested, exercised and demonstrated, but not made use of: a tuning and forming process of the instruments, the musicians, and the audience.

Besides, this is a school of empathy too, because the imitation is in the typical case an elementary, corporeal mirroring and sensuous echoing response to the expressions of another body. An example is when we are talking with a person and supporting (or resisting support) him or her in a similar, imitative way in our own body, or when we are laughing or weeping with the actor or actress and empathically imitate and take over the person's delightful or difficult predicament in a screen play.

This mimetic reaction to a human body is primary and exemplary in a way that is infectious: it inspires and tempts imitation. But we can just as much trace the corresponding reaction even in our sensuous and associative responses to the qualities of *physical objects*, their expressions of formal composition and proportion, colour and material qualities of different kinds and the images and recollections which these objects may arouse within us and create the prerequisites for. (In the above-mentioned conference paper of mine, the narrative of the somewhat mystical wrist-watch that I had to buy for quite other reasons than time-measuring, may be seen as an example of such a mimetic performance.)

The individual, experiencing human being has the absolute precedence to interpretation, even if the mimetic-transmitted, historical, cultural and group-bound aesthetic codes to a certain extent restrict what is possible to think, feel and experience in a specific historical situation. This fact is of great importance, not because it might say anything about what is experienced as *beautiful*, but because it says something about how the experience of *the truth*, yes, that is, the experience of *the real*, may be created.



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My paper at the mentioned conference is published in Margaretha Rossholm Lagerlöf & Dan Karlholm (ed.), *Subjectivity and Methodology in Art History*, Eidos nr 8, Skrifter från Konstvetenskapliga institutionen vid Stockholms universitet, Stockholm 2003, pp. 59-67, esp. pp. 59-62. – My present article with its stronger emphasis on the performative aspects has also some connections to important observations in Margaretha Rossholm Lagerlöf's recent book *Inlevelse och vetenskap. Om tolkning av bildkonst*. Stockholm 2007, pp. 242-251. On *mimesis*, see: Władysław Tatarkiewicz, "Mimesis", *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, New York 1973-74, vol. 3, pp. 226-230. Also on the Internet: <http://etext.virginia.edu/cgi-local/DHI/dhi.cgi?id=dv3-27> – A modern, comprehensive account of the concept of *mimesis* can be found in Matthew Potolsky, *Mimesis*. New York and London 2006.