

Editorial

The State of Things

'It is no easy matter knowing your way around things', philosopher Vilém Flusser wrote in 1989. Our relationship towards simple, everyday objects is in fact complex and continuously changing. Even more so as we are surrounded by an increasing amount of virtual products, taking over functions previously performed by physical objects. Though the material world is in a state of transition, it will continue to surround and constitute us. To analyze the role of objects as they mediate between the individual and society, in both past and present times, is essential. It is through this lens, the prism of the everyday artefact, that *Kunstlicht* seeks to understand how cultures can be analysed.

How do objects relate to us? And what do man-made objects tell us about the way societies are shaped? In our daily lives we encounter numerous products, things and objects. Whereas we use these terms here indiscriminately, these definitions all have their own connotations. In order to denote our relationship to artificial objects in a way that suggests an archaeological interest, this issue is called Artefacts.

The academic field of design cultures is about studying objects and how they are conditioned by the time and place in which they have been designed, produced, and used. Surprisingly few articles have investigated how specific ordinary objects reveal larger social phenomena. One of the main challenges of the discipline today is the endless scope of everyday artefacts. How should we define our object of study? Should our research focus

on the object in general, a specific type or model, or on one special object? How can we apply a specific analysis of one particular object to more general phenomena? As there is no beaten track to follow for analysing design, this issue hopes to contribute to what John Woodham wrote in 1995 about the academic discipline of design: 'Its methods and approaches are continually appraised, boundaries change and are occasionally crossed with positive results.'

Together with J.C. Gimeno-Martínez, a selection was made of new essays departing from singular objects. The first article, by Gimeno-Martínez, serves as an introduction, investigating the relation between design history and material culture studies, and argues why it is necessary to have more object-centred research. Another perspective is offered by Timo de Rijk, with whom we discussed his favourite ordinary objects of study, such as tape recorders and Chinese restaurants. De Rijk predicts a booming, rose-coloured future for the field of design, if researchers would focus more on ordinary phenomena rather than solely on well-known, revered designer's chairs and the like.

The specific artefacts dealt with in the eight essays included here range from the very ordinary to the more exclusive. One could say a chair is merely a chair in all situations, but Jetske de Groot and Marlies Noijens prove this wrong, by considering the life span of two iconic chairs, respectively the ubiquitous white Monobloc and Maarten van Severen's acclaimed .03. While the first is often

considered an anonymous product, the second is better known in spheres of high design. These articles reveal what is common about a design chair and what is designed in a common chair, thereby questioning the supposed deviation between design and designed objects. The biography and agency of objects is further examined by Roel Griffioen, who traces the life events of an artwork through specific stages of its existence.

Just as artefacts function as silent witnesses to ancient times in ethnographic museums, the objects studied by Robbert van Strien, Selçuk Balamir, and Sil Krol can be seen as witnesses to a turbulent age. Moreover, they perform a decisive, active role, as in the case of the AK-47 assault rifle and the surveillance camera, which are omnipresent in the modern world. Other objects appear to be the vehicles of carefully composed messages, as Souwie de Wijn and Rosa te Velde demonstrate. Uncovering Moleskine notebooks' storytelling quality, De Wijn reveals one of today's most important marketing mechanisms. Te Velde exposes the rhetoric of Finnishness through an analysis of Iittala's Ultima Thule series, and demonstrates how national identity is actively constructed.

Five different artists have made contributions to this issue. A work from her *Color Studies* series by Sara Cwynar adorns the cover of this issue, jointly with its mirrored equal on the back. The New York-based photographer, graphic designer and collage artist shows our image culture in an organized and manipulated form, as constantly reconstructing constituents of a shared world: photography as artefact.

Photographer Anna de Jong has captured the discussed artefacts on the premises of a barren edifice, showing how even context-ridden locations provide connotations and meaning when combined with objects familiar to our eyes. Abandoned by human presence, the photos emphasize the idea that these objects, once produced and consumed, are now subject to our archeological interest.

Processing Authorities is an ongoing project by Amsterdam-based artist Diego Tonus, who took the collection of gavels owned by the International Institute for Social History (IISH) as point of departure for a performative research practice. These ceremonial hammers serve as a

symbol of authority and as a 'tool' for decision-making within countless committees, clubs and societies.

Critic and artist Tom Holert contributed two stills from his video installation *The Labours of Shine* (2012), in which the 'loss of substance to surface' is investigated by reconstructing the very substance of surface. Holert takes a variety of objects, from a shoe shining standard to Brancusi sculptures, which enable him to reveal the representation and repression of social conflicts.

Furthermore, a number of recent projects by visual artist Sil Krol are included. These works are conscious of the perceptive power of his object of research and are rich in social critique. In addition, Krol contributes an autonomous article considering the culture of surveillance prevalent today.

Artefacts is much indebted to the production-consumption-mediation model (see page 4). Not only is the PCM model embedded in much of the research published in *Artefacts*, it also informed the unusual compositional structure of this issue. The sequence of the sections and articles is based on their (symbolic) moment of production in order to foreground the conditions of producing a journal. In giving the reader the choice to decide upon a specific reading order, the consumption of a publication is made tangible. The artefact you are reading now is a materialized mediation itself — of the artefacts discussed and the research they resulted in. The paper-form mediation is in turn mediatized on our website and in social media, reflecting on the issue with additional content.

We hope the unfamiliar structure of this *Kunstlicht* issue encourages you to consider the journal as an ordinary, curious object of study in itself. This issue, being written entirely in English, serves as an experiment. Dutch versions of some of the articles will be available on our website.

We would like to thank Javier Gimeno-Martínez for compiling this issue with us. Furthermore we would like to warmly welcome Masha van Vliet to the editorial board and Judi Haynes-Smart as proofreader.

**On behalf of the editorial board,
Ragna Manz and Rosa te Velde**