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Matafunctional/MetaFictional Objects

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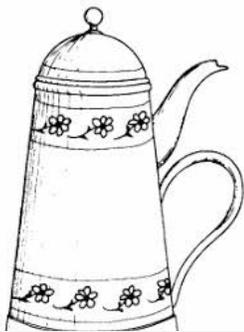
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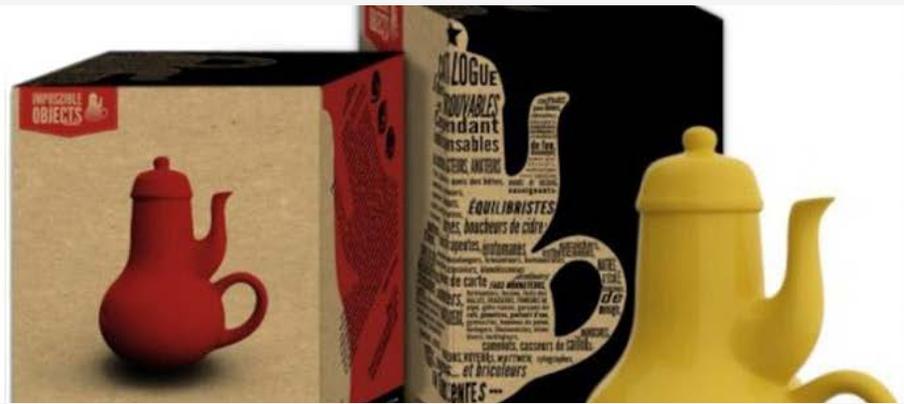
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MATAFUNCTIONAL / METAFICTIONAL OBJECTS

Paolo Cardini

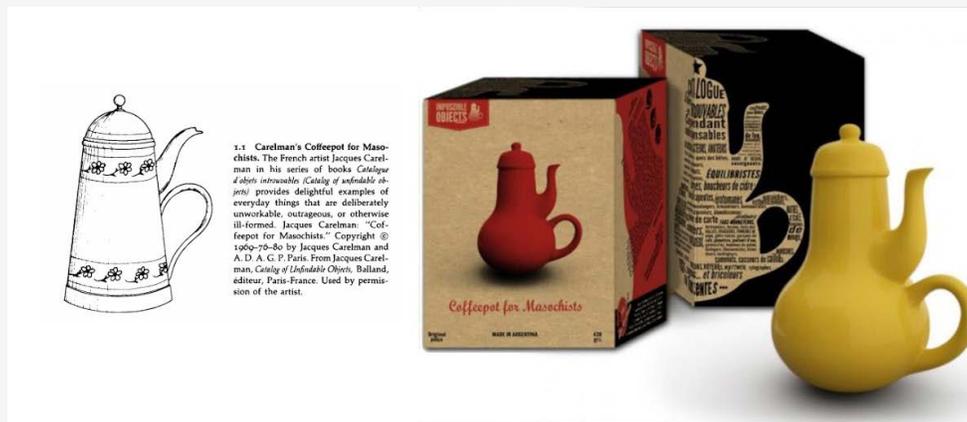


1.1 Carelman's Coffeepot for Masochists. The French artist Jacques Carelman in his series of books *Catalogue d'objets introuvables (Catalog of unfindable objects)* provides delightful examples of everyday things that are deliberately unworkable, outrageous, or otherwise ill-formed. Jacques Carelman: "Coffeepot for Masochists." Copyright © 1969-76-80 by Jacques Carelman and A. D. A. G. P. Paris. From Jacques Carelman, *Catalog of Unfindable Objects*, Bailand, éditeur, Paris-France. Used by permission of the artist.



Few years ago I heard the story about the founder of eBay Pierre Omidyar who, while operating in an early version of the platform, put on sale a broken laser pointer. Though Pierre was just using the item to test the system, he sold it for \$14.83. When he contacted the winning bidder to ask if he understood that the pointer was broken, the buyer simply replied he was a collector of broken laser pointers, proving in fact the validity of his business idea. This anecdote caught my attention, not much for the umpteenth confirmation of how odd human beings are, but for a deeper reflection on the real value of non-functional objects. The Italian title for Donald Norman's bestseller on usability, *The Design of Everyday Things* (Norman 1988), was *La Caffettiera del Masochista* ("Coffeepot for masochists"), named from the picture on the book's cover, the

French artist Jacques Carelman's coffeepot in which the handle is on the same side as the spout. From a semiotic point of view we just assume the object is not working, signifier and signified are in this case boldly declaring what, how and which purpose the object is supposed to satisfy. In reality what we've learned by the switch from classical to cognitive ergonomic, and what Carelman's piece title suggests, is that functions can lie in emotions, environments and social relations as much as on geometrical proportions and mere physical comfort.



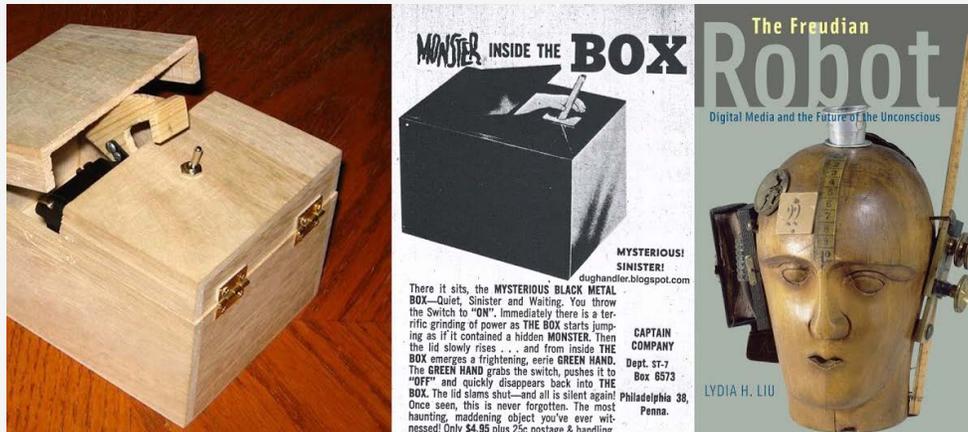
Objects can be defined as the sum of physical and social rules (Proni 2002); the form of the woman's bicycle, for instance, was designed to respect the social rule requiring women to wear long skirts and conceal their legs. Function - represented by the frame's shape - and social rules - in the guise of woman's dignity, are here directly connected. Breaking the natural link between physical and social, and approaching them independently, more complex constructs can be fostered and unexpected land discovered. The *Art Furniture Collection* (Boym 2006) is an example of this dichotomy's misalignment. Chairs and benches are made by real art pieces where the painted canvases have been transformed into common upholstery. Social rules would deny you sitting on a painting, turning these functional furniture in non-functional objects; on the contrary, if the priority is given to the act of sitting,

the piece of art is, in this case, the one destined to become non-functional.



Often non-functional objects are described as useless or, even worse non-sense; following new parameters, these adjectives can eventually overlap and contribute to enrich the debate on objects' utilitarian or philosophical nature. In the 50's Marvin Minsky, artificial-intelligence expert and professor emeritus at MIT, gave birth to a small box with an on/off switch and a hinged lid. When the switch was turned on a lever pops out turning the switch off, and then retreats. The machine's sole purpose was apparently to turn itself off after being turned on. The device was named "The Useless Machine", explicitly declaring its non-functionality. During the 60's a version of the same machine, called "The Monster Inside the Box", appeared on the market. In a creepy attempt to fill uselessness up with narrative: the function was restored thanks to a naughty monster playing jokes. A different interpretation of the same back-to-the-function effort can be found on the book "The Freudian Robot," where Columbia University professor Lydia H. Liu wrote that the useless machine reflects an "intuitive grasp of a fundamental problem of the unconscious that Freud has termed the death drive." In both cases there is a sort of resistance to futility that triggers some questions about the realism

of non-functionality. Both functions, added at a later stage, are symbolic and set the dialogue far from the physical world (the monster in the box clearly looks at fictional environments while the unconscious Freudian theories are referring to a mere psychological and existentialist context). Reality and Fiction become indeed part of the equation together with functionality and non-functionality.



Baudrillard classifies everyday objects as functional, non-functional and meta-functional. His treatment of non-functional or "marginal" objects focuses on antiques and the psychology of collecting, while the meta-functional category extends to the useless, the aberrant and even the "schizofunctional" (Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 1968). The meta-functional sphere, describes objects completely taken over by the imaginary suggesting a strong relation between reality and fiction and how in "hyperrealistic" situations "the signs of the real" are substituted for the real.

Baudrillard's work is frequently associated with postmodernism and is significant that Heinrich Klotz asserted that the matter of post-modernism is "not just function but fiction" marking the predominant role of imaginary and speculations for the years to come. Upgrading the initial given definition of non-functional objects and embracing then the more complex and articulated description of meta-functional objects, a new typology of

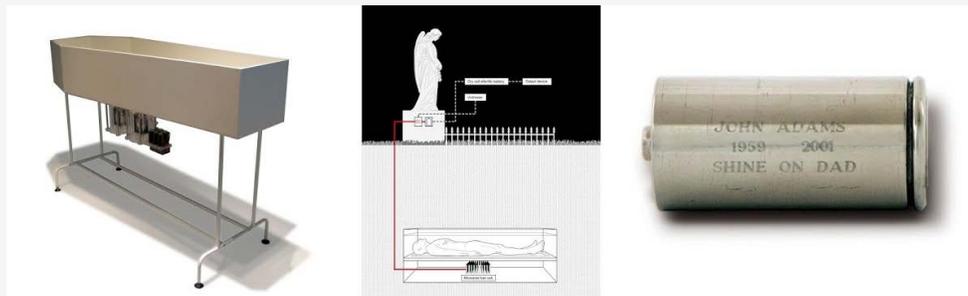
functionalism can be recognized in fictional context. *The MacGuffin Library* (Noam Toran 2008) is a design fiction project based on the production of objects without a clear and declared function but to be used as prompts for film synopses. Hitchcock coined the definition *MacGuffin* to describe cinematic plot devices, usually objects, able to set and keep the story in motion despite lacking intrinsic importance. One of the most interesting pieces of this collection is a 3d printed brit-style teapot with a Nazis' eagle-plus-swastika decoration on top; the hidden scenario suggested by this particular MacGuffin was about a fictitious Adolf Hitler, after the conquest of the entire Europe, taking residency at Buckingham Palace, appointing Princess Margaret his bed warmer, Churchill his butler and starting a process to pacify the English population. Here the object is present but is non-functioning mechanically - you cannot make tea with it -, it is non-functioning as souvenir or memento – it talks about an event that never happened -, but is actually meta-functioning as real artifact - been produced and physically present -, and it is *meta-fictional* – not fully fictional neither fully real.



Looking at systems engineering something similar can be found.

Functional requirements, in this specific context, define specific behavior or functions while a non-functional requirement is a requirement that specifies criteria to judge the operation of a system. Functional requirements respond to what the system "shall do" and, on the other hand, non-functional requirements respond to what the system "shall be". Focusing on the "be" and using the "do" as a prompt to serve the "be" is what is partially happening in the fictional design world. In Design Fiction objects are often used as prompts or "diegetic prototypes" (Sterling 2011) and their speculative functions, or non-functions, are just mediums to understand and highlight deeper social implications.

Back to the relation between physical attributes and social constrains, the possibility to disconnect Functions from any preconceived socio-political-economical constrain enables the creation of brand new connection and a new meanings. The *Afterlife* device (Auger-Loizeau 2009) converts the chemical potential of dead bodies into usable electrical energy. The function, materialized into a power storage device, has been separated from the contextual limit of present religious and ethical perspectives. *Afterlife* used fiction to improve the level of acceptance of a functional idea covering it under a meta-functional veil and setting the scenario in a place suspended between impossible and real, the meta-fictional space.



The peculiar evolutionary process that sees objects passing from being functional, non-functional, meta-functional to finally

incorporate a meta-fictional nature is only part of the complex system that manages our relation with products. This body of definitions is not vanishing when a new one is introduced; they keep living side-by-side making our understanding and ability to decode and differentiate their meanings every time more difficult.

