Verb-Things:
Changing the Conversation

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For Q,
My patient, loving and supportive husband.

Also many thanks to my advisors, friends, faculty, and technicians who have been essential guides throughout this process.
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The way we communicate has a direct impact on our impressions of the world this thesis argues that the various forms of abstraction represented by language and the focus on objectivity in development of explicit knowledge have created the impression that the world of inanimate things is a static one. Through both text and furniture objects, this thesis proposes a metaphor re-languaging of the way we understand our objects, from nouns to verbs as a means to enhance our interactions with them and through them with ourselves and others.

Abstract

The way we communicate has a direct impact on our impressions of the world this thesis argues that the various forms of abstraction represented by language and the focus on objectivity in development of explicit knowledge have created the impression that the world of inanimate things is a static one. Through both text and furniture objects, this thesis proposes a metaphor re-languaging of the way we understand our objects, from nouns to verbs as a means to enhance our interactions with them and through them with ourselves and others.
Introduction

We are disconnected from everything: the material world, the natural world, each other and even ourselves. Almost daily there is a new study suggesting that this gadget or that habit is responsible for driving us further away, further inward, and forcing our withdrawal. This thesis argues that these ‘usual suspects’ are not necessarily to blame, that the root cause is not our technology or our lifestyles specifically, these are merely symptoms. Instead it suggests that this current predicament is the inevitable conclusion of a system that was set into motion long ago as we began to articulate the world. As we separated the world into nouns and verbs, subject, object and action, we implied a subtle but persistent distinction between activity and thing.

The struggles throughout the history of science illustrate for us that subjects are not capable of objectivity and conversely, objects are not capable of subjectivity. Activity is the bridge between them, the commonality needed for a shared understanding. Subjects and objects, people and things are all active. It is through an understanding and experience of this activity that there can be dialogue between us and them. This thesis proposes a metaphoric re-languaging of our objects, from nouns to verbs, and thusly seeks to enhance our interactions with them. It asks, if our objects can communicate their activity, if they can evolve and change with us and through our engagement with them, can we form a kind of dialogue with the things in our world? Can we foster a greater connection to them and through them with ourselves and others?

Notes on the Text:
The footnotes are intended to be read with the main text. They serve as support for the material presented as well as an opportunity for multiple layers of conversations to occur concurrently within a single document.

The metaphor of Verbs has been selected for its immediate and obvious associations with time. Verbs are contrasted against Nouns and not adjectives, adverbs, etc., because of their designation in Latin as the two necessary components of sentences. The categorical ambiguity of Gerund Phrases (verbs used as nouns) and Verbification (nouns used as verbs) highlights the tensions created by the classical distinction between verbs and nouns.

The methodology of this exploration borrows Stuart Walkers notion of propositional design. “The resulting artifacts which are effectively questions-in-form, exists within a continual process of exploration, debate, and knowledge development.”(Walker 2013, p 448)
Part 1: An Object

Object, noun  "Originally: something placed before or presented to the eyes or other senses. Now (more generally): a material thing that can be seen and touched."

Object, verb  "to present or offer in support of an argument; to bring forward as a reason, ground, or instance, or as a proof of something."

-ive, suffix  "with the sense 'having a tendency to, having the nature, character, or quality of, given to some action.'"
I know that I am not a category. 
I am not a thing - a noun. 
I seem to be a verb, 
an evolutionary process - 
an integral function of the universe.

- Buckminster Fuller

The small unassuming book, I Seem to be a Verb, by Buckminster Fuller, is a peculiar kind of object. To engage with the book is an interactive and ongoing process, it is non-sequential, visual, at times opaque and mysterious; nearly impossible to take in all at once, its clarity lies in vignettes, with the impressions of larger ideas. It resists attempts to sit down and read it for any long period of time. Instead it requires a lengthy, but casual relationship that unfolds over months and years of small interactions. I doubt I have even read every page; there are perhaps, one or two left to discover.

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The book begins with the premise that Fuller seems to be a verb and not a noun providing a useful metaphor for a world made up of activity. The way our language describes the world has the inevitable consequence of creating subtle assumptions about reality. The idea of verbs not nouns - that things are a process, ongoing, never static -- is the idea that extends throughout my practice across mediums and scales. It led me to Alfred North Whitehead and Process Philosophy, Lars Spuybroek and Sympathy, Jane Bennet and Material Agency, to scrap yards full of vibrant, rusty metal and to hours spent at the edge of the sea watching plants ebb and flow with the waves. Typically nouns serve as the primary way we denote things. Instead I propose (with the help of those mentioned above) that our phenomenal world actually consists of accumulated experiences, of verbs.

Verbs 1 Not Nouns 2

1. ‘Verb’ according to The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics
“One of a class of lexical units whose characteristic syntactic role is as a predicate or predicator and which is characteristically that of words denoting actions or processes: e.g. run, make, melt.

2. Noun’ according to The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics
“One of a class of words characterized by members denoting concrete entities, whose basic role in syntax is in phrases representing arguments of a verb: e.g. dog or tree; also words such as music or anger which, though not denoting concrete entities, have the same or similar roles in syntax.”
By definition, Nouns are “concrete entities”, which implies a certain stasis. The things to which they refer can be modified yet their basic essence relies on an unchangeable form. This basic form is preserved, untainted by associations of time, fresh and ready to be deployed again. The way we describe our world, through language, has the inevitable consequence of creating certain assumptions about reality.

An extreme example of the implications of nouns, can be found in the short story by J.G. Ballard, The Overloaded Man. Faulkner, the main character of the story, abstracts his world in increasingly extreme ways, eventually completely divorcing the objects around him from any associations with the real. These entities, including people, are then envisioned only in their most basic conceptual forms and are devoid of motion, relationship, and actions. They lose all reference to meaning. The ultimate consequence of this complete abstraction is the eradication of life. The story ends with Faulkner murdering wife, who he sees only as a collection of static forms that lack agency and can be arranged by him. (Ballard, 2009 pg 253) The murder is followed by his own suicide as he attempts to completely disassociate himself from the physical world.

The story serves as a potent fable about a world consisting only of nouns, static things; a world that common sense and experience tell us cannot exist. Verbs provide the missing component; they describe activity and relationships between things. Nouns depend on verbs to give them life; alone they cannot act. Verbs are required to tell the truth of their existence. Verbs have a tense, they are intertwined within time, inseparable from it and thus verbs are a better representation of the real. The conceptualization of things, needs to be through action and activity. Yet we tend to rely on nouns as the primary representation of things in the world and thus we are left with the lingering impression that there is some aspect of the natural world that exists as an abstract and lifeless place.

To better capture the concept of a lively world we may need to consider a shift in thinking from noun-things (things that are) to verb-things (things that are becoming). Metaphysics is an area within philosophy that is primarily concerned with understanding what and how things exist.

3. “When a language forces its speakers to pay attention to certain aspects of the world each time they open their mouths or prick up their ears, such habits of speech can eventually settle into habits of mind with consequences for memory, or perception, or associations, or even practical skills.” (Deutscher 2010)

4. “Looking through the surface of the water six inches above his face, he watched the blue disk of sky, cloudless and undisturbed, expanding to fill his consciousness. At last he has found the perfect background, the only possible field of ideation. An absolute continuum of existence uncontaminated by material excrescences. Steadily watching it, he waited for the world to dissolve and set him free.” (Ballard, 2009)

5. There do not exist things made but only things in the making, not states that remain fixed but only states in a process of change.” Bergson quoted in Sympathy of Things (Spuybroek 2011) To really begin to address the problems that the fixity implied by nouns creates and the poignancy of Fuller’s insight at the start of this paper it is important to move beyond metaphors.
in the world. There are many metaphysical branches and theories but the most interesting collection of ideas for a conversation about verb-things is found under the umbrella of Process Philosophy.

Process Philosophy focuses on time and experience as essential characteristics of existing. It is a philosophy focused on becoming (in direct opposition to being). It is in essence a phenomenology of change. According to its tenets, everything is fundamentally processual in nature. ‘Things’ are not the discreet, independent substances that they are often thought of as being. Instead they are an ‘occasion’ in a process of becoming; they are processes which are themselves a manifold of processes. Process Philosophy is not trying to suggest that we are seeing the world incorrectly, it is more trying to clarify that our interpretation of what we see is imprecise. Some of the more granular impacts of time tend to be excluded when thinking about inanimate things in the world. We see a chair in a coffee shop and unless it is acted upon by a force outside itself, we do not necessarily notice its transitions and changes. Process Philosophy makes the case that the chair itself is not so passive. Since nothing in the world exists outside of time, to exist is to transition from one moment to the next; the chair is actively engaged in its continual existence, and that existence and therefore activity is processual in nature.

Within Whiteheadian Process Philosophy the world is explicitly temporal. For Whitehead time is both cumulative and reproductive: “nothing can ever purely and simply recur, because of the ‘cumulative character of time.’ Every event once it has taken place, adds itself to the past that weighs upon all subsequent events.” (Shaviro 2010) Novelty and creativity are central themes within Whitehead’s philosophy, and the idea of the past adding to the present ensures that there is always something unique. A Whiteheadian world is one of dynamic relations and change in which nothing is static, everything is becoming and there is always something new. This view of world is very similar to Buckminster Fuller’s, the primary difference being that within Whitehead’s framework (and borrowing Fuller’s phrasing), there are no nouns; everything organic and inorganic alike seems to be a verb.

6. This important distinction targets a major divide within philosophy discourses. Being is often thought of as a primarily Heideggerian notion and the foundation of many of the substance- and object-focused philosophies. Becoming is specifically associated with philosophies of process. It also appears again and again throughout most literature concerned with describing the qualities of things. "Shifting attention from being to becoming can undermine seemingly obvious assumptions about thingness." (Daston, 2004)

7. Nicholas Rescher summarizes the basics of process philosophy as: "(1, 2) The characteristic feature of process philosophy is its stress on the primacy of activity - and on the range of associated factors such as time, change, innovation and so forth. It maintains that these conceptions are not just necessary but even basic to our understanding of the world." (Rescher, 1996)

8. For the immediate discussion, ‘we’ refers to humans and human perception and attention in a very generalized sense. Whether or not we notice changes in things caused by time has many
In Objectivity, Lorraine Daston chronicles the origins of scientific objectivity and its contentious relationship to subjectivity and empirical data derived from individual experience. In its pursuit of developing and discovering “truths” about the world, scientists beginning in the 18th century began abstracting examples of natural world, trying to create clearly defined types and discrete categories into which all things would fit, their aim to show nature as it “truly is” (Daston, 2007). Throughout the emergence of these various movements, scientists continued to oscillate between abstraction and specificity in effort to define and categorize the world; all the while they succeeded in driving a bigger wedge between the subjective experience and the idea of the “truth” of the world.

The ‘structural objectivists’ are particularly guilty of this. Their approach to the complexity of individuals was to further abstract the natural world from verbal or pictorial representations into numbers. Numbers offered them a completely objective system that was intended to reveal the true underlying structure of our world. The trouble with defining the world in numerical terms is their fixity; numbers as signifiers outside of equations and systems, are even more static and unchanging than nouns. The number 2 can only ever reference two of some unit or thing. They are fully abstracted representations twice removed from any actual thing in the world.

To fully understand the impact that science has played in widening the divide between action and thing (verb and noun), we need to examine the aims of science in addition to its methods. The imposed objectivity of scientific methods are all in service of generating facts that communicate a truth about the world. Within the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Wittgenstein states, “1. The world is all that is the case, 1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not things.” It is toward an understanding of what facts are that we must turn to next.
11. The things to which numbers refer, if they are intended to refer to any actual phenomena can only do so through being designated using nouns. The nouns act as an additional barrier between the thing in the world and concept being communicated through numbers. Perhaps the initial dislike most children feel when learning how to work with “word problems” reflects an instinctive resistance to this additional separation from experienced reality.

12. “In the conventions of the intellectual world we now inhabit there is no item of knowledge so solid as a matter or fact”, “matters of fact are held to be the passive result of holding a mirror up to reality.” (Shapin 2011, pg 23)

13. Turning to Wittgenstein and symbolic logic is useful here since the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus is primarily concerned with proving the possibility of language to communicate true statements about the world. He felt that symbolic logic, an extreme abstraction of language, could provide the necessary framework to prove this truth, though in his later works he contradicts this notion.
Language is dynamic - it changes and shifts over time; meanings evolve. ‘Fact’, a word now almost exclusively thought of as unbending, unchanging truth – the only constant in a world in flux – has been misinterpreted through the sciences in its pursuit of objectivity. Fact, originally from the Latin Factum once had a real almost tangible and grounded relationship to the physical world; the literal definition is “The act or process of making, doing, or performing something.” (OED, 2015, fact) In many ways, facts were once a narrative of process, a diegetic act. In its current interpretation, a fact is now memetic, an abstract representation, an imitation, of the world. The stripping of variation, the singularity of experience and relationships within time in favor of the certainty of abstraction has removed this grounding from facts. They no longer tell the story of the world as it is. Instead facts represent the world in a way that it can never be, removed from the occasion (time) and lacking in the variations and distinguishing qualities that mark real things.

This reduction to essential generalities, quiddity, was necessary in many ways to get us where we are technologically. “This is because to live, humans need to interpret the world reductively as a series of fixed objects, a need reflected in the rhetorical role assigned to the word ‘material’. As a noun or adjective ‘material denotes some stable or rock-bottom reality…” (Bennet 2010) We have however reached a point where we can add the variable complexity, the haecceity, of a world in motion, made up of verbs and singularities, back into our facts—to once again consider activity and doing a necessary component of the ‘truth’ of our world. When we start to examine Wittgenstein’s statements about facts in combination with the original definition, we can begin to create a case for a world made out of stories of doing, making and performing, of the combined narratives of verb-things.

14. Diegesis is “a narrative; a statement of the case.” (OED 2015, diegesis)

15. It is also interesting to note that Wittgenstein makes a distinction between facts and things and later goes on to include “3.142 Only facts can express a sense, a set of names cannot”. The notion that facts - doing - best express a sense of the world and not “things” or “a set of names” - nouns - seems to emerge in keeping with Fuller’s metaphor of verbs.
**Arti-factum**

This experiment began as a way to work with the natural structure of wood to highlight the activity embodied within the grain of the wood.

Blocks of wood were submerged in a dye bath until the dye was able to saturate the entire piece. As each block was removed from the dye bath, the results of the experiment were recorded on fact sheets, the first eight of the forty-three tests accompany the previous text section. The following pages present these sheets adjacent to the dye subjects. These abstract forms create a fingerprint-like identity system and preserve some of the activity found within experiments process through the double stamp recording both the occurrence and an evolution over time. Upon a closer inspection and comparison of the prints and their source, patterns start to emerge. The prints can be read to gain an understanding of the qualities of the wood blocks that created them. Areas of heartwood, sap wood, face grain, end grain, knots and other features are all visible. Each one is a unique expression of activity and process.

*Artifact*

A.1 A. An object made or modified by human workmanship, as opposed to one formed by natural processes.

A.2 A spurious result, effect, or finding in a scientific experiment or investigation, esp. one created by the experimental technique or procedure itself. *(OED 2015, Artifact)*

*Fact*

Etymology: < classical Latin *factum* deed, action, event, occurrence, achievement, mischief, real happening, result of doing, something done, in post-classical Latin also thing that has really occurred or is actually the case,...* *(OED 2015, Fact)*
Interlude
“One way to investigate the instability of things is to ‘misplace’ them in full sight.”
- Laurel Thatcher Ulrich
Both language and science have, perhaps unintentionally, collaborated to create the impression of a world in stasis. In the attempt of science to explicitly define the natural world into static facts and abstract numbers it has silenced the potential dialogue with a dynamic world of verb-things. One way to reopen this conversation employs aid from an unlikely source, Misinterpretation.

To misinterpret generally means providing a wrong or faulty interpretation and further, to interpret is to translate or explain a concept or idea. Often the notion of misinterpretation evokes negative associations and it may seem more palatable to talk about these as ‘reinterpretations’, however that would be imprecise. When applied to verbs, the prefix ‘re-’ means “back to the original place, again, anew, once more, also with a sense of ‘undoing’.” Reinterpretation is much more of an exercise in revision. Its goal is not the creation of something entirely new, instead it drives at a more exacting and precise interpretation within the original meaning. It is not the taking of things completely out of context, it aims at providing a better meaning within its existing context.

Misinterpretation is something else entirely. When applied to verbs the prefix ‘mis-’ means “bad, wrong,.”. It is also notable that its etymological root means “to change”. Misinterpretation changes meaning. If you are trying to communicate the original intent of an idea, to change its meaning would most certainly be the wrong way to go about it. However if the goal is to create new meanings, shift contexts, and provide a different understanding, then misinterpretation with its roots in change might be exactly the right way to proceed in this conversation about ever changing things; first though we need to understand what they are saying.

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16. interpret: “To expound the meaning of (something abstruse or mysterious); to render (words, writings, an author, etc.) clear or explicit; to elucidate; to explain. Formerly, also, To translate (now only contextually, as included in the general sense)” (OED 2015, interpret)

17. misinterpret, v. trans. “To interpret wrongly, misunderstand; to draw a wrong inference from.” (OED 2015, misinterpret)

18. “Re- 1. With the general sense of ‘back’ or ‘again’... a. Prefixed to ordinary verbs of action (chiefly transitive) and to derivatives from these, sometimes denoting that the action itself is performed a second time, and sometimes that its result is to reverse a previous action or process, or to restore a previous state of things.” (OED 2015, re-,prefix)

19. “mis- ...and others believing that it may be cognate with Sanskrit mith- to oppose, contend, ...Old Church Slavonic mite alternately, mibosi, mitussu mutually; the Indo-European base common to these Sanskrit and Slavonic words is regarded by some as an extension of the Indo-European base meaning ‘to change or exchange’” (OED 2015, mis-,prefix)
“The real skill of the practitioner lies not in the skilled concealment but in the skilled revelation of skilled concealment”

Michael Taussig
Part 2: **Object, Verb-Thing.**

**Object, n** “Originally: something placed before or presented to the eyes or other senses. Now (more generally): a material thing that can be seen and touched.”

**Object, v** “to present or offer in support of an argument; to bring forward as a reason, ground, or instance, or as a proof of something.”

-**ive, suffix** “with the sense ‘having a tendency to, having the nature, character, or quality of, given to some action.’”
In 1977, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi conducted a study designed to understand what things we cherish most in our homes and why. Amongst the many categories of things cited, his study found furniture to be the type of thing most often mentioned. That furniture has special meaning, that is it something we cherish is not really that surprising. After all furniture defines a room, gives it character and denotes its function. It is what “makes a house a home” without its presence, places feel uninhabited and empty. Furniture allows us to dwell comfortably and inhabit the spaces we make, within the US, it is a sign of achievement and it has an implied permanence that signals that we have settled in a place. When we move, we typically take the furniture with us and most of us are likely to have a story that involves carting a beloved, yet heavy or unwieldly piece of furniture into a too small apartment or up too many flights of stairs. The study also asked respondents to discuss the reasons behind their choices and each example given highlights highly personal nature of our relationship with our furniture. It is a relationship that evolves and deepens as we grow older, from a focusing on utility as children, to developing into a more complex narrative built on memory and experiences as the story of our lives unfold with the piece. Throughout the examples given, one theme seemed to be constant, that of activity and change. Some pieces mentioned where painted and refinished with each new owner. Others were less formal pieces of furniture and instead were cobbled together components, like doors that served as impromptu desks and tables, the person’s agency in the assemblage sufficient to inspire a connection. Creating a shared narrative, a dialogue between people and things allows us to see something within the objects that we can relate to. From the embodiment of memories and experiences, to avatars of people we are close to, furniture is well suited to develop these connections. Perhaps it is the very personal nature of objects designed quite specifically in response to our own form; their shapes are supportive of our bodies, habits and tasks and reflective of our cultures and ideals. Engaging with furniture engages
the body and within furniture there is tremendous potential to establish a deep emotional connection between people and things. However, while this potential exists and it’s probability heightened for furniture, according to a 2011 study conducted by the EPA,24 we are discarding more furniture every year. There is a growing body of research that suggests that the reason for this lies in the failure of these objects to inspire the kind of emotional connection that was so often mentioned by the respondents to the Csikszentmihalyi study. Jonathan Chapman, author of Emotionally Durable Design, finds that more and more objects are failing to establish a lasting narrative. He found that the development of a narrative, a shared story between us and our things was essential to the development of an emotional connection but that many times the interest in connection is never sparked or dies out too quickly before we become entangled with the object.25 Without that initial attraction and interest to encourage repeated encounters and without the depth of story needed for those encounters to remain meaningful, we are never able to traverse the distance from generic thing, to our thing; we are never able to feel the activity of things within our lives. According to Chapman’s research and the EPA study, it would appear that we are disconnected from the stories many of our things are trying to tell. People and things, subjects and objects, the animate and inanimate are all active, all verbs. It is through the successful communication of this activity that a connection and understanding between people and things can develop.

The further we are removed from something, the more distant it is, the more abstract and static it becomes. Much like looking out across the ocean at the far away horizon creates a sense of unchanging stillness, despite the turbulence of the waves. The closeness of the immediate shore reveals that any notion of stillness is an impossibility. When standing at the edge of the ocean we are surrounded by activity, we feel the water gathering and receding around our ankles, the sand rushing from beneath our feet with the waves. In these moments we are wrapped within the rhythmic crescendos and cadence of the ocean, we are encased within activity. It is the opportunity for engagement with so many senses that this kind of closeness enables, and that creates a deep experience and story. The

Stylist reasons (12%), Experiences (11%), and Utilitarian (5%). *(Csikszentmihalyi 1981)*

A piece of furniture can signify a memory or collection of experiences such as an heirloom piece of furniture handed down throughout generations within a single family. It could be a lounge chair favored by a certain family member or as simple as having our own ‘place’ at the table.

24. An EPA in 2011, found that furniture contributed 11.1 million tons of household waste, 4.4% of the total, making it the largest distinct category of durable goods entering the waste stream. The same study also finds that furniture is the least recycled at a staggeringly low 0.1%

25. “Durable narratives must therefore attempt to sidestep the deflowering gaze of the consumer, maintaining enchantment while never actually being fully understood.” (Chapman 2015, pg124)

“Users find it hard to engage deeply with artefacts where there is no growth, no change, no narrative and only predictability. However, change alone alienates users through a lack of coherence.” (Chapman 2015)
“when communicating through objects the meaning is created through the materiality of the object. The materials become words; the design becomes the syntax. The piece speaks without the detour of language.”

- Julia Lohman
more layers of connections we have with a thing, the closer we are able to feel to it. The less distant and abstract a thing becomes, the less noun-like and more verb-like it is. The more furniture becomes entangled within our activity, through sharing with us a part of its own, the more opportunities there are for connections to form.

The objects that we surround ourselves with speak to us if we listen. Before we can inquire about ‘what’ they’re saying, we need to ask ‘how’ they are speaking. The explicit language of the sciences, designed to abstract and objectify, seeks to codify knowledge into fixed frameworks that can be readily transmitted through a common, or even better - universal - language. In opposition to this formality sits Tacit Knowledge. ‘Tacit Knowledge’ encompasses knowledge learned through experience, things that can only be understood by doing them. The most common example given of tacit knowledge is learning how to ride a bike. You can be told and understand the mechanics of bicycles, physics and the agility and power of the human body but until you sit on a bike and pedal those first wobbly feet, you aren’t able to understand or really know how to actually do it. This is what tacit knowledge is; the things that we know and learn only through engagement with the physical world.

The term ‘tacit’ was likely adopted to describe this sort of knowledge as “unspoken, unvoiced” but a full definition includes “saying nothing; still, silent” (OED 2015, Tacit). This poses a problem. The notion that silence is related to stillness and that communication requires sound, is where the idea of tacit knowledge goes wrong. It is a human-centric view of what can communicate – living things that make sounds, and what cannot - everything else. However in a world of verb-things, a world in which there is no stillness can we really assume that silence is synonymous with ‘saying nothing’? It is the very activity of verb-things that makes communication possible; If communication is understood as a means of orientation, its purpose that of establishing points of relationship then it need not be reliant on language; any registration can provide an opportunity for understanding.
Craft objects, which often exhibit very processual qualities, are a particularly useful example here, “our valuation of the craft object centers on matters of touch which we sometimes loosely describe as a form of ‘reading’ but is in fact non-linguistic in nature.” (Adamson) According to Glenn Adamson, one of the leading scholars of craft theory, the skill inherently displayed in a crafted object enchants the viewer as he imagines what would be required of his own hands in the creation of such a work, “their becoming rather than their being.” (Gell) It is in this relation of hands, our own in comparison to the skilled hands of another, that is mediated through the object. We understand the crafted object relative to our own skill. Everyone, including children, can begin to relate to handmade objects. (Adamson) Knowing more about the way the object was made, possessing similar skill ourselves, only increases its ability to connect with the work, as we are then able to understand with a greater complexity the nuances of a work and the skill required to achieve them. The experience of a craft object and furniture specifically, is a haptic experience. It is an experience that engages the whole body and moves beyond a purely visual or linguistic understanding.

Things talk. But they do not use words or language in the way we are used to. They communicate in a more subtle, non-linguistic way. On their surfaces, at times quite literally, they relate the stories of their entanglement in our lives and histories. Museums are full of these kinds of objects, but so too are our homes, workplaces and forests. We communicate with these objects through shared experience. In his book The Sympathy of Things, Lars Spuybroek describes this shared experience as a form of ‘Sympathy’. Spuybroek defines sympathy in three parts, which he borrows from the idea of sympathy found in the Dutch Language, “invoelen, meevoelen, and meeleven” or “feel-into, feel-with and live-with”. (Spuybroek, 2010, pg169) We ‘live-with’ things, but we also ‘feel-with’ them. The knowledge gained from them is not gained through their silence as indicated by ‘tacit’ but instead it is ‘implicit’. The change in term is a subtle but important shift if we are to begin to understand the world as one made of activity, of ‘verb-things’. Implicit means “entangled, entwined, folded or twisted together; involved.” (OED, 2015, Implicit) Our dialogue with things is predicated on the kind of involved entanglement, captured by the term implicit.

28. We orient ourselves by feeling, either in space or in time, and as James says, we are next to, in, over, against, towards things. All relations are felt relations and therefore relations of sympathy.” (Spuybroek, 2010, pg171)
“many things conspired to tell me the whole story, not only did they touch me, or my hand touched ‘them’ they were so close that they were a part of my being, they were so alive with me that they lived half my life and will die half my death”

- Pablo Neruda
“perhaps more provocatively, narrative can challenge the way we live, consume and perceive the made world by masquerading familiar while secretly polluting the consumer psyche with subversive stories and ideas”
- Jonathan Chapman

**A Drawer (Mis) Interpreted**

When making a case for Verb-things, a drawer is particularly interesting because it is defined by the fact that it does move, and its entangled relationship to another object, in this case a ‘cabinet’ or ‘table’. Objects designed as perfectly functional yet open to subtle misinterpretations, can highlight the moments where assumptions about facts have been misinterpreted or simply overextended, allowing additional questions to form. The use of diegetic materials to extend the conversation is the next step. Materials that legibly change and evolve with use can draw our attention to specific interactions and ways that we encounter the object. Ultimately, shifting notions of passive and active, noun and verb and opening the conversation that the static is actually in flux.

Through a combination of diegetic materials such as copper, tactile and legible processes, and interactions intended to challenge our assumptions about objectivity and facts; objects are poised as arguments for misinterpretations to reveal the implicitness of their activity and verb-like nature. Furniture which is designed with use and function in mind provides the ideal canvas to
look at things we know to be true and fixed conceptual notions in new ways. Take for example a drawer, the word immediately conjures familiar images. Drawers exist concealed inside of cabinets or dressers, desks and tables; they open outward, towards us and we reach into them from above. They give us the ability to conceal, or at the very least “put away” things we don’t often use.

These are all things that many of us feel that we know about drawers, and can consider them facts that define them as drawers. The actual definition of a drawer is far less specific than many of us might think, and is simply: “a box-shaped receptacle, fitting into a space in a cabinet or table, so that it can be drawn out horizontally in order to get access to it.” (OED 2015, drawer) This definition makes no demands of the object that holds the drawer to enclose it, merely that provides a space for it to be. The movement of a drawer is specified as ‘out horizontally’, but not that it is accessed in any particular way or even that it must move ‘out from under’ or ‘out from within’; the movement merely needs to be ‘out’ and ‘horizontal’.
drawer: “a box-shaped receptacle, fitting into a space in a cabinet or table, so that it can be drawn out horizontally in order to get access to it.”
A Roll-Top (Mis) Interpreted

Like the Drawer, the Roll-Top is another opportunity for a misinterpretation to challenge our assumptions about the way we interact with things. The literal definition of a Roll-Top is interpreted into three dimensional form creating an object that engages us dialogue. Once again, this is an object type defined by an action, in this case a rolling top. A traditional roll-top desk has a tamboured front, serving to conceal the interior of a desk, to gain access the front slides up into an enclosed space. This Roll-Top challenges these assumptions creating a new interaction. The top of the desk rolls out towards us unfurling to create a writing surface inviting us to interact with it.

Despite the slightly uncomfortable nature of misinterpretation there is a benefit. Taking words, statements and ideas out of context, allows them the freedom to take on new meanings. It provides the opportunity to examine assumptions and can inspire new avenues of thought. Most importantly it provides access to the previously closed conversation of the explicit. Misinterpretation is a catalyst for changing meanings and altering our orientation toward the seemingly unchangeable. When considered within the context of the non-linguistic, within talking things, misinterpretation begins to provide the opening needed to shift the conversation of things from simply inanimate to one of engaging active materiality. Things and objects, furniture and art, are uniquely placed as companions throughout our lives to engage us in this conversation.

“Roll-Top: 1. Having a top with a rolled or curled shape. 2. Esp. of a writing desk, bureau, etc.: having a sliding top or cover, esp. one made of parallel slats fastened to a flexible backing.” (OED 2016)
**Twist Lounge**

The Twist Lounge Chair is a play on traditional woven forms. The steel, felt and cord all twist and wrap around each other to create both structure and surface. A chair, is the ideal form for an open conversation between people and things. Chairs are designed to support us, they envelope us more completely than most other furniture archetypes.

From the front, the felt straps dive out of sight, twist around the cord to create voids and small moments of intrigue, while also adding additional tension and stability to the form. The thin ribbons of steel, bend and wrap, at times they follow new interwoven paths, converging and diverging as needed to create the primary structure for support while still remaining flexible. The back of the chair faces out toward the room, and reveals the narrative detailing that allows understanding to form, engaging in conversation with the space and objects around it. The Twist Lounge is both a twist on the notion of a ‘conversation chair’ and an illustration of the implicit dialogue of materials and things.

*Implicit: entangled, entwined, folded or twisted together; involved.*” OED

“Conversation: 1. The action of living or having one’s being in a place or among persons.” (OED 2016)

‘Conversation Chair: a type of upright chair on which a person sits facing the back.” (OED 2016)
**Trace Table**

The Trace Table is both engaged in active dialogue with the furniture and objects around it as well as revealing a trace of what is beyond. The trace is both formally integral as well as communicated by the white surface through projection of ambient in the traces of shadows that move across the surface.

The shape of the table is another three-dimensional definition. The thin sheet of steel rises and folds to create a place for a cup of coffee or book.

“Trace: 6. a. Vestiges or marks remaining and indicating the former presence, existence, or action of something. b. A mark or impression left on the face, the mind, etc. c. An indication of the presence of a minute amount of some constituent in a compound; a quantity so minute as to be inferred but not actually measured;” (OED 2016)

“table, n: a flat and comparatively thin piece of wood, stone, metal, or other solid material; a board, plate, slab, or tablet, esp. one forming a surface used for a particular purpose; (also) a natural formation of this kind, as a lamina of a slaty rock.” (OED 2016)
All things are ‘verb-things’ and all things are saying something, however some are more easily understood than others. Those that speak the loudest in the inanimate world are diegetic in nature. They are objects and materials that readily expound upon their relationship with each other, with us, and with time and other phenomena in the world. The traces of their interactions, the processes of how they came to be where, what and how they are at the moment—their life stories if you will—are easily read through our involvement with them. Some even begin to engage us in conversation.

The accessibility of the information is dependent on a few factors: 29 the limits of our perception, the freedom things are given to express themselves, and our reception of the information that they are providing. To begin, the scale of our perception is a critical factor for reading change and activity (verbness) in things. We often perceive large things and systems of things as unchanging; large rock formations are the perfect example of this tendency. This is largely due to the rate of change relative to our perception of time. 30 To us time passes somewhat quickly and creates a superficial impression of stone as solid and unchanging. 31 However stone is a very diegetic material; it is in a state of constant change; its surfaces chronicle its history and its interactions with other phenomena can even cause perceptible change. As we look closer, touch the surfaces the textures and patterns begin to reveal smaller pieces and composites that have assembled into the larger thing. We may only be seeing a part of the story but even that small bit is sufficient for a level of understanding.

Metal is another material commonly associated with solidity and thus stasis. It can seem ‘cold’ at times when compared to wood or other ‘warm’ materials. 32 The story it is telling is often quite subtle and the perception of it as unchanging lends it an otherness that distances us making it hard to relate to. These impressions are largely formed through how we treat materials. Most metals are

29. This list is neither exhaustive nor discrete but does contain the major areas of interest for this discussion.

30. A developing ecological movement that centers itself around ideas of material agency and a disanthropocentric worldview, that considers a shift in just this sort of understanding to be critical in developing a sustainable relationship with the planet, “stone’s intimate alterity demands acknowledgment of more-than-human temporal and spatial entanglement, so that ecology becomes Long Ecology, an affectively fraught web of relations that unfolds within an extensive spatial and temporal scale, demanding an ethics of relation and scale.” (Cohen 2015, pg 41)

31 Utilizing impressions of stability and permanence that the imagery of stone presents, it is often found in marketing campaigns and logos of corporations, such as Prudential Financial, to provide some of the same associations.

32. Often steel is considered ‘cold’ because it isn’t usually thought of in the ‘natural’ materials category. It is an alloy, a combination of other metals smelted
in fact quite fragile. If untreated, steel is an exceptionally
diegetic material. Simply entering the word “rust” into
a google search or any online image database floods
our screens with an uncountable number of vibrant and
at times hauntingly beautiful images of metal in various
stages of decay and rust. In these captured moments the
metal comes alive, sparking the imagination and drawing
us in. We are able to see the activity in these remnants of
structures and artifacts and overlay a multitude of possible
narratives, envisioning the various actants and conditions
that led to its current state. However in our most common
encounters with metal and specifically steel, it is rarely
allowed to have this freedom of expression unfettered by
coatings and sealants; its story is muted, a barely audible
whisper. That there is an eventual expression of change and
activity through rust, is a testament to the strength of a
world understood through verbs.

The need to slow the change expressed by the
steel’s interaction with the natural world, is of course due
to the strength it lends to our structures if its change is
arrested for a time. Its necessary role in modern life places
our goals in direct opposition to the structural weakening
that is most often the inevitable result of rust. Thus our
orientation to rust is a negative one; we may hear it but
we aren’t interested in what it is saying. To further explain
this point we must continue this conversation with non-
structural metals.

30 Tarnish, the matte grayish - brownish
blackish hue that develops on silver when its left unattended
is also seen as an overwhelmingly negative effect. To
most tarnish implies a certain lack of care and attention,
but this is simply learned cultural
association. There is little to no difference in the processes
at work in patina and tarnish; a tarnish is a patina. A piece
of tarnished silver is no more or less useful than a piece of
patinated copper.

Copper is perhaps one of the few readily used
and interacted with metals whose diegetic and evolving
surface qualities are celebrated. The most common copper
patina, a greenish-blue hue, evokes images of beautiful old
churches and the ornate ornamentation found on stately
row houses in old historic neighborhoods. We are so
eager for this effect that most copper used in construction
comes ‘pre-patinated’. This trend skips ahead in the story
into something new. However, in some
ways it is a composite
not unlike plywood or
veneered wood surfaces
in which the substrate
is made up of MDF or
another manufactured
composite.

33. Cor-ten, or
weathering steel, is
strengthened by the hard
rust that forms on its
outermost layer, however
this type of steel has
other traits we largely
deem undesirable for
most of our uses of steel,
not the least of which
being that unless treated
the surface rust leaves
its residue on everything
that touches it.

34. Silver and Copper are
chosen for the relative
ease of associations and
use in contemporary
functional objects. Silver,
is a very common metal
to find in dinner services
from cutlery to platters.
Copper is a regularly
used construction
material used from
ornamentation, roofing,
water management
such as gutters and
downspouts, pipes, and
even siding. There are
many other metals that
develop highly desirable
patinas such as bronze,
but bronze, though often
found in hardware, is
not quite as pervasive as
copper.

35. Tarnish is defined as,
“The fact of tarnishing
or condition of being
tarnished; loss of
brightness, discoloration;
stain, blemish;” (OED
2015, tarnish)
of copper and the result is disconnected from the form of the building and from the site. When a copper detail develops a patina over time, darker area develop where more water is present and the change is accelerated. The color and pattern that develops tells the story of its form, its location on a building and in a place over time. There is a mass uniformity of color and pattern when encountering a pre-patinated facade that hints at its creation in a factory setting. The unique story of place is missing and just as when you skip chapters in a novel or episodes of a show, skipping to the end of the process cuts us off from a deeper understanding. The connections to the aging process is severed.

This disconnection between story and place isn’t always very obvious, and in a single object or building its effect is minimal and often fleeting, similar to a film glitch that causes the voice track to be slightly out of sync for a moment. As more and more objects, buildings, and places are produced using processes and materials that mask and disconnect the voices of places, people, and materials, the more the effect becomes like a badly dubbed martial arts film. As the number of these things grows, increasing and surrounding us, the greater and more unintelligible the cacophony of a place. It is almost as if all of these disconnected stories combine into a wall of noise so opaque and uniform that they become the white noise of the made world, the jet engine that starts off so deafening we can barely think about anything else which then drops so completely from our awareness that we only notice it again once it is off.

Most of us have a very basic understanding of how the objects that we surround ourselves with come to be; we tend to assume some machine in some factory somewhere is responsible. This disconnection from the modes of production of objects creates a barrier between us and them, putting a distance between people and things that makes communication and interest harder. There is still a story being told however it is a story of industrial processing and manufacturing that most of us don’t have experience with. The products of these processes have limited options to tell their stories and the successful ones rely heavily on precision and the design of their details to inspire a connection. Even Apple found it useful to show a video of

36. Patina is defined as, “a. A thin coating or layer; spec. an incrustation on the surface of metal or stone, usually as a result of an extended period of weathering or burial, a green or bluish-green film produced naturally or artificially by oxidation on the surface of bronze and copper, consisting mainly of basic copper sulphate. b. A gloss or sheen; spec. that on wooden furniture produced by age and polishing.” (OED 2015, patina)

37. In 2009, Apple released a promotional video to showcase the manufacture of the new “unibody” design for the macbook pro.
their new unibody macbook pro being produced to help people find entry points into the processes involved in its manufacture; we can speculate that this was to help us find ways to connect to an otherwise completely opaque production method.

Once these objects are removed from our awareness and lose our interest, we are cut off completely from developing an emotional connection with them. They are only noticed again when they break, when there is enough of a change that it recaptures our attention. There were no intermediate shared activities or experiences developed over time because we completely forgot they were there until they stopped functioning the way that they were. Our impression of them became that of a static thing. This change that captured our attention isn’t something that evolved with us, that we experience with them, it is sudden and often jarring, an unwelcome intrusion; a car horn, furthering disinterest and disconnection. Unfortunately, these abrupt, unwanted changes also begin to align associations of change in objects with negative outcomes, similar to associations with tarnish.

The ever growing disconnection from the activity of things and their verb-ish nature has distanced us from noticing change within a thing and instead we are more prone to simply changing things, swapping an old one for a new one. One chair for another, a noun for noun, destined to be swapped again if it fails to inspire connection. We are social creatures, we want and crave connections. In the case of objects perhaps it is this craving that has led to the extreme volume of consumption we are currently facing. We consume more and more looking for something that can spark and hold our interest long enough to develop meaning. The placement and treatment of materials and details plays an important role in shifting the conversation from things as nouns to verb-things. Those moments where different materials and components come together, the places where we touch them and they touch us, and the space that is generated through these interactions. It is in these moments, large and small that we are able to really see the whole story. The small glimpses of the production are enough to tell the story but also leave a few mysteries. They leave room for us to join the story, to fill the gaps with our own interpretations and to create a larger collective narrative.

38. The broken thing is still seen as inactive, in some ways it is just another noun, fixed in their state as a non-function version of the previous form. They simply exist in a new fixed state.
Materials and processes have nearly unlimited potential to serve as discourse markers, orienting the dialogue within the larger context of place and individual experience. When materials and processes are allowed to communicate freely, they are able to open a dialogue with us that includes a positive view of change. It is a view of the world, animate and inanimate, as one of lively activity and it is something we are able to relate to more easily. Mystery is an essential component of any story, even simple mysteries such as “what does that feel like” spark an interaction. In order to sustain the conversation, to continue our engagement, the best objects ask us questions, they are active communicators. They encourage us to respond to them and to remain engaged.
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Verb Things:
Changing the Conversation

by Kendra Kirchmer