

# Hide & Seek: Objects of Meaning

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## **Thesis Document for Master of Fine Arts Degree**

Rochester Institute of Technology  
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
Department of Industrial Design

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College of Imaging Arts and Sciences—Rochester Institute of Technology

Title: Hide & Seek; Objects of Meaning

Submitted by: Amy Chidiac

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Thesis Committee Approval:

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## **Abstract**

This thesis project is to design a philosophy to create mindfulness in the user of an object. To exemplify the philosophy, the secondary goal is to design objects with these attributes. Objects that encourage mindfulness will be meaningful to the user. Meaningful objects will increase the enjoyment of everyday life. Research on psychology, cultural anthropology, brain function, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism help form the philosophy. The design philosophy developed consists of three criteria that when met will make an object encourage mindfulness in its user. The objects designed are a 5 Inch Utility Knife, a Hemisphere Mixing Bowl, and a 4 Piece Cutting Board.

## **Foreword: The Fountain Pen**

Fountain pens are wonderful devices. They must be among the most personal instruments you can buy. With a good fountain pen, something already expressive and unique—handwriting—is made even more so. And for someone who learned to write with pencils and ballpoint pens, they are almost a revelation.

Let me explain. The best fountain pens were (and still are) literally made to last a person's lifetime. I happen to like vintage pens, and I typically use a pen anywhere from forty to ninety years old. These pens were made before the concept of “disposable” was even invented, and as such use more expensive materials in their construction. The barrels are usually made of an early plastic called celluloid, which is always warm and smooth to the hand, and will burnish nicely from use over time.

A fountain pen will hold only about five pages worth of ink, so there is a ritual involved in refilling. There are hundreds of bottled ink colors available, and I've developed a fondness for a particular shade of blue. Filling only takes about a minute, but I use that time as a respite, and always look forward to it—a kind of antidote to the piles of email I receive.

The best part of writing with a fountain pen is the act of writing itself. Ink flows through the nib by a combination of gravity and capillary action. Once the nib touches the paper, ink is actually drawn out of the pen. There is virtually no pressure required to write! In the best vintage pens, the nibs were made to be quite flexible. Adding a little pressure causes the tines to separate, and the line you are writing to become wider. In practice, the down stroke of any given letter is thicker than the upstroke. I find that I enjoy writing and sketching more than I ever have.

I keep my pens close to me. I like carrying something so old and beautiful and useful in a shirt pocket. I like the discipline involved in not losing them, and I like to think about the decades of service an older pen has seen.

Mark McKenna  
Humanscale Design Director and lover of fountain pens  
June 30, 2009

## **Concept: The Question, The Hypothesis and The Goal**

### *The Question*

How can an object increase the enjoyment of everyday life? Much of product design is aimed at making peoples' lives easier. The reasons range from theoretically freeing up time to the necessity of keeping up with technological advancements. The result is that we mindlessly speed through daily tasks, which used to require more attention and time. We have been fooled

into thinking that there will be more time for the enjoyment of life. Designing objects to make life easier is not creating more enjoyment of everyday life. Instead of rushing thoughtlessly through day-to-day tasks, perhaps we should pay more attention to them.

Jon Kabat-Zinn writes in *Full Catastrophe Living* that our lives unfold only in moments (4). “If we are not fully present for many of those moments, we may not only miss what is most valuable in our lives but also fail to realize the richness and the depth of our possibilities for growth and transformation” (Kabat-Zinn 4). Kabat-Zinn continues to say that diminished awareness of the present moment leads to problems that can build over time if they are not attended to and can eventually leave us feeling stuck and out of touch (4-5). The more we attempt to make our lives easier by rushing through moments, the more enjoyment we are denying ourselves. If we continue to live by carrying out automatic actions and behaviors we may lose confidence in our ability to redirect our energies in ways that would lead to greater satisfaction and happiness (Kabat-Zinn 4-5).

### *The Hypothesis*

Rather than attempting to rush through tasks to “make” time, if people are more mindful of their day-to-day tasks this will create a more enjoyable everyday life. If everyday objects are more meaningful to the user, that person will be more mindful of the activity being performed and in turn will have a more fulfilling and enjoyable experience.

The story of the fountain pen and the act of writing is an excellent example in support of the hypothesis. Using a fountain pen forces the user to pay more attention to the act writing and also to the message being written. As a result, the process of writing a simple note is exhilarating.

### *The Goal*

The overall goal is increase the enjoyment of everyday life. The initial goal is to design a philosophy to create mindfulness in the user of an object. What attributes does an object need to create mindfulness? To exemplify the philosophy, the secondary goal is to design objects with these attributes. Objects that encourage mindfulness will be meaningful to the user. Meaningful objects will increase the enjoyment of everyday life.

*“How wondrous this, how mysterious! I carry fuel, I draw water.”*

-P’ang Chu-shih

### *Methodology*

An understanding of the everyday will be developed, including customs, rituals and routines, and how they apply to the objects we use. Existing meaningful objects will be investigated with relation to psychology and cultural anthropology. Research on brain function, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism will help identify the philosophy of creating meaningful objects through helping the user be mindful of the action being performed.

### **Research: An Investigation of Meaning and Mindfulness**

#### *Meaning*

To have meaning is to have significance, importance or to be of value. An ordinary object can create an extraordinary experience if meaning is created when using the object. In designing an object, if the designer realizes the significance of the object, a true form will come. Meaning is about truth.

In *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton write that despite the importance of objects, little is known about the reasons for attachment to them, about the ways in which they become incorporated in the goals and in the actual experiences of persons (x).

#### *Mindfulness*

In *Full Catastrophe Living* Jon Kabat-Zinn writes that fundamentally, mindfulness is a simple concept (4). “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn 4). The reason for doing so is to nurture greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality (Kabat-Zinn 4). Interestingly, Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton write that attention is a finite resource (5).

At any given moment we are incapable of focusing on more than a few bits of information at a time (Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, 5). To be mindful is to

purposely not concentrate on multiple things at a time. Since we have a limited supply of attention it is possible to use this to our advantage rather than disadvantage.

### *Brain Function*

Edward de Bono writes in *Lateral Thinking: Creativity Step by Step* that lateral thinking is closely related to insight, creativity, and humor and is a definite way of using the mind just as logical, or vertical, thinking is (9). A familiar example of unforced, everyday lateral thinking is when one is in the shower or taking out the garbage and suddenly realizes a solution to a problem that was not consciously being solved at that moment. In this example the solution arrived accidentally and without provocation. Edward de Bono calls this an insight solution, and it is the product of lateral thinking. In his writing, de Bono puts forth techniques to control lateral thinking. For many people, lateral thinking can seem like an unconscious thought breaking through while vertical thinking appears to be an extremely “conscious” process.

Critiquing de Bono’s techniques for bringing about lateral thinking is another subject but the point of the techniques is appropriate and important. The ideas explaining lateral thinking come from study of how the mind works. The mind is not a machine but a special environment allowing information to organize itself into patterns (de Bono 10). “As the patterns are used they become even more firmly established” (de Bono 10). This is what makes us predictable and stuck in our ways of thought. The purpose of lateral thinking is to restructure the old patterns and bring them up to date (de Bono 14). Stated alternatively, we should create new patterns from the information available and escape from the dominance of the old patterns (de Bono 14).

There is a link to routine in these statements. If one is carrying out a routine without thought involved, a pattern is forming. To upset this pattern is to break free from a contained way of thinking. Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton write that people differ considerably in how they learn to structure their attention, in how much they can concentrate on certain patterns of information (6).

“Like logical thinking, lateral thinking is a way of using the mind. It is a habit of mind and an attitude of mind” (de Bono 13). Lateral thinking is the description of a process, and can be a deliberate process (de Bono 9, 11). Some people naturally tend toward lateral thinking, de Bono claims that one can develop skill in it (13). This brings us to routine again.

Some people tend toward a life of routines. Some people have a life of almost no routines. To some the routine needs to be ritualistic to be worthwhile. It is an interesting thought to combine the theories of brain function, pattern making and lateral thinking, with everyday routines. Perhaps this is why for some routine is freeing and to some burdening. It is a matter of how an individual's brain functions.

### *Zen Buddhism*

Zen Buddhism developed when Buddhism was brought to China in the first century and is considered a religion, a philosophy, a psychology, or any combination of these disciplines and some consider it to be beyond these terms. Zen is a practice, a way of life, to develop mindfulness and ultimately enlightenment, or wisdom. "To study Zen is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to realize enlightenment" (Looi). The mind and body are considered to be ever changing and impermanent. Also, mind and body are not separate entities but two sides of the same coin, that is, "All dualities are one reality" (Looi). As one meditates, one begins to see the unity we are a part of. The full realization of unity is called wisdom, or enlightenment.

Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki writes in *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, "Personal experience is everything in Zen. No ideas are intelligible to those who have no backing of experience" (33). In other words, if one does not experience anything, one will not understand anything or be able to convey information effectively. To gain inner experience Zen uses the tool of meditation. The point of meditation, whether it is a sitting or working one, is to keep the mind under control. In *Zen Philosophy, Zen Practice* Thich Thien-An writes, if the mind is kept under control it will be able to return to its natural condition of calm and quiet (13). When one is meditating, the mind should be empty and there should be no thoughts of the past or future, or the external world (Thien-An 12). Self-knowledge will come from meditation. However, what gets in the way during our search is ourselves: "ever present, and yet so far away; so close at hand, and yet so elusive; so familiar, and yet so poorly understood" (Thien-An 73). We are too close to ourselves and this is why we must try to detach ourselves and look at the whole, not the particulars.

To detach oneself will lead to living in the moment, and to live a serene life in the constantly changing world (Thien-An 104). Thien-An makes a connection with the sage from the *Tao Te Ching*, "Life is flowing, always changing, and the sage never looks back to the moment



which has sped by, nor does he look forward to the moment which lies ahead. Rather, he lives in the present, flowing along in harmony with the rhythm of life..." (106).

A working meditation is when a task is being carried out, like tending the garden or preparing lunch. The statements about meditation will be applicable to designing the philosophy. Also, understanding Zen Buddhism and its practice is important in creating the actions and use of the objects being designed.

There is a nice intersection of concepts among mindfulness, working meditation and Edward Hall's thoughts in *Beyond Culture*. "Paradoxically, the only way that we can escape the hidden constraints of covert culture is to involve ourselves actively and consciously in the very parts of life that we take most for granted" (Hall 7).

### *Taoism*

Buddhism allows for existing religions to become a part of it. Taoist principles, along with other East Asian religions and philosophies, were absorbed into Buddhism, creating Zen Buddhism. Therefore there are aspects of Taoism in Zen but there are a few points that should be highlighted with specific reference to Taoism. Taoism is also elusive in its description of what it is, like Zen Buddhism, so I will refer to it as a philosophy for the purposes of this investigation.

Benjamin Hoff, describes Taoism well, while not describing it, in *The Tao of Pooh*. "It's about this dumpy little bear that wanders around asking silly questions, making up songs, and going through all kinds of adventures, without ever accumulating any amount of intellectual knowledge or losing his simpleminded sort of happiness" (Hoff xii). Also from this description, we can actually see the beginning understandings of the mind and lateral thinking in Taoism, where one does not want to retain the patterns of information that hold us back by becoming too definite in our minds.

Another way to explain the same idea is an aspect of Taoism called the "uncarved block." Hoff's example of the uncarved block is Pooh Bear and it means, in short, to let oneself be open, let one's mind be open and free, and from this will come the answer that is sought. As designers it would behoove us to be the uncarved block. As users of an object, performing an activity, it may unburden one's mind and mix up patterns by being the uncarved block.

## **Process: Applying Research and Product Development**

Meetings were held with the thesis committee, David Morgan, Stan Rickel and David Suits, on a regular basis to discuss the project and review progress. Committee members are referred to as Morgan, Rickel, and Suits throughout.

*Meeting: 01.14.04*

The starting point of this project was the statement, “Menial tasks can be exhilarating.” This is not a direct quotation from anyone in particular, just a general idea in Zen Buddhism and also in personal philosophies. Alexander Manu wrote in *The Big Idea of Design*, we have diminished many rituals and transformed them into mundane activities (27).

So, menial tasks can be exhilarating. I wrote a list of tasks that at the first meeting was called “women’s work” by Morgan. This thesis is about putting *life* back into everyday routines through objects, which does not necessarily mean “women’s work.” Therefore, the list was broadened to include everyday tasks. I began thinking of them more as activities than tasks. The list included: cleaning snow off the car, making a sandwich, brushing teeth, making a cup of tea, checking email, folding laundry, shaving, shoveling, clipping your nails, eating dinner (at home), eating lunch (at work), writing, making coffee, showering. Two main categories emerged, one was food related and the other was personal hygiene, both are the two main things we can count on a person doing everyday.

In the first meeting it was decided to focus on the attributes or qualities of an object. It did not matter what the object was yet, it was necessary to figure out the attributes of the object that would be created for the thesis project. Then the next step would be to apply these attributes to different objects. The reason for coming up with the attributes before the object is because what I am attempting to figure out may not be in the object, it may be in the experience. I believe this is true after completing the project. The concept of this thesis can continue to be applied to all sorts of objects.

There were suggestions on how to create criteria from the committee. Basically, it was to look at other areas of design that had created principles or criteria of their own, such as, Universal Design or Modernism. Or even a non-design related area that has a philosophy, such as Zen. In the end using a Zen allegory worked.

Ritual and how it is a part of our lives is also a part of this thesis. It has proven to be the most controversial though, because people have different personal concepts of the word ritual, even a dictionary defines it in more than one way. One question that was brought up at the first meeting was, “What is more important, the ritual or the object?”

Some questions that were asked initially were, “How do you personalize a task?” and “What motivates a user?” There were some simple answers, “Let a user change or customize a product” and, “Because an item is unique or fun,” respectively. Also, the look and quality (manufacturing quality) were mentioned.

Returning to the subject of menial tasks being able to be exhilarating, the reason, or way, that a menial task can be exhilarating is dependent on how mindful the person is when performing the task. My theory, based on research, is that the more mindful one is of an activity then the more exhilarating it will be, this will create more emotion, and then the object associated with this exhilaration will have increased meaning to the user.

It was necessary to perform some experiments. I needed to look at activities and the experiences that occurred as a result. “Why is eating dinner with my family more meaningful than brushing my teeth?” Morgan asked. I needed to discover the reasons why certain activities are more meaningful and apply them to those which are not. I needed to discover why some objects are meaningful and apply that answer to those that are not. So I started by investigating different activities from my list of menial tasks. After doing this for several activities I would be able to see similarities and begin to develop criteria.

### *Between Meetings*

In the beginning, I kept going back to *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* for answers because it had sparked the initial idea of the thesis project. The problem with that was that I had not done enough on my own yet for it to be applicable in a new way—the new way that I was looking for. It was still applicable in the original way, but only now do I realize how it is applicable further. I wondered what is the connection between meaning and truth?

I kept thinking Robert Pirsig’s statement: The real cycle you’re working on is a cycle called “yourself.” I wondered if I could alter it to, the object you’re designing is an object called yourself. It turned out that does not make much sense. And I did not figure out how it could be changed to make sense. But there is something there in some way.

Ideas on looking for meaning: a person puts care into things to try to give it meaning, or maybe the act of caring during an activity creates the meaning on its own. So then can a person also find the way to a meaningful relationship through finding the meaning of an object? But is it possible to put too much structure behind meaning, do you have to just let meaning happen?

Other thoughts about routine and care came from thinking about jobs. My first job after completing undergrad, I worked in the kitchen of the Barley Neck Inn at the salad and dessert station. I wanted to make poetry at the Barley Neck when I made salads and desserts. You knew you were having a good night if everything just flowed together and you could just keep moving in one solid movement, the whole night, completing orders. That was poetry. It was a special feeling if you had a good night like that. The next job I had after that was at a news agency that collected exit polls for elections, I was a manager. The favorite part of my week was turning unused yellow time sheet into notepads. I really paid attention to and worked with care when I made those old time sheets into a notepad. It always made me happy and calm. How do you make an activity poetry, how do you give it flow, make it smooth and fluid with a solid result? How does one create flow...poetry? Why did I care about those time sheets and how did it make the time sheets better? Or, more importantly, how did it make me better? The time I took out of the day to rip up pieces of paper and then put them together in a pad was a time of mindfulness for me. And I believe it was a working meditation; it gave me time and space to let my mind rejuvenate itself.

I began investigating simple tasks by relating the steps to a Zen allegory about ox herding. The allegory is to help people understand about enlightenment. Its story is about a man looking for an ox. He finds the ox, tames it, and then loses the ox. As inappropriate as it may seem, I applied tasks like tooth brushing and making a cup of tea to this story. And it was the first time I realized I knew what I was doing.

After looking closely at several tasks I came up with a rough and somewhat redundant list of criteria. The original list of what makes an object more meaningful was:

- User feels a sense of accomplishment.
- User puts care and thoughtfulness into task.
- The activity is true or honest or real, that is, keeps the user in the moment.
- The activity is engaging; it takes attention or holds the attention of the user. (Not too much

attention, but not too little.)

- The user has an end product or result that is satisfying in some way.
- The user gets to do the activity in his/her own way. That is, the activity is not structured too much.
- The activity makes the user knowledgeable. The object is not difficult to learn to use. And the object kind of makes the user look good using, or smart. Or maybe teaches the user something.
- The activity or object should not be aggravating.
- The object allows the user to develop his/her own technique or way of carrying out the task.
- The object lets the user feel like he/she is doing a good job.
- And finally, the object lets the user be him/herself.

After I developed this initial list, I tested it. I observed a volunteer shave his face. Although the list was rough, the ideas checked out. The list that I had created from doing simple tasks and watching others do simple tasks still made sense afterwards as a checklist. This still did not mean that creating an object of meaning would be easy. There still was the big question of why, or how, is something meaningful. There is the emotional importance of the object or activity and there is the experience of the object or activity. There will always be an unknown factor when it comes to emotional significance, it will always be different for everyone. However, there are other factors more easily discussed such as: how hassle-free an item is, how memorable, the quality of the product, if the user has company, the life span of the product.

*Meeting: 01.21.04*

At the second meeting the application of brushing teeth to the ox-herding story was discussed and several realizations were made. First, the activities are all self-conscious until ox forgotten, self-forgotten. Also, the mouthwash part is a returning to the very thing you wanted to do. The key is number eight, both ox and self forgotten, which I translated to the task being completed—the user is ready to continue with the day. The next step, returning to the source leaves him no better off—it is humbling. It is a never-ending cycle; we will have to do it again and again. How do we find pleasure, or something positive, in an activity we know we will have to repeat? Compassion is learned more each time—a person gets better each time and forgets more and more of the self each time.

The list of object attributes was discussed. A product can encourage a behavior but the user can still feel they are doing it their own way. The criteria will not hold true for all products but they do not have to. In Zen woodworking, the pleasure, or zone, is from actually using the tool, the connection between the person and the tool goes away. One interesting question came up, “Can you have a sense of accomplishment without some hurdle?” Frustration is when you do not accomplish what you think you should accomplish. Enduring hurdles without complete discouragement is satisfaction. There was some confusion about what I meant about being yourself when using an object. It was later cleared up; it is more a statement of using something that suits a person.

The question was asked, “Does it have to be good for humanity?” I honestly did not think of greater humanity as a concern, only individuals, on a personal level. However, I believe the answer to helping humanity as a whole is through individuals. If a person is being more true to him/herself then he/she will likely be more understanding of him/herself and therefore more so of others. I believe this would lead to more compassion and empathy among people, therefore being good for humanity. In *Beyond Culture* Edward Hall writes that we do not give ourselves enough credit (3). A product that lets us give ourselves credit and fits our needs, desires, and personality will lead to more content people.

The list of criteria I made was obviously long, repetitive, and disjointed. We discussed making a shortened checklist that was more cohesive; three or five points were the suggestions. Three seemed to be most appropriate for the material I had come up with. I also needed to test the list.

We talked about how I could make a ceremony of making a sandwich. The user does a, b, and c (the ritual) and through this process the user is put in a new frame of mind, a positive one.

Then, something very exciting came up. I do not remember what we were exactly talking about and then Suits said, “What if you had a knife handle with a burr on it?” The burr makes the user take notice, the knife is not perfect (and not trying to be perfect) so the knife is special and it will make the user mindful. Also, it is important to point out that a person has to go through a lot before an object can have meaning so maybe my objects have the potential to be a part of a ritual. When I spoke with Skip Battaglia, an instructor in the School of Film and Animation, who has an interest in ritual, he said, “A routine is not a ritual until there is meaning in it.”

### *Between Meetings*

I noted that at several times during the day, during several different kinds of activities, we have the choice of several different utensils to complete a task. Often people will use their favorite utensil to carry out a task, as long as it is available and clean. Examples could be: making a cup of tea—use favorite mug, writing a note—use favorite pen, cleaning snow of car—use favorite ice scraper, making a sandwich—use favorite knife. There is almost always a choice. We will almost always reach for an object of meaning when there is a choice.

### *Meeting: 01.27.04*

We first went over the refined criteria.

#### 1. Feel Accomplishment

- have end product or result that is satisfying
- feel like you are doing a good job
- learn
- motivating

#### 2. Engaging (Holds Attention)

- requires care, thoughtfulness (act with care)
- aesthetics
- memory

#### 3. Be true to Oneself

- develop own style, technique, way of doing things
- aesthetically pleasing to likes
- quality

The list was generally accepted and I would begin making objects, test, and then refine the list further. There was one question about what the word quality meant, also a big question in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. In this case I meant construction quality and good use of materials and finish. We discussed the *MacGyver* factor, that is, using a nail file as a screwdriver, but that is not really the point of this thesis. Although, the *MacGyver* factor would make a person feel accomplishment, it requires too much previous knowledge and skill—

particular skills are not assumed to be available for the objects being designed. Also we discussed a poor quality screwdriver that a person gets lots of use out of and then it breaks and that person buys a new one. This example shows poor quality in general and is against the point of my thesis because I plan to make objects that are not disposable, and should not encourage disposableness.

I tested the criteria and was encouraged to pursue the ideas further by beginning to make objects that applied the criteria. The next decision was what kind of activity to focus on. Continuing with the overall concept, it needed to be an everyday activity that many people engage in. As I looked back at my original list of activities they fit into two general categories of personal hygiene and food preparation.

Both personal hygiene and kitchen products are refined because people have been doing using them for a long time. So how will the objects for this project be different? Returning to the idea of a nub or burr on a knife, objects that intentionally make the user pay attention to the object and the task at hand will be designed. Or, the less aggressive way of putting it, the objects I will design encourage the user to focus on the task, which involves the object.

A good example of this is light switches, which we spoke about at several meetings. The simple flip light switch, mounted to a wall, the user does not think about at all. The light switch that has to be turned, also wall mounted, the user has to think about but often does not enjoy (some people actively dislike them). Then there is the Achille Castiglioni clicking light switch, on the cord switch, is perfect and enjoyable. The Castiglioni clicking light switch has something unexpected, a pleasant and reassuring clicking noise tells the users the light is on. The clicking does not take away from the function and, I would argue, that it adds to the function because it pleases the user. So I would like to incorporate this concept into my work. I want to put something special into each object to make it mindful for user, to produce extra awareness.

Between the two choices of food preparation and personal hygiene, I chose the former. The committee also agreed that I should work on objects for food preparation. I was nervous that I was making the wrong decision; even though the idea of my thesis is that these concepts could be applied to many different activities. I am generally interested in kitchen supplies so I didn't want to make the easy choice, however I am also more passionate and have more ideas about kitchenware so in that sense it was the best choice. I needed to continue my passionate attachment to the project. And Morgan was sure to remind me that, "You're gonna mess it up."



We discussed who my user is. Since these objects are to encourage mindfulness, they need to aid in mindfulness among people who don't already have it. The objects created would be for the non-mindful, not terribly skilled person, that is, the ordinary person who prepares a meal.

We discussed some things that make a person mindful in the kitchen. For instance, cutting food for a meal and placing it in little bowls and on trays prior to cooking. The ingredients, vegetables, meats, and spices look and smell good and this provides satisfaction and anticipation. Also a gas stove versus an electric one, the gas stove is more satisfying because the user hears the clicking of the pilot, sees the controlled explosion, and then can visually adjust the heat desired, instead of having to read the numbers on an electric stove dial. It was also noted that putting a nub on a cheap pan would not fulfill the goal, which had been stated before, the objects must be of quality because it is the aim of this thesis to produce objects that will have a long life.

Everything is a part of the experience. I will not be able to control all aspects of the experience. There is the tool, or object, the environment, and the person. Also, people are able to put meaning on anything. I cannot and will not address these issues. I only have control over what the object is, and I will be mindful of it. What comes from the object will come, and it will likely be different for everyone.

### *Between Meetings*

Began drawing ideas, no matter how weird or silly, of objects used to prepare a meal.

### *Meeting: 02.4.04*

I brought several 2D sketches and a few 3D sketches to the meeting. I learned that there is a fine line between engaging and annoying objects. Suits made some interesting comments about some of the knife handles, he said they were organic and sensuous, also he said they were alien knives. About the objects overall, Suits commented, "Is this an exercise in perversity?" Everyone laughed. Even though this is certainly not an exercise in perversity, it was the only way I could begin attempting to solve the problem. Also, I realized as I was working that for something to be engaging there will likely be a fun element to the design. Overall, the similar feature that all my initial sketches possessed was that they would make the user stop and think

about what he/she was doing. However, the objects also fell into one of two categories, either fun and functional or annoying and dysfunctional. The hot pot, weeble bowl, knives, and flippy spoon were all possibly functional items. I was warned not to get off the subject with knife handles. I knew from the beginning though, if I made a knife I would not attempt to make the “perfect” knife handle because it has been done and because a lot of knife handles can feel good in different ways. I knew that if I did make a knife the handle would be purposefully “different,” like the mushy knife idea or the knife that ended up being produced. I was advised to think about materials and more importantly, to not get distracted from my concept by the knife handles, which I had already exhibited a bit.

I wanted my objects to be fun and still functional, not serious; achieving that is serious work. Just like producing good comedy is serious business, creating fun, functional, simple objects is serious.

When talking about how ritual is a part of the objects I am making Morgan made a notable statement, “Ritual forces someone to come out of their routine.” I thought a long time about whether I agreed with this statement because it seems contrary to an earlier statement that I do agree with, that is, “Routine is not a ritual until there is meaning in it.” Some examples of routine versus ritual were that eating a Hershey’s kiss is a routine but eating a fortune cookie is a ritual. Also pushing the button on a coffee machine is a routine while the activity of grinding coffee could be a ritual.

It was official; Morgan said I was “on to something.” I was sent off to do more and warned not over-intellectualize, which was exactly what I did, though not intentionally.

### *Between Meetings*

I spoke with people about preparing a meal. I made several more 2D and 3D sketches but mostly I thought about them too much, and they were all ideas that did not make it any further.

### *Meeting: 02.11.04*

Since I over-intellectualized my design work this week, most of the meeting was about how the things I came up with were wrong for the thesis. Many of the objects I designed were to make a person’s life in the kitchen easier, but not really encouraging a person to be mindful. The strainer is a good example of this, it may make a person’s life easier but it did not require any

special attention. I was accused of designing *Ronco* products, or kitchen gadgets. I was advised to be more brutal about my own work, to point out when designs meet my criteria and when they do not. I was reminded that I must believe in my designs first. I want to make timeless, mindful, subtle, with important detailed designs.

I had some clarification about the “Be true to oneself” criteria. If a person thought that a product was kooky and he/she thought that it said something about his/her personality that would be true. Or if a product makes a person smile when they saw it and used it, that would mean he/she was being true to themselves.

After all the *Ronco* designs I realized that I needed to make products that did not detract or intentionally enhance the function. If the design enhances the use as a byproduct that is alright. I would argue that a byproduct of the designs I am attempting would be that the function is enhanced—because of the user’s frame of mind.

I needed to make more 3D sketches. I needed to just make stuff. Since I was intellectualizing things I needed to put myself in the frame of mind I wanted my user to be in when using my products. I had to remove myself and at the same time become a part of the process. Most importantly, I needed to combine my former approaches, the first when I just drew and did not think and the second approach, when I thought about the products and asked others questions.

Also I needed to develop the criteria as I was developing the objects to help make it fit together better.

A new idea came up at this meeting when Suits suggested that an ordinary knife could come from an extraordinary holder and that would make the user mindful about the preparation of use, and then be mindful when using. An example of this was a wine lover unwrapping a bottle of wine. The process of carefully removing the wrapping and cork prepares the person for a special event. It may not just be the holder, it could be the motion, the skill, or the circumstances—there could be different attributes that create the mindful part of the process. The idea is to set up the possibility for a new frame of mind. My object is part of a process, or a player in drama. I should be thinking about preparing the user to use the product. It may be too much to ask for one object to do all this. These are all ideas to think about and when they can be integrated, when it is right, it will come with the design.

### *Winter Quarter Presentation*

The primary question that came up at the Winter Quarter Presentation was “Am I designing a philosophy or a product?”

### *Meeting: 03.11.04*

I had more mock-ups and drawings to present. The “weeble bowl” was a bowl with a round bottom, as opposed to a flat bottom. I thought it would need a magnetic stand to keep the bowl upright. The exciting news was that a hemisphere weebles on it own. The stand became unnecessary immediately because it was not functional and pointless for the objective. The bowl was meant to be round to encourage the user to pay attention. The committee wondered if, when loaded, the contents would spill. The material and size of the bowl, along with some tests, would answer this.

The “utensil garden” was a utensil holder that sits on the counter top and encourages care for ones utensils. The possibilities could be that the garden comes with utensils or that it holds utensils already in the home. The more it is used the more potential it has to be a part of daily life. It is meant like a garden, it is a basic and natural growing environment.

Along the same lines, a knife block was designed. Again, the idea is that having utensils on the counter will lead you to use them more often and care for them more.

A usable knife mock up was presented for the first time. It was plaster with a blade, meant to be used as a paring and utility knife. The comment was made that it was like a “very, very old tool or knife.” It was indeed rustic. Is a knife with an unusual shape enough?

The ritual argument came up again. The object I make is an empty container, to open up the possibility for ritual. My job is to make an empty container. It reminded me of the uncarved block in Taoism.

### *Between Meetings*

Experimentation to alter the objects one way or another was carried out. Also experimentation in construction and materials was carried out to understand what is the best and most realistic way of creating each object. If a product no longer seemed reasonable to make or in its application to the thesis, it was no longer pursued.

### *Meeting: 03.18.04*

The objects were taking more realistic forms. The weeble mixing bowl had been prototyped. It was slip-cast ceramic, made from a plaster mold. The first bowl was brought to the meeting. It was still fragile because it hadn't been fired yet. It seemed very promising and everyone wanted to see it further developed. I ran an aggressive slip-casting schedule in the following weeks. Some bowls were made for experimentation of form and many were made for production to complete the thesis.

The wooden cutting board that fit together like *Lego* was a little problematic to prototype. A yellow foam model had been made previously. When I tried making it with wood I was burning the wood. I had help from the shop technician and Morgan described how to build the piece more successfully. Everyone was interested in the concept and wanted to see a more developed prototype.

We moved on to the flexible cutting board. This design was very dependent on the material it was made from. I had several samples and made some models. I was not happy enough with how the material and the concept worked together. The flexible cutting board was meant to roll up like a scroll or stick flat on a refrigerator. Once rolled, the material did not want to lie flat, so this created a problem. We discussed refrigerators and how they were used in everyone's homes. Most people's refrigerators were covered already—there was no room for a cutting board. There was enough hesitation from everyone that this product did not continue.

A more developed knife handle made out of yellow foam was presented. It was full size and sturdy so that everyone could hold it. The form was very unlike normal knife handles yet it was still a comfortable form to hold. It seemed reasonable that the form was different enough for the user to pay attention. This product also needed further development.

We discussed the Thesis Show for the first time. Mostly we talked about how I will convey the idea of the project. I said that I never read what the designer wrote when I attend exhibits. Morgan said that was an important point for me to think about. How will I either do without a written explanation or make get people to read my explanation?

### *Between Meetings*

Refinements were made to each object to help decide if they were worthwhile to continue working on. Form and materials were decided upon. Better prototypes were made.

*Meeting: 03.24.04*

Final decision was made about objects to be produced and displayed at the Thesis Show. I had to get busy producing everything—the 5 inch utility knife, the four piece cutting board and the hemisphere bowl with a simple stand.

*Between Meetings*

Production had begun of a cutting board. A local woodworker with trusted experience in laminating wood was making the cutting board. I continued production of ceramic bowls. This was a several week process because roughly twice as many bowls as needed had to be made because of breakage. Materials were acquired to make the knives. A student woodworker with an interest in knife making was leading the project. We built the knives together and he carried out the metal work with my assistance.

*Meeting: 03.31.04*

There was a planning meeting for the Thesis show on March 29. It became clear that for the amount of space I had to exhibit in, one of each object was not enough. The decision was made to make multiples of the three final objects, the 5 Inch Utility Knife, Hemisphere Mixing Bowl, and 4 Piece Cutting Board. That meant a lot more work in the next two weeks.

*Between Meetings*

A lot more production work was completed. More cutting boards were ordered. I continued making bowls. Making the knives was a multi-step process that required a lot a attention and hand work from the woodworker and I.

*Meeting: 04.7.04*

All focus was on final details for the show. The largest problem was how to explain this idea, which is somewhat abstract, in writing. The idea of mimicking a conversation seemed to be an excellent approach. That way I could ask the questions I wanted and make sure I answered.

Another problem was that of safety and insurance because I was displaying knives in the gallery. The solution accepted by the gallery was that the knives would not be fully sharpened

and they would be wired to a board. For the reception, since I would be present, a sharpened knife was allowed.

The design of the exhibit space was finalized, including a tasteful way to display the knives that had to be secured to a board.

#### *Between Meetings*

Production of the knives, bowls, and cutting boards was being completed. The large display boards for the exhibit, with questions and answers explaining the project, were written and designed.

#### *Meeting: 04.14.04*

This was a short meeting to confirm the final details for Thesis Show. Installation was April 16-18. Production of the objects was complete, it was finalized that there would be 5 cutting boards, 12 bowls, and 7 knives on display.

#### *Between Meetings*

The installation of the exhibit was completed and specific arrangements for the reception were made.

#### *Reception: 04.23.04*

The reaction to the thesis exhibit was fantastic. Viewers who knew the project and who did not know the project all understood the concept very clearly. The comments were extremely encouraging and complimentary. The best part was that viewers were enjoying themselves!

A table displaying one of each object was the centerpiece of the exhibit. Each object on the table was available to touch and use. A bowl of apples was put out to cut, providing opportunity to use the knife, cutting board and bowl. The table was crowded throughout the reception.

## **Final Product and Thesis Defense: 5 Inch Utility Knife, Hemisphere Mixing Bowl, 4 Piece Cutting Board**

For the Final Presentation all drawings, mock-ups, prototypes and final products made throughout the thesis process were exhibited. A presentation documenting the concept and process was delivered, as stated above. The three products developed to exemplify the philosophy were all made with great detail and quality; every object was a functional piece.

The presentation was well received and the Thesis defense was accepted.

### **Conclusion**

A design philosophy was developed; to do so was the primary goal of the thesis. It consists of three criteria that when met will make an object encourage mindfulness in its user. An object designed with this philosophy in mind allows for a more meaningful experience. Encouraging users to be more mindful in everyday tasks will create more enjoyment.

The philosophy developed consists of three attributes for an object of meaning to possess: firstly, the object is engaging while in use; second, the object delivers satisfaction at the end of use, and finally the object allows the user to express him/herself by using the object. Whether small or great, use of a meaningful object for everyday tasks can make everyday routines more enjoyable, and even ritualistic.

The secondary goal was to exemplify the philosophy, by designing objects with these attributes. The objects made fulfilled the criteria in different ways. No two objects will fulfill the criteria in the same way; the point is to understand how each object can be designed to effectively encourage mindfulness. Once designing a specific object, the activity that is being performed becomes paramount to the way the criteria will be fulfilled. Upon close inspection of the task being completed and the actions required to complete the task, the design begins to show itself and meeting the criteria can be accomplished.

The objects made were a 5 Inch Utility Knife, a Hemisphere Mixing Bowl, and a 4 Piece Cutting Board. The knife is engaging because its shape is unusual for a knife, it creates a rocking motion when in use; it delivers satisfaction because it functions very well, despite its unusual shape, and helps the user cut; and finally the knife allows the user to express him/herself by



having better knife skills than with an average knife. The bowl is engaging because it does not have a flat bottom, there is a decision to be made to use its stand or not; the bowl delivers satisfaction because having a round bottom on the inside creates a better mixing surface and the stand allows for the bowl to be tilted; finally the bowl allows the user to express him/herself by having fun, this object in particular made people smile with glee. The cutting board is engaging because there are four pieces that fit together to make one large board, the user must decide what size is needed and put it together; the cutting board delivers satisfaction because only the needed size board is used, which makes use of space in the kitchen and later in the sink more appropriately utilized; and the cutting board allow the user to express him/herself by creating an alternately shaped cutting surface when needed.

It should also be mentioned that great care was put into the aesthetics, material choice, and construction quality of the three objects. All three were built to be beautiful objects that would even aesthetically be engaging to the user and all an expression of taste by owning it.

The primary and secondary goals were met. In addition to the goals being achieved, the process of fulfilling the goals also created a meaningful experience.

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