On the Decentered Human and Nature as a Facilitator of Dialogue

Michael Osheroff

Submitted to the faculty of the Herron School of Art and Design in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art in the Herron School of Art and Design Indiana University

May 2018
Tables for Moss Gardens

By
Michael Osheroff
Master of Fine Arts

Herron School of Art and Design
IUPUI
Indiana University

[Signature]
Associate Professor
Cory Robinson

[Signature]
Associate Professor
Danielle Riede

[Signature]
Gallery Director
Max Weintraub

Accepted: December, 2018

[Signature]
Professor Mark Goggin
Dean of Herron School of Art and Design

01. 14. 2019
Date
“The world runs on communication.” One of my classmates spoke those words, anecdotally quoting her high school soccer coach in reference to his admonishing her for missing practice one day without any explanation. He of course meant that one should alert others of one’s inability to fulfill a responsibility that they may change course and adapt rather than twiddle their thumbs in anticipation of one’s arrival. But the words “the world runs on communication” have a much broader implication than mere unexplained absences from extracurricular activities. Indeed, their meaning goes well beyond any human to human interaction. The coach’s words remind me of the philosophy espoused by Alfred North Whitehead, particularly as explained by Speculative Realist philosopher Steven Shaviro. In his book, *The Universe of Things*, Shaviro explains, interprets, and builds on the writings of Whitehead, and places them in the context of post-human philosophy—a way of thinking that ultimately works towards the end of decentering humanity in humanity’s own comprehension of the universe for the purpose of creating greater understanding and harmony between our species and its surroundings. One of the central themes of *The Universe of Things* is that all objects, whether animate or otherwise, are actually processes, endless “becomings” that relate to and communicate with one another; and it is these processes that fuel the actions, reactions, and interactions that make a thing like the universe possible.

My thesis installation, *Tables for Moss Gardens*, couches itself in this post-human philosophical mindset, and in that of Grant Kester’s critical theory of Dialogical Aesthetics, which positions the process of art-making as a facilitation of discussion rather than as the creation of objects. The installation itself is composed of five tables, each supporting a different found, fallen branch that acts as the impetus and facilitator of a dialogical process of making in which I collaborate with an object to create another object. Working this way has
led me to experience a heightened sense of empathy for my materials and for the found pieces of Nature with which I design. By utilizing an intuitive and improvisational design method, wherein each piece of furniture is made through collaboration with and in reaction to a specific fallen branch, my work decenters the artist—myself—and promotes a greater sense of connectedness with and appreciation for my materials and environment. With its inspiration of empathy through dialogue, this body of work runs counter to my experience in contemporary American carpentry practices and reacts against the internet age’s commoditization of materials, processes, and time while speaking to the bridging of relationships that have been allowed to deteriorate with the advent of technology, social media, and the capitalist “bottom line.”

In college, I was a painter. Influenced by the work of the Light and Space Movement artists James Turrell and Robert Irwin, and by the father of color theory, Josef Albers, I became interested in illusory painting. Not tromp l’oeil. I made no attempt at all towards figuration or representation. Instead, the illusions that I created pertained to the painting’s objectness, and certain effects that color and light can have on the brain. Through this course of investigation, I began building special panels that at once highlighted the paintings as objects on a wall by tilting their façades up and down, and at the same time denied them this same object status by presenting only the front façade of the painting. To achieve this effect, I built my panels with beveled side walls, so that viewers had to be at extreme angles to the work in order to see the side walls at all. Upon leaving school, I had a mind to enter the world of architecture design. But I couldn’t decide between that and taking my painting even further, and creating whole environments that played with the viewer’s perception. As a happy medium, I found work as a carpentry apprentice, as such a job would give me insight
into contemporary construction processes—how the architecture I might be designing would actually be built—and teach me skills I would need should I choose to make environments the like of Sarah Oppenheimer or James Turrell.

In the beginning, the work seemed good. Every day I was learning, talking to the more experienced members of my crew, becoming more and more fascinated with the common-sense reasons for making things in certain ways. The world of contemporary “stick” construction was unfolding before me as I familiarized himself with standard tools and methods of the trade. Stick construction is the method by which virtually all homes in the United States were built from the turn of the twentieth century onward. House frames made using stick construction are comprised almost entirely of 2x materials (2x4, 2x6, and the like), the “sticks” that give this construction method its name. These form walls using a base plate, vertical studs spaced at 16 or 24 inch centers, and a top plate, all of which are nailed together using compressed air. With my increased fascination, I began developing a collection of electric saws, drills, and nail guns for myself: the essentials for the contemporary carpenter. As my enthusiasm for the trade grew, I read about carpentry in journals and books to improve my efficiency and skill. Work was good. Life was good.

But there came a tipping point. With my growing interest in carpentry as a career rather than just a stepping stone, I began to research the various traditions of the craft. Eventually, I arrived at traditional Japanese carpentry, a style of construction that, to my astonishment, used no nails whatsoever. Instead it relied on cleverly fashioned wooden joints to hold massive posts and beams together. Immediately, my interest was piqued. The craftsmanship, the beauty, the humility, they all absorbed me and my imagination. The buildings that were realized in this way displayed, even paraded their skeletons. There was
no drywall, no plywood sheathing, no covering up the bones of the various temples, shrines, homes, and stores. Everything was made aesthetic, right down to the foundations. By comparison it made the work I was doing seem to be all about hiding mistakes and applying skins and facades to imperfect and ugly structures.

Everything about the traditional Japanese craft was honest. Everything was open. Everything was so considered. Indeed, in preparing the stock for their buildings, the Japanese carpenters of old would mark the trees they felled so they could use it in as much the same directional relationship in which it originally grew: trees from northern faces of mountains were used for northern facing walls, those from the Eastern faces of mountains for the Eastern facing walls, and so on (Brown, 27). Building this way, they said, resonated with the harmony that trees develop with their surroundings, bringing that harmony into the structure itself. They treated their materials and tools with a respect that I hadn’t witnessed at all on my own job sites. To compare the immaculate construction and harmony with the environment that traditional Japanese craftsmanship produced with the work that I was doing was mindboggling. They weren’t in the same league. They were barely playing the same sport.

After more research, it occurred to me that the buildings I was working on hadn’t been around nearly as long as the Japanese houses and temples and shrines about which I was reading. Many of them had only been constructed 20 or so years previously, yet they were rotting from the inside out. Joints were sagging, there was water damage, nails and screws were rusting. I began asking my colleagues why we did things the way we did them. Not to discover the same common sense reasons as before, but to try and understand why we didn’t make things like the Japanese, why we weren’t building houses to last for more than a few
decades. I kept receiving the same two answers: stick construction was faster, and it was cheaper. The houses I was building weren’t homes, they were products. Products to buy, dress up, and sell again. Products to be replaced or repaired in ten or twenty years. Products for showing off wealth, for creating wealth, but not for living in, not for building a life in. Thoughts like this come from a cynical place, but that’s where I found myself after being admonished for taking too much time making things perfect, after expending too much energy over parts that would never be seen once the house was finished. Everything was about deadlines and bottom lines. And when I compared the knotty, bark-ridden studs I was working with to the beautifully pristine posts in my books, I knew there had to be a change, and that I was going to leave contemporary carpentry behind. But what was I going to do? I was going to make products that people could count on. Products that would last. Products for the home, for building a life, and for living well. I was going to make furniture.

Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once wrote, “there is not a sentence, or a word, with a meaning which is independent of the circumstances under which it is uttered” (Whitehead, *Science and Philosophy*, 103). In asserting such a view, Whitehead reinforces his philosophy of processes and happenings as one that investigates “modes of thought,” or rather, the way in which things interact rather than the respective essences of “unchanging substances” (Shapiro, 18). As such I think it is important to look at the processes by which my work has been, and is currently, made to better understand the effects and affects those processes have on myself as the artist, on the viewer, and on the materials with which I work.

There are many ways to go about making something. During my furniture career, I have primarily used two. I call them the *recipe method* and the *intuition method*. The *recipe method* is so named because its main objective is not only to create a piece of functional
furniture, but to create a set of instructions for doing so that may be followed by anyone, much like a recipe found in a cookbook. As such, the *recipe method* is divided into two distinct phases: the design phase, and the construction phase. It starts with the design phase, which in turn begins with an idea of what to make. This idea, like so many inventions, is born of necessity. I require a nightstand to hold a glass of water and a lamp beside my bed, so I set out to design a nightstand that can hold glass of water and other miscellanea. I need a coffee table to set impressive looking books and chess sets on, so I set out to design a coffee table large enough to comfortably hold a stack of oversized books and a board game. A client needs a coffee table in which they can curate and display small objects, prints, photographs, and books, so I set out to design a coffee table with a display compartment proportioned generously enough to contain a collection of such objects. And so it goes.

After establishing what to make, the design phase continues with a slew of quick, small-scale sketches to loosely determine the aesthetic of the piece and to establish, in very general terms, how it will be built. I choose what I deem to be the most compelling small sketch and from there begin to create more detailed schematics of the piece on either gridded paper or with 3-D modeling software like Rhinoceros. This becomes a process of iterative design. No two drawings are exactly alike. After completing one, I take myself down the proverbial “rabbit hole” of its construction to ascertain any foreseeable problems or obstacles to its physical realization and use. Upon evaluating this theoretical jaunt into the future, I create a new, slightly different design that offers fewer complications to construction, a more refined aesthetic, and a better user experience. I like to think of working this way as a process of distillation, as this exercise repeats itself until I arrive at the design that will be the
simplest to make and the most theoretically enjoyable to use— all while maintaining the aesthetic integrity of the idealized version I create in my mind.

It would be easy to think that the design phase ends here, with a detailed drawing of the piece and full-scale schematics of all its joints. But it doesn’t. The design phase’s final step is to create the namesake of the recipe method: the recipe. This consists of two things, as all recipes do: a list of ingredients and their amounts, and a step by step procedure. In the case of furniture, this means a parts list— which includes every member of the piece of furniture along with their dimensions and the material out of which they will be made, as well as any extra parts or jigs necessary to building the piece— and a procedure that contains all the information necessary to physically fashion these members and then assemble them into a functional piece of furniture. With this recipe, the production phase is quite straightforward: simply follow the instructions and you’ll be alright, minimal thinking required.

This approach to making work, in my experience, lends itself quite nicely to making large production runs. The design process along with the recipe it results in are themselves designed to maximize economy of material and time by reducing the need for thought or troubleshooting during the production phase. With this mindset, however, comes the same commoditizing themes of my experience in contemporary carpentry. I am designing forms in the vacuum of my headspace to sell, using the wood and my own aesthetic as selling points. In doing so I not only commodify this beautiful material, but also myself; and while we all have our livings to get, I wonder at the slippery slope between economizing my time and effort, and making everything about “the bottom line” and profit. It’s only a hop, skip, and a jump away from skimping on higher quality material and joinery in the name of time and money.
The *intuition method* takes a different tack, as it does not have distinct phases. Rather, it is comprised of intertwined and interdependent mental and physical activities that oscillate back and forth as part of one state of being. This is in part because the intuition method uses as its nucleation point not an idea of a piece of furniture, but rather an actual, physical object. In the case of *Tables for Moss Gardens*, these objects are fallen branches. By starting with the branch, and not with a piece of paper or a computer, I am brought into the design process in an embodied way, reacting to the piece of wood in front of me: its twists, its curves, its colors and textures, and even its smells. I am “in it,” so to speak, working with the branch as a kind of partner to help it become what it wants to be, to help it rest the way it wants to rest.

As the title of the method suggests, decisions are made intuitively, which results in a procedure and a finished form that are improvised rather than meticulously planned. As such, I expect a certain amount of “messiness” along the way. That is to say, I must reconcile any change in course with decisions that were made earlier on the process, which can lead to some awkwardness in terms of joinery and shaping. To minimize this, I engage in much more playing in physical space: holding the ends of the branch at different heights with the help of wooden blocks, using sticks to try out different angle relationships of legs and stretchers, temporarily assembling the structure to see where its development should head next. I have found that very little drawing is done when I use this method. Perhaps I’ll make a quick schematic of a leg to be turned, just to pull some measurements for the leg’s graduated thickness, but for the most part, the designing is performed in physical space.

Working this way can be a bit more stressful, but also a lot more satisfying, because the element of surprise is always in play— and when using the intuition method, I’m very open to that. I find that when working in this method, I’m more open to a lot of things. I think it’s
because not only is the design process embodied, but also because I see myself as collaborating with a partner, the branch, rather than creating forms in the vacuum of my headspace.

It’s like the difference between reading a script and having an impromptu conversation. Without the aid of a preplanned procedure and parts list, my mind must remain engaged throughout the entire process of designing/building the piece, much as it would during a conversation: continuously acting and responding to the developing relationship between the branch and the furniture I’m creating for it. And like any good conversation, the one I have with the branch is predicated on respect, and leaves me with an increased understanding of not only my partner, but of myself as well. It’s a reverential process, made even more so by virtue of the limb being dead, being nothing more than part of a larger carcass, but still supporting a great amount of life in the form of the insects that call it home and the moss and lichen that so delicately flock its bark. In this way, the *intuition method* does what dialogical artist, Steven Willats, says art should do, and acts as “a form of aesthetic exchange in which the artist’s own presuppositions are potentially challenged by the viewer’s response through a process of direct collaboration and feedback” (Kester, 92). In this instance, the branch is both the audience and subject of the artwork, which in turn is really a conversation between the two of us that is mediated through the creation of a table. I become decentered from the position of an Artist who makes Art, and instead become a converser and a collaborator whose conversations happen to result in the generating of objects. In the words of theorist Grant Kester, the result of this approach “is a new set of insights, generated at the intersection of both perspectives and catalyzed through the collaborative production of a given project” (Kester, 95). The term “perspective” might be a
bit of a stretch, since in this case, my collaborator is an inanimate object. But the sentiment remains the same. I feel a change when I design this way. I become more connected to the material. It’s as though the branch, with its bark and moss and the checks running through its end grain, acts as the stimulus for a greater sense of connectedness and empathy with the wood used in the construction of each piece.

This is an interesting notion, mostly because one could say that the wood used to construct each piece of furniture has been through quite a bit more than the branch has. To arrive at a state fit for working, the tree must be cut down, milled into relatively flat slabs, dried for potentially several years, then re-milled to be perfectly flat, and cut down to particular sizes. It is sawn, baked, re-sawn, cut, shaped, abraded, and finally sealed; and at the end of the process, upon seeing the glory of its grain figure, one might extoll its beauty, or its warmth, or its richness in much the same appreciative tone as they would marvel at the beauty and depth of flavor possessed by a well-marbled steak. But what most people don’t think about is that the wood is to the tree it came from as the steak is to the cow. It is the naked, exposed flesh of a once-living organism. The act of viewing, let alone working with it, is inherently intimate—almost invasive. But despite that, wood in this form doesn’t trigger a sense of connectedness, shared experience, or intimacy. The way it’s shaped might, but the material itself? No.

No, that notion of a living being, or of a path walked together with Nature— or as a part of Nature—comes only with the addition of the branch, the raw piece of the natural world, the carcass—once a thriving organism and still supporting all manner of life. The branch is shaped by the hand of nature to be part of a tree, not to be a flat board used in a cabinet or table top. As such, it has all the character of its tree-ness and seems to come to
furniture as a kind of hobby career after it has retired from its life's mission. The rest of the piece simply responds to it, supports it, and highlights it. In Kester's model of a dialogic aesthetic, the artist acts as a facilitator of social engagement and interaction. But as applied to my practice, it is the branch that becomes the facilitator of an interaction between myself, it, and the furniture wood, a conversation that develops through the kinesthetic bond of maker and material and that manifests as a piece of furniture made for a branch by my human hands. The results are imperfect, but illuminating. And those imperfections, I have found, tend to bring the piece to life.

This fact reminds me of a personal anecdote. Last semester, the students of the furniture program drove out to West Lafayette, where we met Dan Cassens, a Professor of Wood Products at Purdue University. The field of Wood Products studies wood as a viable engineering material. In this program, students learn the process of milling, drying, and testing wood to discover the necessary strength parameters it needs to accomplish certain engineering tasks. Dan owns some 80 or so acres of land, and most of his property is wooded. He owns his own sawmills and cuts down trees on the property that are sick, dead, or that threaten the health of the forest in general. When speaking to us about the process of milling and drying a tree, he emphasized that we should always have respect for wood as a material. He told us, “even though a project may take a few days or a few weeks, it took that tree sixty, seventy, one hundred years to grow.” This meant that even though I might only be involved on a project for a few days or weeks, everything I build is really decades in the making. Not only that, but everything I make will have a life after I’ve completed it, living with people and their families and pets in their homes, hopefully for many generations. It’s a staggering concept; and it has keyed me into the way commoditization tends to blind us to
our relationships with things, causing us to take not only the things themselves for granted, but also where they come from and how they are manufactured. We have become entitled. Perhaps we always were.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the willful separation of ourselves from what we call “Nature” and the universe at large. This is a phenomenon that my work aims to point out and to combat. In *The Universe of Things*, Speculative Realist Steven Shaviro, describes a short story by the same name in which Earth has been colonized by aliens, the Aleutians, whose technology is so advanced that everything they make literally has a life and consciousness of its own. “In effect, the Aleutians literalize Marshall McLuhan’s thesis that all media are prosthetic extensions of ourselves” (Shaviro, 46). In this story, everything is mentally connected, and nothing is “a-part,” or separate. In this fictional world, tools have senses and offer very real feedback to their users. It highlights our tendency to reduce things to their empirical properties and the fact that in so doing we force upon them the status of only being what we can perceive them to be (Shaviro, 49).

To combat this human-centric mindset, Shaviro, following Whitehead’s lead, emphasizes the importance of aesthetics, which he claims “is about the singularity and supplementary of things: it has to do with things insofar as they cannot be cognized or subordinated to concepts and also insofar as they cannot be utilized, or normatively regulated, or defined according to rules” (Shaviro, 53). In other words, one can never know an object or thing in its entirety. No matter how familiar we may be with it, no matter how often we use it, some part of it remains unknowable to us, because we do not have the faculties necessary to know anything in its entirety. Instead we must appreciate and feel “an object for its own sake, beyond those aspects of it that can be understood or used” (Shaviro,
53). Even though we do not, and cannot, understand or use something—or indeed, someone—fully, we must appreciate it all the same for its mere presence and not only for the fact that it has the capacity to enrich our own lives and those of so many others.

This is brought into a particularly poignant light when we consider the temporality of objects. When looking at the branches resting atop the tables in this installation, it becomes quickly apparent that each one is aging. From the greying hue of the end grain, to the cracks and checks running through it, to the bark that flakes off at the slightest touch, each branch is displaying the process of its own slow decay. It’s a stark contrast to the polished, shaped wood on which each branch rests, which, though dead, does not seem to parade its state as such, but rather “comes to life” with the figure of its grain and the sheen of its oil finish.

They are branches—covered exquisitely with green mosses and grey lichens, forming “still explosions” (Bishop)—perched atop stands of deep, rich cherry and cedar wood, stands that rise from the floor to accept and hold the various amputated terminals of their woody relatives. It is at once a familiar and a foreign sight. How often do we gaze at trees, swaying in a cool summer breeze, or crowded with songbirds chirping to and at one another? But how often do we consider, really consider, the shapes, the color, the mass of their architectural organs? Seeing a furniture object for a branch is outside our normal understanding of what furniture is, what it is meant to do. Furniture is, after all, invented by us, for us, to facilitate our interactions with architecture and with each other. How then are we to understand furniture that is made not only not for human use, but for the use of an inanimate object like a branch? A man-made structure holding, propping, supporting, crutching, balancing a natural form: two states of the same material, existing with and for
the other, the result of a conversation between myself and a branch. If furniture for humans facilitates and negotiates interaction between people, then view this installation as furniture meant to facilitate an interaction with yourself and the world around you. Engage with the universe as a participant, as a collaborator.
Voyager Nightstand,
White Oak,
2016,
A piece designed using the *recipe method*
Voyager Nightstand, White Oak, 2016
Tables for Moss Gardens, Thesis Installation
Bradford Pear, Hackberry, Cherry, Western Red Cedar, 2018
Tables for Moss Gardens, Thesis Installation
Bradford Pear, Hackberry, Cherry, Western Red Cedar,
2018
Concatenation,
Bradford Pear, Cherry,
2017
Perpetual Perishing, Hackberry, Cherry, 2018
Contrapoise,
Bradford Pear, Cherry,
2018
Conduit,
Hackberry, Cherry,
2018
Rest, Now,
Hackberry, Western Red Cedar,
2018
Works Cited


