Aesthetics and the Rationality of sensory input

So our whole group together essentially moved on from looking at affect and emotion

and started looking more closely at the **sensory** inputs that generate affective emotional responses and where the senses start to morph from an affective experience to a rational one.

My interest, obviously, fell toward how this phenomenon happens with functional objects seeing as function implies touch which becomes a tricky line for aesthetics

Question: Does the addition of sensory experience (visual, tactile) enhance the aesthetic value of a functional object from purely affective to rational?

To phrase it another way,

Can adding things like color, texture and imagery **elevate** a functional object and allow it to have meaning beyond just its intended use?

Does it become elevated to an art object as opposed to just a tool?

I mean this goes to the core of the craft vs. art argument that has been going on since the industrial revolution and I’m not going to try and fry that fish right now,

But I do want to delve into how “decoration” for lack of another word, **performs** on functional objects.

Decoration does…**something** and aesthetics **is** an important concept even when talking about function.

There is a reason we don’t live in a world where there is only one type of cup or car or one standardized house.

It’s why everything we own isn’t just made in a neutral color.

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Before we consider the addition of extra layers of sensory stimuli to our objects,   
I’d like to go back and start with one small section I tapped on in my previous presentation.

The idea of there being an actual ‘Aesthetic of Function”.

This is that affective feeling of satisfaction that you get from using a functional object that is perfectly suited to its task.

How something can come to be more desirable in terms of visual aesthetics because it **ideally** serves a purpose that you value.

Like how you come to love the form of a particular glass that holds the perfect pour of your favorite beverage.

The visual aesthetic becomes desirable through a **rational** appreciation of physical function.

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Thinking about this function and physicality approach to aesthetics pulls in a degree of the materiality argument as well.

In the Christina Mills reading about *Materiality as the Basis for the Aesthetic Experience*

she talks about how the physical, material nature of a work becomes a vehicle for conveying the “mutable and intangible…such as thoughts and feelings, both bodily and emotional.”

She doesn’t pull out the exact words “rationalization of sensory input”, but this quote gets really close.

“Art locates viewers within their corporeal selves by engaging the senses; […]

The aesthetic experience is evoked first through art’s **physical** components, and then through an intellectual engagement with materiality in a broad sense, through time.”

She is talking very much about this **aesthetic of form and function** through the lens of physical materiality.  
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So now,

in addition to a **rationalized** appreciation of function and physicality,

what happens when we start adding more and more sensory cues like texture and color and image to an object?

Texture and tactility in particular, coupled with the physical materiality discussion above,  
inevitably leads us into Karen Barad’s theories of Agential Realism and intra-action

where these tactile, physical objects serve as a definition our “separateness” and our “Boundaries and properties as individuals.”

By touching them and using them, we are drawn into a “shared phenomenon” as Barad calls it,

but there is an **agential cut** between the object and ourselves that makes us aware of ourselves as “other”, as separated individuals.

By holding onto and really noticing and feeling the surface of something else, we can define our own existence, our **own** shape and we can define our relation to the world.

Okay, this is a pretty profound mode of thinking  
and it does follow a rational path from sensory tactile interaction to realization of self, but it’s still not quite what I’m looking to do with my own work.  
I struggle to be that deep.

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Cue the addition of pretty colors and fanciful imagery on top of   
materiality and form and function and now where do we go from there?

In his discussion on plural thinking, French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy uses the term “multiple arts touch” to talk about how art can engage you on more than just a visual level.

He talks about how we interact with external influences in three different ways  
  
Being-there, being-alongside and being-with.

I understand Nancy’s “being there” as being similar to what Barad is saying about using “the other” to define the simple fact that we exist.

But I struggled to get my head around what he is saying about the “being-with” as opposed to the “being-alongside”

and to me what it came down to was the idea of a **common shared experience**.

Which finally gets closer to what it is I’m wanting to do in my own practice.

The sensory signals **I** choose to use  
such as bright colors, delicate forms and flowery imagery,  
all relate to my own rationality,  
  
This relates directly to Nancy’s concept of **being-withness**.  
  
I am encoding my functional objects with a rational expression of my experiences and personality in hopes of creating that feeling of ”**withness**” for someone else.

Creating a connection with another person’s life through a shared set of sensory aesthetic values.

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This really started to define more clearly for what I’m trying to do with all of this “decoration” on my functional items.

The use of color and imagery gives a much greater capacity  
to trigger thoughts, trigger associations and trigger memories.  
To trigger that rationalized response.

I got a bit side-tracked here when I started thinking about this as the “Fine china” effect.  
  
Wanting to create special, elevated, functional objects that reach that ‘heirloom’ quality.

Because they are “fancier” and generally more expensive and of higher quality, they tend to get reserved for special occasions.

Going back to Shaviro, where each time we interact with an object, the aesthetic experience changes slightly,

So limiting the use tends to preserve the emotional impact.

This spiraled into thoughts about consumerism and the fact that we tend to be pretty enamored by new “things” be it art, functional objects, clothing, etc…   
but each time we use them, our relationship to them changes, becomes less special and so eventually, we want something new  
even though the actual functionality of the object hasn’t diminished at all.

We are emotionally affective aesthetic junkies.

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Okay, back to how this relates to my practice.

One of the things I’m working on now is enforcing the rational association of an object by relating it to representative textiles of an era.

This grew out of explorations of Flower Power that were triggered by Laura’s first presentation.  
  
I found that the simplified, flat, graphic floral designs I was using were rooted in the posters and clothing of the 1950’s, 60’s and 70’s.

This evolved into making vessels based on the patterns in vintage dresses  
and then into a series of photos that are based on the advertising from each decade that invoke an ironic(?) shared experience with women of those eras.

While the vessels themselves have a strong visual aesthetic on their own,   
it is when you consider them rationally in relation to the dresses and the era   
that they develop a stronger meaning and emotional impact.

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So to tie this all together and go back to the original question…

“Does the addition of decoration and imagery elevate the aesthetic value of functional objects from affective to rational?”

YES.

But does adding sensory information such as color and imagery,

just create a battle with  
the **affective** realization of self that comes from holding a physically comfortable object?

Does surface decoration pull focus away from being able to **appreciate** the physical and functional nature of an object to look at the rational associations and meanings of its color and imagery?

For example, think about drinking your tea or coffee out of your favorite cup  
How touching it’s particular curves and bumps anchors you physically to the moment in a purely affective way  
but over time to the cup comes to represent the idea of a break, a small pause from life.

Now if we add imagery that resonates with you   
to the surface and it then sends your mind away from the present moment into an imagined or remembered space.

And then back again as you lift its weight to take your next sip.

I think this oscillation between immediate affective response and extended rational thoughtfulness   
is kind of the ultimate goal of what I’m trying to do.

To find a balance of perfect functional forms with uplifting colors and motifs

I’m going to end with another quote from the Christina Mills article that seemed to tie everything up with a bow.

“An aesthetic experience ensues once art materials are transformed, via an individual’s imagination, into thoughts and feelings that are, first, expressed by the artist and, then, received by the viewer.”

And a paraphrase from me.

“We set out to make art rationally, with a purpose in mind, with an experience we want to convey to the viewer that drives our aesthetic choices as we create.

It is then up to them whether they choose to appreciate what we have made at purely at the visual and tactile affective level or whether it resonates with them more deeply through rational process.

**Pick a Cup, Pour a Drink** Blown Glass, Dalayce Nichiporik, 2018

Pick your favorite cup from the collection provided. Pour yourself a drink of water.

As you take your first sip, consider what it is about that particular cup that caused you to choose it over the others.

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**Did you choose a handmade glass cup over a plastic cup? Why?**  
Is it simply a matter of materiality? Is glass inherently more aesthetically appealing that plastic?  
Or is it a rational decision to pick glass? Because it’s reusable? Because it’s more expensive? Because the perception of quality and longevity is higher? Because it makes you feel supportive of and connected to the craft community?

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 **If you selected one of the handmade cups, what was it about the aesthetics of that particular vessel that drew you in?**  
Was it the physical form? Did you choose it based on size? How it fit in your hand? The solidity or the delicacy of its construction? The smoothness or texture of its surface?

Was it the visual properties? Is the cup made in your favorite color? Does it fit with your personal aesthetic in the same way that a fashion accessory would? Did you choose clear glass in order to be able to see what’s inside?

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**Did you choose your cup based on something more than pure aesthetic response**?  
  
Does the color, decoration or imagery remind you of a memory?  
Is it associated with something positive in your life?  
Does the object convey a message that resonates with you?

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The choices of objects we select as curators of our own life’s collections are based heavily in our rationalization of materials, production methods and sensory characteristics. The selection of an appealing functional object is based on a mixture of sensory factors and each choice falls somewhere along the spectrum from immediate affect to considered rationalization. We select the things that resonate with us and help us isolate our own existence. As artists, we produce work rationally, with the intent to convey meaning or share an experience. Once a work is completed, our own rationale ceases to be relevant and it is the decision of the viewer to consume and digest the aesthetic impact on their own terms.