

Cow with Interventions & Carved Dog by Aaron Mountz

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Before finishing this essay, I had never seen my personal object and my study collection object next to each other. One is a small plastic cow, no more than two years old, the other a 150 year old wooden dog. I had built mental maps of form, weight, size, and feel. I had photos taken from like angles, but I was still not sure how they occupy space together. This may have been an obstacle to my writing, but, more importantly it is the way we engage with the majority of art and objects when we say comparison helps define them. I wondered whether my cow could balance on the narrow back of the dog. I wondered what sound they would make rubbed against each other. The physical space they occupy is only the first difference between them, and yet I will try my hardest to keep this cow with me for the rest of my life, and I left my first handling session disappointed at how little time I would have with the dog. Their similarities in subject and in emotional resonance better define the considerable ways in which they differ. These, in turn, illuminate the paths we take to build empathetic connections with objects. They are varied and diverse, but hold sometimes undefinable similarities that point to how thin the border between the living and non-living can be.

I received this little cow as part of a birthday present from a close friend. My room is an exhibit of knick-knacks whose curation is perhaps unintelligible to guests, but significant to myself. I was content with integrating the cow. For a few weeks, it occupied itself in between a model of a hippie volkswagen beetle and some pretty soda cans. But I wanted to be able to wear it. To carry with me this funny little cow that had become such a staple of inside jokes. Looking at the photos of the results of attempting to make it into jewelry conjures those of an autopsy, or a crime scene: a weapon in the body, close-ups of the wounds. The cow even seems to give a suspicious side-eye. And like at the scene of a crime, analyzing the wounds reveals the intentions and emotions of the perpetrator. The nail itself goes through the plastic body at an awkward angle. It is far from straight, and would not be successful in attaching the cow to something else. This was not my intention. The

angle of the nail shows what little regard I had for details when manipulating the object. I wanted to put the nail through the cow's body, and tried hammering the toy while holding it in the air, which resulted in a lack of precision. This is clear in the paint and sticky tack as well. The paint is not evenly layered, and the texture indicates that it was not completely dry before I touched it. It is streaked through with scratch marks, covers some of the cow's spots, and randomly appears in small splotches away from the main oval. The tack is spread unevenly for a rough effect. This toy, no more than three inches long, makes painfully clear the impatience and hazy objective with which it was attacked.

In fact, the meaning of my making is obscure—even to me, its maker. I truly do not remember why I started using the paint or the sticky tack, or why I burned the cow's leg. Crafts usually carry a lot of cultural context, because they are born from traditions passed down through certain families, or carry symbols, patterns, and materials imbued with meaning. Perhaps the cultural context that this butchered cow carries is, yes, an impulse to create, but a lack of material aptitude. I set out with a simple task of making the figurine into jewelry, and was wildly unsuccessful. Beyond this, the essence of the object—it being a cow—was vaguely funny to me and nothing more. No matter how realistic the design was, the actual material implications of it were foreign.

This along with the descriptors haphazard, uneven, hazy, impatient, work towards an impression of disrespect of the object, but is this fair? This ended in mutilation, but it came from a deep-seated desire to create, to expand the function and personal resonance of the object. The contrast between the factory impeccability and my rash crafts is stark, but it is undeniably personal and human. I now often end up soothing myself by fitting my fingers in the crevices of the object, letting the nail dig into my palm, pulling and stretching the still yielding putty. It may not be a toy

like originally intended, but I play with it because I have given the cow a tactility it had not previously known.

Similarly, the texture of Aaron Mountz's small sculpture of a dog is the first thing that struck me. Carved from pine wood in the late 19th century, it is covered in bumps and tiny canyons crosshatched across the entire surface except for the expressive face. I ran my fingers along them, lightly and instinctively grazing my nails, the moment I picked it up. I expected it to be musical in its sound, but it was quite muted. This cross-hatching was characteristic of Mountz's work. It was not completely regular; it warped around limbs and at joints, its grid grew and shrunk. Considering, however, that Mountz's small body of work was focused on animals, the technique seems more than stylistic: To me, this texture immediately imitates the fur of a dog and the subconscious draw of the human hand to petting it. This fosters an intimate relationship between the handler and the object.

The carving skills used to create this are masterful, so masterful that Richard Tuttle, the sculpture's previous owner, did not completely believe it was made by Mountz, a self-taught artist. However, it is not immediately clear that the figurine is a dog. When I first handled it, turning it every which way, I thought it could be a lion, or a forest animal. The ears begin at the top of the head, the back of the figure is extremely narrow, and the head is in line with the body. The immediate familiarity with the object is not dependent on representational accuracy. It is not solely a connection based on real connections with dogs. It is truly with the object itself. A question Richard Tuttle may ask, however, is why this sculpture of a dog is any less dog than a living dog? Tuttle is dedicated to pushing the boundaries between living and nonliving, as well as human and non-human, both of which apply to this sculpture. Why limit oneself to valuing an object's worth because of what it replicates or represents? The same ideologies are the center of tirades against

modern and contemporary art, and are so reductionist of the potential of our relationship with objects.

Notably, Tuttle does not differentiate between the objects he collects and the objects he creates. They are both prisms for communication, self-discovery, and history. Both the study collection object and my personal object embody a multitude of relationships. My friend was the purchaser, I was the receiver and the intervener. For the dog, Mountz was the creator, John Gordon the first collector, and Richard Tuttle the second. These relationships, however, can be muddled. One of the owners of the dog at one point repaired the back hind leg - does this make them an intervener to the same capacity that I was to my cow? Because I have changed so much of the perception of the cow, do I become a creator? When does one transition from being an owner of an object to a collector? To the same degree that our paths to connection with objects are diverse, our functional relationships with them are on a spectrum. Perhaps more important than a strict definition of these roles is a personal exploration of them, because they can shape our treatment of objects as active matter. Richard Tuttle rarely even considers himself as a collector, even though this title is often ascribed to him. I believe this to be because to him, it understates the impact the objects have on his life and takes away their agency.

The object I do not own had a more immediate tactile impact, though this is not necessarily correlative. I eventually achieved this reciprocal connection with my cow, but it took my intervention. This illustrates such a key difference between the two objects. The cow is factory-produced, my ownership of it is completely alienated from its production. Human minds designed it, human hands helped make it, but the object attempts to completely conceal this history with its seamlessly molded body. In every industrial product, there is an undertone of exploitation that is easy to ignore. But when we ignore it, we lose an essential part of the object's history and the social and cultural impacts it has. When we don't however, it perhaps complicates our relationship

with objects. On the other hand, the dog's value lies in the fact that it is hand-crafted, that the name of its maker is attached to it. We do not know the provenance of every Mountz sculpture, but there is a clear apprehension built into the texture. As Tuttle writes on his collection card, "If one saw the whole collection, it would create a portrait." We know that Mountz made the majority of his sculptures from teenagehood to young-adulthood. Perhaps the dog was made for practice and stayed on a shelf or a workbench in his own home. Maybe he whittled it with a pocket knife to impress friends made in Frankford. Schimmel could have made an eagle from the same lump of pine, split in two before their creation and in their histories. The potential for imagination is in every limb of the mid-sized animal.

This idea, however, that an object's value comes from whether it is home-made, from its proximity to its production, is proven wrong simply because we know it to be untrue. A world that still has innovative artists, must still have innovative relationships with objects, and with other people through this. In a world that still has people, certainly people studying material culture, there must be objects that break boundaries. The distinction between my personal object and my study collection object that I want to leave you with is not one of real and artificial. It is not even a distinction I want. What matters is the way in which I, and all previous owners and observers of each object, have formed a relationship with them. While the means of production has a huge impact on this, it is more limiting of our collective potential to break free from dangerous or uncreative materialism than it is of the objects themselves. We have to ask questions of ourselves when learning to love objects, like whether missing knowledge holds us back or enriches an object, whether we can be owners of objects. The day of presentations is the last and first time I will ever see my two objects next to each other. I own the cow. I do not own the dog. Despite their vast differences and soon to be separation, they've entered a significant mental collection of my own, one that disregards ownership and persists through loss and decay.