

ARTIE VIERKANT

We are increasingly used to thinking our world through objects. This may seem counterintuitive in a time of screens and files, which pretend to be immaterial and untactile, but in fact it seems clear that these interfaces, as our primary methods of organizing and interacting with the world today, have made it easier to think the world as an enormous assemblage of objects,¹ including ourselves. If contemporary practices are primarily concerned with a kind of relational materiality—the work’s objecthood and form being dictated by a set of external structures and protocols—then they are interestingly emerging concurrent with the idea of “interobjectivity.” Interobjectivity is a term used variously by Bruno Latour,² Vivian Sobchack,³ and Timothy Morton⁴ as a framework for understanding the relational world as it exists amongst nonhuman entities, including but not limited to structures conceived by humans. In other words, it is a framework that could be used for understanding the impact that international monetary standards could have on the rising sea levels, or less abstractly the influence an erect nail might have on a bouncing ball. It is a kind of contemporary (and professed as non-anthropocentric) descendant of Norbert Wiener’s theorization of the world as a set of cybernetic systems caught in feedback loops,⁵ or a more loose advancement of Latour’s own “Actor-Network Theory.”

A running theme in writings on interobjectivity is that humans aren’t really so special, and that much like historical notions of the sublime we have been humbled by systems that are much vaster than we can comprehend—as Sobchack states, “we become acutely aware not only of the irrelevance of our subjective will but also of the extreme vulnerability of our material objectivity.”⁶ We see ourselves as objects within this system, and with it the notion of authorship has become strained and the cult of personality uncomfortably transparent. Vilém Flusser said of authorship that “if images were to become models for actions, they had to be made accessible, intersubjective, and they had to be stabilized, stored. They had to be published.”⁷ But how does Flusser’s phrase look if we replace intersubjective with interobjective? Arguably this substitution is being tested in the work of a num-

1. Here, the term “object” is used to connote not only material objects, but as a general term also referring to individuals and immaterial concepts.

2. Bruno Latour, “On Interobjectivity,” trans. Geoffrey Bowker, *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 3, no. 4 (1996).

3. Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, 2004.

4. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

5. Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1948).

6. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, p. 300.

7. Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (1985; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

ber of artists,⁸ whose work deals with objects that have their own interrelations to external cultural and technical systems. These artists re-assume the role of individuals in society who do not attempt to construct an authored, alternate facsimile of the world, but live inside it. By interpreting or interrupting the relationship between objects the artist can construct models for actions, to use Flusser's phrase, which do not make subjective claims about social, political, and biological structures—they interact with them directly.

In 2013 I began work on a project I broadly refer to as *Exploits*. These works are made by purchasing or licensing intellectual properties of any kind for use as a material. While I don't subscribe as a purist to these recent materialist philosophies, an understanding of interobjectivity allows for a more nuanced understanding of what we are used to thinking of as a fixed and dry legal structure. Intellectual property, in fact, has developed over the last four centuries into a technology—an object—that serves as the backbone for post-industrial society. It allows individuals and corporations to claim authorship over abstract ideas, production methods, managerial practices, and now life-forms. It, like other objects, isn't an absolute that came from nowhere but an objectivity that evolved in its relationship to ourselves, passed from generation to generation not unlike a symbiotic bacterium or virus. Its objectivity has transformed as our idea of our own subjectivity has—*she* made this, therefore she owns it—and now purports to provide individuals with a moral grammar with which to approach creative labor.

In wrestling with ideas of subjectivity, agency and authorship, art after modernism has been deeply entwined and rightfully at odds with intellectual property. In response to the legal codification of protections for creative labor, the twentieth century brought us “the readymade” and “appropriation” as key artistic tools. These tools are changing, however, or producing tools that aren't yet named.

With *Exploits*, for example, when I license a patent to produce objects this isn't quite appropriation because nothing is being taken. While I quite simply could have appropriated the IPs for use without permission, the work then would have been merely representational. It would be a work *about* intellectual property, as opposed to an actual *manifestation* of intellectual property. By engaging the intellectual property as an objectivity, the works involve an engagement with other entities or discourses, and only look and act the way they do as dictated by the terms of the licensing agreement. It is possible that these actions can be understood as examinations of interobjective relations, a new materialism that isn't so concerned with the specifics of *signs* and content so much as how that content acts on other entities.

ARTIE VIERKANT is an artist based in New York.

8. For brevity this statement discusses only my own work, but I am also alluding to the work of Dora Budor, Sean Raspet, Christopher Kulendran Thomas, Dis, Shanzhai Biennial, and others.