

Many people think with objects, some people count with them and others like the artist Madelon Vriesendorp look through them. She has an unusual take on the world the result of her Dutch background and London foreground. Married to the architect Rem Koolhaas since 1971, she has played a role in forming the image of his early work, and continued to bring to architecture the fresh perspective of an outsider. Her unexpected vision is created by allowing objects to set up an unintended narrative, that is, a story outside the usual bounds of literature. Some people have called this the undergrowth of literature.

In the 1960s, the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss wrote about the category of so-called primitive thought. Those people, un-schooled in systematic thinking, use objects to classify different types of condition and as a result, Levi-Strauss argued, 'a science of the concrete' came into being. In tribal societies, for instance, different kinds of plants – tasty, poisonous, healthy – became known for their concrete properties and formed a very useful science for daily life. Another example he cited was the handyman, or bricoleur, who looks into his toolkit before tackling a problem. This craftsman then defines the situation in terms of the several objects he owns and knows well. But it isn't only so-called primitive thought that operates this way; we all do to some extent, even scientists who were supposed to re-invent their toolkit anew, with each problem.

It turns out, according to Sherry Turkle and her recent investigation of scientists that they too fall in love with their objects of use, they too become fixated, and confuse themselves with their instruments. In her book *Evocative Objects: Things we think with* (MIT 2007), she shows that the Polaroid instant camera became a strong symbol of memory and mourning for its inventor and his family, or the slime mould came to represent the political ideology of the sixties for the famous biologist Evelyn Fox Keller. Indeed. The slime mould is an amazing example of self-organisation that has also fascinated Complexity Theorists, the mathematician Ian Stewart, Peter Eisenman and me. In 1992 I gave Eisenman a sealed bottle labelled by the producer *New Orleans Cajun Slime*, and I added the word *Mould*. He accepted the gift, as a fitting symbol of the new paradigm in architecture.

Madelon has not incorporated slime into her sometimes bizarre collection of objects, her *musée imaginaire*, but she is amused by the undergrowth of literature, the underbelly of popular society. She sees behind the perverse and generic a simple force of desire others may wish to hide. The Statue of Liberty carrying a torch is a typical pop object of her thought, or rather Liberty's disembodied arm holding the flame (**1**). What is that object? Is it a light-bulb of dubious taste, or a phallic beacon, or a symbol of Enlightenment Reason?

Objects can symbolise concepts and vice-versa, because all thought, all signs are based on equations between things.  $X = y$  is the same as  $y = x$ , the terms in symbolism are interchangeable. The 12 stars on a blue banner symbolises the Europe of 27 nations, and vice-versa, even though the twelveness is now history. The only near-universal symbol system is money where the equal sign is accepted as a substitute for bargaining with objects. But with runaway inflation, the superiority of bartering with things, not symbols of exchange, becomes clear. Madelon might like to start a new economy based only on objects. You give me a bottle of claret, I give you some slime mould – we're both ahead if you like slime mould; and there's no tax. The artist of the sixties Ed Kienholz started such a new system when he paid his dentist with a currency of his famous signatures, worth more than the usual dollar bills. "This paper is worth 2 hammers and nails, Ed Kienholz" – and his hardware store quite rightly accepted the bargain.

**Image giver**

When published in 1978, Vriesendorp was instrumental in giving iconic power to the narrative of *Delirious New York*. Some of her images from the book were endlessly reproduced because they captured the idea of delirium – skyscrapers as a zombie race of inquisitive voyeurs, skyscrapers as copulating couples, the Rockefeller Center as Private Dick bursting in on the couple with his intrusive, police-like headlamp. The flabby Goodyear balloon as spent contraception device; the grid-plan of New York appearing below the bed as the illicit offspring – what was the plot? This madness became the first cover of *Delirious New York*, Rem Koolhaas' conjecture on the hidden life of "Manhattanism," the Secret Life of Buildings in the City. It was a portrayal, through objects, of *Sex and the City* twenty years before the city discovered sex. With the x-ray of narrative vision, the objects were seen through, re-animated to get the unofficial story than Koolhaas was telling. Because of their humorous power Vriesendorp's images soon became the thought-diagrams of the book. Like all effective icons they essentialised the basic idea, reduced it to a few images that became so associated with the concepts as to be interchangeable,  $x=y$ .

When writers wanted to illustrate New York's boiling pot and pluralism they used Vriesendorp's painting *The City of the Captive Globe*. When they wished to show the way the endless grid-plan could incorporate 2700 identical blocks of extreme difference, they used this image, or the cover of the book with the emergence of the illicit offspring. Why? Because these icons summarised a partial truth better than other available images. I would often have recourse to these two paintings because they were the *ne plus ultra* of the idea. They captured a thought and colonised my mind, as objects do.

Madelon listened to Rem's narrative and pushed it a bit further into a different realm where it could be revelled in as a joke that everybody already knew, the sub-Freudian realm of phallic skyscrapers and lighthouses as flashing dicks, the world of pop-psychology and postcards. Her best work combines these insights with a deeper, sequential story, like the drama of skyscraper promiscuity. After all, the Chrysler Building and Empire State Building were procreated by the previous biggest towers; they slept around, or their architects did, absorbing all the necessary organs into their gene pool. Their passion play (whose needle will be the biggest?) led to cheating. Their secret, that every block of New York wants to be both a fat slab and a narrow prick – the one for maximum rent, the other for maximum scraping – provides the deep narrative. It drives these objects upwards and outwards. Fatter and higher!

Rem and Madelon collected 7,000s postcards, just as did Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton and Alvin Boyarsky and every 'knowing consumer' educated in the hothouse of London Pop. Lectures of the Independent Group on Pop during the 1950s established this form of intellectual research. It became the way to fashion an alternative image-bank. To prove an architectural point the AA student might not show a slide of the Pantheon, but rather as Koolhaas did a postcard of Coney Island. "Maddie" (as she is known for her mad-insights and stream-of-unconsciousness) had a postcard of the lighthouse over Miami Beach and she painted it above the illicit bed. Out come its pulsating beams, picked up by the moonbeams over the beach and the cars intrusive headlights. They, with the searchlight of Rockefeller Center, all focus on Liberty's Hand holding the symbol of George Bush's America – freedom! Bedside tablelamp. It is an upside-down flaming phallus and flamingly funny. Postcards whispered to Maddie "go there," and she did quite innocently. She saw through the object, as Le Corbusier repeatedly asked: "Eyes which Do See."

### **Cabinets, boxes, peeping into collections**

The Wellcome Foundation in London has recently opened its collection of bizarre objects, a collection of over a million crazy medical things, a few paintings and sculpture. Some of the objects were so perverse that Henry Wellcome's wife said, "no thanks," and ran off with Somerset Maugham. Cabinets of Curiosity, *Wunderkammerer*, have been canonic in the west since the Early Renaissance, since the Duke of Urbino put together his little *studiolo* with its

magical instruments, globes and pyramids. Such rooms and buildings became the source of both the scientific collection and the modern museum. Paolozzi made a heroic attempt to reverse this history in the 1980s with his *Blueprint for a New Museum* to recombine what history had put asunder. But it fell to the Wellcome Foundation, and its billions, to start this reversion. What inspired Paolozzi was his earlier archive called *The Crazy Cat* and that included all the pop ephemera he found compulsive. Vriesendorp has her own very selected version of an archive. It includes objects small enough to get on the table in her house, things that come from New York or China, colourful generic items one might find at an airport or flea market, mass-cultural stuff that reveals an attitude or a cliché.

Her paintings and drawings, her watercolours and gouache are kicked off by such ephemera, liberated by the material in a way that recalls the Surrealist work of the early 1930s, and the paintings of Balthus and Delvaux. One is tempted to look into her boxes the way one peers into those of Joseph Cornell or today Valerian Baghosian. It is an invitation by taboo, by restraint and deflection, by veiling and uncertainty. At the Wellcome Collection (appropriate name) one is now invited to peep into lots of what would have previously been called porno-holes. Hunt the pullulating couples. Science and art now sanction the peeping, it is now mass-cultural uplift. Educational.

There is something of the funfare in Madelon's collection, something of the car-boot sale and she has collected at the flea market in Cape Cod. Here oddments are resold by individual citizens, just as they are on the Amsterdam canals once a year, on the Queen's birthday. Vriesendorp loves to buy small things, and give them away. She is as generous as Paolozzi; I have a little collection of gifts from both of them, received over thirty years.

Like all collections they threaten to push the owner out of the house, like the Magritte apple that fills up the entire room. Objects are dangerous especially for the collector and the rich who are invariably victims. So Madelon collects harmless and naff little things that she can kill or loose without guilt.

Her research dredges up from the undergrowth a vast mixed metaphor of unlikely stuff: 'the day of the dead-scorpion,' 'a father Christmas with wings (from Habitat).' These objects have their mini-narratives in search of a greater story, so Madelon classifies them on her archival tablescape according to a new logic. The result is a new city ordered by similarities, facing the viewer, an alternative classification created by the easiest way the collection goes together (and her eye) (2).

### **Unlimited semiosis**

Everyone carries around a unique *musée imaginaire* in their head formed by experience, school, the daily newspaper, reading, films, friends and common opinion. The fact that we all order this melange in roughly similar ways is a result of science, accepted classification and social norms. Hence our libraries, the periodic table (an ultimate classification system) and progress. But the world can always be re-ordered according to heterogeneous classes, and Vriesendorp following Koolhaas following Salvador Dali is interested in heterodoxies, not orthodoxies. Dali's 'paranoid critical method' argues for the imposition of mania, of theories, by sheer willpower and charisma. Examples vary from the paranoid conjectures of Jesus and Marx, two of the more successful, to the visions of any good artist who creates the audience by which she is judged. Frieda Kahlo, whose work is somewhat recalled by Madelon's, persuaded her new audience by the intensity of her vision, not by following traditional norms.

As Umberto Eco has argued post-Joycean literature, and post-modernism, is confronted by this quandary. As contemporary novelists know too well, anything can be connected to anything else, all the objects in the universe have several things in common, beyond their atoms. This

hyper-connectivity leads to the hyper-text, Google and much else, but it also leads to two mainstays of post-modern poetics.

The first implication is that if everything has some connection to something else then the unfolding of meaning is unlimited. Semiosis, the deciphering and communication of meaning, can go on forever. Secondly, there are always heterodox classification systems waiting to be formed, ones that show the previously hidden links. Personal and zany they may appear, but then all art has some idiosyncratic meaning, and such individual connections are one reason we value the artist's vision.

Michel Foucault brought such uncanny classification to the table in *The Order of Things*, subtitled in its 1973 English translation as *an Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Foucault relished the idea that the mind can use *any* system of linkage and so he quotes from Jorge Luis Borges a particularly delicious example of strange classification, “a certain Chinese encyclopaedia,” that becomes successively stranger as it deals with the open class of animals – “animals are divided into (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.”

This was not the Linnaean System, but it was meant to provoke the kind of laughter that follows recognition. We see at once that classification can be generic and idiosyncratic, collective and personal, scientific and associative. This fabulous Chinese encyclopaedia has the hint of science and Darwin, genus and species, and the flavour of a holiday from reality. Like Magic Realism in general it confuses truth and fiction in order to heighten the opposite categories themselves.

### Collective

Madelon likes to work with other people, such as her daughter Charlie, or friends. Collective work, mutual help, collaboration have been staples of Modernism in architecture and the feminist movement, an ideology of anonymous teamwork, ‘everyone is creative.’ Walter Gropius’ old firm, TAC (The Architects Collaborative) was *not* a model for Rem Koollhaas’ OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture) because it was so midcult: teamwork as conformity not creativity. Most architectural firms follow Jencks’ Remorseless Law (aka, The Law of Diminishing Architecture, The Ivan Illich Law, etc). Bigger = more predictable = more boring. The 1000 biggest firms of architecture produce more collectively boring square feet than the next 5000 biggest. Proof? The aerial view of any downtown.

I have known Rem and Madelon since the late sixties and the Architectural Association where I was teaching and he was a sometime student. We have been close friends ever since, close enough to enjoy our differences over architecture, and share many personal and amusing moments not to be recounted here. Since 1996 Madelon and I have worked together occasionally on garden design, models of DNA, mounds, drawings and paintings of ideas, metaphorical analyses of iconic buildings and a few unlikely things. When I had to go to a fancy dress party, she fashioned some cosmic attire for me using the canvas of a chef’s costume (3). When, for a Milanese Park, I had to transform a readymade (but boring) garden seat into a trellis, she stitched the hybrid Trellis-Seat together with thread (4). Stitching, sewing seats together, how unlikely a solution, not the kind of design research and breakthrough one would find at OMA or Foster’s Office. Low-tech, modest, sewing: bricolage beats high design, R&D.

The sly feminist joke, though Madelon may not intend it that way. In any case, when we work together it is often the humour that breaks through her multi-tasking. We will be forming a plasticine model of a galactic collision from both sides of two interlocked spirals, when her

mobile phone will start moaning and grunting and bouncing on the table. It is Rem in Beijing. He is coming out of an underground and is lost, needs direction or something I can't understand because it is in Double Dutch, with too many 'dis-dats' and guttural consonants slamming into each other for my English-only. But we carry on laughing. Small-scale collective work is different from big-scale. The office of Emilio Ambasz is 200 times smaller than Zaha Hadid's. There is time for humour and change of direction, for sideways thought, not everything is streamlined for production. James Lovelock invented the Gaia Hypothesis, as he tells the story, after he left NASA and bigness. He was able to invent this and the electron capture device and make countless other breakthroughs only because he was a cottage industry, a lone inventor able to create at one-brain speed. Not everything is big science, £25 billion, CERN. But most people are compelled into the system, into either the orthodoxy of the Big or the orthodoxy of the Brand. .

### **Mental prosthetics and cyborgs**

Vriesendorp has a Mind Game (see below) under development for other people to analyse their intercourse with objects. The ciphers are a female torso, a bird, building, a foot, dice and a dog, etcetera. One imagines the tool kit will expand and change through use. Salvador Dali probed reality through his melting watches, naked torsos, Christian icons, flabby crutches and so on. Paolozzi used bug-eyed monsters, Charles Atlas, comix boob and classicism. Vriesendorp's larger corpus includes skulls, cows, clocks, masks, eyes, legs, the Tower of Babel, pagodas, post-modern architecture, iconic buildings, lighthouses, dismembered bodies, etcetera. The encyclopaedia is an unlimited list of semiosis. Vriesendorp and Koolhaas used to say that their Raft of Medusa, where survivors of catastrophe ate each other to survive, was an 'architectural dipstick.' Like a thermometer or oil dipstick you could put it on the site to take the temperature of a building or neighbourhood. Most verdicts were 'here is sickness.' New York is in terminal decline, absence of delirium – a strange doctor's report.

Were they serious? Yes and no. Taking the temperature with these objects is a surreal method I christened 'Surrationalism' because of its mixture of rationalism and madness, but no one else took up the label or idea. The European Rationalists, like Jose Luis Sert, had analysed the city statistically for its ills, and Koolhaas was to extend some of this in the 1990s, in his work on bigness. But looking at the city from heterodox positions also tells us things that 'rational' categories do not reveal. Odd categories can be applied, everything is connected to everything else, and every paranoid conjecture will produce some new information. After all, playing the old game of Twenty Question – asking whether a concept like democracy is "animal, vegetable or mineral" – is absurd on some levels, but it gets you to answers.

Objects are mental prosthetics, and with them we become cyborg-doctors wandering around sticking our instruments into reality to see how it fits the toolbox. The sixties verdict used to be – "it's not you, there's a fault in reality." Of course the toolbox has to expand and change, it can, over time and with breakthroughs, get closer to reality. The periodic table proves that. With artists the confirmation is something different, the way their world builds up its own necessity of objects and their connections. "Only connect," has been the artistic injunction for more than a hundred years, and "make it inevitable, through narrative," one might add, for objects on the loose are always in search of the rest in the plot.

3250 words

Photos

1. Cover of *Delirious New York*, 1978
2. Tablescape
3. Cosmic Man
4. Trellis-Seat (design Charles Jencks)

