




# Objects, Things, Hyperobjects. A Philosophical Gaze on Contemporary Design

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**Abstract.** Through an applied research project in the field of contemporary design, the essay identifies and illustrates the passage of three philosophical transitions: the idea of the object as a design project (Flusser, Sottsass, Mendini) – first transition –, crosses over to the realm of the thing (Heidegger, Bodei, Rigotti) – second transition – until it reaches the notion of the hyperobject (Harman, Morton), – third transition – involving human and non-human entities.

Through reclaiming for design the possibility of becoming a trigger for divergent thinking, the object acquires new human and dialogic qualities. The transition from the object-function to the *object-thought* [1] transforms the meaning of the product to the extent that it is no longer a passive element of dialogical discourse but rather the triggering actor of that same process of confrontation. In this perspective, the object transforms from an exclusive commodity with normal function into a thing full of meaning and expressive possibility. Such objects are connected to the individual and the intellectual relationship they establish. From a posthuman perspective (Braidotti), they are narrative subjects of a reflection increasingly striving for a pluriverse coexistence beyond humankind itself. (Haraway, Caffo).

The last transition, to the hyperobject, is illustrated through a design experience at the boundary between these three value transitions. The final hyperobjects designed have their primary meaning to interrogate and raise awareness around diverse relationships – with ecosystems, beyond the human – unhinging an outdated idea that sees the object forcibly relegated to the world of practical and tangible consumer commodity.

**Keywords:** speculative design · practice-based research · marble design · hyperobjects · coexistence

## 1 Transition 1: From Object to Thing

Since their changes can affect human behavior and relationships, contemporary and speculative design objects are connoted by a solid evocative and symbolic power and, in this sense, can be considered powerful devices of meaning with a discursive nature of their own. “In the civilization of objects, the word loses its primacy: material products are texts, they are discourses. They tell us about men’s social and cultural history, the history of ideas, behavior, spiritual sense, and ethical and aesthetic values. [...] Objects represent in synthesis the spirit of the time” [2, 10–11].

The shift from the object-function to the *object-thought* transforms the meaning of the product to the extent that it is no longer a passive element of the dialogical discourse but rather the triggering actor of that same process of confrontation. In this perspective, the design object is transformed from an exclusive commodity with a standard function into a “thing” full of meaning and expressive possibility.

The *thought-object* is linked to the individual and the mental relationship it establishes. If it works in an introspective dimension, it is at the same time also the narrating subject of a cultural and human reflection, definitively changing its ontological status [1]. When it is speculative, it aims to destabilize through a reflection, an awareness and the subversion of a presumed conception. The result of this interaction can be measured in inspirational, experiential even behavioral terms. In this perspective, the *thought-object*, vehicle for an existential reflection, approaches the meaning of things – as understood by the philosophers Bodei, Flusser, and Rigotti – and it goes on to unhinge ancient literature that sees the design object perforce relegated to the world of immediate and tangible consumer goods.

The subject of the object understood as a thing, long debated by philosophers, needs to be investigated further in the field of design culture. The interconnection between the sense of responsibility that the concept of thing carries with it, along with the fact that it can generate affection, leads to a new possibility for design: a design that generates not only objects to sell but things adequately understood in the philosophical sense of *res*.

From an etymological point of view, the term thing is very different from the word object, since it derives from the contraction of the Latin word *causa*, which indicates something that interests us deeply and for which we are willing to fight [3, 12]. For the thing, we feel a feeling, an emotional transport; the thing takes on a predominantly non-utilitarian functionality. The object, on the contrary, is treated with greater indifference, as if it were a lifeless element, distant from man.

Furthermore, the etymology clarifies its deeper meaning: object derives from the medieval Latin *objectum*, which from Greek means problem and indicates something that stands before us as an obstacle, a hindrance to the path – that objects to the subject.

In the essay entitled *Design: an obstacle removal?* Flusser advocates a return to things, arguing precisely how design should not produce more objects [4, 55]. The things, rich in interpersonal relationships and “ancient affection”, are more prone to free interpretation by the subjects who use them. Regarding this degree of expressive freedom and inter-subjective relationship, Remo Bodei also incited design to transform objects into things, insofar as these, full of meaning, can naturally enrich human life [3]. The being dense of humanity, as Heidegger reminds us in the essay *The Question of Technique*, brings them closer to the world. Heidegger visualizes things first and foremost through common physical objects such as the pitcher, “the book and the picture, the crown, and the cross”, and it is with these in mind that he writes, “let us leave behind us all pretensions to unconditionality [...] let us take care of the essence of the thing by bringing it into the region in which it unfolds. To care is to approach the world” [5, 121]. This, reconciling with the world, implying a greater understanding, is the aim of many contemporary design projects that try to investigate this mutual relationship. It is with the intention of re-establishing this atavistic relationship that contemporaneity is increasingly asking us to build things and not objects.

The word thing, moreover, has a double translation in German: *Ding* (akin to the English thing) and *Sache*. In philosophical language, *Ding* predominantly means the tangible thing, the physical object; on the other hand, *Sache* (from *suchen* to seek) stands for something that is to be sought, the essence of the object, its substance.

The dual valence of the thing thus brings us before a complex ontology that merges theory and praxis, invisible and visible. What is interesting is that the term has retained both meanings over time, and it is in this inseparable ambivalence that its profound value originates. It does not matter whether the things we refer to are closer to the German concept of *Ding* or *Sache*, to an idealist and theoretical dimension, or a concrete and tangible one. What matters is their irreducible reconnection to a human dimension. “What is important is the relationship, the contact, the tension with the thing [...] It is men and women among them who talk about things: the thing dictates the conditions because it can only be taken for what it is, an instrument or a thing in itself, but it is the man who talks about the thing and attributes human qualities to the objects [...] You cannot get out of man, you cannot get out of language” [6, X]. Further evidence of the link between these two aspects, theory, and praxis, is provided by the interrelation between the English words *think* and *thing*: both far from the materiality of the object.

The term “thing” however has had multiple meanings over the centuries. It is emblematic to recall, for example, that, used in the Latin sense of *res publica*, it indicated a precise attitude to dialogue and interaction among humankind in dealing with an issue concerning all. The public thing pertained to the human activity of coming together around issues that a community care about. It follows that things acquire value first and foremost concerning the dialogue that they are able to arise.

In *The Thought of Things*, Francesca Rigotti shows how “in a single connective tissue, subject and object, mind, and world, consciousness and thing” can be joined. “The fusion is not and does not want to be confusion, but neither does it want to accept for the date the usual juxtaposition that is made of them, as if subject and object, consciousness and thing, were two opposite sides that observe each other without touching” [6, X].

Similarly, the philosopher Pannikar places them in a physical dimension and argues that there is no higher principle of objectivity that cannot be verified in immanent reality. “If, in fact, from what we observe in our experience, we realize that everything is connected to everything, that being is characterized by radical relativity (or radical relationality). There is nothing transcendent; it is impossible to sever one thing’s ties with the rest of reality without altering both reality and the thing itself. The bonds that relate each thing to every other also constitute the things themselves” [7, 105–106]. As we can see later, this philosophical thought, which works on a relational level, is also present in the third object’s transition, that of the hyperobjects of Morton, and it will be used as a theoretical guide for the practice-based design experience illustrated at the end of the paper. From this perspective, designing things means being responsible in front of an object and making it a relational tool for humans. This way of approaching the thing is one of the most interesting approaches to contemporary design and is a strategic element for change.

Over the course of time, many designers have likened design objects to things in a philosophical view similar to the one described so far. Sottsass, for example, expresses

himself several times on design using the word thing, without any fear of making generalizations. On the contrary, he uses this term on several occasions precisely because of its ability to reveal a complex human dimension. “My opinion is that, instead, the problem is not to approach ‘good design’ but to make design to come as close as possible to an anthropological state of things, which, in turn, must be as close as possible to society’s need for an image of itself” [8, 20].

Alessandro Mendini’s famous statement, “we are things among things”, gave the title to the exhibition *Quali cose siamo?*, which, at the Milan Triennale in 2010, addressed precisely the world of objects as a systemic, relational, living whole. In the many preparatory drawings for the exhibition, Mendini, through an analysis of groups of objects placed together in random and non-random ways, tried to define the relationships of function and aesthetics, matter and technique, and the resulting human behaviors. The unstructured set of objects that diffusely surrounds us stands before us as a geography of our minds, an “animated constellation” that invites us to new levels of relationship. This anthropological gaze reveals the systemic world of things as an organism made up of “breathing and telling objects. They breathe for their designer and their industrialist. They say to the one who employs them; indeed, they coincide with the one who employs them. We are our things. We are things among things” [9, 12].

Following this interconnection, objects constitute active devices for a reflection where the intrinsic human dimension reinforces their existential value. It is in this dimension that *objects-thought*, looking at man, are assimilated to the realm of the thing.

## 2 Transition 2 – From Thing to Organism

Among things, Heidegger makes space for the stone, the piece of wood, the tong, the clock, the apple, and a piece of bread, but also for living things, a rose, a shrub, a beech tree, a fir tree, a lizard, a wasp, but not, he adds, the number five, which we hesitate to call “a thing” [5, 121].

Following this selection, a thing concerns the universality of being, denoting its complexity in a non-transcendent sense. It always refers back to something physical that can be imagined and touched. “Thing” is all there is, of concrete and abstract, of material and ideal, in its broadest sense, concerning the human language. In a narrower sense, what is perceptible to the senses: what is tangible, visible, what is within reach and which refers back to the materiality of the real. Indicating Heidegger between things also the living species, he evolves their realm.

Returning to design issues, for some decades, design has also been invading the world of the natural sciences, moving closer to an idea of object as a living organism. The question arises from the development of bio-design with the exponential interest of designers [10] in anything called organic and living. In many avant-garde studies, it is possible to discern this continuous reference to the living matter in an attempt to analyze it, transform it, and reprocess it in some way. Since antiquity, humankind has looked to nature and its extraordinary ability to grow and self-regenerate as something to take as an example. However, the nature explored in contemporary design goes beyond a simple criterion of bio mimesis. These studies present a profound change in the relationship

between humans and the natural environment, reinforcing an old and intrinsic link with life which unites human and non-human forms of life.

Objects, materials for production, ways of living: in bio-design, everything is permeated by a widespread sensibility that overcomes an outdated vision of sustainability, going deeper through a symbiotic and necessary relationship. Through this nature, where there belongs awareness, design can now look at resources, materials, industrial processes, and all living organisms in a different way. From this renovated gaze, design studies on nature evolve in multiple ways. Living nature is understood as an aesthetic, sensory amplifier and is often narrated through sophisticated interactive technologies that allow for a different fruition or recomposed through science to a universe of images subservient to a visual, almost cathartic contemplation.

Nature is also examined as living substances, an animates, processable through advanced crafting and laboratory protocols. In all these exploratory possibilities, the most innovative experiments have been implemented in independent design laboratories, far from the mass industry logic. Representative case-studies include research by designers such as Neri Oxman, Officina Corpuscoli, Gionata Gatto and Giovanni Innella, Eric Klarenbeek, Mathieu Lehanneur and Arabeschi di Latte [11].

In this operative scenario, the designer is a conscious alchemist working in nature through generative sequences and procedures: his research leads to constructing new manufacturing logic, tools, and visions. These experiments are not always aimed at a positive reunion of mankind with his surroundings. Nevertheless, they aim to trigger a reflection that destabilizes, since they are no longer understood as anthropocentric. In an allocentric perspective – concerning the entire living ecosystem – the product's conception is not a passive object but evolves toward a horizon of living manufacture where humanity and nature coexist at the same level. With the acceleration of technological progress and the spread of bio practices within creative processes, many previously unrealizable projects are now being realized, shaking up the traditional industry from below. It is from these premises that, with new balances, the most avant-garde contemporary research is entering directly into laboratories and collaborating with varied scientific figures, putting different knowledge and perspectives into circulation. Returning to independent design practices, the relationship between technology-nature-object reaches a fundamental turning point toward a process of re-signifying matter and its manufacturing processes for a new kind of intellectual experience. In this sense, the old sustainability paradigm is being replaced by a new living paradigm, even more, radical and akin to the very ways in which nature operates [12].

From the encounter between techno-scientific and humanistic-artistic knowledges, there are new studies on the relationships between organism and machine, man and nature, human body, animal, and plant. The result of such hybridizations leads to the elaboration of new consumer relations, symbiotic systems, and synesthetic artifacts, in the philosophical sense, understood in turn as *thought-objects* [1].

In this perspective, the assimilation of the object to the living thing is one of the most interesting approaches of design and, for all intents and purposes, a strategic element for active change in the contemporaneity. Approaching things to the realm of organisms fundamentally changes its purpose, as it grafts a divergent helpful approach for human understanding and coexisting in a pluriverse world.

### 3 Transition 3 – From Organism to Hyperobject

As previously described, since 2000, with the rise of several bio-design projects and exhibitions [13], the design paradigm has shifted profoundly toward a new horizon of living and circular manufacture. The current research scenario, on the border between biology, technology and design, imagines and experiments new interactions with the concept of life, in its multiple genesis processes, and according to a disruptive post-anthropocentric perspective [14].

Triggered by emerging phenomena such as the Great Acceleration, Climate Change and the Sixth Extinction, the design value system has shifted the focus from humans to the entire planet. From a co-evolutionary perspective, the post-anthropocentric orientation expresses an anti-hierarchical and holistic conception through the fusion of man with nature and his coexistence with all kingdoms, living and non-living.

Regarding the relationship with the object, taking up in a personal way the reflections of Heidegger and Husserl, Harman proposes a theory of objects in a context of a flat ontology where the human occupies no privileged vantage point. Harman develops the idea that every object that is, every existent in its irreducible singularity – appears to every other, giving rise to a multiplicity of representations that all equally legitimate, imposing an entirely different perspective. It concerns caring for the non-human understood as that which, while not belonging to human history, has entered into phase with it [15].

If postmodern thought had found its own “vision” in the notion of “liquidity”, breaking down the boundaries of separate interpretive forms, the definitions of O.O.O. and hyperobjects, take the next step. Absorbing the peculiarities of “liquidity”, this theoretical framework metaphorically evolves by sublimating towards a gaseous state: a kind of universal space-time where everything is involved in a viscous and beyond life relationship. Returning to humans, the object-oriented ontology paradigm argues that the traditional, anthropocentric primacy of us (humans) must be replaced by a plurality of objective perspectives, primarily because we too are “objects”.

From the object to the hyperobject, Timothy Morton defines this new step as any element “relating to things massively distributed in space and time and related to human factors”. “We must turn to an ethics of otherness based on the proximity of the stranger” [16, 161]. Hyperobjects are viscous and real even if we cannot always directly touch them. They are identified by five characteristics: viscosity, non-locality, undulating temporality, a zone-dimension of their own, inter objectivity. It is impossible to distance ourselves from them, thinking that we can drive them back in an elsewhere that does not exist.

Starting from this complexity, constituted both by a plurality of sensual objects [15] and hyperobjects together, what can design do to investigate this universal and interconnected realm?

The essay starts by recognizing an inter-objectivity relation between all things, living and non-living and by the existence of hyperobjects, setting a design path in motion following new ethical and aesthetic forms of coexistence. The consequence is that the design object, passing through the realm of the thing, moves to the hyperobject, working in a particular spatial/temporal dimension, also geographical, not immediately related to humankind. The awareness of the existence of hyperobjects serves as a basis for reconstructing human habitation and behaviors, also “recognizing in what is perturbing

(uncanny) the characteristics of the real after the end of the classical categories” [16, 161].

#### 4 Hyperobjects: A Philosophical-Based Design Research

*To be an object means to be in relation with other objects. (...) The universe of OOO is a paradoxical place (like that of quantum physics) in which everything is connected, but in which, at the same time, each object hides within itself an abyss of hidden properties.* [16, 161]

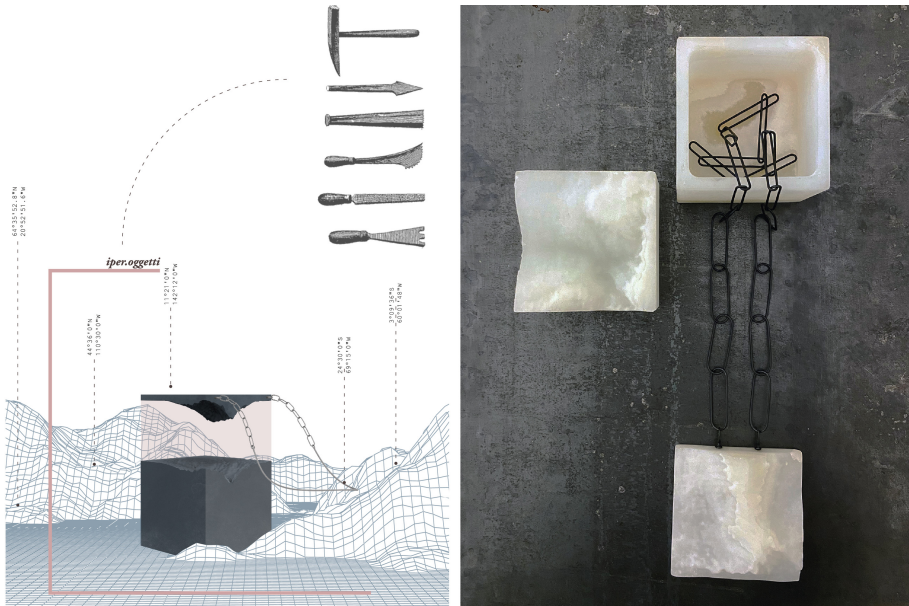
*Hyperobjects* is an applied-research project that mixes product design, contemporary philosophy and jewellery, CAD/CAM manufacturing technologies. Designed to be produced in limited series according to a numbered editorial approach, *Hyperobjects* intends to investigate the philosophical theory, described above, called O.O.O. (Object Oriented Ontology), and to the hyperobjects’s coexistence perspective stated by Morton, by practice. The project is inspired by the idea where everything exists inside an inter-subjective relationship, hiding within itself a dark side, not comprehensible in its entirety. Through this ambiguity and mystery, the project tries to instill a new awareness.

The project was commissioned by *AlfaternaMarmi* in 2020, a brand created by the company from Campania of the same name that has been working in stone processing sector for the past fifty years, with it being part of the project curated by Roberto Monte called *Paesaggi di pietra*.

The project consists of five monolithic cubes made of different precious marbles and different oxidized metals, which are divided into three parts: container box, lid, and surface – tilting and wearable like a pendant that emerged from the landscape (see Fig. 1).

The five chosen locations are the Okjokull Glacier, the Yellowstone Volcano, the Atacama Desert, the Amazon Rainforest, and the Mariana Trench. They are all geographic landscapes of fundamental importance to humans, despite their apparent distance, with each, for different reasons, being related to the ecosystem balance of the planet. The correspondence between artifact and landscape is determined by the type of marble and surface shapes evoked by the location through the cardinal points and geographic coordinates marked on the artifacts. Regarding the manufacturing processes, they are unique blocks extracted and 3D modeled by single pieces of marble. The same uniqueness derives from the metal chains whose oxidations cannot be replicated (see Fig. 2).

As a metaphysic element extracted from the subsoil, each Hyperobject can be positioned in a domestic space, recalling a geographic area spatially located in a remote part of the world, albeit one of vital interdependence for humans. As Aldo Trione argues, thinking about the cosmic energy of stones, “Regions populated by minerals, by fragments, by ruins where those original images are imprinted that, with their own ambivalences, explain the universe and human beings, and reserve continuous surprises and instill wonder and astonishment” [17, 29].



**Fig. 1.** Okjokull Glacier.  $64^{\circ} 35' 52.8''$  N,  $20^{\circ} 52' 51.6''$  W. Materials: white onyx and oxidized silver. *Hyperobjects* is a project of 5 cubes, representing 5 remote landscapes, which can be split into boxes and necklaces. Manufacturing techniques: 3D cad/cam marble modeling, handcrafted microsculpture, goldsmithing, oxidized metals.

In their being solid and evocative presences, *Hyperobjects* are design objects that testify the bond that runs through all living and non-living beings, offering, from time to time in different ways, the possibility of being unmasked as things functional to beauty and thought.

Their primary function is to be a vehicle for existential reflection concerning the universal relationship between, the owner – humans – and the corresponding landscapes – not humans. Through the color, the close shape, ambiguity in the appearance and functionality, they evoke the entirety of all despite their fragmentations in pieces. Moreover, approaching the idea of thing – as described in the second transition above – they unhinge the obsolete idea that sees the object forcibly relegated to the world of practical and consumer goods.



**Fig. 2.** Okjokull Glacier. 64° 35' 52.8" N, 20° 52' 51.6" W. Materials: white onyx and oxidized silver. Hyperobjects is a project of 5 cubes, representing 5 remote landscapes, which can be split into boxes and necklaces. Manufacturing techniques: 3D cad/cam marble modeling, handcrafted microsculpture, goldsmithing, oxidized metals.

## 5 Conclusions

Through a practice-based design approach, the essay has tried to explore some well-known philosophic theories by manufacturing new contemporary objects intended as full of meaningful *objects-things*.

Starting by analyzing three philosophical transitions concerning the object realm, design can be the agent for a radical change of perspective toward new forms of awareness. By design-oriented crafting activity connected to theoretical frameworks, the designer is an intermediary of new ways to think about the real and production, opening up divergent behaviors and perceptions.

In this operative scenario, the *Hyperobjects* project represents a conceptual tool for understanding the world's complexity differently. In the awareness of a plural universe, the five remote landscapes exist in space-time dimensions, even if they are too large to be seen or perceived directly by humans. However, by their design representation, they are not seen as passive entities but active daily objects that remember the vital coexistence between all living and non-living forms. They represent something that escapes us and in which we are dramatically immersed.

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