

Materializing Dematerialization

creating the object of an in-between state

Chulan Kwak

ABSTRACT

I, as both an active maker and a designer, have a natural tendency to be interested in different materials and in how these materials can be applied. This interest had led me to a philosophical and theoretical research about a basic logic of 'creating things' - how to materialize an 'idea.'

Greek philosophy has offered the critical foundation to a development of the Western culture and it still influences the society and its people in the current world. My interpretation of material world is a wonderful source to explain the current social phenomena.

Especially considering Plato's illustration of the materializing process, which deforms the idea and informs the matter, it does not only offer us a very clear way of approaching the material world conceptually, but it also makes us to acknowledge that we are losing the states of an empirical awareness between the intellectual and material reality. I, therefore, hypothesize that it is possible to create an object that juxtaposes both the existence and the non-existence, by locating between the intellectual and material state. Inspired ultimately by those contemporary artists, who have tried to take away objectivity to express their ideas, I realized that the in-between state can be communicated more effectively through dematerialization than materialization.

My conclusion is to materialize dematerialization: an object that creates a certain 'material paradox,' through making a material and its expression to play opposite, to become meaningless, and finally to dematerialize the material itself.

My aim is to create an object that dematerializes itself through doubly denied material contradiction, taking the viewers' vision beyond the material world.

Materializing Dematerialization

creating the object on an in-between state

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Vilém Flusser,
The Shape of Things,
p. 20

‘We are tricksters tricked’

When I was a furniture designer in Korea, I often visited furniture shops to have a look at new designs. While this was of course for researching the market and new models, it was also for my enjoyment.

Let me explain this. If you are a furniture designer in Korea and want to see new products or research furniture retail stores, you have to disguise yourself as a common customer. Because, in Korea there is a very big problem with people copying design, you will be kicked out of stores by sales clerks if you are too honest. And you’re definitely not allowed to take photographs. For this reason, I used to pretend that I was going to be married soon. Then the sales people become incredibly kind and dedicated but most of all the reason why it was fun for me was that salespeople would lie quite often when I asked questions about their products. Of course I could easily recognize the exact materials that were used or the process of how they were produced. But all the time M.D.F printed like wood became real wood or pressed paper became natural leather by salesmen. Because I knew all, it was sometimes impossible to swallow a laugh.

Because of this kind of personal experiences, I used to think that being a designer is not bad in a sense that we can see both sides of the objects surrounding us.

However at the same time I have feeling of responsibility due to the fact that I am positioned in the center of this ridiculous phenomenon and also, more significantly, we designers are the main creators of it.

1.2 Assessing my perspective

Being a designer in the core of consumerism we have always tried to find out the factors that give us a closer relationship with consumers or users with objects only in terms of 'Creating things'. So my interest in this subject is not only how can I deal with this paradoxical context where designers are suffering with their own activities. It's also to establish that the real matter is not 'to create or not', but 'to extend the meaning of creating'.

This thesis is an illustration of my personal thought relying on the historical overviews and reflections of philosophy of 'Creating things' through 'Materializing'. While I am partially informed in these fields, I am by no means an expert in any of them, even more because especially in these fields it is very hard to distinguish the empirical from subjective approach. Debates are an ongoing constant of any philosophical approach, as philosophy doesn't try to find the absolute truth, but tries to pose new sets of questions ever more.

Ivana Borovnjak,
Logic of language vs.
World of Objects
p. 8

Therefore I believe that the inborn background of design – 'making things' (both material and immaterial) that is the subject all designers concern – should be studied under the theoretical digestion of how physical objects are being made.

2. RESEARCH

2.1 Theory of creating things

Plato's theory of forms

The Theory of Forms typically refers to Plato's belief that the material world as it seems to us is not the real world, but only a shadow of the real world. Plato spoke of forms in formulating his solution to the problem of universals. The forms, according to Plato, are roughly speaking archetypes or abstract representations of the many types and properties (that is, of universals) of things we see all around us.

We can easily understand his argument for Ideas and phenomena in the conversation between Socrates and Glaucon that was described in his book, Republic 6: The philosopher-King. In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato described symbolically the predicament in which mankind finds itself and proposes a way of salvation. The Allegory presents, in brief form, most of Plato's major philosophical assumptions: his belief that the world revealed by our senses is not the real world but only a poor copy of it, and that the real world can only be apprehended intellectually.

How things are created

It seems that our current consumer society is a full-scale working model of philosophical conception. Under his theory, Plato, all of physical objects surrounding us are the familiar dark existences and the shadow of truth. Although Aristotle's interpretation of reality strongly defers from it, the basic idea of the Greek philosophers is that the world of phenomena that we perceive with our senses is an amorphous stew behind which are concealed



Tim Noble and Sue Webster, *Real Life is Rubbish*

eternal and unchanging forms which we can perceive by means of the supersensory perspective of theory.

So then what was the makers' process for him in this inconvenient relation between the truth and the distorted phenomena?

Vilem Flusser,
The Shape of Things,
p. 22

...The Greek tekne means 'art' and is related to tekton, a 'builder'. The basic idea here is that wood (hyle in Greek) is a shapeless material to which the artist, the technician, gives form, thereby causing the form to appear in the first place. Plato's basic objection to art and technology was that they betray and distort theoretically intelligible Forms ('Ideas') when they transfer into the material world.

The quotation above from Vilem flusser's book, 'The shape of things', seems very bitter but plausible of describing the philosophical positions of producers. For Plato, artists and technicians were traitors to Ideas and tricksters because they cunningly seduced people into perceiving distorted ideas. And besides we can realize the reason why this indication is more interesting in this objectified era through his interpretation of carpenters' work.

ibid., p. 24

... The tragedy here is that in so doing they not only in-form the wood (impose the table form on it) but also deform the Idea of the table (distort it in the wood). The tragedy is therefore that it is impossible to make an ideal table.

Although this all sounds very archaic (as Vilem Flusser said so himself), here I could face the most important conceptions of process, 'deform' and 'inform', those are the main factors of social tragedy made out of alienation Ideas from Material realities.

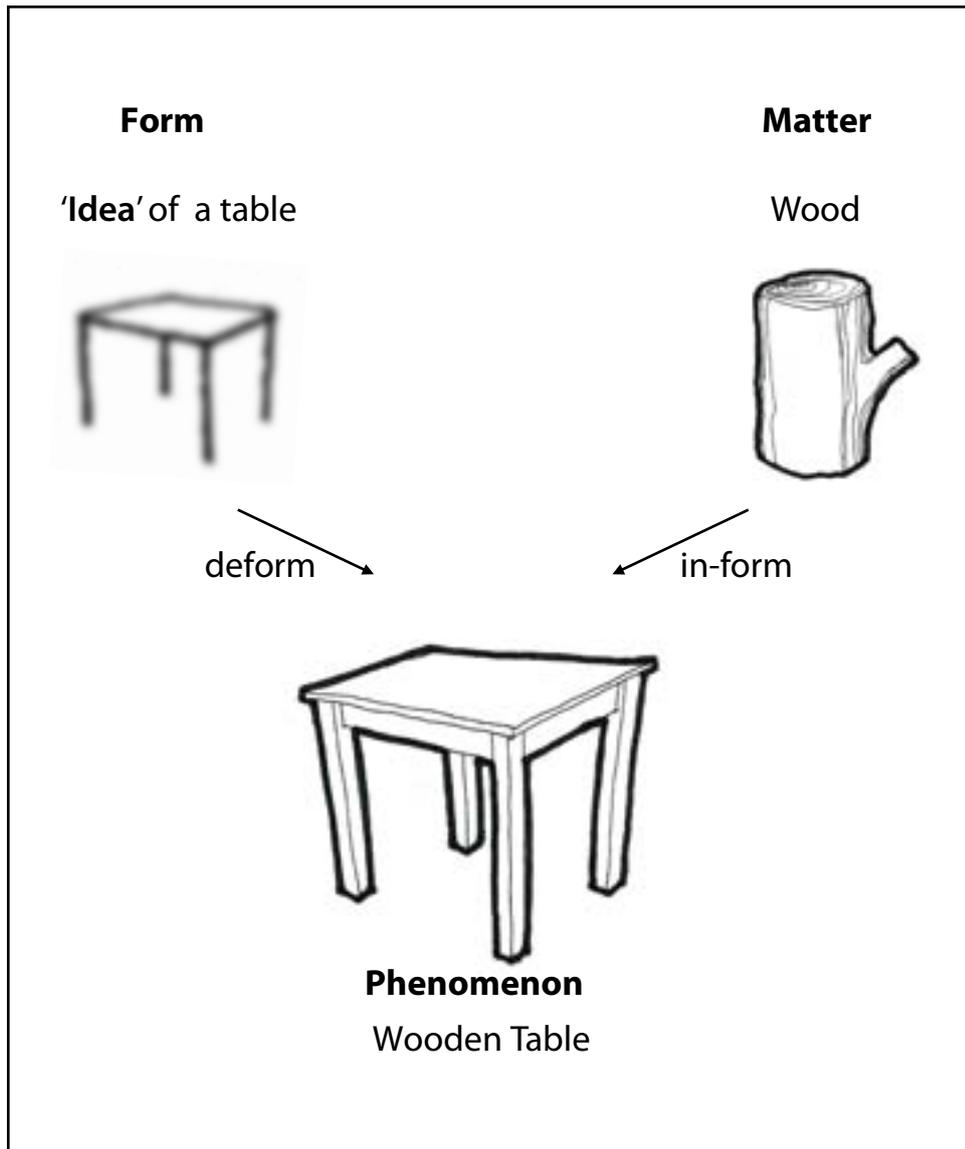


Illustration of Carpenter's work, drawing by Chulan Kwak

Deform and Inform

Even though I myself am a designer and a maker, the reason why those two conceptions are so striking was actually I haven't really seen any clearer explanation than that. In fact, there are so many things we take for granted and we never doubt how and why things are there like I have never questioned the theoretical interpretation of 'things.'

For instance you have sweet ice cream, you can enjoy the softness of cream or milk and the taste of flavorful ingredients such as fruit, chocolate or sugar. So at that time you cannot taste the fresh water, which is the most basic ingredient. The society we are living in has become an incredibly complicated system in which we are fully surrounded by numerous goods that we can consume no matter what. It doesn't matter if they are material or immaterial. When you see our modern society as the ice cream and the labour of humans being the water that forms the largest part of it. We have no interest in how the human labour has to be or how we could develop our culture through working, because we are only looking at the ice cream.

Richard Sennett also starts his book 'The Craftsman' with mentioning the dilemma of the material world through quoting the well-known myth of 'Pandora's Casket'. As this well-known myth shows, the critical motivation or theme of Greece was that human civilization started with the 'use of fire' that means understanding the process of 'deform' and 'inform' and it is the origin of cultural development.

2.2 Designer's Work

Step on the devaluated Idea

Here the process of 'deforming' – the ability to turn 'Idea' into something physical (the realm of Art) - is done by the means of 'informing' - the ability that makes 'deforming' possible (the realm of Technology). In other words 'deforming' is the bridge that connects Ideas to phenomena and 'informing' is the process that makes 'deforming' possible.

However, since the Industrial Revolution, the value of 'Informing' has changed - it was a matter of forming the material to hand to make it appear, but now what we have is a flood of forms pouring out of our technical equipment, and this flood we fill with material so as to 'materialize' the forms – and this started to make people incapable of recognizing the notion of 'deforming'. And in doing so, designers have devaluated all values and finally the price people pay for this is the loss of truth and authenticity. Although this may sound really abstract, this problem is the cruel reality of our daily lives and truly our own story. To take one example, plastic pens are getting cheaper and cheaper and tend to be given away for nothing. The material they are made of has practically no value, and work (according to Marx, the source of all value) is accomplished thanks to smart technology by fully automated machines.

ibid., p. 28

ibid., p. 20

The only thing that gives plastic pens any value is their design, which is the reason that they write. Yet this is a design we don't even notice, so such pens tend to be given away for free – for example, as advertising. Great ideas behind them are treated with the same contempt as the material and work behind them.

John O'Neill, Hegel's
dialectic of desire and
recognition, p. 228

UNCONDITIONAL FULFILLMENT OR
PERFECTION OF BEING THAT IS THE AIM
OF A HUMAN DESIRE THAT CANNOT BE
SATISFIED BY ANY OBJET BECAUSE “THE
BEING OF LANGUAGE IS THE NON-BEING OF
OBJECTS”

- Hegel

3. HYPOTHESIS

I become shameful when my childhood mistakes cross my mind. If the design that I'm doing now has existed for its own sake through the fact that people become easily blinded to reality and even let them stick to the material world – the lowest hierarchical level in Platonic philosophies, how can I take the activity of creating? Or how can I deal with these? Can I find a third possibility, in-between creating and non-creating?

Vuokko Takala
Sensible, Pleasurable
and Sorcerous Design
in Design-Pleasure or
Responsibility, p. 88

Medium-like Function

Fortunately I could find out hints about this question in Plato's Symposium where an intermediary appears between oppositions, as told by Diotima.

'What then is love?' I asked; ... 'he is neither mortal nor immortal, but in a mean between the two.' ... 'He is intermediate between the divine and the mortal.' 'And what is his power?' I said, 'He interprets between gods and men. ... he is the mediator who spans the chasm which divides them, and therefore by him the universe is bound together.'

ibid, p.89

If we are the creations of God and we are trying to mimic his ability of almightiness – we have already created an alternate world, 'what kind of mediator can I create?' and 'how can I design it?' as God has created the being of angel and devil for medium-like function.

The answer is always located in the question itself. It is 'the in-between', the middle of flow from conception to physicality. The pressing question for me therefore is: How to create an object that exists physically but reveals non-physicality? How can I make an object be located in-between them?



Martin Klimas, *Untitled (porcelain figurine #04)*, 2004

4. THEORY

4.1 Materialization

Failed communication

There might be a lot of ways of expressing the middle of 'deforming'. Currently 'Imperfection' that represents expressed craftsmanship, the burning issue within designers, is also one of the ways to show the process of 'deforming'. In fact 'imperfection' has been regarded as an appropriate alternative and many designers are now actively applying it to their design. But 'imperfection' of craftsmanship is actually more interpreted as the expression of opposition to globalization, expression of tradition or even one of luxury trends rather than the method for showing the process of 'deforming'. This is mainly because 'creating' has always proceeded in the direction of 'materializing'. The interesting fact about this is that the same distress was also an issue that Performance artists dealt with in the mid 20th century.

For instance Jackson Pollock claimed that the most important thing is the process of how a concept of an artist is materialized, not the work that follows it. This was why he created the performance called 'action painting.' But the problem starts from this point. The fact is that we see his works, according to him not valuable, through pictures or in galleries then we interpret his works through sensual-perception and we start to impose our imagination on them.

Jungkwon Chin,
Lecture 'Happening and Conceptual art'
translated by Chulan Kwak

Let's say that we cannot imagine going on a picnic in his landscape paintings, but still we can imagine exploring space on his action paintings and when this happens the thing that he was trying to communicate is lost.



Action Painting by Jackson Pollock



How we impose our own meanings to objectivities is also well explained in Joana Ozorio de Almeida Meroz's thesis, 'De-signing Design'. We are always making interpretations in order to make sense of them. Therefore the direction of 'Materializing' creates the problem that there must be an objectivity that always possesses the potential to become a subjectivity.

Joana Meroz,
De-signing design,
p.35

4.2 Release from objectivity

This side effect of failed communication caused Dematerialization of art as a counteraction and this has been the main vision of many contemporary artists since the beginning of the last Century.

For the structuralist L. Moholy Nagy, the absolute beauty should come into being at the very moment when it is seen and art should get rid of materiality from itself. In 1960's Yves Klein believed 'making things' is an old fashioned way of expression so artists as executors are the beings who had to fade away of the history of art. In 70's the advent of conceptual art has pushed dematerialization of art works to the extreme level. Conceptual artists are the strict Gnostics and anti – materialists so their works should not belong to materiality fulfilled with errors but spirituality. Because material is not the foundation of their works they believe that the essence of art exists in conceptuality and materiality is mere a medium that transports information.

Sangyong Shim,
Lecture 'An effigy of
digital artists' translated
by Chulan Kwak

However the main theme in this thesis is not debate whether the essence of things are in conceptuality of materiality. As I mentioned above the most significant thing we need to discuss is that the moment of metamorphosis in a flow between idea and phenomenon cannot be empirical knowledge for us any more. And besides, as it is very difficult to name the numerous variations on how the different artists have tried to remove

Hannah Higgins,
Fluxus Experience,
p.58

‘FLUXUS MATERIALS ARE USEFUL IN ...
AN EMANCIPATORY SENSE NOT BECAUSE
THEY CONSTRUCT POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES
BUT RATHER BECAUSE THEY PROVIDE
CONTEXTS ... FOR PRIMARY EXPERIENCES.
IN OFFERING OPPORTUNITIES TO GAIN
KNOWLEDGE BY MULTISENSORY AND
PERFORMATIVE MEANS, FLUXUS HAS
POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS IN THE UNFIXED,
UNASSIGNED, PERHAPS ANARCHIC SENSE.’

– Hannah Higgins



Phil Corner, *Piano Activities*, 1962

objectivities from their works and reveal non-existence of them, I will limit my discussion of what gave me inspiration in the initial stage of my project.

The Fluxus movement that used to be called 'Neo Dada' is well known for performances that accompany unexpectedness. Especially performances such as 'One for Violin' - over the course of five minutes, Paik very slowly and intently lifts up a violin and then smashes it with one blow on the table - or 'Piano Activities' - a group of artists eventually destroys the old piano - are the strongest representatives.

We can see their way as showing contrasts with Jackson Pollock's. Their aim was more precisely communicating their performances themselves through destroying and dematerializing objects that we can unconsciously perceive as symbols. Through their so-called concerts they reveal the opposite process to the traditional way of performing, they wanted to express the meaning of 'in-between' more exactly by removing objectivities that can somehow be interpreted. While 'Fluxus' the name taken from a Latin word meaning "to flow" is widely known, the fact that their performance of destruction shows the course of objectivities' being shattered seems also tightly related to the Plato's statement 'things in the sensible world are in a state of flux.'

Vuokko Takala
Sensible, Pleasurable
and Sorcerous Design
in Design-Pleasure or
Responsibility, p. 89

5. DESIGN PROPOSAL

5.1 Destruction or Dematerialization

Since English is not my first language, one of the difficulties in writing this thesis was to use paradoxically related words appropriately. Philosophical thoughts are so sensitive that using the right words are very important not only to offer the exact meanings of them but also to give directions for theoretical proceeding. For these reasons, I tried not to mislead any of the thoughts or concepts used in this writing. Yet, it was not easy to make a design process that deals with these conceptual words and it was especially difficult to interpret those words correctly. Therefore, it would have been quite a big challenge for me if I had defined the activities of Fluxus movement and conceptual artists as destruction or dematerialization.

Especially the destruction in Fluxus activities is a totally different concept than just throwing away or disappearing, but it's more about communicating a process of being dematerialized. As Hannah Higgins writes, they did not destroy the piano haphazardly – it wasn't 'just' a destructive anti-art statement. Rather, the performance concentrates on "the careful rubbing of a brick over the strings, (the) patient waiting for the right moment to use a hammer. In this sense I believe that the 'in-between state' can reveal a process of 'conscious destruction - Dematerialization' of concrete objects. Moreover, based on the reverse process to 'deforming' by 'informing' of carpenter's work, we can realize a fact that the tool of destruction is dematerialization.

Hannah Higgins,
Fluxus Experience,
p.51



Rene Magritte, *The Treason of images*(*La trahison des images*), 1928

G.S. Evans,
Hegel's This could be
a pipe: Foucault, irreal-
ism and Ceci n'est pas
une pipe

TO MY MIND, THE 'INVISIBLE' IS THE
REMOVAL OF THE HABITUAL MEANING
OF THE THINGS THAT ARE VISIBLE IN
THE PICTURE, BY MEANS OF WHICH
OUR MYSTERY COMES TO DOMINATE US
COMPLETELY.

- Rene Magritte

5.2 Materializing dematerialization

Revealing Dematerialization through material-based creation is not an easy work. In which way can I express the flow of dematerialization as a tool for creating design?

As Gaston Fernandez Carrera defined conceptual art, the history of art in 20th century is the mechanism of ‘disappearing (disparaitre) ‘and an eloquence of non - existence. The great source of inspiration initially came from the work of Belgian surrealist artist Rene Magritte, whose paintings questioning our ability to perceive objects - This is not a pipe (Ceci n’est pas une pipe) or The Treason of Images (La trahison des images). As Foucault explains: “The calligram uses that capacity of letters to signify both as linear elements that can be arranged in space and as signs that must unroll according to a unique chain of sound. As a sign, the letter permits us to fix words; as line, it lets us give shape to things. The calligram aspires playfully to efface the oldest oppositions of our alphabetical civilization: to show and to name; to shape and to say; to reproduce and to articulate; to imitate and to signify; to look and to read.”, calligram quite often used to be the tool in the mediaval art forms and its aim was tying up a meaning doubly through ‘speaking’ and ‘showing’ simultaneously.

Sangyong Shim,
Lecture ‘An effigy of
digital artists’ translated
by Chulan Kwak

Foucault, Michel. This
Is Not a Pipe, p. 23

Magritte applied its logic to his works in a totally opposite way. But how is it that Magritte has here unraveled a calligram? we might ask. “From calligraphic doubling,” writes Foucault, “Magritte seemingly returns to the simple correspondence of the image with its legend. Without saying anything, a mute and adequately recognizable figure displays the object in its essence; from the image, a name written below receives its ‘meaning’ or rule for usage. Now, compared to the traditional function of the

ibid, p. 24

legend, Magritte's text is doubly paradoxical. It sets out to name something that evidently does not need to be named (the form is too well familiar). And at the moment when he should reveal the name, Magritte does so by denying that the object is what it is.

The main theme of modern philosophy has been the efforts to identify objectivity in our perception through texts. But calligram was destroyed as Magritte shows in his work. Although conceptual art is not about forms or material, it gave me some insights to start my ideas. Magritte's calligram creates the effect that both an objectivity and verbal expression become meaningless as they play opposite to each other. According to Foucault, this is an event where a calligram is eventually destroyed by a calligram.

I cannot create an object of non-existence but what I can do is, as Magritte destroyed a calligram with the calligram, to destroy a material with itself by creating a fake material that doesn't have habitual perception. By doing so, as Foucault notes, I can create a certain 'material strangeness' in my work. Also, I would first consider the possibility that the strangeness results from contradiction, arguing that contradiction can only exist between two statements.

5.3 The Treason of Material

Materializing without material

I would like to move myself back to the 'wooden table' that was a plausible example of how an idea is materialized and become a physicality. When we see a 'wooden table', there are many components such as wood grains, joints, and structures that define the table as a wooden table. Those components are evidently do not need to be explained because they are too well familiar. This means that they can be also as doubly paradoxical as Magritte's text, if I can remove the material called wood from the wooden table. My proposal is to design 'Materializing without material' - a wooden table consists of all the factors that make it a wooden table even when it is not made wood. By doing so, this wooden table creates 'material strangeness', which results from the contradiction between a wooden table and absence of wood, and finally it only exists as an in-between state.

THIS STATEMENT IS FALSE.
THE STATEMENT “THIS STATEMENT IS FALSE” IS FALSE.

THIS STATEMENT IS A LIE.
THE STATEMENT “THIS STATEMENT IS A LIE” IS A LIE.

BASED ON A TRUE STORY.

5. CONCLUSION

This study started from the fundamental problem all designers are suffering from – not only problems related to a consumeristic environment that product designers have lead to, but troubles of all people who are dealing with creating ‘things’ even if they may not notice it. Although Plato’s interpretation of Idea and phenomena is quite old and often criticized by Nietzsche, I believe that there is practically no more appropriate theory than Plato’s to be applied to the consumer society and today’s troubled relation between designers and consumers. And my research shows that this problem is driven by the fact that makers always take ‘how things are created’ consist of experiences of ‘deforming’ and ‘informing’ apart from public.

The main theme that I want to pursue, designing an object that exists only an in-between state, is therefore an effort to create a sort of ritual object for myself to seek for forgiveness and at the same time a challenge to stand against the design-tradition through breaking away the old notion of ‘creating things’ and bring about the new declarations. I want to prove the fact that a designer’s work does not always progress in the direction of materializing Ideas to phenomena through confronting physicality as a result of material culture and create work that will prove my assertion. The conclusion is materializing dematerialization: an object that creates a certain ‘material paradox,’ through making a material and its expression to play opposite, to become meaningless, and finally to dematerialize the material itself.

Most of all, I hope that something new comes about (along with the questioning of idyllic illusion) which corresponds to my intention and will give rise to a unique link between existence and non-existence, between the successive and the simultaneous

– and all within a single image.

Therefore my aim is to create an object that is ‘an in-between state’ where being and non-being or spiritual and physical can exist together, and to offer a new context where people can confront their own personal approaches to the material world.

My expectation is that this situation can be communicated and that it will give us thought in our everyday world.

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