

Fool Me Twice by Hannah Sage Kay

Objects and materials may appear to possess an indelible function in, what one might call, their natural habitats—situations in which they are taken, sincerely, at face value. But what makes an encounter between object and viewer sincere? Do objects embody their functions regardless of time, place, and context? “Sincerity” suggests that they are what they are regardless of these variables, transparent and free of deceit.

The time-honored “truth to materials” may come to mind, a mid-century idea that materials in their rawest form, unaltered and unmediated by human intervention, foreground their most “essential” nature. Nelson Goodman observed in “When Is Art?” that this “essence” is in fact a myth, a decision on the part of the beholder to prioritize certain symbols over others, valuing for example form over representation, or materiality over function. An object invariably possesses infinite symbols and potential significances. The beholder, nevertheless—succumbing to an all too common delusion—falsely conflates the *symbols* that they deem to be important in any given moment with *facts* that effectively, and inflexibly, serve to characterize that object.

One may view a cement tile as a building block for a patio, while another may see it as a unit, a simple shape to be repeated ad infinitum. One thing after another. Some may see a framed family photo as an emblem of the past, while others may see a soon-to-be poor image ripe for copying and pasting, duplicating and reformatting. Singularity, paradoxically, begets multiplicity.

Experience, in conjuring a multitude of perspectives, remains paramount, but also amorphous and undefined. It is that experience, that unrepeatably configuration of time and space, which informs the beholder’s sensibility, their ability to identify the “inside and outside” of a work—as Craig Owens might say in “Detachment from the ‘Parergon’”—to observe its frame and delineate its boundaries.

Can an object evade such restraints? Can an object shield itself from the gaze that seeks to classify and curtail its scope, its ecology of interactions? John Curley suggests in *A Conspiracy of Images* that all images (whether paintings or photographs) exude a certain degree of doubt when surveyed with scrutiny, their evidentiary properties sooner or later unravel to reveal a fundamentally unstable structure within. Though he speaks of images, this doubt may be extended to objects and materials as they have increasingly assumed, in a postmodern paradigm, a doubly ontological position.

Curley equates an artist with a spy. One who, while hidden in the shadows, actively observes and interprets what they see—objects, images, events. Interpretation takes the form of language, whether visual or verbal, translating the real into the communicable. But what of the narrator, and their subjectivity when transcribing a story? Roland Barthes says, in “The Discourse of History” that the “a-personal pronoun is merely a rhetorical alibi,” suggesting, not at all implicitly, that the narrator’s position in time, space, and context remains inseparable from their narration—what should be termed their interpretation.

In such circumstances, can anyone or anything be sincere or are all embroiled in the duplicitous act of doubling, deceit, disguise? Do objects fool us, or do we merely fool ourselves?