



KE TSA BAENG

Reserved (for a) Function

KE TSA BAENG - *Reserved For Guests*

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DUMELANG

Introduction

I grew up in Ausi's¹ house, which was a comfortably large white Greek-looking house that was rather peculiarly fitting in the township of Mabopane, Pretoria. It housed several objects in various parts of it, mainly the lounge. Some of these objects were safely kept somewhere within the crevices of the home, like a secret that only unfolded after her passing. These were reserved objects, waiting for the arrival of noteworthy guests and special occasions. "Ke tsa baeng,"² Ausi would often respond whenever I asked her why it was that I couldn't use any one of those objects. That's what we then began to know them as, 'dibyana tsa baeng'.³

I recall how Lesego⁴ and I would always have to clean some of these during school holidays. Our hands parched from rotationally polishing the tableware with Brasso. I remember how much fun it was for our tiny feet to step on the heavy, warm and velvety blankets that were soaked in Ausi's bathroom, washing them days before the arrival of a guest that was staying over. Then upon their departure, folded and returned to the wardrobe in her bedroom. I remember the white couch, the majestic white couch that looked like clouds and probably felt like them too. I wouldn't know this until one evening when closing the curtains in the lounge, and Ausi was out somewhere, I decided to rebelliously throw myself on it. It felt like I was completely immersed in ledombolo⁵ batter- silken warmth wrapped around my skin. I felt like I was eternally descending into an idyll dream. I quickly stood up and ironed the creases with my hands so that Ausi wouldn't know what I'd done. This paradise was reserved for visitors as well. So was the gold cutlery, the porcelain crockery, the cotton doilies, and anything that was delightful. These were among many other objects that were all locked away in the mahogany kist, taken out only when we were graced with a special guest whose arrival was often preceded by bees - Ausi believed that whenever the bees in our chimney came to visit us in the kitchen, then she was to expect the arrival of a guest whom she didn't even know she was longing to see.

Whenever I came home came home from school to the sweet warm smell of freshly baked orange zest biscuits or the sourly-sweet smell of Pine⁶ still lingering in the air, I knew that Ausi had spent the afternoon struggling with the bees as we'd had someone special over. My heart would always leap from my throat and pace to the kitchen to see if the guest was kind enough to have left me some of these because we could only ever enjoy these delicacies on some Sundays and special occasions.

1 My grandmother, whose house I grew up in.

2 It's reserved for visitors.

3 Dishes for the guests.

4 My sister.

5 Steamed bread.

6 Traditional pineapple juice.

Sharing the humour and frustrations of this experience with others, I realised that it is not unique to my family or township. Although every society has its own nuances that inform their reservation of these objects, each consider visitors to be among the most respectable people in the home, those whom the at most appreciation and reverence should be extended towards. Serving them with one's best possessions is a symbol of the host's appreciation and honour for their visit, and commitment towards their comfort.

This custom was sacred and as a result, also extended towards the people who were considered the heads of the family, where they had their own special crockery from which they would be served in on a daily occasion and would also be the only ones who could use *dibyana tse tsa baeng*⁷ at the special family occasions. There were some objects however that my sisters and I only ever saw when we were cleaning. Those which we'd never either seen bein used by a guest. Whenever we asked why they were never taken out even for the most respectable visitors, Ausi would joke that they were waiting for Jesus. They waited for a very long time, until her passing.

*Dibyana tse*⁸ were decorated with what I have now come to learn as colonial designs. I recall the fine crafted and delicate form of the crockery and cutlery. Some were made of porcelain, thin enough to have your fingers kiss if you pressed the rims hard enough. Crystal glasses with gold trimming, some engraved with Ausi and Daddy's⁹ names. Bone china complimented by hand-painted foliate patterning and, in some cases, medallions of iconic British royals. Stainless steel polished to reflection and stained textured glass. This craftsmanship was reflected in their price and, as a result, class was implicated in this culture, where it was most commonly practiced among middle-class to more affluent families. Affordability consequentially informed the preciousness of them - Ausi never missed an opportunity to remind us that she had worked hard to be able to buy these objects and she didn't want them getting worn out through excessive use, thus reserving them for visitors. There was a hierarchy in the experience of these objects, it was only the special kinds of visitors and those with a more socially respected position that would be served with them. Whenever Mma Pretty¹⁰ came to visit, she would be served juice in the mundane enamel cups. Though when the church mamas came over, we would take out the black set with the foliate patterning, serving them rooibos or coke in the crystal glass with gold trimming,

7 The guests' dishes.

8 These dishes.

9 My grandfather, who was Ausi's husband.

10 Our neighbour, who was Ausi's friend.

complimented by the warm orange zest biscuits. Whatever leftovers were there, were ours to savour. Whenever Lesego and I craved some, we would bring our hands together, clasping the hope for a visitor in our hopeful palms.

There is a layered performance that texturises hospitality, which is of interest to this paper. I want to look at *dibyana tse tsa baeng* to explore hosting as a masquerade that is gendered, sustained by cultural rituals, as well as an exhibition of economic success, curated by class politics. These objects were not only reserved for guests because of the respectability politics and hierarchies of hospitality, they were also an intentional exhibition of class, sophistication and the presentation of a modest, and refined household. Hospitality is "perceived primarily as a symbol of economic success, the embodiment of the discerning taste of the occupier, or the site of family life." (Darke & Gurney, 2000: 84) *Dibyana tse*¹¹ were not merely arbitrary crockery with a pragmatic function of servitude, they were signifiers of various elements, notably: Firstly, an aesthetic one - whenever there were no guests to serve, they would be curated inside room dividers that would allow them to be seen through their glass doors, where they became ornaments that carried out a decorative function; Secondly, an archival one- they were initially portraits of their owners, capturing their taste, continuing on to be portraits of their owners' societies as this culture was largely practiced. They extensively became artifacts that documented the experience and ritual of hospitality in their societies. Whenever their owners passed, they were inherited by their daughters and sisters, passed down lineages of women, contributing towards the archive of not only that individual family where they are passed down in, but that of the larger collective community; Lastly, they capture gendered ontologies - hospitality is implicated by patriarchal notions that curate the proximal relationship between women and these objects, where they become ontologically gendered through the domestic performances carried out by the women who use them.

Using Object-Orientated Ontology, Actor-Network Theory and gender theories, I want to explore the triadic relationship between the guest, the host and these objects and how their relationship evokes various themes of domesticity, the essential nature of objects, function, semiotics and ritual.

11 These dishes.



The silver and gold cutlery was only used during Christmas and birthdays.



The silverware was used often for even the most casual visits.

Ke'ng Dilo Tse?

Whenever we are asked what an object is, we are often prompted to speak of it in either of two ways: speaking towards its components or its function and effects. These two mechanisms of approaching objects happen in two reductive directions: we either undermine them by reducing them downward to their units of makeup, or overmine them, where we also reduce them, however, this time, upward to their effects. (Harman, 2015: 402) These approaches were coined by one of the key founders of Object-Oriented Ontology, Graham Harman. Object-Oriented Ontology is a Speculative Realism philosophy (ibid: 401) that adopts a post-humanist view to objects by approaching them as entities with an autonomy that operates exclusively from human interaction. (ibid: 407) In doing this, it imbues objects with an agency that is informed by their essence - one which the theory claims is elusive to humans. (ibid: 403) This philosophy departs from what critics have said to be a "flat ontological starting point" that places humans and all other non-human monads, whether tangible, intangible or ephemeral, on the same ontological footing. (ibid: 404) Essentially, the philosophy denies humans the ontological privilege over objects, (Oenen, 2011: 2) dispelling the "ontological delusion" (Harman 2015: 404) that all non-human materials, particularly the inanimate objects, revolve around our interaction with, and need for them. I am quite skeptical of this.

Object-Oriented Ontology bears a symmetrical relationship to Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory, (ibid) henceforth referred to as ANT. ANT is a sociological method of mapping the connections between how technologies and material objects equally participate alongside humans to shape society. (Serious Science, 2015) The word 'participate' draws our attention towards how ANT also establishes that objects act with us to produce our reality. It grants objects an agency, approaching them as what Latour refers to as actants. (Harman, 2015) This approach is a non-hierarchical understanding of matter. What is disappointing is that both of these philosophies do not clearly qualify this agency- they only go as far as

using Sociomaterialist theory to argue for this agency, looking at the "mutual interplay with humans that objects do to shape our world." (Harman 2015: 405) They seem to approach the activity within 'interplay' quite literally though, without nuancing agency. Socio-materialism is a research theory that draws relationalities between social elements, such as culture, behaviours and rituals, and material elements, such as people, technologies, artifacts and institutions, analysing how they simultaneously work to produce our reality. (Scottish Graduate School of Social Science, 2018) This connection is not newly established by these theories, what is however unique is that it places emphasis on the non-human materials actively doing things to produce our reality instead of their activity being limited and defined by our interactions with them. (Serious Science, 2015) "Latour basically enables object-agency by radically disavowing the subject-object dichotomy," (Oenen 2011: 2) a distinction which he and Graham believe to be an ontological myth.

I question: if the essence of an object is as they claim inconceivable to human consciousness, (Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2014) how can they qualify its existence to begin with? Graham (2012) attempts to answer this question using John Locke's theory (1979) of primary and secondary object qualities. Locke was an English philosopher and physician who has made foundational contributions to Liberalism. In his most important book, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (1979) Locke writes that the sensible qualities that objects evoke in us are often mistaken for the essential qualities of the objects themselves and that is misconstrued as these sensible qualities are merely our reactions to the objects, which are produced by the essence of the objects but are not inherent qualities of the objects themselves. (ibid: 137) To explain this, Harman (Moderna Museet, 2015) uses a red apple: it is not important for an apple to be red or taste sweet for it to be an apple. Its colour and taste are a consequence of its fundamental properties, those being the wavelengths of light they radiate, which produce the red colour and their starch properties that converts into

sugar after harvest. This approach to an object draws a distinction between the inherent qualities of an object as those that exist without the validation of human's sensible experience, and secondary qualities as those that are affirmed by our sensual experience. (ibid) The colour and taste of a fruit exist only as far as they are experienced.

Object-Orientated Ontology and ANT's positions reminds me of the infamous philosophical question about whether a tree actually makes a sound when it falls in a forest, with no one present to hear it. This thought experiment proposes that sensible qualities such as sound, only exist as far as sentient beings are present to experience them. The interaction of our ears and the sound is what validates the existence of the sound. The experiment has however been contested by noting that sound also exists through vibrations that interact with other inanimate properties, where sound over 160 dB can move objects through those vibrations. Therefore, the absence of consciousness does not invalidate the presence of the sound. However, other senses such as taste do not exist if there is no consciousness to experience them and are, therefore, according to Locke, secondary elements to an object, along with every other sensible quality of an object that does not exist if we cannot fathom it. Therefore, whatever qualities that exist regardless of our experience of them are what Object-Orientated Ontology proposes to be the essential qualities of the object, the 'real qualities' (Moderna Museet, 2015) which are elusive to our consciousness, and because they do not depend on our senses to be validated, from there originates their agency as this essence cannot be reconfigured by human perception and activity. (ibid)

Although one can understand, and perhaps appreciate how this qualifies an object having an essence that exists outside of our experience of it, it is questionable if that qualifies it exhibiting any agency. I do not understand how the maintenance of an object's objecthood separate of human capacity consequently enables it to act within its own autonomy. Perhaps it is

ridiculous of me but when I imagine an object that can act within its own capacity, my mind excavates the childhood memory of the teacups in the Disney film, *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) waltzing around in people's absence. This is not to say that this is a childish claim made by these philosophies, rather a fantastical one where non-human materials seem to be transmogrified beyond their capabilities. Or perhaps not. I mean, who can confirm that Ausi's tableware doesn't throw it down in the kist when there is no guest to serve? That the ice tongs don't twirl into a *Twalatsa*, the glasses a *Step* while the utensils *Chang'a Magiya*? If there is no one to see them, who can deny that these objects practice self-servitude? Anyway, the philosophy doesn't sound impractical because of the absence of a witness to this all, but because of its limited ability to systematically explain when and how objects acquired agency. (Oenen 2011: 2) Regardless of this, there are still several intriguing questions which they propose about objects and their relationship to humans. I am curious about Object-Orientated Ontology's indispensable approach to objects and how *dibyana tsa baeng* intervene in how the philosophy understands and limits the essence of an object. These are questions that I want to apply to *dibyana tsa baeng* to distill the triadic relationship between the guest, host and objects.

This type of relationship does not only explain the individual connections that these agents have with each individual other, but how every agent in the network is responsible for the quality of relationship between the other two agents. Not as a mediator, but as an integral and indispensable partner to that relationship. There's a polyamorous relationship between these elements that I want to explore in arguing for a duality in the function of these objects when the host and guest agents are absent from the relationship, as well as speaking towards an essence that is indeed informed

12 A triadic relationship doesn't only note the participation of three elements in a network, it reinforces the inseparability of these elements from each other, where they each protect and cultivate three relationships. This relationship consists of an observer, an actor and object. (Zagefka, Abstract: 2018)

and validated by their relationship with people, contrary to ANT and Object-Oriented Ontology's positions. Although I do concur that an object is more than the exact set of qualities it presents to us at any given moment, (Harman 2015: 402) meaning that an apple is more than the red and sweet sensual qualities which the one in your fridge presents to you in that moment, as there is also a green and sour one that exists at the spaza shop, I also think that an object is also more than these essential properties which these philosophies argue for. An object is a bundle of both the primary and secondary qualities because if these objects "act" with us to produce our reality, (Serious Science, 2015) then they are constantly renegotiated within the networks in which they exist and are liable to various uses, interpretations and representations within that network and to fully understand them, one must approach them from various sides: that of Graham's (2015) over- and undermining, accounting for what they are made of and what it is they do. I think that this 'doing' should consider their pragmatic capability as well as the secondary qualities which they provoke in their societies. These qualities should include the sensual ones which Locke identifies, while also extending to the cultural and semiotic qualities which objects take on.

Let us take for instance Mama's¹³ teacup, as displayed in Figure 1. If the object were to be undermined- reduced to its materials, it would merely be captured as: a ceramic object. There is, however, a plethora of objects made of ceramic, so to undermine it as such would make it something it is not because in that regard it could very well be a ceramic plate, sculpture, table, and anything that has this material in common with it. While in the same breath, to speak of a teacup only as something from which tea is drunk ("Teacup", 2020) is to reduce it to the same limitations and infinities

¹³ My mother's.

as speaking about it as only what it is, i.e., tea can also be drunk from a glass, a pot, or a flask and any other object that is capable of holding liquid and sustaining heat. Therefore, to speak about a teacup in a justified manner is to capture its holistic capabilities and dynamics, making each mechanism aware of the other by relating them to each other. Loosely, Mama's teacup could be captured as: a ceramic object with a handle, that can hold liquid, familiarly tea. I am tempted to factor in the comfort of using this object as a quality, I am although wary because the comfort in the user experience of the object is a rather fragile state and to use it to define an object can potentially make for an unstable definition. I will show how this happens later when the conversation expands to hospitality as a performance built upon the maintenance of comfort, (Darke & Gurney, 2000: 84) and what happens when that comfort is absent.

The problem with undermining is that it mistakenly ascribes the accidental properties of an object to its true form. (Harman, 2015: 403) One assumes that it is essential that a teacup be made of ceramic and have a handle because that is how it is often presented to you in your immediate society. We assume an object to be the secondary bunch of qualities that we frequently encounter it as, but these are mere costumes (ibid) which designers dress them in so that they can best fulfil and expand their roles to us: ceramic is a common material for teacups instead of glass because ceramic, unlike glass, is more porous a material so heat can sustain itself longer when encapsulated within it. Although, I do recall Ausi's glass teacup set, particularly how lovely it was to watch the tea dance inside of it as guests brought it to their lips. Glass is, however, a rather poor conductor, and the tea would quickly evaporate. It is funny to think that Ausi might've been aware of this and served the guests whom she wasn't quite fond of in those cups so that their tea grows cold quicker and their stay would be compromised. She was a quirkily sinister one like that. It is interesting to bring forth though that tea does not have to be hot to qualify as tea though. Therefore, drinking it from a glass teacup does not disqualify the object as

teacup merely because it cannot retain heat in the same way that ceramic does. When we substitute the glass for ceramic, the teacup still fulfils its function of holding tea. If a quality of an object can be replaced for another, and still have the object remain the same, then that is not its fundamental property. The material of a teacup, thus, does not speak to its essence because essential properties cannot be renegotiated. To discover the essence of an object we need to remove the extra properties which it is encrusted with, (Moderna Museet, 2015) such as the materials because they are merely costumes. Though Harman warns that one can only reduce the cup to a particular point until it ceases to be what it is because "Every monad requires a plurality of qualities that vary from the other monad else all monads will be the same." (ibid) The materials are a part of the multiplicity of qualities that an object has for it to differentiate itself from all the others and these qualities all operate simultaneously to make the object what it is. They are, however, not essential to the object, though should still be considered when speaking of it.

According to ANT, if we agree that an essential property of a teacup is to hold tea, then we would first need to establish what exactly tea is to figure out what can best hold it. Only then can we conclude if any other object that can also hold tea, such as a pot, or a dish, are any less of a teacup than Mama's one. In doing this, we will slowly plummet down the abyss of locating what every element of a thing is, to figure out if the next thing best relates and caters to it. To know what a teacup is, is to figure out what tea is. To figure that out, is to locate its primary ingredients, but before that, one must evaluate each component of the ingredient. We will do this until we reach a point where the network of tea can no longer be broken down and it is at that point where we would need to re-evaluate upwards if every element in the network is true to its counterparts, basically, building tea from the ground up to figure out which material can best hold it, and is thereby a teacup. All of this to figure out what a teacup is?

I am not interested in this tediously procrastated quest, although it is precisely the process which ANT follows when evaluating the ecosystem of objects and society. It has consequently been criticised for this. It begins by establishing that everything acts within a network, then evaluates the actants that produces our societal network, drawing connections between them. It then further evaluates all the elements within the individual actants of that network. Furthermore, breaking them down to all the other minute properties of those elements. It does this to correlate everything within a network as an equally integral part to the larger component we encounter as our society. The theory does an amazing job at evaluating the evolution of networks and all its assemblages, but this is also its downfall-over evaluating networks to the point of verbosity. (Serious Science, 2015) I am not too interested in what a teacup or tea are, rather in how when one accepts the repetitive series of appearances that an object is constantly presented to them as, as their essential properties, they also assume that to be the essential and truest form of that object. This speaks to how repetition, ritual and custom can create a stagnant society.

Over- and undermining objects are static approaches to objects which limit an object to our current perceptions and experience of it, offering a false representation of what it is, while also dismissing venular cultures. When we expand our explanation of an object as a thing that is this and could be that, instead of strictly what it is, we begin to eradicate dogmatic definitions of objects, (Harman 2015: 405) which do not make space for change and for what an object could be because it fails to recognise an object beyond its current form. (Denison University, 2018) In this expansion, we can begin to explore the multiple forms and functions that an object can be appropriated as in its society.



Figure 1 - Mama's teacup



The black ceramic dishes were reserved for the most esteemed of visitors.

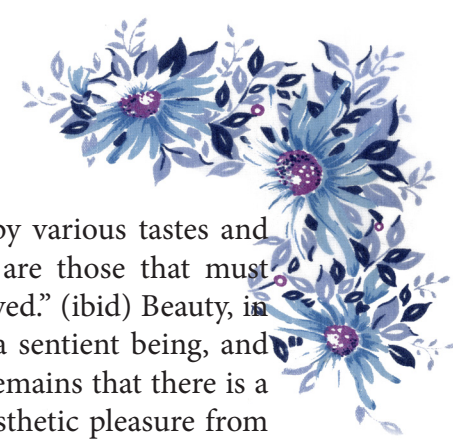


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Racial and class chemistries breed various cultural approaches to objects and consumption. Where some people drink tea in enamel cups because of affordability, others on the opposite spectrum consume it in bone china teacups. Whatever material the cup is substituted for, if it can hold tea, it can still fulfill its purpose and is, therefore, a teacup because when the quality of holding is removed, the object changes. I, however, don't think that this means that a leaking teacup is any less of a teacup than one that's not compromised, rather that it is dysfunctional. These semantics of function is where I want to begin to challenge Object-Orientated Ontology's idea of an essence. When we have removed the inessential properties of an object, we begin to realise that the qualities are subservient to the purpose of the object where the material it is made of is in response to this desired function. What I enjoy about these theories is they raise questions about 'what it is that things do' and 'evocative objects'. (Oenen 2011: 1) Where it attempts - and in my humble opinion fails - to answer these questions by pointing towards an object's agency to carry out activities within their own autonomy, I want to respond to these questions by highlighting how an object's activity is mediated by humans' necessity for it. Graham however argues (Denison University, 2018) that when we approach objects as actants - existing only in relation to what they do for us - we dismiss the potential held in their reserve when they are not doing that which we have portrayed and understood them to do. If we explain a teacup as an object from which we drink tea, then by that definition, when it is not in use, it is, therefore, not a teacup because we have limited our understanding of its function to how it performs for us and do not account for its function when it is passive. When we myopically speak of objects as actants that perform for our needs, we dismiss what else they can do, particularly in the times when our needs are not outsourced onto them, (Denison university, 2018) (Oenen (2011: 12) as when they sit in the kist. We need to speak about an object doing

something which it is not currently doing as it brings attention to the act that is held within the reserve of the object. This reserved act is a state which Oenen (2011: 1) regards as 'interpassivity'. This is a condition where an object is still, waiting to be activated by being used. In the case of hospitality, the function of objects is activated by the arrival of the guest. However, during this interpassive state the objects do not become passive, their practicality is not in any way dormant because they come into another function- a decorative one. When our activity is not being outsourced onto these objects, they become ornaments that are displayed in glass cabinets. This aesthetic charge that these objects exhibit reflects the owners' taste, capturing an element of them and thus becoming a portrait of them. This aesthetic element is one of multiple essential properties of decorative objects. Going forward, I will argue how this decorative property intervenes into how ANT and Object-Orientated Ontology have evaluated and limited the essence of objects to scientific elements which are elusive to human consciousness.

When we overmine these objects, it is not that they become dysfunctional when they are stored away in room dividers, waiting for visitors so that their function can be activated, or that their function is even compromised in any way when not in use. Rather that when they are being withheld, their activity also then becomes reserved too. In this moment when they are interpassive, their interactivity is a potential act that is reserved by their stillness. I want to use two concepts of interactivity to explain how the activity of the object revolves around the guest: Firstly, Oenen's approach towards an interactive artwork as one that is, "Not a mere object to be contemplated by subjects, such as museum or gallery visitors; it is an entity that must realise itself in interaction with human visitors." (2011: 2) Secondly, Information Science's approach as an interaction between users and machines, ("Interactivity", 2020) which is mediated by a user



interface. Here, the program's outputs depend on the user's inputs, and the user's inputs, in turn, affect the program's outputs. This is the process where two elements simultaneously work together and rely on each other's cooperation to produce results.

When applying these concepts to the relationship between moeng le di byana tse,¹⁴ then this proposes that users activate the practicality of a functional object by interacting with it and without their need for it, it becomes passive, though not useless. The user interface in this regard is the space where the interactions between moeneg le di byana occurs. This space is both physical- the host's home, and also abstract- the event of hosting itself.

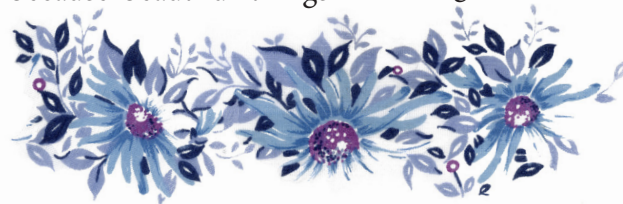
This reservation of these objects further proposes a duality in their function- a practical one when used, and decorative one when not, which intervenes into the semiotics of function: when these objects are reserved and not in mutual interplay with people, they raise questions about Object-Orientated Ontology's theory of objects merely being a primary quality of an elusive essence. The theory argues that the aesthetics of an object are secondary and arbitrary qualities of it. However, since objects do not exist within and for their own right, but are rather created, used and dependent upon human need, then I want to argue that when an object is created with an aesthetic premise in mind, particularly these ones tsa baeng,¹⁵ then that value is a primary quality of the object as its intention is to be beautiful, among other things. These objects were made with this delicate beauty because they were always intended for more than just a practical function, but a sensual one too. However, Graham (2012) would argue that although the beauty of the an object may motivate its creation, it is not an indispensable quality of the object because beautiful things

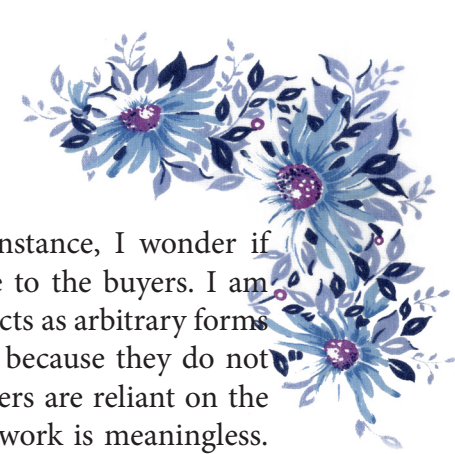
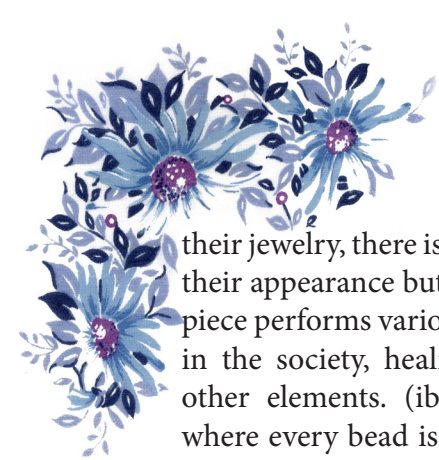
are contextual and can, therefore, be negotiated by various tastes and cultures. Graham states that, "Primary qualities are those that must belong to an entity whether or not they are perceived." (ibid) Beauty, in this case, exists only through the observation of a sentient being, and can, thus, be contested. While this is true, it still remains that there is a community, or at least an individual that takes aesthetic pleasure from the object, to whom it is unalienable, and in that instance, that beauty informs the essence of the object. The dismissal of aesthetics in an object's fundamental premise and value can be a disregard of several cultural significances to objects. Where does this philosophy place Decorative Art? How does one analyse the essence of the form, not the objects within it but the artistry of it, without accounting for aesthetics as an essential element of it? Society has always valorised beauty and beautification, from ornaments to jewelry and makeup. These objects serve a purely aesthetic function, and in some cultures, a spiritual one too and I think this challenges the theory's notion that objects are not human-centred. Ndebele beadwork is an object that strongly contests this.

My mother is Ndebele. She has a rather elusive relationship to the culture and has always found the beadwork to be the connection she chooses to have with it. As a result, I grew up with a variety of ornaments, dolls and jewelry endowed with meticulous beadwork of intricate geometric patterns and bold colours. This beadwork is of cultural and linguistic significance to the tribe and a key aspect of African aesthetics because of their outstanding handling of the art. (Mashiyane 2006: 11) This beadwork is also a strong representation of the culture's valorisation of beauty and has a significant relationship to spirituality and philosophy, portraying adornment, ritualistic ceremonies and religious significance. (ibid 2006: 130) African and Eastern approaches to aesthetics have always had an integral relationship to sacredness and ritual. When Ndebele people wear

14 The guest and these dishes.

15 Of the guests.



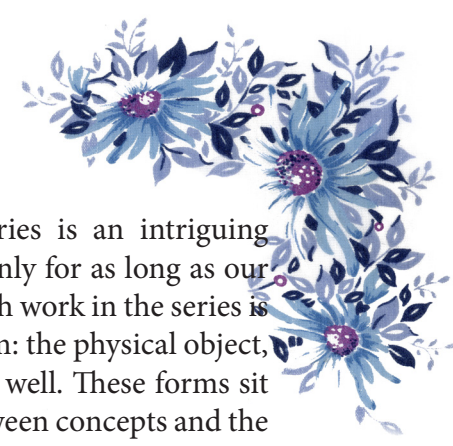
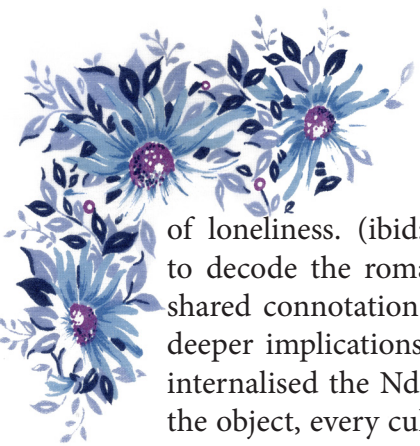


their jewelry, there is not only an intentionality behind wanting to enhance their appearance but the figures, colours, style, shape and symbols in that piece performs various things such as signifying the ranking of the person in the society, healing, and often exchanged as gifts of love, among other elements. (ibid: 7, 65) These objects are spiritually grounded, where every bead is informed by a sacred significance. (ibid, 15-18) The clinical approach to objects which Object-Oriented Ontology adopts dismisses decoration as an essence, and consequentially, a whole range of cultures and beliefs and further marginalises Decorative Arts. When the philosophy argues that the essence of an object is one that is not limited to its experience with sentient beings, thus failing to recognise aesthetics as an essence but a costume, it fails to consider that in some cultures, beauty, form and colour are not merely appreciated and exist for the visual pleasure of their community, but are channels of communication and spirituality, transcending sentient beings into the divine realm. Object-Oriented Ontology's approach to objects seems to risk being a dismissal of various society's valorisation of aesthetics. Societies have never been a clinical and robotic population that approaches objects in a reductive manner that is merely interested in the scientific elements of an object. We have always appreciated and felt the need to beautify, communicate and worship, and this has commonly been done with objects encrusted with aesthetic value. If we agree that the essence of an object is the property which when removed alters the object, then I think that aesthetics and spirituality are essential properties of Ndebele beadwork because they motivate the existence of these objects. Interestingly, these are limited to the interrogation by and relationship with consciousness. These beautiful articles are infamous tourist attractions and collections in South Africa. (ibid: 138) There have been many of these tourists who have bought these pieces because of their visual attraction to them, though may have no

idea of the meaning reserved in them. In this instance, I wonder if their spiritual implications are of no consequence to the buyers. I am considering Semiotic theory's attitude towards objects as arbitrary forms that do not necessarily convey meaning, not only because they do not have any agency to do so but because their signifiers are reliant on the interpretation of an audience. Without them, the work is meaningless. In *Critical Terms for Art History* (1996), Alex Potts uses Charles Sanders Peirce's tripartite sign-model to explain how the meaning of objects is not immanent. What this means is that similarly to Oenen's interactivity, an object is only realised in interaction with an audience. Yet again, a triadic relationship arises, between the object, sign and interpretant. (Potts 1996: 2-3) Signs are not self-referential, they are encrusted with signifiers by society through representations, uses, teachings and cultural rituals. Therefore, the spiritual significance of the Ndebele beadwork is not inherent in its identity and existence. (ibid: 1) When there is no one to interpret these spiritual underpinnings, they are removed from the object and it is not the same anymore. It then returns to the regular and arbitrary realm of objects. It may visually still be the same, but it is no longer a spiritual and linguistic object and is, therefore, significantly altered.

Although the beauty of these objects carries linguistic expressions and ideologies, (Mashiyane 2006: 10) these forms, colours and symbols are contextual to every society, and as a result, there are still varying societal understandings of them. Even in the common connotations of them, there are nuances: Where red carries romantic signifiers in various cultures, including Ndebele, (Mashiyane 2006: 126) when arranged in a particular fashion in the beadwork, it has a continual meaning: certain arrangements of red beads signify a reddening of the heart because



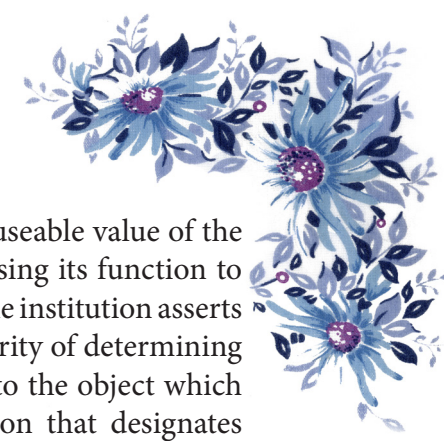
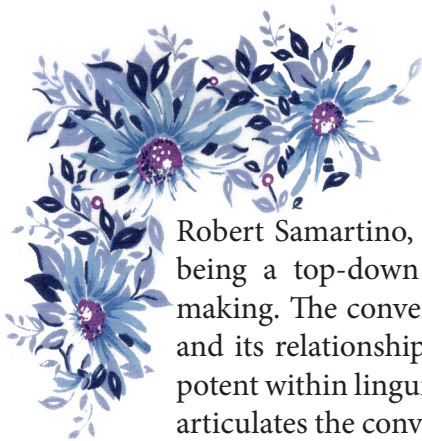


of loneliness. (ibid: 117) Therefore, even though one might be able to decode the romantic signifiers in the object because of the widely shared connotation of the colour, they may not be able to decode the deeper implications communicated by the patterning unless they have internalised the Ndebele symbolic language because when approaching the object, every culture privileges the meanings which they have access to through their cultural habits. (Potts, 1966: 2)

Does this however mean that when one is unaware of the spiritual energies of the jewelry which they have bought then those energies cannot operate in their lives? I don't think so, not because of their unawareness of these spiritual elements disables them from manifesting in their lives, but because not every piece of jewelry is spiritual, and those that are need to be initiated through a ritual that sanctifies them, a ritual that also requires the presence of those who will be wearing them. (Mashiyane 2006: 89) Although these are divine objects, the Ndebele people understand that these beads are common pieces, requiring ritual to 'activate' their spirituality. The objects that relay linguistic messages do indeed require a decoding to be accessed, but those that are spiritual require a level of consent- given through attendance of the wearer in the ritual, to carry through this holy essence. Without access to the language, or given consent, the object is indeed a common one. The absence of this essence does not, however, make it a dysfunctional object. I want to return to the aforementioned idea that a leaking teacup is still a teacup, regardless of its compromised ability to hold and serve tea. Therefore, these beads, although altered when not linguistically and sacredly accessed, are still beautiful to the tourist, nonetheless. They then carry through their decorative function, which is also of importance to their existence because these are decorative objects as well. In this other regard, their aesthetic essence remains uncompromised.

Visual artist Joseph Kosuth's One and Three series is an intriguing process that captures how objects become actors only for as long as our activity continues being outsourced onto them. Each work in the series is comprised of three representations of the same form: the physical object, a photograph of it and a dictionary extract of it as well. These forms sit together to discuss the dialectical relationships between concepts and the realised objects through privileging art as a process of making meaning. (Robert Samartino, 2019) One of the key questions raised by the work is which of these three forms best captures what the portrayed object is. Before we get into this, I want to introduce a hammer as, "A tool with a heavy metal head that is used for jobs such as breaking things and driving in nails." ("Hammer", 2020) In *One and Three Hammers* (1965), the first 'hammer' is captured textually from a dictionary definition. This is not so much a definition of a hammer, rather a linguistic representation that offers idioms created from the actions and implications of hammering. (Kosuth, 1965) This does not reflect the hammer that is represented in the other two forms as they are physical representations of the actual object that is used to carry out the labour of hammering. The definition can, however, not apply itself to the labour of hammering. I cannot use the idiom, "To bring under the hammer," captured in the definition to physically hammer a nail down. Although it is a funny idea worth exploring. The second form of a hammer is a representation of the object depicted by a photograph. It too cannot be used to carry out the labour. The last form is the recognisable and tangible hammer itself and one might assume that to be the true form of the hammer as it is the actual object itself, which is capable of being used for the aforementioned jobs. This is, however, complicatedly not the case either as the object is also not the object itself but rather a representation of it, and Magritte has already told us in 1929 with *This Is Not A Pipe* that representations of objects are not the objects themselves, which is what Kosuth reinforces in the series.



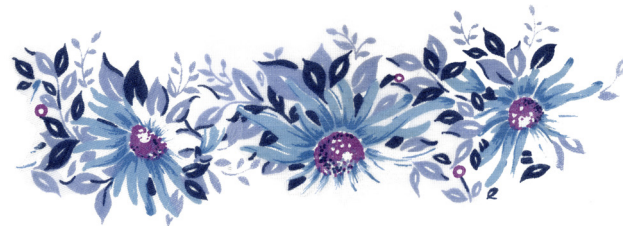


Robert Samartino, An American Visual Artist, speaks about this work being a top-down process of the institution's assertion of meaning making. The conversation held by Kosuth in this series about language and its relationship to form and meaning is not unique as it has been potent within linguistic and semiotic discourse for some time. He merely articulates the conversation in an installation that could very well be and has been described verbally to the same conceptual end. (Samartino, 2019) What is however unique about this series and conceptual art of this Duchampian caliber, is that in privileging the concept above the perceived content, the work embarks on a process of undermining the objects - the objects are dematerialised and, therefore, to substitute the hammer for any other hammer does not disturb the conceptual gravity of the work. The objects depicted are the physical underpinnings of the concept and are arbitrary. (Moderna Museet, 2015) The essence of the work is the concept so to replace the hammer with another would not disrupt the essence of it because the materials are subservient to the concept. This is where and how the third representation of the hammer is also not a hammer: this dematerialisation of the work extracts it from its initial commodified context. The hammer cannot be used to nail in something, not because it is dysfunctional but because it is meant to be a representation of an ordinary hammer as to distinguish itself from the mundane object that is an actual hammer. This distinction is critical to the process of valorising this object of ordinary use, which the museum does. (Samartino, 2019)

A hammer has meaning in society, it could represent labour or violence and other connotations, based on its context. The placement of this ordinary and easily accessible object into a museum, as is where the institution begins to designate artistic meaning and, therefore, value on

the object, but it can only do that by removing the useable value of the object and replacing it with an artistic one, by refusing its function to meet the demands of a potential user. In doing this, the institution asserts itself as the author of meaning and claims the authority of determining what has value. It is not only the artist's proximity to the object which endows it as art, but its proximity to an institution that designates meaning and value. Therefore, the hammer can only be art for as long as the object does not conform to its initially intended function as it will cease to be a representation of the object, but the object itself, and will, therefore, revert to the ordinary market of commercial objects and at that point, it might as well be placed in a toolbox. Here, the object has been appropriated by a power system. This doesn't mean that it is not still read as a hammer, because of its form, this signifier cannot easily be removed from it, but because it has passed down the hands of a prolific artist, into a museum, it is now read alongside various other signifiers and is now no longer a mere object that belongs in a toolbox. (ibid) Seemingly, all these three forms are not actual hammers but a portrayal of them.

Approaching objects in the surreal manner of Object-Oriented Ontology by divorcing the object's function from human validation and necessity and bestowing it with an agency can sound insubstantial when we do not conclude exactly where its agency lays. What these philosophies do though is set the frames from which we can begin to explore the various themes and relationalities which these objects share with other entities, such as gender, and how that process is established. We will be exploring this in the approaching chapter.





The orange zest biscuits were often kept in here.



The Christmas crystal glasses.

MOSADIKE SEPI LI SA LAPA

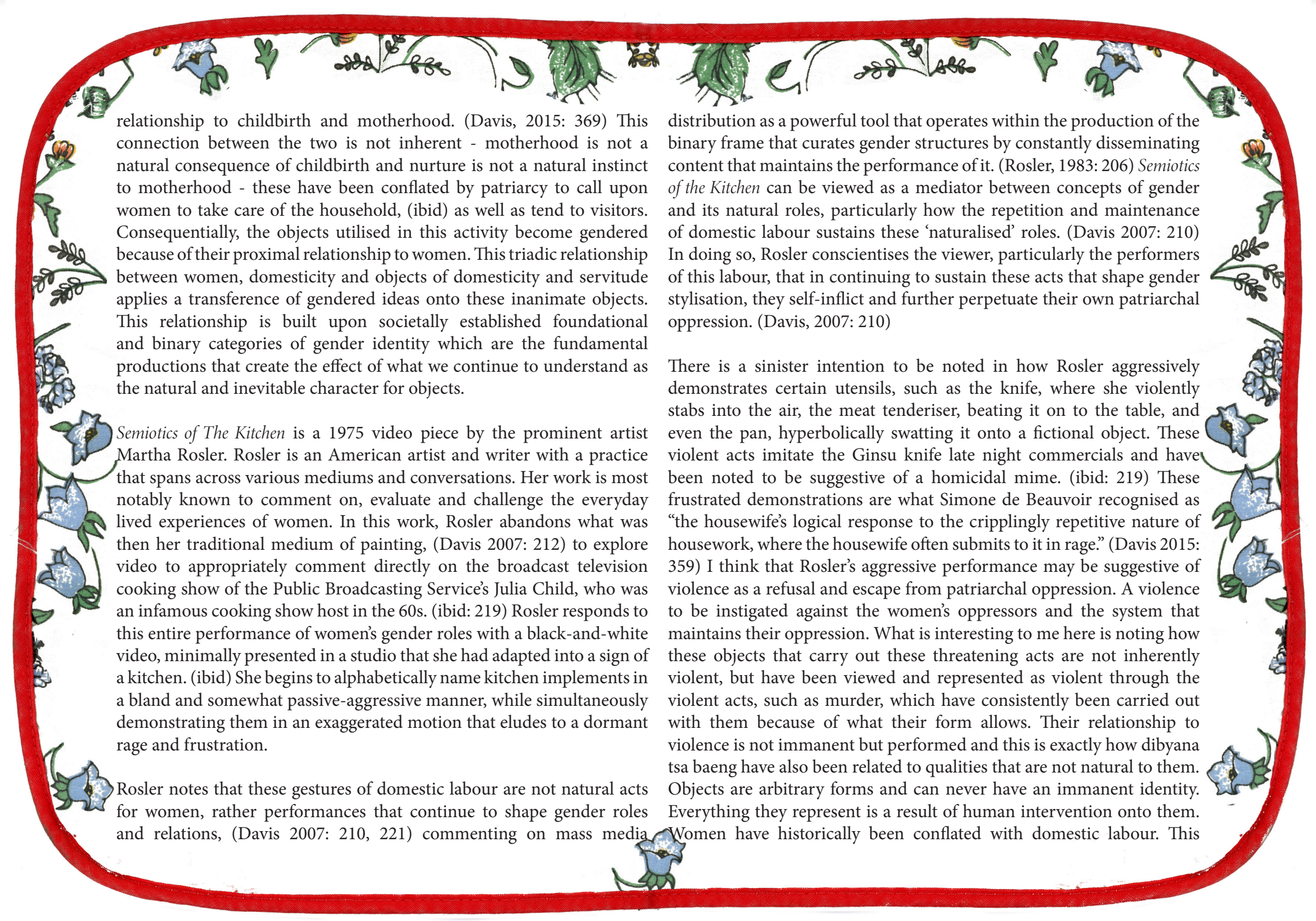
The relationship between gender and objects is one that has been, and continues to be, conversed and thoroughly revised through feminist theories. I am interested in having this conversation using Judith Butler's prolific contribution towards gender in her book, *Gender Trouble* (1990). Here, this phenomenal gender theorist dispels the idea of gender as an inherent quality that has a natural relationship to sex, but as an identity that impersonates social contracts, (Butler 1990: viii) and "is real only to the extent that it is performed." (Butler, 1988: 527) In distinguishing between a sexed body and gendered behaviour, Butler interrogates this contentious relationship between sex and gender with a skeptical lens that disassociates gender from the historic confines of sex, so that we can begin to understand how it is a systemic and oppressive construct that relies on performativity and ritual to reinforce heteronormativity. (Butler 1993: 91) Butler approaches gender as a cultural construct that persists through the constant impersonation and performativity of gender roles. These roles have implicit contracts of binary relations between 'men' and 'women' that stabilise these contracts through a heteronormative matrix which create a heterosexual hegemony. (ibid: 19)

However, when we begin to recognise these systems as arbitrary establishments of 'natural' and 'artificial' identities, we can begin to "problematise the gender categories that support gender hierarchies and compulsory heterosexuality" and continue decentering gender discourses from defining institutions that continue to operate within, and perpetuate this hierarchy. (Butler 1990: viii-ix) These constructions of the semiotics of gender are often discreetly coerced and violently enforced through what the Cultural Theorist, Stuart Hall (1992) understood as a "regime of truth". These are institutional and cultural systems that coerce behaviours through various channels such as definitions of masculinity and femininity, which are taught through representations in the media and culture, confining people within a heteronormative performativity, while using gender roles to affect the relationship which people share to

to inanimate objects and activities as well. Dibyana tsa baeng are among many of the domestic objects that have been gendered through their proximal relationship to women that perform this domestic labour with them. (Davis, 2015: 366) When we examine these objects through the lens of Object-Oriented Ontology, in coalition with Butler's gender theory, we can identify the moments and locations of this gendered transference onto the objects.

Diyana tsa baeng are centred around consumption and servitude and are curated around guest-host relationships that introduces conversations of hospitality, domestic labour and its maintenance. When speaking of hospitality, it is necessary to foreground gender in its analysis so that we can understand how hospitality is deeply implicated by patriarchy (Darke & Gurney, 2000: 78) and how through the performance of gender roles in this field, these objects consequently adopt a gendered ontology. Hospitality is the quality or disposition of receiving and treating guests in a warm and welcoming manner within one's home. This act has been appropriated in the service industry into a large-scale service that facilitates the reception and treatment of guests into a commercially based accommodation. (ibid) In the household, this role is often facilitated by women because of the performative social relations of gender that overlay host-guest relationships. (ibid) The 'housewife' assumes "crucial significance when considering the importance of gender in hospitality and its expectations in the home. Hospitality is thus deeply implicated in any analysis of patriarchy." (Darke & Gurney, 2000: 84) This performance of hospitality is fragile and precarious as it requires a constant, careful and continual impression of managing the performance. (Darke & Gurney, 2000: 78)

Hospitality, has through the systemic processes of attributing gender roles, become established as a role reserved for women since they have been arbitrarily defined as nurturers because of their biological




relationship to childbirth and motherhood. (Davis, 2015: 369) This connection between the two is not inherent - motherhood is not a natural consequence of childbirth and nurture is not a natural instinct to motherhood - these have been conflated by patriarchy to call upon women to take care of the household, (ibid) as well as tend to visitors. Consequentially, the objects utilised in this activity become gendered because of their proximal relationship to women. This triadic relationship between women, domesticity and objects of domesticity and servitude applies a transference of gendered ideas onto these inanimate objects. This relationship is built upon societally established foundational and binary categories of gender identity which are the fundamental productions that create the effect of what we continue to understand as the natural and inevitable character for objects.

Semiotics of The Kitchen is a 1975 video piece by the prominent artist Martha Rosler. Rosler is an American artist and writer with a practice that spans across various mediums and conversations. Her work is most notably known to comment on, evaluate and challenge the everyday lived experiences of women. In this work, Rosler abandons what was then her traditional medium of painting, (Davis 2007: 212) to explore video to appropriately comment directly on the broadcast television cooking show of the Public Broadcasting Service's Julia Child, who was an infamous cooking show host in the 60s. (ibid: 219) Rosler responds to this entire performance of women's gender roles with a black-and-white video, minimally presented in a studio that she had adapted into a sign of a kitchen. (ibid) She begins to alphabetically name kitchen implements in a bland and somewhat passive-aggressive manner, while simultaneously demonstrating them in an exaggerated motion that eludes to a dormant rage and frustration.

Rosler notes that these gestures of domestic labour are not natural acts for women, rather performances that continue to shape gender roles and relations, (Davis 2007: 210, 221) commenting on mass media

distribution as a powerful tool that operates within the production of the binary frame that curates gender structures by constantly disseminating content that maintains the performance of it. (Rosler, 1983: 206) *Semiotics of the Kitchen* can be viewed as a mediator between concepts of gender and its natural roles, particularly how the repetition and maintenance of domestic labour sustains these 'naturalised' roles. (Davis 2007: 210) In doing so, Rosler conscientises the viewer, particularly the performers of this labour, that in continuing to sustain these acts that shape gender stylisation, they self-inflict and further perpetuate their own patriarchal oppression. (Davis, 2007: 210)


There is a sinister intention to be noted in how Rosler aggressively demonstrates certain utensils, such as the knife, where she violently stabs into the air, the meat tenderiser, beating it on to the table, and even the pan, hyperbolically swatting it onto a fictional object. These violent acts imitate the Ginsu knife late night commercials and have been noted to be suggestive of a homicidal mime. (ibid: 219) These frustrated demonstrations are what Simone de Beauvoir recognised as "the housewife's logical response to the cripplingly repetitive nature of housework, where the housewife often submits to it in rage." (Davis 2015: 359) I think that Rosler's aggressive performance may be suggestive of violence as a refusal and escape from patriarchal oppression. A violence to be instigated against the women's oppressors and the system that maintains their oppression. What is interesting to me here is noting how these objects that carry out these threatening acts are not inherently violent, but have been viewed and represented as violent through the violent acts, such as murder, which have consistently been carried out with them because of what their form allows. Their relationship to violence is not immanent but performed and this is exactly how *dibyana tsa baeng* have also been related to qualities that are not natural to them. Objects are arbitrary forms and can never have an immanent identity. Everything they represent is a result of human intervention onto them. Women have historically been conflated with domestic labour. This



continues to be sustained by cultural attitudes where housework has been established as a measure of women's commitment and affection towards their family and pride in their roles as mothers and women, instead of the dreadful chore that it actually is. (Davis, 2015: 365) The pride that women take in this work can be seen in their reluctance to get domestic automated machines such as washing machines which would ease the amount of time and work which they spend doing these chores. For some women, they regard themselves as the very appliances, this is an expression of their hardwork and devotion to domesticity, which they take pride in. (Davis, 2015: 376) The women's identity has been closely defined with domestic labour and when it is not performed, one can often encounter an identity crisis. Rosler, however, deploys passive-aggression as a tool to point out the repetitive and unenjoyable character of these domestic jobs. (Davis, 2007: 225) This curious case of women as domestic appliances is a siphon that transfers qualities of each entity onto the other one: the objects become personified, adopting the gendered ontology of these women, and the women conversely become objectified, where they adopt the automation and repetitive acts of machinery, becoming metonyms of appliances. (Davis, 2015: 367) These objects are not gendered because they perform these gender roles - we have already established that the idea of objects exhibiting agency is surreal - but are rather gender through this entire siphoning mechanism. This transference occurs metaphorically where the qualities of the subject and the objects shift onto each other through their constant relation to each other. The presentation witnessed in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* directly comments on this performance and masquerade of the housewifery (Davis, 2007: 210) and its oppression. Rosler's New York style deaden comedic approach brings attention to the dull and repetitive maintenance of labour as the sustenance of naturalised gender roles, (ibid) bringing forth foundational concepts to this paper.

The objects used in this video are largely hand-held kitchen tools that needed to be manually operated by women. (ibid: 216) When men left for WWII and the women joined the labour market, they experienced a financial liberty and most of them valued this independence and were reluctant to return to the tedious and uncompensated setting of household labour. In an attempt to entice them back to the domestic space, automated machines were introduced. These signified post-war modernity and affluent consumer purchase-power. (Davis, 2015: 359) They however did not liberate women from any of the domestic labour as these machines still needed to be operated by someone, so the maintenance still needed to be carried out. (ibid: 365) "The housewife therefore still remains figured within the home, identified with her domestic chores, even if updated through her augmentation by mechanical appliances, and positioned as some kind of index." (ibid: 359) Race and class are heavily implicated in these conversations as well because the accessibility to these tools factors in finances, geographical and electrical capabilities of their home.

What should be noted is that although these objects and acts are referred to as "feminine/masculine", they are gendered opposed to sexed. To assume that these objects are sexed would be to assume that they have an inherent biological structure and DNA, whereas their orientation is based off the roles that these genders perform because sex is not a performance but a biological structure. (Ton 2018: 14) Although Butler has argued that sex too is a performance. Butler has been criticised for misrepresenting the intentions of transsexual people by using the reconstruction of their sex as a point that sex too is a cultural construction (ibid: 7) (Butler 1990: viii), in as much as gender is. Critics have responded to this saying that since sex is biologically informed, it does not perform any socially constructed roles but is rather a natural occurrence. However, it should also be noted that sex too is not a stable occurrence because nature is also vulnerable to

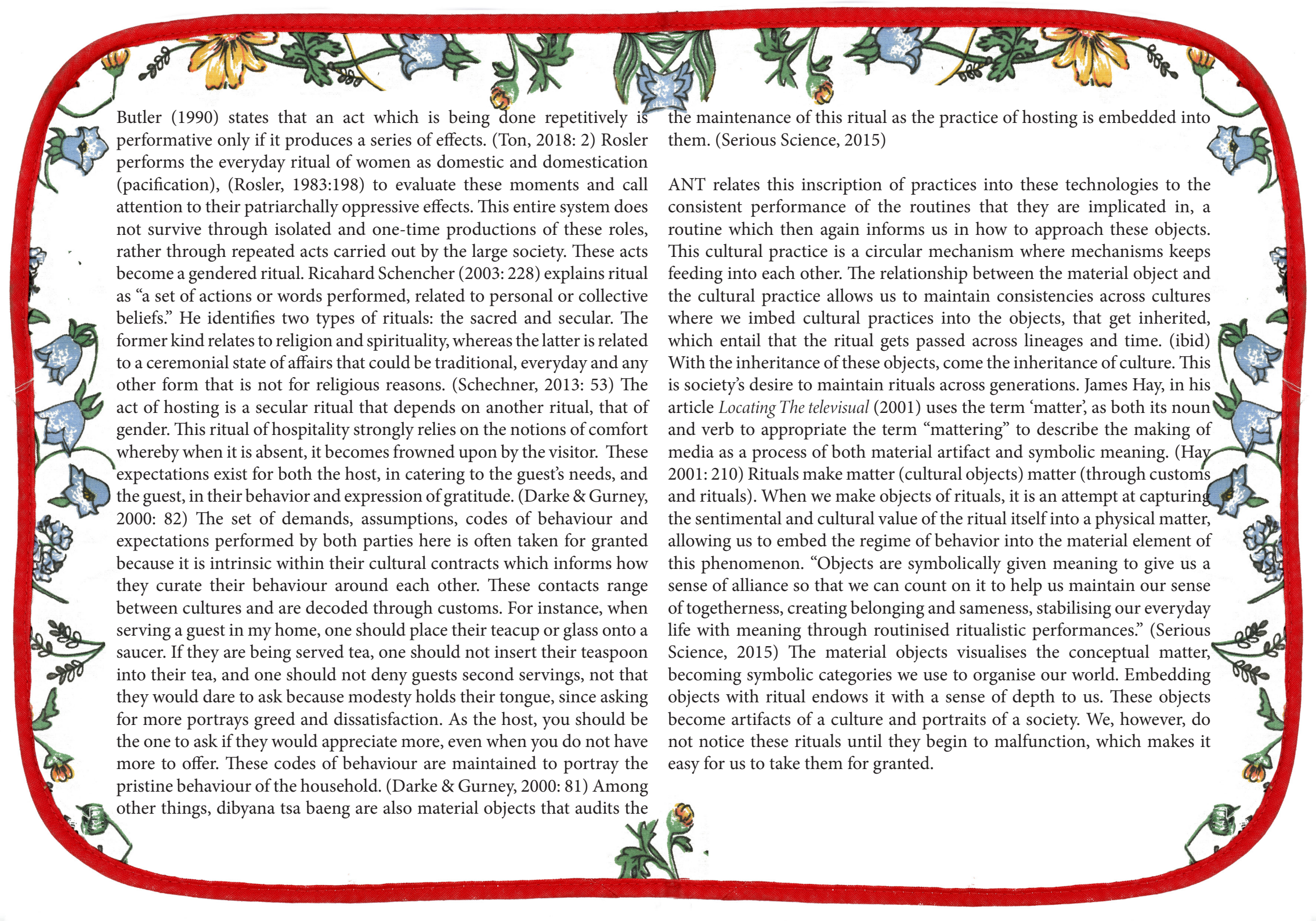


inconsistencies - some people of the XX chromosome are born without wombs, and others with dual genitals. We should therefore be wary of using nature to reinforce the stability of arbitrary notions. Although I disagree that sex is a cultural construction, I do agree that it is as unstable as gender and curating one's identity around it can make for an unstable identity. (Ton, 2018: 6) When we begin to think of gender as a performativity, we begin to realise that these acts are not inherent but rather prescribed and can, therefore, be altered, reimagined and dismissed because what is not natural can be negotiated. It would, however, be misleading to propose that since gender is a social construct, one can escape it and redefine themselves without severe penalty. (Harvey, 1994: 127) The consequences of this destabilisation of heteronormativity are firstly, constantly shown - almost as a subversively threatening gesture - in mainstream media where homosexual movies always reiterate how difficult it is to escape and contest heteronormativity, and secondly, practiced in conservative societies where they respond to this contestation with violently despicable acts. Although "expanding gender to allow for an inclusive number of embodied manners of living" (University College Dublin, 2015) is necessary, it should be acknowledged that it is quite literally a life-threatening act.

When I think of one of the ways in which heteronormativity is intervened in, I think of African languages that do not refer to people in a gendered manner. When I ask where my father is, my mother would respond, "Ashule," which is also exactly what she would also say if I was asking about my sister's whereabouts. Meaning, "There they are." This is not to say that we do not recognise gender, we most ardently do. Though seTswana, like many other African languages, does not have gendered pronouns and also doesn't refer to other animate entities such as animals with their gender. This linguistic predisposition has already begun to contest heteronormativity, where people that do not associate with any [one] gender have claimed the pronoun 'they/them'. I am curious about how this can further disrupt the gendered ontology of these objects.

How will objects continue to be gendered when 'they' use them? Will they revert to the neutrality of 'those' objects? Will gendered roles also further be neutralised. When we begin to ask these questions and demand interventions into the status quo, we begin to see how the issue is not so much gender but the heteronormativity of it. (ibid) When we expand gender, and maybe even eventually get rid of it altogether, we not only give people the freedom to curate themselves within the frames in which they want to exist and express their orientations, but we also release these objects from the gendered ontologies which they have been made to appropriate as it would be difficult for roles to be gendered.


It is not a natural instinct for women to be able to host and serve, the performativity is expected and compelled. Gender is a kind of persistent impersonation (Butler 1990: viii) that exists to benefit capitalist and patriarchal systems because when there is a relationship between loyalty, honour and labour, women perform these roles with pride, and it is easy for their labour to go uncompensated. When they do have to be compensated though, they don't even earn nearly as much as men. Time magazine's November 2013 issue had an exceptionally unsavoury representation of how patriarchy claims that women belong in the kitchen, until it is time to pay them for their labour, then the kitchen suddenly becomes a boys squad. The cover depicts three chefs, all of which are men, two of which are White and one Asian, with a boldly written title that reads, "The Gods of Food". (*Time Magazine*, 2013) The issue not only sustains this phallogocentric dynamic of constructing meaning and gender, but also represents the interests of patriarchy quite clearly: that all of these notions of women as natural caregivers and cooks belonging in the kitchen, is merely unadulterated falsehoods fabricated to keep women within the household for various oppressive reasons, one of which being to sustain the capitalist exploitative agenda. The economic kitchen space is a masculine and militaristic one that marginalises women.



Butler (1990) states that an act which is being done repetitively is performative only if it produces a series of effects. (Ton, 2018: 2) Rosler performs the everyday ritual of women as domestic and domestication (pacification), (Rosler, 1983:198) to evaluate these moments and call attention to their patriarchally oppressive effects. This entire system does not survive through isolated and one-time productions of these roles, rather through repeated acts carried out by the large society. These acts become a gendered ritual. Ricahard Schencher (2003: 228) explains ritual as “a set of actions or words performed, related to personal or collective beliefs.” He identifies two types of rituals: the sacred and secular. The former kind relates to religion and spirituality, whereas the latter is related to a ceremonial state of affairs that could be traditional, everyday and any other form that is not for religious reasons. (Schechner, 2013: 53) The act of hosting is a secular ritual that depends on another ritual, that of gender. This ritual of hospitality strongly relies on the notions of comfort whereby when it is absent, it becomes frowned upon by the visitor. These expectations exist for both the host, in catering to the guest’s needs, and the guest, in their behavior and expression of gratitude. (Darke & Gurney, 2000: 82) The set of demands, assumptions, codes of behaviour and expectations performed by both parties here is often taken for granted because it is intrinsic within their cultural contracts which informs how they curate their behaviour around each other. These contacts range between cultures and are decoded through customs. For instance, when serving a guest in my home, one should place their teacup or glass onto a saucer. If they are being served tea, one should not insert their teaspoon into their tea, and one should not deny guests second servings, not that they would dare to ask because modesty holds their tongue, since asking for more portrays greed and dissatisfaction. As the host, you should be the one to ask if they would appreciate more, even when you do not have more to offer. These codes of behaviour are maintained to portray the pristine behaviour of the household. (Darke & Gurney, 2000: 81) Among other things, dibyana tsa baeng are also material objects that audits the

the maintenance of this ritual as the practice of hosting is embedded into them. (Serious Science, 2015)

ANT relates this inscription of practices into these technologies to the consistent performance of the routines that they are implicated in, a routine which then again informs us in how to approach these objects. This cultural practice is a circular mechanism where mechanisms keeps feeding into each other. The relationship between the material object and the cultural practice allows us to maintain consistencies across cultures where we imbed cultural practices into the objects, that get inherited, which entail that the ritual gets passed across lineages and time. (ibid) With the inheritance of these objects, come the inheritance of culture. This is society’s desire to maintain rituals across generations. James Hay, in his article *Locating The televisual* (2001) uses the term ‘matter’, as both its noun and verb to appropriate the term “mattering” to describe the making of media as a process of both material artifact and symbolic meaning. (Hay 2001: 210) Rituals make matter (cultural objects) matter (through customs and rituals). When we make objects of rituals, it is an attempt at capturing the sentimental and cultural value of the ritual itself into a physical matter, allowing us to embed the regime of behavior into the material element of this phenomenon. “Objects are symbolically given meaning to give us a sense of alliance so that we can count on it to help us maintain our sense of togetherness, creating belonging and sameness, stabilising our everyday life with meaning through routinised ritualistic performances.” (Serious Science, 2015) The material objects visualises the conceptual matter, becoming symbolic categories we use to organise our world. Embedding objects with ritual endows it with a sense of depth to us. These objects become artifacts of a culture and portraits of a society. We, however, do not notice these rituals until they begin to malfunction, which makes it easy for us to take them for granted.

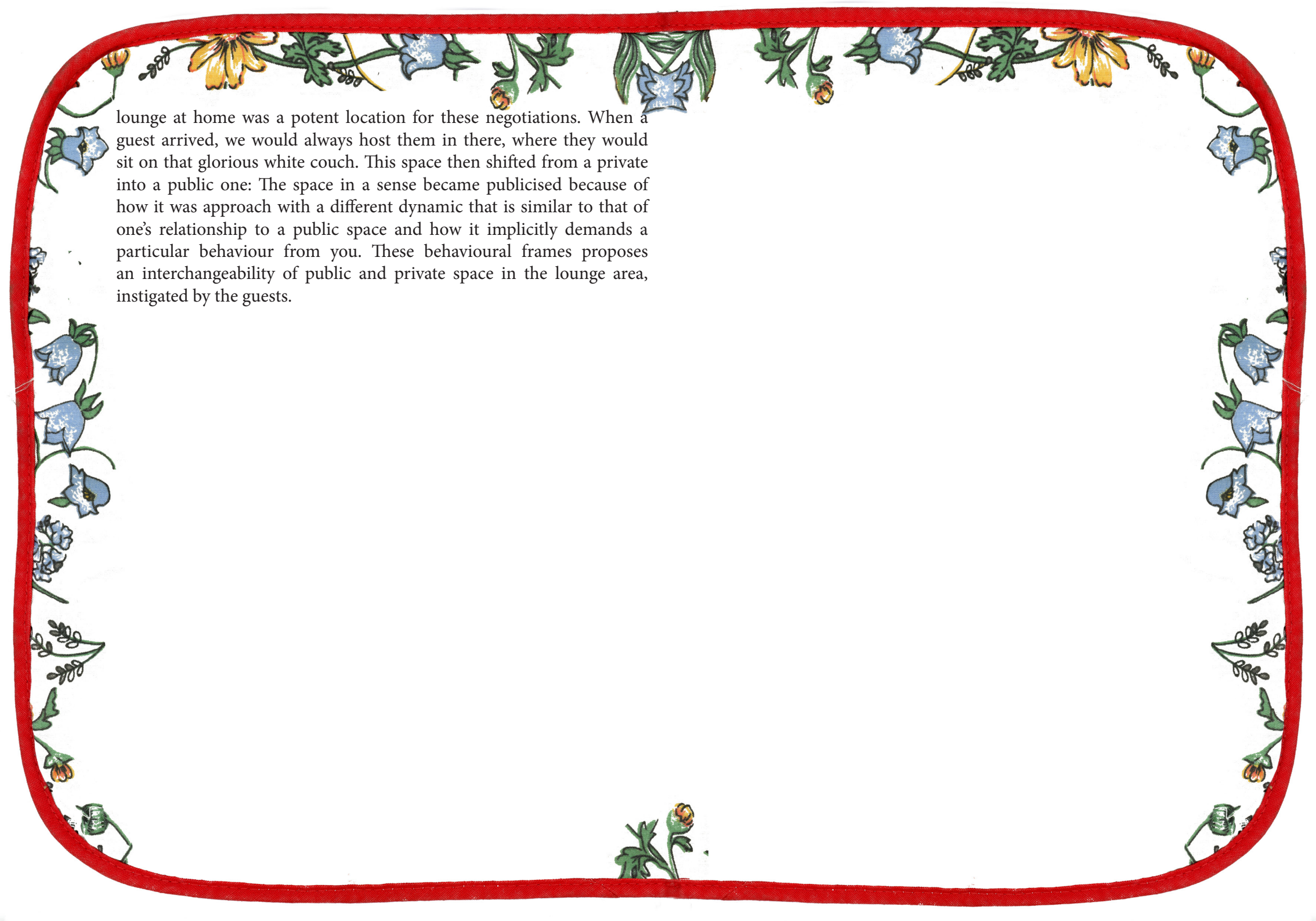


Caterina Kamprani's *The Uncomfortable* series of objects are a comical exhibition that can be read as a breaking of the pristine façade that regulates the performance in hospitality. They humorously subvert function by having no responsibility towards practicality. Kamprani is an Architect and Designer from Greece, who reimagines mundane objects, some of which are grounded in domestic spaces, analysing their form and function to sabotage them in a rather discreet manner. These objects then become uncomfortable to use, though not useless. (Kamprani, 2018) The series is comprised of objects that refuse to carry out their function because of their odd design ,i.e, A watering can with a long spout that returns back to the opening of the can, where water is inserted. The watering can therefore waters back into itself (quite a poetic allegory, if you ask me); A 1cm ruler that becomes painfully arduous to use because of the number of times one would have to shift it forward to measure or draw a line; A fork that has the handle and the prongs connected with a chain, making it rather ridiculous for the user to be able to stab into or eat anything, having to "fish for their food" (ibid); and a fan with a glass lid that covers the apparatus of the rotating blades, blocking the air from ventilating the space it is used in. Some of these objects seem self serving, though still require human activation as this is an inescapable quality of objects. Kamprani highlights good design by eliminating the ease in their function, upsetting the user experience to showcase how comfort is better perceived when absent. (ibid) This absence of comfort that she works with is one which relates to that of a guest in one's home, particularly the rather pedantic lengths that the host goes through to offer it. There are implicit codes of behavior in the home that attempted to present a flawless household to the guest.

Martin Heidegger uses what he calls a 'tool-analysis' in his book *Being and Time* (1927) to explain how mechanisms such as comfort operate through a seamless operation of background interfaces, such as

as modesty, that make these rituals seemingly natural. We only begin to notice and negotiate these operations when they malfunction, obtruding on our awareness (Harman 2015: 402). These tools are silent mechanisms that mediate our experiences with objects and situations, where they only become pronounced when they withdraw into our attention, by malfunctioning. The tool in the performance of hospitality is the performance itself which offers a presentable home to the guest. When a guest arrives, my sisters and I should not seem to be pretending to actually be modest ladies, the performance should come with so much ease that it would not be questioned. This performance is rather "fragile and precarious, necessitating careful and continual impression management." (Darke & Gurney, 2000: 84) When that tool breaks, whereby my sister and I for instance slip into an argument, the background interfaces are brought to the guest's attention, becoming uncomfortable for them to witness. The consequences of this can result in societal ostracisation in some communities where the immodest behaviours would be viewed as a reflection on the women's abilities as housekeepers and women because it is the women that are viewed as enforcers and regulators of the standard of performance, (ibid: 97) not only in their home but that of other women too. "Judgements on housekeeping standards are at the hub of a complex set of patriarchal social relations. This has led us to postulate a relationship between discourses of women's roles in families and those of the hostess." (Darke & Gurney, 2000: 84)

There are behavioral contracts intrinsic in the relationships we share with people. Schechner (2013) speaks so marvelously about how by virtue of being a particular thing to a particular person, we approach that relationship with the demands and expectations unique to it, thereby fulfilling roles in each of these relationships. The insertion of a guest into one's home shifts the codes of behaviour within that house because of the expectations of these guest-host roles. The lounge



lounge at home was a potent location for these negotiations. When a guest arrived, we would always host them in there, where they would sit on that glorious white couch. This space then shifted from a private into a public one: The space in a sense became publicised because of how it was approach with a different dynamic that is similar to that of one's relationship to a public space and how it implicitly demands a particular behaviour from you. These behavioural frames proposes an interchangeability of public and private space in the lounge area, instigated by the guests.



It would however be disingenuous to conclude that hospitality is a painful performance that is curated only for the comfort of a guest, or to elude that these objects tsa baeng are merely there as props for the performance. People such as myself, Ausi le¹⁷ Mama take pleasure in hosting and caring for others, extending them the at most hospitality and nurture in our homes. I want to be wary of implying that the owners of these objects, in reserving them for visitors, did not claim them as their own because this is not true. There is an agency to be noted in how the owners fully exercised the autonomy to determine when, how and by whom these objects are used. These women curated, cared for and indeed did use these objects for their own pleasure. This pleasure came from seeing the guests admire their collection, take comfort in their homes, as well as the aesthetic delight the objects brought. Their lounges, kitchens and whatever other space which they kept these objects in became entire exhibition spaces. Ausi and Mma have passed now, and some these objects have been inherited by their daughters and sisters, where they are now artifacts that document our relationship to hospitality, contributing to our family archive. Some of them however still sit in the kist, showing off the characters of these women. Their lounges are now museums holding collections of gendered ontologies, archives of portraiture and artifacts of ritual.

TSELA TSWEO

CONCLUSION

¹⁷ And.

¹⁸ “Tsela tswao,” is what the host would say when the guest departs, thanking them for their visit and wish them well on their journey home.



The red doili was used for the more common visitors.



The Christmas napkins.

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