

Nicholas Tilma

*Light Objects*

Integrative Project 2014-2015

Section 003 Khan & Freylinghuysen

## Light Objects

I have developed a daily ritual that recently has become an obsession. Anywhere I go, I stop intermittently. No walk across town goes uninterrupted by me stopping and snapping a picture of some peculiar brightly colored or interestingly shaped object sticking up from the urban landscape and posting it on Instagram. These could be traffic cones, elements of a construction site, pipes, sign posts, etc. I have always been a very observant person and from a very young age, I have had a fascination with construction sites. Within the last year, I began questioning this fascination, and I now understand that I'm drawn to the purposefulness of each object in a construction site. Each crane, truck, brick, pipe, etc., has a very specific purpose for the construction of the building. I was also attracted to the forms and colors of these objects. More recently, after remembering my fascination with construction sites, I started taking photos of objects in cities to start a collection as a visual reference for my work.

As I continued to collect images, I developed an obsession with documenting these "unintentional sculptures" or "urban objects," as I call them, because of how they feed into my creative process. When I began my integrative project, I had already begun this daily ritual and had a growing collection of images on my Instagram account, and I knew I wanted to create a series of lamps inspired by these urban objects. I decided to design a series of three to five "light objects" inspired by my daily observations of the urban landscape. These objects would be designed and fabricated by me, and would be sold as limited-production handmade design objects. Through pursuing my goal to create a finished series of light objects, I wanted to explore form, aesthetics, and construction techniques, while simultaneously developing my creative process.

## Context

My work follows in the tradition of designers who have focused primarily of formal and aesthetic design, from the Russian Constructivists to the Memphis Group, leading up to contemporary furniture/object designers. These designers share an emphasis on formal and aesthetic qualities over functional qualities in their work. Russian Constructivists El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich worked with composition of geometric shapes, in two-dimensional compositions, and moved to making three-dimensional compositions in space, like in Lissitzky's *Proun Room*. DeStijl designer Gerrit Rietveld's chairs were functional three-dimensional compositions of rectilinear forms. Both the Constructivists and Rietveld have informed how I arrange geometric shapes in three dimensions to find the most visually pleasing compositions. I am also influenced by the relationships between rectilinear solids in Rietveld's chairs. In addition to Rietveld, I am also inspired by the work of minimalist sculptors Donald Judd and Sol Lewitt. I appreciate the purity of form within their sculptures and their exploration of variations on simple geometric forms, like in Lewitt's *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes*.

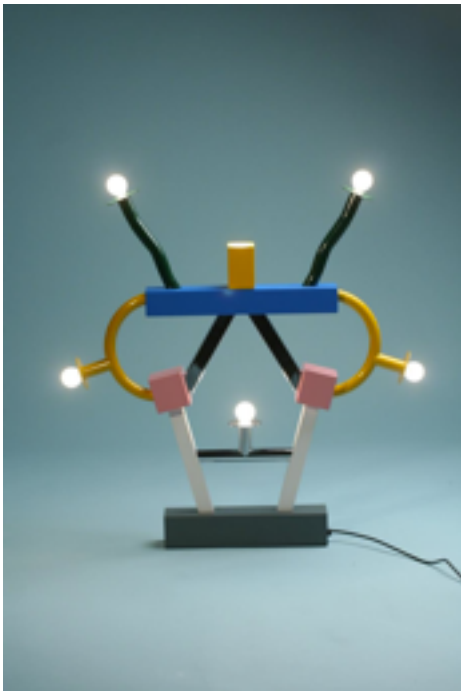
My strongest influence is the Memphis Group. I am greatly inspired by their aesthetic, formal qualities, and conceptual framework. The group was founded on the basis of designing furniture and objects grounded in the postmodern cultural movement of the 1980's and in direct response to the preceding modern style furniture. Stylistically, they designed wacky furniture combining blocky forms at odd angles in unusual compositions with clashing materials and brightly colored laminate surfaces. I am most notably attracted to their combinations of shapes,



El Lissitzky, *Proun Room*, 1923



Sol Lewitt, *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes*



Ettore Sottsass, *Ashoka Lamp*

intersections of forms, and unconventional furniture typologies. The group's founder, Ettore Sottsass, was said to have, "[Built] up the group's catalogue with a number of designs for lamps. . . Like the Memphis furniture, these lamps defied conventional typology, through their shape and size as well as their decorative syntax and vocabulary" (Thome, et. al., 309).

Conceptually, I am inspired by their exploratory approach to design and how they designed without market limitations. They designed rapidly, eager to explore to new aesthetic territory and without concern for the marketability of their designs. Philippe Thome's biography of Sottsass explains, "The Memphis group [was] set up entirely independently of any specific consumer demand. As Sottsass pointed out, its goal, first and foremost, was 'to reveal new linguistic possibilities,' in order to 'free ourselves of from the cultural archetypes'" (Thome, et. al., 297).

In addition to designers of the past, I am also heavily influenced by the work of contemporary designers who focus on creating and producing their own work and who often use experimental construction techniques. These designers include Chen Chen & Kai Williams, who create objects and furniture by mixing various materials into resin; Anton Alvarez, who designed a machine that wraps thread and glue around pieces of wood to create stools and other structural objects; Likeminded Objects, who uses common materials like plywood and laundry baskets to create quirky assemblage-like functional objects such as shelves and lamps; and Naama Hofman, who designs sculptural lamps with metal tubing and glass panes. These current designers strive to create innovate work utilizing both old and new materials and techniques. I am continuously inspired by their experimental ethic and rapid output.

## Process

As I worked to define the aesthetic direction of my work, I continued to document my daily observations of urban objects and think about how these observations would influence my work. Initially, I thought I wanted to make tributes to individual objects by recreating their form and adding light bulbs or fluorescent tubes. I realized, though, that by doing it this way, I was not adding my own creative input. Instead, I decided to use these observations as a formal input, taking elements of different objects and combining them in different ways to design original objects. As I developed the designs of the final three light objects, I decided to use a consistent design language. I set the constraints of using concrete cylinders, bent metal tubing, and the most common colors of the urban objects: Orange, yellow, and blue.

After developing the observational aspect of my process, I became aware of another part of my process: The Lego method. While playing with some Lego pieces during the initial brainstorming phases, I had an epiphany about my creative process. I remembered how I had played with Lego as a kid: I would sift through the bin of Lego, pulling out pieces that I thought could be combined into a cool creation, before even deciding what exactly I was going to make. As I collected these pieces, I would start combining them in different ways until I realized what I was going to make. Back in my studio, I realized that this method of collecting forms/ components and combining them into new forms was what I was doing with the urban objects. As I collect images of interesting urban objects, I begin to visualize and sketch different combinations and new forms. For example, I might take a large cylinder and visualize different ways to intersect it with a pipe or cone or ring, and then think about how I can incorporate a light bulb or fluorescent tube in an interesting way, just as I had done with Lego as a child.

I began practicing the same process physically when I would go to Home Depot and buy interesting objects, then go to the studio and combine them in different ways to create assemblages. My observations were feeding my visual output, while my trips to Home Depot were fueling my material research, both processes utilizing the Lego method.

### **Final Work**

For the final series, I have created an installation of three light objects, several “houseplants,” and numerous small brightly colored concrete objects. The installation resembles an interior arrangement or garden setting, with the three lights near the corners of a ~15’ x 15’ floor space and the “houseplants” and other objects placed around them. Each of the three light objects are untitled and referred to by their color. The first, the orange one, is composed of two concrete cylinders, one vertical, one horizontal, connected by an orange bent steel tube that resembles a handrail. A half chrome covered light bulb sits atop the vertical cylinder, while a green nylon-covered cord comes out of the horizontal cylinder on the opposite end. A small concrete cylinder encases the electrical plug at the end of the cord, a detail found on all three light objects. The second light object is a floor lamp, composed of a tall, nearly vertical yellow steel tube. On the bottom, a horizontal concrete cylinder lies on the floor, from which the yellow tube emerges from one end, making two 90 degree bends before bending upwards at a 75 degree angle. At the top, the tube bends forward, leading to a concrete lightbulb socket and again, a half chrome bulb. A contrasting blue nylon cord comes out perpendicular of the concrete cylinder at the bottom. The third light object is made of a five foot long by three inch diameter concrete cylinder leaning at about a 45 degree angle against a blue, steel tube A-frame made from a single

bend. At the top of the cylinder is the half chrome bulb, and an orange nylon cord comes out perpendicularly from the bottom end of the cylinder. The four “houseplants” are composed of wider concrete cylinders, about five inches in diameter with brightly colored foam and plastic tubes sticking out of them, resembling foliage. The smaller concrete objects are painted bright colors and gradients and include small cylinders, two “hands” cast from rubber gloves, one atop a small truncated pyramid, and a small wedge, all placed on the floor or on bare concrete blocks. All together, the light objects, “houseplants”, and smaller objects compose an almost garden-like space in the gallery, contributing to the paradox of the industrially produced and inspired objects within a natural feeling space. The emphasis is on the three light objects, but the smaller items add punctuation and contribute to the intentionality of the arrangement.

I set out to design a series of light objects— sculptural, yet functional lights that explored form and aesthetics and that were inspired by my observations of objects from the urban landscape. I also wanted to develop my creative process. Throughout the past year, I have been able to complete all of these goals. I didn’t know exactly how my influences and objectives would inform the final body of work or what that work would even look like. I am pleased with the final result, and see it as a visually complete series. Now that I have developed my process, I am eager to create new work using this same process, and continue to work within the visual language I have established in this body of work. I hope to set up a personal studio where I can continue to create furniture and start a small studio business selling the work I create.





*Light Objects*, installation view, Argus II Building

Bibliography

Kuramata, Shiro, and Deyan Sudjic. *Shiro Kuramata*. London: Phaidon, 2013. Print.

Meyer, James Sampson. *Minimalism*. London: Phaidon, 2000. Print.

Thome, Phillipe, Francesca Picchi, and Emily King. *Ettore Sottsass*. Berlin: Phaidon, 2014.

Print.

Zijl, Ida Van. *Gerrit Rietveld*. London: Phaidon, 2010. Print.