

Ryan Thurmer

University of Michigan School of Art & Design

**THE**

FUTURE

**PAST**



# THE FUTURE PAST

Integrative Project Thesis

**Ryan Thurmer**

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# TAKE A MOMENT TO LOOK OUT THE NEAREST WINDOW...

...if you can find one. Now look back inside, up and all around you. Notice what your hands are touching, what you are sitting on, and what your eyes are really seeing. Now ask yourself, how did we as a people get from *out there* to *in here*, surrounded by things we've made? The content of this Integrative Project is a response to this natural progression, and our daily behaviors within our material lives. This project is an investigation of the primordial human impulse to apply desired uses to preexisting forms and materials found in human environments. In this case, form does not follow function, rather, function is informed by form, function, material, and context. **The Future Past** is an exploratory design project, resulting in an installation of appropriated everyday objects: a desk fan and an electric pencil sharpener, headphones and a rotary phone, and three measuring tapes and a grandfather clock case. They are each arranged on and near a wooden desk, and chair, where one would typically find such objects, thus inviting viewers to engage.<sup>1</sup> With the reappropriation of found objects as media, **The Future Past**, explores the human curiosity and desire for unconscious creation. Disrupting the familiar patterns we generally associate with the everyday, this installation sought to alter the way we perceive our environment and our daily interactions with objects. The application is explored through the context of contemporary western life, using discarded objects and technologies and our mass-manufactured environment as media. I intended to critically observe our western object-culture, and challenge our general perceptions of common objects we put little or no conceptual thought towards. Lastly this project was structured to highlight the fact that all humans possess the ability to make, create, and design. While most already do, whether they intend to or not, this ability is what brings all humans together. It reminds us all we come from common genetic and cultural ancestors, revealing that the societal barriers we have constructed are truly paper thin. (MacGregor, BBC Radio 4)



**Olduvai handaxe**

Lower Paleolithic, ca. 1.2 million years old Olduvai Gorge, Tanzania.



# BEFORE ART BEFORE DESIGN

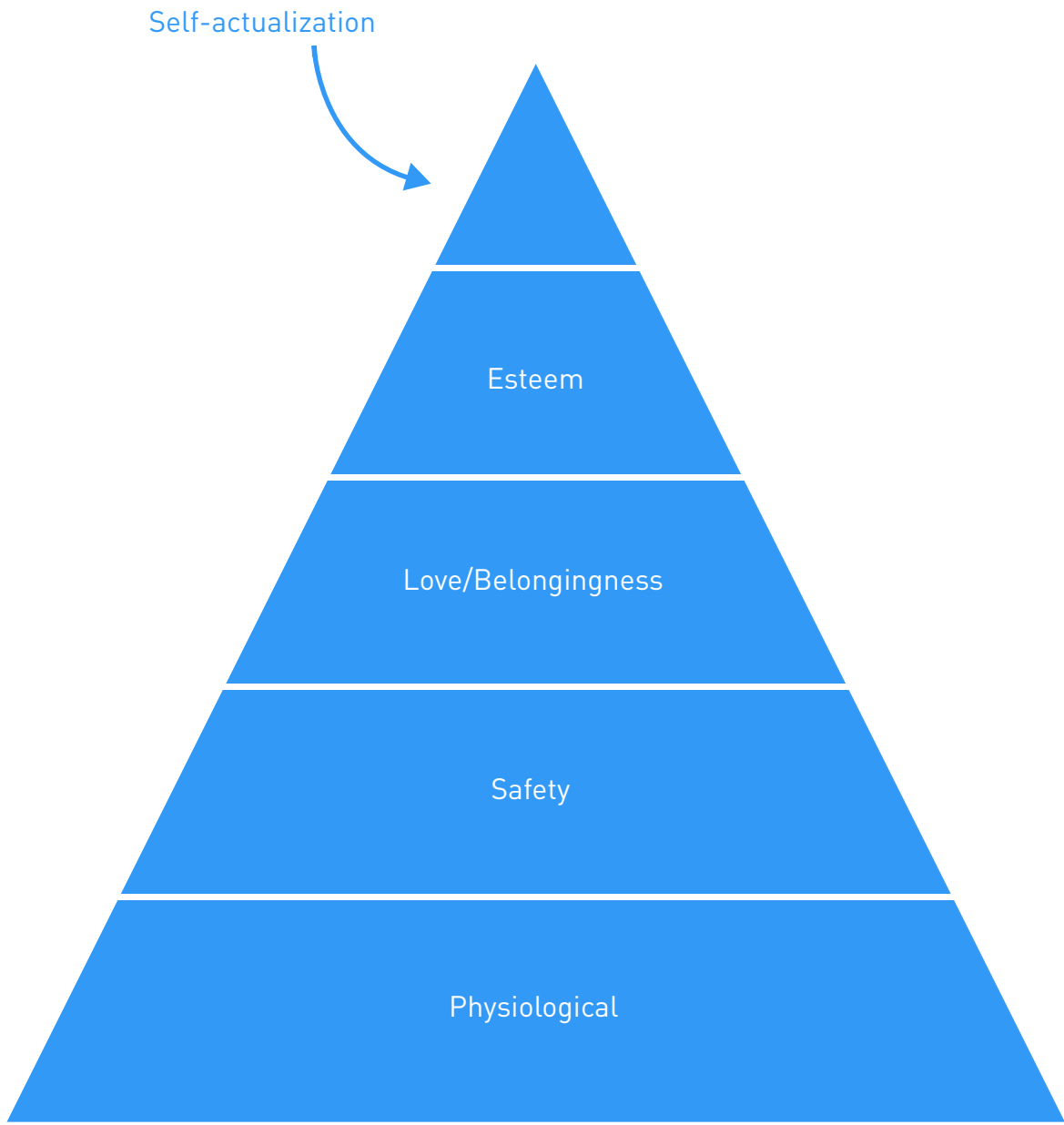
Where did the spoon come from? Who invented pockets? These were the questions which sparked my interest in this project, as many of the answers are missing hard evidence. Since most prehistoric objects were made of organic materials, only few have survived to make it into modern museums. However the prehistoric spoon is thought to have come into existence from a combination of found, natural objects: a shell and stick. Even the etymology of the Greek and Latin words for spoon are derived from *cochlea*, meaning a spiral-shaped snail shell. (Academy Research) Early hominoids gave new purposes to many of the natural objects they found and manipulated to suit their survival needs. These included the appropriation of rocks into knives, plant and animal material into clothing, and shells into spoons (Petroski, 15).

Unrefined designs, such as these, fulfilled the universal wants and needs of human life. The objects created were the most fundamental for the existence and evolution of our species. By creating tools, humans gained higher quality nutrition, and thereafter a developed brain capable of unprojecting thoughts into the future, and the ability to recognize thousands of faces, words, and objects within fractions of a second. (MacGregor, BBC Radio 4) The ready-made<sup>2</sup> objects early humans appropriated were simply elements of their environment. Is it possible that the objects we are creating and misusing today are still helping us evolve into superior beings beyond *Homo sapiens*, as did the chipped hand axe 1.2 million years ago?

<sup>2</sup> Ready-made is a “[t]erm applied from 1915 to a commonplace prefabricated object isolated from its functional context and elevated to the status of art by the mere act of an artist’s selection.” (MoMA)

Abraham Maslow's theory of human motivation, a **Hierarchy of Needs**, formed of levels in a pyramid represents a generalized view of how humans must strive to fulfill their needs and wants in a specific sequence in order to maintain a stable lifestyle. For example, to survive we must first steadily fulfill our basic physiological urges to eat before building a shelter. The hierarchy presents a ladder of fulfillment, which suggests that the ultimate goal of each individual human is to reach *self-actualization*, or what could otherwise be interpreted as a highly euphoric fulfillment of the potential self. Perhaps happiness is the ultimate human drive. Do the objects we create and use, for each of Maslow's levels, contribute to the process of reaching self-actualization, and the acquisition of sustained personal happiness? The thought of an improvised spoon helping us reach our ultimate selves today might seem thin stretched, however, if we take a second look around us, as we did at the beginning of this thesis, we will notice objects around us performing as they were never meant to adding simplicity and comfort to our lives. The radiator acts as a table with objects resting on top of it, the mug sits on the desk holding a handful of pens, the door handle to the room acts as a hook for a plastic shopping bag, which itself is being used as a garbage bag. Each of these reuses adds permanent or temporary ease to every day situations, and at times even adds beauty.





Self-actualization

Esteem

Love/Belongingness

Safety

Physiological


Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's

# NON INTENTIONAL DESIGN

German professor and design author from the Köln International School of Design in Cologne, Germany, Uta Brandes, describes “the everyday redesign of designed objects by the user,” as *Non Intentional Design* (NID). “It does not create a new design, but through use, creates something new or replaces the old.” Excluding do-it-yourselfers in her definition (much of what they do is intentional and very considered), NID is more of a spontaneous, unconscious act, uninfluenced by “the will to design,” but rather by the drive to problem solve. That which forces us to create a better life for ourselves. The reasons for this drive are either “momentary (emergency solution, provisional, improvisational: for instance saucers as ashtrays) or systematic (no product suited to the specific purpose: like beer coasters under a leg to steady a wobbling table).” (Erthoff & Marshall, 270-2)

Our brains are pattern making and matching machines. We remember forms, behaviors, faces, stories, etc and make connections back to this information to understand the world around us. When this reconnection operation leads us to an unexpected destination, a new connection is created, much like processing and understanding the punchline to a joke. The physical act of laughter is often the result. Similarly, when we see an object being used in an unfamiliar fashion for the first time, a similar operation occurs. A new connotation is made with this object and behavior in the human brain.



For example, while studying in Germany in 2010-2011 I experienced a variety of ways to open crown capped bottles which had never previously occurred to me, using lighters, rings, even other bottles. It might then be reasonable to say that he or she who makes this new mental connection between an object and behavior has formed an individual connection, a personal relationship with that object. As I myself will never see lighters or bottle caps in the same way, **The Future Past** challenges the cognitive pattern recognition process of the user, provoking them to question the existence of these objects, and to question our individual relationships and behaviors we each hold true to the everyday object.

# READY-MADES

“100 Chairs in 100 Days”

Martino Gamper



The use of found, ready-made objects, as a creative material, provides enormous potential to link and reveal the historic and cultural connotations embedded within each designed object and its owner. At the same time users bring unique personal experiences to each object found in the gallery with which to evaluate and add individual perspective. The juxtaposition of two or more allows for the telling of a complex story, which itself will change or reshape, as the objects do in society in real time. The appropriation of objects, intended for the gallery space, became defined as a form of art and design throughout the early to mid 20th century. Artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso daringly blurred the lines between art, life, and design by bringing the outside world into the gallery. Today many of these appropriation projects result mainly in furniture. In his 2006-2007 project "**100 Chairs in 100 Days**," Martino Gamper used discarded and broken chairs to create a charming collection of frankenstein-furniture. The collection includes a simple wooden

chair with an inflatable tube as its back. Another, called *Unstable*, is a lone seat atop a single piano leg. Like Duchamp, his goal was not to waste time toying with the aesthetics of the final form, but rather to question what our abundance of furniture means today, through the spontaneity of a one-off method. (Gamper) Though much of today's appropriated furniture are admirable pieces of design or sculpture, I intended to avoid making bricolage<sup>3</sup> furniture, or simply figuring out which common objects were solid enough to sit on. Instead I aimed to work more with objects with which users more actively engage. **The Future Past** was intended to captivate users in a deeper excavation of the cultural and personal significance each item offers.

<sup>3</sup>The rough english translation for this term is "handyman" or "jack of all trades," describing a process of sculptural collage. (German & Barrett, 1)

**Dialog05**, a conceptual product design group, similarly took on the challenge of juxtaposing the physical world and the virtual world as a collection of objects centered around the ubiquitous Universal Serial Bus (USB), a system which bridges the physical and the virtual. The collection includes a trash can for deleting virtual information, and a thumb-drive embedded in a padlock. They were able to go conceptually far beyond what Gamper’s appropriated furniture achieved. Rather than quickly altering an object’s original use or form, **Dialog05** successfully altered the way we see and understand modern forms of exchanging information.



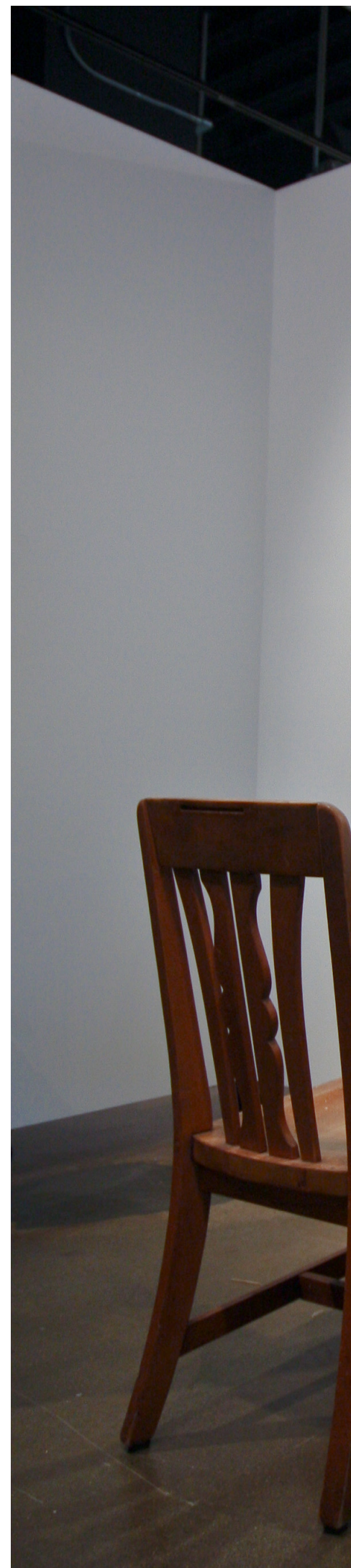
As an attempt to recontextualize everyday objects, I first interpreted their potential uses outside of their originally designed context. The process consisted of envisioning the form, function, material, and significance of objects separately from one another. An outcome of the escalated production speed of mass-manufactured goods, and competition between businesses within, is of course an increase of objects deemed obsolete, losing the value found in their original context. This is why I've chosen to work mainly with discarded objects and mid 20th century technology, which today are far from breakthrough. The days of physical forms of music, for example, are getting farther away from the mainstream at an exponential rate. Thus future or foreign viewers of objects like vinyl records, 8-track tapes, and minidisks, who see them for the first time, might only be able to comprehend these items simply as form, potential function, and material. The contextualization of the object will then be open for new interpretation biased solely on the behaviors and norms of that future culture. "Each product, regardless as to whether it was intentionally designed or not, can trigger associations because it

is solely dependent upon the social and cultural contexts which kind of associations the product will generate." (Design by Use, 10)

It would be ignorant, however, not to note these practices happening in our own time, mainly in so called third-world countries and areas of extreme poverty. Due to the lack of a variety of consumer goods and the resources to acquire them, these cultures resort to whatever is at hand. In Morocco, Haiti, and the Philippines, for example, workshops exist which transform rubber car tires into bags and shoes. When a car tire enters the boundaries of these different cultures the significance and meaning of *car tire* is reborn into a useful necessity, thoroughly altering the object's identity and daily significance. (Design by Use, 44-5)

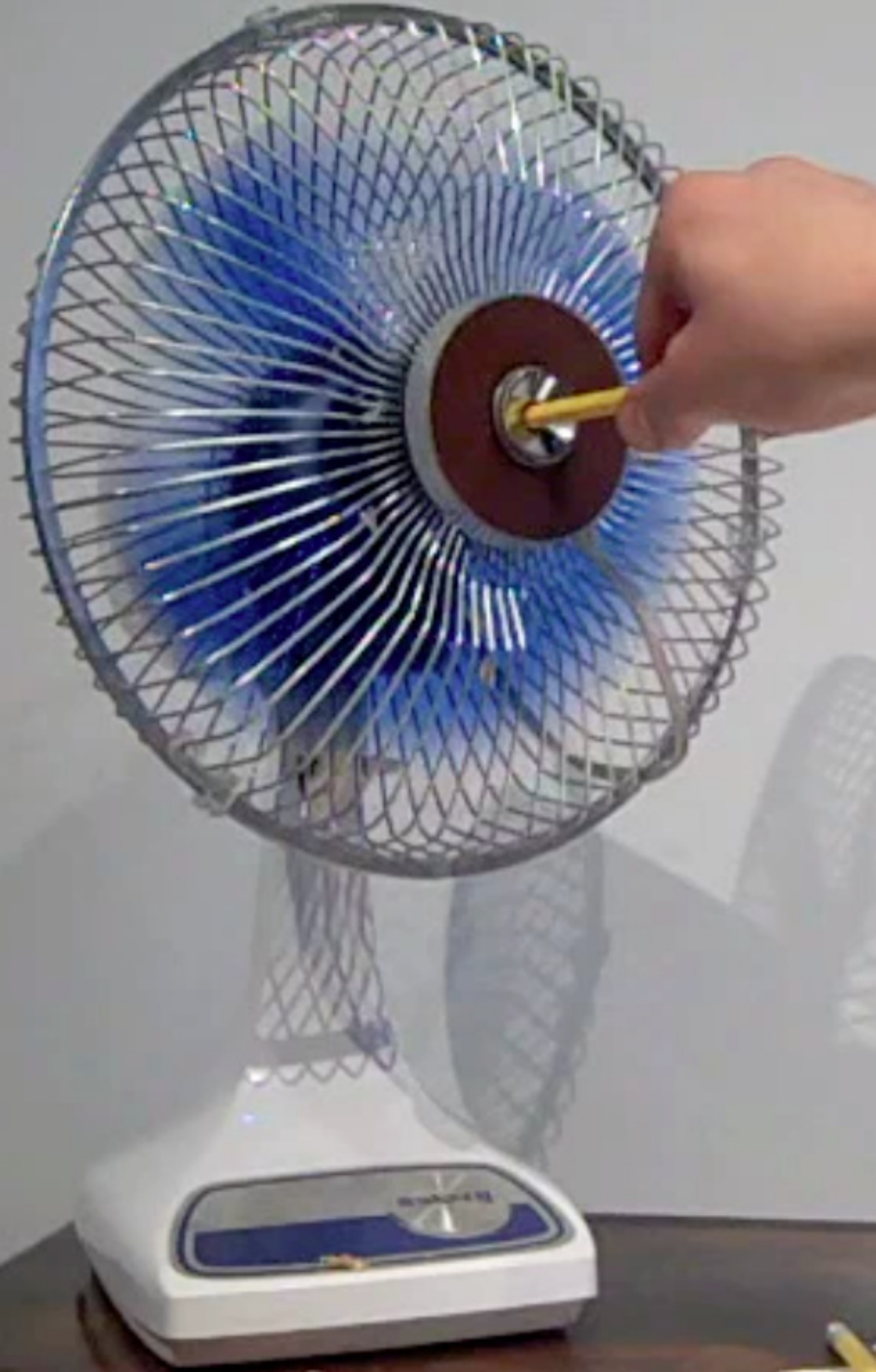
**The Future Past** challenges our cognitive pattern recognition process, which can often trick us into believing the object or sound we are perceiving is something we've experienced before. After an initial glance at the installation objects and interacting with them, the brain's retrieval process fails when attempting to recall for templates of fan, phone, and clock, and new links between these patterns are made. At this moment gallery visitors realize (through interaction or sight) that the fan is actually a pencil sharpener, that the phone is just a listening device and that the measuring tapes represent the current time. The users have an initial cognitive letdown and within milliseconds an "ah-ha!" moment overcomes them. Some experience impulsive laughter as this cognitive process is structured similarly to that of experiencing humor or a pun. (Bono) They embrace the absurd, as if experiencing a daydream about the ordinary, revealing itself as something quite unexpected. So it is valid to say that though appropriating our products does not always give us the best solution, or even function as well as the original object(s), but what it can bring is ease to everyday life, humor, and add to the actualization of the personal self and communal self.

As we take one final look around the room, we can start to picture what it took to create all that humans have created. Everything we are and have, in one way or another, comes from the earth. Meaning all human-made things are directly connected to nature. From a primitive shell-spoon to a space shuttle, all made things are personifications of their environments. But when humans connect with these objects, these unique connections can change that object's form in countless ways. For a project that seems to encompass enough content to endure a life time of focus, I feel I have merely had time to scratch the surface. This project is not finished but rather open ended, allowing for the continued search to redesign the uses of our preexisting objects.



















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