

# **Actual Cognition**

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## **Abstract**

This text is an introspective vision of how the material world can be interpreted and experienced, related to my artistic process. This exploration attempts to analyze the aspects regarding the perception and cognition of objects, which can be considered an extension of the human body. Moreover, marketing strategies influence behaviours and decisions that resonate more in our life. By looking at the environmental consequences of which our relationship with things take place, I argue to reconsider our knowledge starting with individual beliefs. The thesis is centred on Western studies for their features to analyze phenomena rationally and for their fundamental scepticism, which is something that triggers my work. My research points out that exploring how humans make sense of their surroundings is a current matter of discussion and can be open to interpretation. In the text, I break apart my artistic practice and describe each aspect of it, to look over my relationship with objects, in which I try to reestablish new values. In the end, this essay proposes an alternative approach to making objects and how to use them, to investigate unconventional ways of perceiving the world.

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## Paragraph 1: Introduction

Objects have always been a central topic in my practice. It is fascinating the functional combination of shape and purpose with which they can make us relate to the world. Objects can be regarded as devices that open a new world which we would be unaware of without them.

I grew up in a small town near Venice, and the fact that I wanted to be an artist was never disparaged, on the contrary, was always stimulated. Since I was a kid, I used to stare in front of toys and imagine exactly how I would use them, but it always somehow bothered me to get a product and feel the excitement of using it fading away. My dream was to become a designer and make objects of comfort which you never get tired of and find original uses every time you approach them. After a couple of attempts to find my way, I ended up practising painting, which is still the medium I can rely the most on for my practice.

In painting, I found my way of playing since I see making art as a tool to detach ourselves from the boring life, we are subject to every day. In everyday situations, objects take over my attention, and they appeal to me regardless of the circumstances I am in. They can evoke a world where there is no meaning to things, but just visual objective components. My research is to depict objects in a way that pushes us to linger on what we see and to question the validity of what we see.



Figure 1, Tarelli, P. (2022) photo reference.



Figure 2, Tarelli, P. (2022) *Untitled*, acrylic on canvas, 99 x 99 cm.

## Paragraph 2: Perceive Obsolescence

In a world where we are surrounded by objects that we consider the consequent trash derived from our use of them, I want to question our position on the material external world and reconsider our approach toward objects.

At this moment where consumerism has reached quite the nexus, it is necessary to slow down our rush of change and ponder on what we already have. Human egocentric and materialistic attitudes are separating us from each other and from the world we live in. I believe that researching visual experiments on the variety of appearance of things can reveal their bizarre qualities and reconsider the value of our surroundings. Depicting objects in as many shapes and colours as possible helps me to prospect for a better understanding of what I see to unfold the beauty behind everyday situations.

To argue and criticize our disposable attitude toward objects, my research is oriented on the cognition of artefact shapes. And my attention goes to those mass-produced objects which are meant to be used for a practical purpose, which we wield and deal with every day. They are often defined as cheap or having low-quality designs, and they permanently circulate in our daily lives. They can be ornaments, decorations, items, and tools, but also disposable objects or any kind of replaceable components. It is interesting in this sense, to see this permanent effort in creating an updated version of an object to make us believe it would make our life easier, while its function stays the same. That specific category of objects might have the quality of being overused, which eventually raises in me a feeling of compassion toward them and makes me wonder how I can value them in a personal way.

Regarding human cognition, I think planned obsolescence is a key factor to take into consideration. Planned obsolescence is a business strategy which ensures an object, or part of it, will not function anymore after a certain date in the way it was meant to. This is to guarantee that the company will maximize profit over the long run. To achieve that, changing the aesthetic of the item nowadays became a priority. Even more interesting is the perception of obsolescence, which comes from customers. According to the notion used in economics, perceived obsolescence occurs when a company alters the appearance of a product and consumers prefer to update or buy a newer model because they feel the older model is no longer useful or valuable<sup>1</sup>.

To me, perceived obsolescence became so present and persistent that it started to affect our smallest behaviours, especially regarding the environment. The most striking example to me is the inclination for shopping, which regularly reminds me to purchase new items of all kinds. Because of the feeling that an object is no longer fashionable, it is easy to consider less and less its effect on my life. But this happens all the time during my daily encounters. This means that the less instantly we understand something we see, the less we consider its value. In my experience, I usually ride a bicycle quite often and sometimes I get bored of the long ride, so I started to pay attention to the bike itself, and how many components and shapes it is made of. And so, I transferred this attention to every moment of my day and started to pay more

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<sup>1</sup> Climate, O. C. (2021, March 3). *Planned obsolescence sucks. Here's why it still exists.* ethical.net. <https://ethical.net/our-changing-climate/planned-obsolescence-sucks-heres-why-it-still-exists/>



attention to my environment.

From the moment I consider a specific object, I start to think about them as a cluster of several conditions: shape, size, context, colour, material, etc... And afterwards, raises to me some questions: Who made it? Why does it have that shape? What kind of needs did the maker have to conceive that object? Does it still serve the same purpose it was made for? And then I ask myself: Is this object useful for me? If yes, how can I get the most out of it? And the only invariant throughout all these questions is the visual components of the scene I am observing. By concentrating on one object's shape and giving various interpretations, I try to develop a strategy to get around the idea of obsolescent perception. The strategy is initially performative, in the sense that it involves the act of depiction, and afterwards, it became more conceptual which requires vision and intellect.



Figure 3, Tarelli, P. (2022) photo reference.



Figure 4, Tarelli, P. (2022) *Untitled*, acrylic on glossy paper, 12 x 18 cm



Figure 5, Tarelli, P. (2022) photo reference.



Figure 6, Tarelli, P. (2022) *Untitled*, acrylic on glossy paper, 12 x 18 cm.

### Paragraph 3: Conventional Cognition

While it is not credible for common sense that objects have a "point of view" or "something to say", as an artist I believe that "lifeless" objects have a greater influence on our daily life than the known limited human perception. We tend to think that human vision is at the top of the hierarchical levels of truth, but we know that sight can be deceptive.

By zooming out and considering a more abstract perspective, there is an immense variety of waves unconditionally present that occur in the world we live in, and we are a receiver capable of decoding a limited range of those waves into information, which is necessary for our survival. This goes for all living spaces. Those waves are electrical impulses, with higher or lower frequencies, that contain no interpretations: they are just waves. We perceive them as shapes and only consequently give them meaning.

Quantum physics also claims that the microscopic world is a lot more chaotic and unpredictable than what our eyes are used to seeing according to Newtonian physics: particles of matter have no order and they go around without an understandable structure, thus everything around us, we included, is energy. Therefore, matter is made mostly of apparent emptiness (energy), while we still perceive the solidity of matter<sup>2</sup>. This leads me to think that what we perceive of our surroundings is far from what our perception can grasp. Eventually, modern science (the science of Quantum) doubts that matter is submissive to the mind. Could it be the other way around?<sup>3</sup> Regarding my practice, I like to think that objects are calling for me to be discovered, and not me looking for them.

In a more general sense, cognition is a mental process that concentrates on knowing something. It includes perceiving, recognizing, conceiving, and reasoning and yet, can be distinguished from experiencing feeling or willingness. Judgment is at the core of cognition, and it is activated when we distinguish an object from others by unique concepts<sup>4</sup>.

There are all sorts of approaches to the dualism of body and mind, and this topic has been addressed in different ways in both science and philosophy. Most of the time Western philosophy has given the matter a passive connotation, as something diametral to the spirit. The reason is that Western philosophy is defined by fundamental scepticism whereas Eastern philosophy does not require a logical or rational explanation. Here I focus on the Western perspective to use scepticism against its logic and include more irrational components to the actual cognition of things.

My approach is informed by two propositions. One is from the idea of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who distinguished *phenomena*, which is the faculty of humans to understand objects or events through senses (sensible content), from *noumena*, that is the object (or event) in itself, without human sensory involvement (pure intellectual concept). Therefore, the latter for Kant is impossible to know because humans can only understand concepts when

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<sup>2</sup> S. (2019b, February 11). Does Matter Exist Or Is It All Just An Illusion? • SHIFT. *SHIFT*. <https://www.shift.is/2013/04/does-matter-exist-or-is-it-all-just-an-illusion/>

<sup>3</sup> R. (n.d.). *Can Materialism Explain the Mind?* Renovatio | the Journal of Zaytuna College. <https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/can-materialism-explain-the-mind>

<sup>4</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (1998, July 20). *Cognition | Definition, Psychology, Examples, & Facts*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cognition-thought-process>



they have both sensorial and intellectual dimensions<sup>5</sup>. The second is from the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget who conceived his theory of childhood intellectual development occurring in four distinct stages based on age<sup>6</sup>. He questioned what mental structures determine how we perceive new data and information, so he postulated two basic processes. The first is *assimilation*, which is the interpretation of reality based on previous individual experiences, and the second is *accommodation*, which is the process of adjusting to new experiences<sup>7</sup>. From this point of view, our beliefs are significant components of the evolution of our environment and therefore of our cognitive experience. This dialogue between the inner and outer world can speculate on our cognition, which is constantly changing.

While Kant helps me to understand that there is always something uncertain about what we see, Piaget suggests that cognition is constantly mutating. Thus, once we realize that neither philosophy nor science can adequately explain what is happening as we view the world, we should begin to reconsider how we perceive things.

There are some scenarios, like in art, where we can have an experience that is unlike the ordinary one. Thus, art can be a space where the sureness of our intention toward the object changes or is disputed. Duchamp has caused me to reflect on this. How he provoked discussion about what constitutes art with his piece "Fountain," which was followed by an endless number of objet trouvé inspired works and art movements, like Surrealism, Pop Art and Trash Art. Holding on to that, with my work, I want to investigate what is at the core of cognition of the perception of objects. But also, what is the mental process which takes us to exclude a three-dimensional shape from its context?

The development of the studies between cognition and objects, or cognition and art, resulted in the evolution of branches of neuroscience, especially in the West World. Which for me, is an attempt to explain scientifically something that is not just scientific.

One significant step towards the understanding of phenomena, or objects, is the concept of *Agential Realism* presented by the feminist theorist Karen Barad<sup>8</sup>. Inspired by the physicist Niels Bohr, agential realism theory proposed that every human and non-human is deeply entangled with each other, and not separated. Separation occurs when there is an act of observation, and this happens temporarily to initiate the understanding of something. Barad's work is relevant to many academic fields, but also scientific studies, philosophy of science and feminist technoscience.

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<sup>5</sup> Kant's *Transcendental Idealism* (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). (2016, March 4). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-transcendental-idealism/#PhenNoum>

<sup>6</sup> Wankat, P. C., & Oreovicz, F. S. (2015). MODELS OF COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT: PIAGET AND PERRY. In *Teaching Engineering, Second Edition* (pp. 331–356). Purdue University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15wxqn9.18>

<sup>7</sup> See 6footnote.

<sup>8</sup> Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*.

### 3.1: Gestalt

The book “*Art and Visual Perception*” by Rudolf Arnheim aims to identify the psychological theories that underpin visual judgment and the aspects of the visual process that have an impact on the production of an artwork. The book uses Gestalt theory to understand those concepts, which entails understanding what we see<sup>9</sup>.

The psychology of Gestalt is a school of psychology theorized in the 1920s in Austria and Germany by three psychologists: Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka. Gestalt is a theory that studies humans' perception and defines some unconditional set of mental structures that supports human beings to give meaning to the external world through basic principles. It brings attention to the fact that organisms cannot perceive just separate single components of an image but perceive it as a whole interconnection of configurations. Gestalt originated also as an effort to include a humanistic perspective into the sterile method of scientifically studying the mental life occurring at that time<sup>10</sup>.

These mental structures are a group of seven principles: figure-ground, similarity, proximity, common region, continuity, closure, and focal point. The principle of similarity, for instance, states that we group things which are like each other, and we are likely to think they also have the same function. Two principles I use the most in my practice are continuity, which explains that whenever we experience an alignment of elements with an interruption, we will inevitably register it in our mind as a continuous pattern. And the principle of closure, which instead posits that wherever there is a gap, humans tend to fill that gap and close an image when incomplete<sup>11</sup>. These two principles are especially useful when I consider making an image because they can conceptually expand the subject beyond the borders of the image, to create an image which appears in our mind but is not present in what we see in sight.

Gestalt theory is an extraordinary approach because I see it as an attempt to ground what all humans can have in common, regardless of origin or social status, and find a structure in human thinking activities. The famous Gestalt quote is “the whole is more than the sum of its parts,” and I like to think that “the whole object is more than the sum of its meanings.”

### 3.2: Object-Oriented Ontology

Object-oriented ontology (or OOO) was developed by Graham Harman which asserts that objects also have their perception of the world beyond human interference. His book “*Object-Oriented Ontology: A new theory of Everything*” has been of great inspiration to me, because it deals with many topics I often encounter during the development of my practice. OOO aims to develop a flat ontology without privileged objects. Although Harman goes further by seeing things like people, companies, and events as objects, I do not quite agree with his

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<sup>9</sup> Arnheim, R. (1997). *Art and Visual Perception*. University of California Press, U.S.A

<sup>10</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2023, March 17). *Gestalt psychology | Definition, Founder, Principles, & Examples*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/science/Gestalt-psychology>

<sup>11</sup> 7 *Gestalt Principles of Visual Perception: Cognitive Psychology for UX*. (n.d.-b). UserTesting. <https://www.usertesting.com/resources/topics/gestalt-principles#figure>

conclusion, but his thought process is remarkable and important to what I do. I will go over a few of these points below.

First, it strikes me with the idea that the theory of everything, which is a coherent theoretical physics framework that links all the aspects of the Universe, cannot be explained by only science. On this matter, science thinks that if it finds out what is the smallest part of a thing, we can see and understand its essence (contrary to Gestalt). Moreover, when we use language to describe something, in a way we simplify the thing, so we are unable to grasp its concrete features. Second, it resonates with me what Harman defines as an object:

*...anything that cannot be reduced either downwards or upwards, which means anything that has a surplus beyond its constituent pieces and beneath its sum total of effect on the world.*

(Harman,2018, p.51)

He describes objects as something that cannot be undermined or overmined. These two terms which he coined, respectively indicate thinking of an object just in terms of its physical component or reducing it to its effect, which would identify it only in terms of its function.

Harman tries to find what is this point where things (objects) are with and of themselves, to question not just ocularcentrism, so privileging the vision over the other senses, but also the vertical hierarchical structure of power, where humans took over the world. Things happen independently of a viewpoint, which is the opposite of phenomenology because phenomenology prioritizes the intentionality of who perceives. If we as humans, consider ourselves independent consciousness because we exist, therefore if we experience something else existing, it might have a form of consciousness.

For Harman, we just have indirect access to reality because it always withdraws from us. According to him, art is one of the tools which give us indirect access to reality, able to show us things beyond personal or practical perspective.

In Harman's book, art can be activated by theatricality. And one of its applications is through metaphors. A metaphor does not work if it is literal (a pen is like a pencil), but it does work when it can create a relationship with us (the real object) and the sensual qualities of an object, which are qualities we think of an object (the cypress is like a dead flame). When there is a deeper correlation between the real object and sensual qualities, the metaphor helps us to create something new out of everyday life: it is a creation of a "third object." Therefore, metaphors are a way to explore diverse realities.

Aesthetics is a concept that copes with human cognition and is related to beauty. Harman defines it as "unjustified true belief" which is something that you appreciate but there is no scientific proof. Aesthetics is concerned with beauty and the appreciation of it, thus my work deals with the shape of objects and the appreciation of it.

What appeals to me is that object-oriented ontology instead of anthropomorphizing objects, is concerned with a world from a perspective that does not privilege human subjectivity. It offers us a picture of how the world could be experienced rather than attempting to provide an absolute reality.

Although we might never get the chance to experience the real essence of an event or

an object because of the wide variety of viewpoints it contains, Harman's idea indicates reevaluating what I see. And it suggested that there are no privileged or more meaningful points of view. Thus, objects may have more agency than we can see and might behave differently if we pay more attention to them.



Figure 7,<sup>12</sup>

One example of the application of OOO in art is in Yoko Ono's three-part installation "The Riverbed". One of the parts of the installation called "Mend Piece" invites spectators to actively participate in building objects from pottery shards, glue, and twine. The work is a strategy for changing one's perspective on the matter to develop more ethical relationships with objects. It relates also to environmentalism, which indicates us to reconsider our treatment of the world and let materials establish their order. Mend Piece reflects best when Harman refers to the reality that always withdraws from us: by the constant change of the visitors and their intervention, the objects on the table will permanently be uncertain to define. Moreover, those objects subliminally suggest to us they might have a sort of agency we do not understand.

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<sup>12</sup> Yoko Ono, *Mend Piece* (Galerie Lelong, New York 2015/2016), 1966 / 2015, Ceramic, glue, tape, scissors, and twine, Dimensions variable; Installation view: *THE RIVERBED*, Galerie Lelong, New York, December 11, 2015 -January 30, 2016, © Yoko Ono, Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

While Yoko Ono's installation is characterized by manual activity, which required practicality, my work instead stays in a more cognitive realm, where the images I create are the means to an imaginary activity<sup>13</sup>. My position is that art does not reveal reality because it is a reality in and of itself, and it provides just a fleeting glimpse of experiencing it. Yet, it is fundamental that we as humans are part of this dialogue to generate more imagination. Art gives us the illusion of having a separate ontology from ours, whereas they are the same. Yet, it is fundamental that we as humans are part of this dialogue to stay connected with materials and ideas to generate more knowledge.

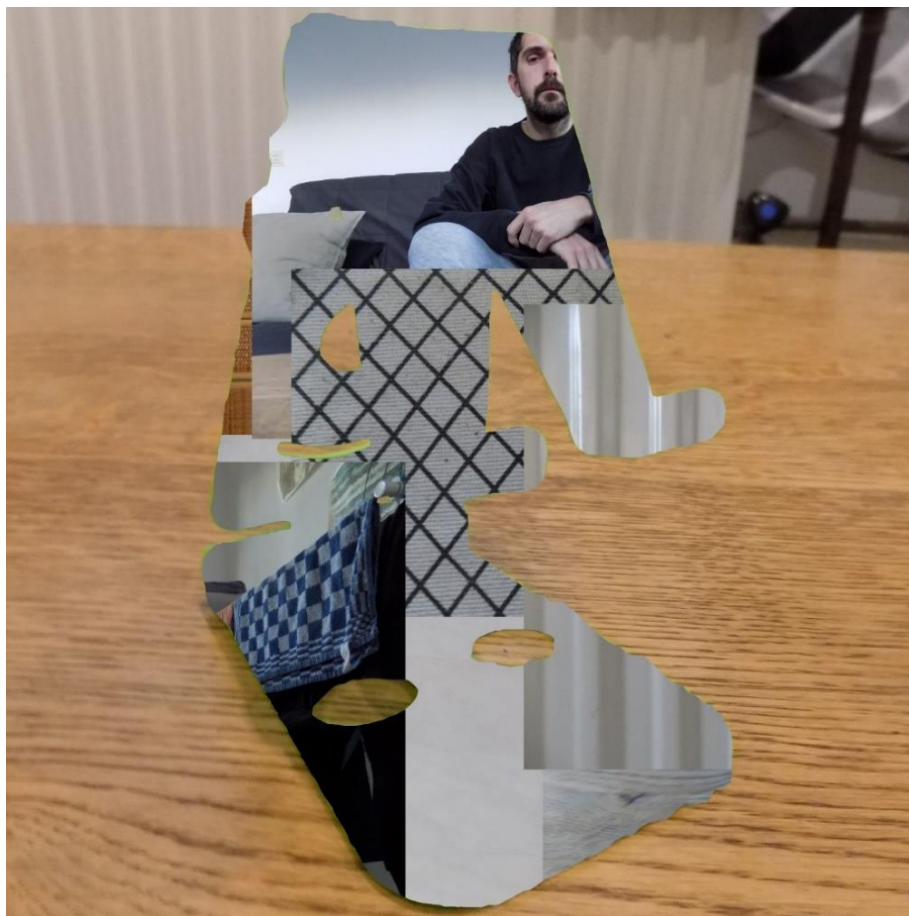


Figure 8, Tarelli, P. (2022) *Untitled*, digital photo

### 3.3: Vibrant Matter

Another similar attempt to narrow the differences between human and non-human influences is by Jane Bennett in the book "*Vibrant Matter*". Her point of view is that the difference between humans and non-humans is in the form of degree, and not of kind. She tries

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<sup>13</sup> AkimboTV. (2018, April 17). *VIEWS - Materialism 2: Object-Oriented Ontology* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1dSLpVUpPc>



to move the inanimate objects to a more active agent, so the agency involved is not located predominantly in humans, but it arises from the interaction of all the actors involved. This is because humans cannot do anything without non-human things, and she goes further by giving non-human things the capacity to actively influence us: the example is the potato chips actively “inviting” us to eat them. Even though this can be seen as anthropomorphism.

In one sense Bennett elevates objects to have agency, in the other, she takes away agency from humans in the direction of objects, to set those two on the same level. She uses words such as *human exceptionalism* and *anthropocentrism* and claims that the whole reality is split into parts which have no prior agency, but the agency comes from the whole. Her goal is to step back and have a wider perspective on reality, not considering humans as the centre of this perspective. The title of her book comes from the idea that in the micro world, nothing is static, everything is vibrating, and she applies this concept to the macro world<sup>14</sup>.



Figure 9, Tarelli, P. (2021) *Untitled*, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 20 x 20 cm.

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<sup>14</sup> Bennett, Jane, 1957- author. (2010). *Vibrant matter : a political ecology of things*. Durham :Duke University Press.

Gestalt, OOO and Jane Bennett's theories have a common claim that matter has more meanings, or functions than one human can perceive. Moreover, objects have plural qualities which we somehow decide to prioritize, based on our urgency and feelings. Thus, the art object as such can position itself in an ambivalent cognitive space.

According to my interpretation, what we can perceive is only a small portion of the energy involved in a moment, also because of human characteristics. We do not comprehend this energy, but it is nonetheless present. My idea is that this energy is a vibration which can be visually displayed and utilized, enabling speculation on objects.



Figure 10, *I shared 5 months with this item. It didn't bother me, quite the contrary. I wonder if I've bored it*, mixed media, four images 36 x 31 cm.

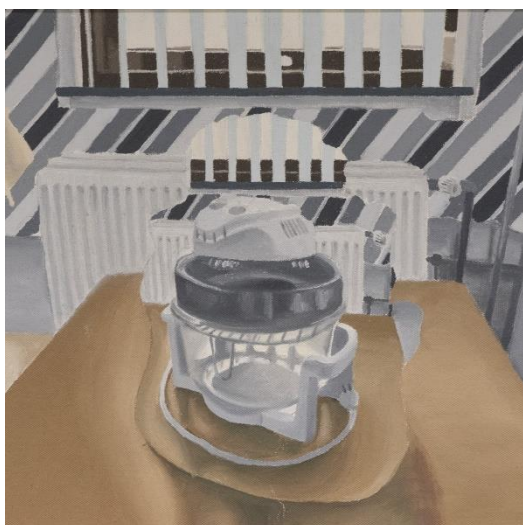


Figure 11, *I shared 5 months with this item. It didn't bother me, quite the contrary. I wonder if I've bored it* (detail), oil on canvas.



Figure 12, [click here](#) to see the GIF.

## Paragraph 4: Visual Inspirations

Artists like Robert Zandvliet have a unique focus on ordinary objects. researching the essence of a condensed form of energy. Specifically, his investigation of stones does not want to show any narrative but shows the power of pictorial art. He tries to create an archetypal image of one object, while at the same time getting closer to its core. With his work, Zandvliet is telling us that the experience is more direct without biases<sup>15</sup>. His method constantly emphasizes brush strokes which represent motion and emotion. By using this method, he produces an image that is purposefully open to interpretation.

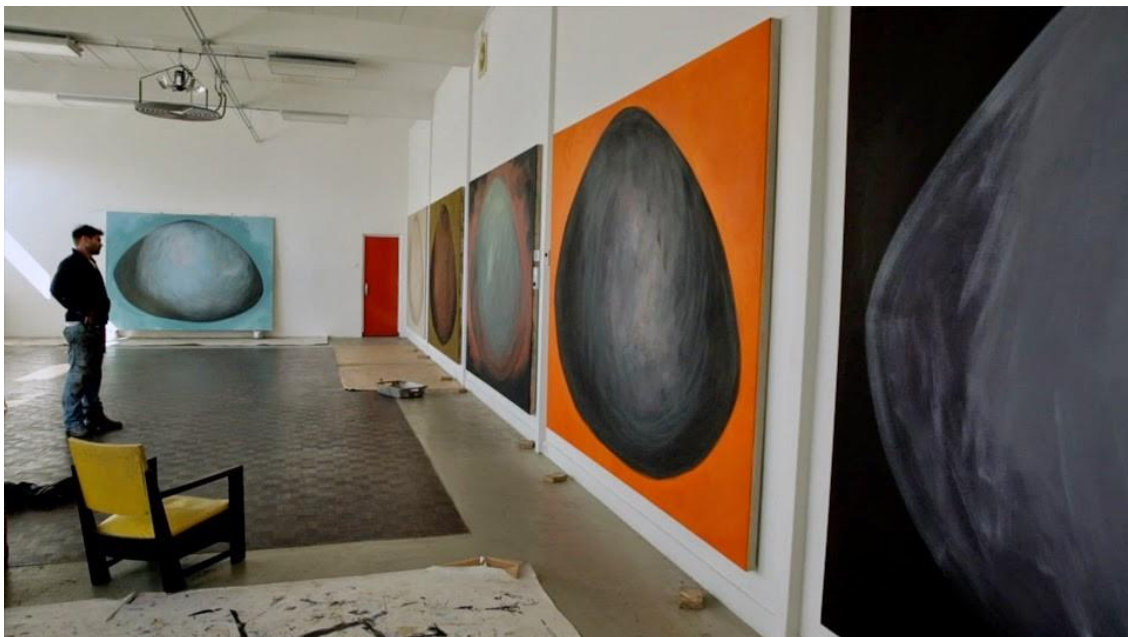


Figure 13,<sup>16</sup>

I first encountered Marco Tirelli's work when I was pursuing my bachelor's, and his visuals had an enormous impact on me. Marco Tirelli is an Italian sculptor and painter who develops his work through an allegorical vocabulary of personal memories, to activate a cognitive space where collective cultural memories collide. He represents manufactured tools, architectural forms, or objects from the everyday world characterized by an unstable position between illusion and reality, as well as between light and darkness. He makes shapes that appear on a surface, which is a border between physical and mental. Thus, the analysis of the relation between forms is always levelled in a space between recognizability and abstraction and the

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Zandvliet / *Snapshot Schiedam*. (n.d.). <https://snapshotschiedam.nl/en/artists/robert-zandvliet/>

<sup>16</sup> Robert Zandvliet in his studio, stills from the film "Seven stones" by Frank Scheffer. (source: cinemeta) <https://atelierlog.blogspot.com/2015/01/robert-zandvliet.html>



light becomes pivotal in his work for the possibilities and boundaries of perception<sup>17</sup>.

As a result, I had the good fortune to have an interview with him in his studio in Rome. This encounter has made me more aware of how similar our approaches to images are, especially in terms of the forms we chose as subjects, the visual impact we seek, and the perspective of curiosity we hope the viewer will be in. Moreover, I have never been enthusiastic about giving titles to my works, which is something else me and Marco Tirelli have in common. The reason is that titles can contextualize the image, and if they do not contextualize it is because decontextualization is the purpose of the work. Therefore, his images are more related to a sensible process, which involves the subconscious, rather than an intellectual approach. One curious exception for Marco Tirelli happened to his work “Proteo,” which refers to a Greek mythology God who was capable of shifting form and shape. Tirelli's artwork is positioned in a way so that an image and a mirror are about one another, causing the picture to change depending on the viewer's perspective.

To me, not giving titles helped to frame a moment of suspension and the image would subconsciously be interpreted differently by each viewer. In this way, there is room for different meanings to take place. As I was experimenting with this concept, I found myself intrigued by titling one work “Abstraction,” which indicates the change of two states. By implying an action in the title, the image produces an intriguing conclusion where the result lies between physical and mental states.



Figure 14,<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cardi Gallery. (2021b, June 3). Marco Tirelli - Cardi Gallery. *Cardi Gallery*.

<https://cardigallery.com/artists/marco-tirelli/>

<sup>18</sup> Marco-Tirelli, installation view Antwerp, Axel Vervoordt Gallery 2015 © Axel Vervoordt Gallery.



Figure 15, Tarelli, P. (2023) *Untitled* (detail), installation view.



Figure 16, Tarelli, P. (2023) *Untitled* and *Abstraction* (detail), installation view.



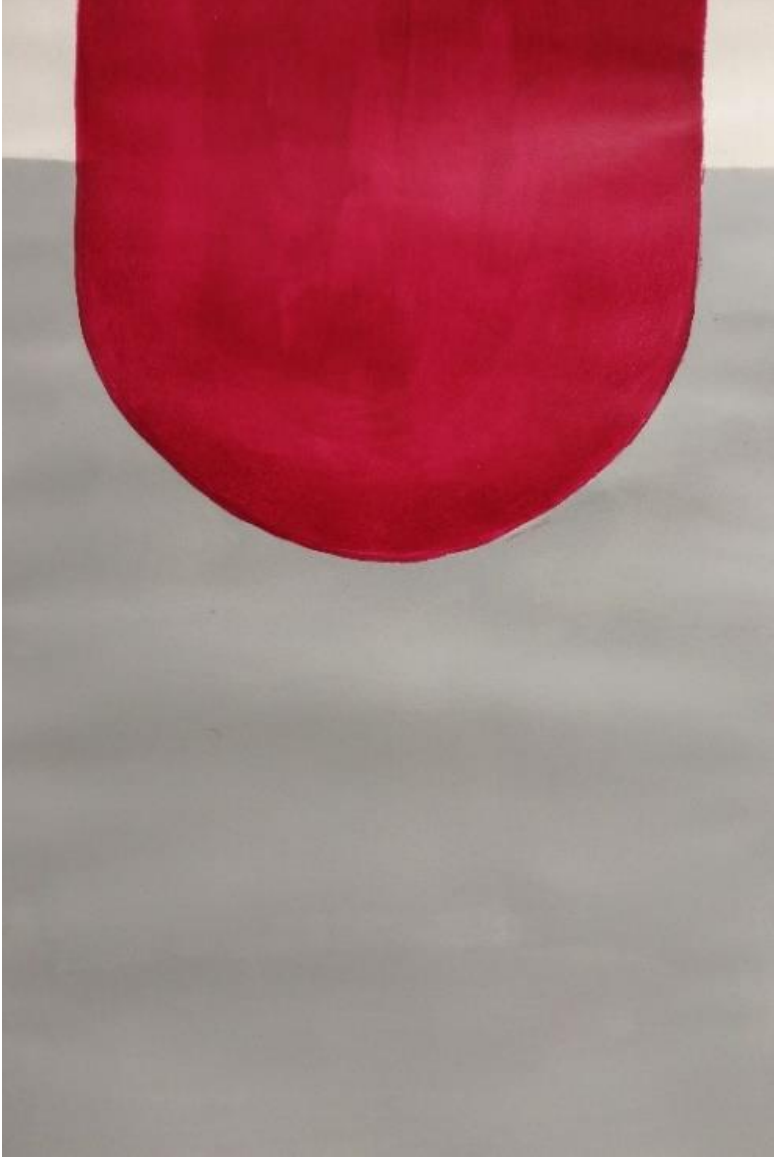


Figure 17, Tarelli, P. (2022) *Abstraction*, acrylic on paper, 31 x 46 cm.

Another artist who is a major source of my inspiration is Wilhelm Sasnal. He is a Polish painter and filmmaker, considered one of the most prolific artists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By applying a photorealistic style and filmic quality on his canvases, he deals with stories of political transformation and captures moments in time suggesting a camera's gaze and trying to connect the present with the past<sup>19</sup>.

Despite the political context in which his work is positioned, which enriches its value, I find his paintings visually stimulating from a pictorial point of view. The relation between flatness, deepness, and texture is composed in a way to create a surreal atmosphere. And this contrast sets the image with a sinister undertone in which the viewer perceives a layer of mystery. Moreover, he seems to me to have total control over the medium of painting and the results are always technically impeccable.



Figure 18,<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Wilhelm Sasnal – Hauser & Wirth. (n.d.-b). *Hauser & Wirth*.  
<https://www.hauserwirth.com/artists/2803-wilhelm-sasnal/>

<sup>20</sup> Wilhelm Sasnal, “*Graceland I*”, 2007, Oil on canvas, 160 x 160 cm

## Paragraph 5: Visual Cognition

*It should be remembered that a picture—before being a warhorse, a nude, or an anecdote of some sort—is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.*<sup>21</sup>

This is a quote from Maurice Denis, a French painter who lived between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and with his theories contributed to movements such as cubism and abstract art. His words resonate with me, but I would take them even further by saying that everything we see is a scene covered in forms and textures, which we only in a second moment classify.

Painting has been the major technique I used in my practice because with it I found the best way to translate my mental process into visual images. It became a language I use to express the intimate relationship I have with those objects I encounter every day. And the results, which are images, can unfold a unique characteristic of the objects to have different perspectives of them. This medium also offers the possibility of layering its features and illustrating in a still image the creation process. It suggests motion, which for me means ongoing change.

At first, what I experience by seeing, is a cluster of stains that take deepness and meaning just in a second moment. Subsequently, I detect the object's shape which is defined by the end of its background. The shape in which the object is defined from my perspective has a unique aesthetic, and because I want to create a link with that shape, I go visually close to the object and frame that point of view. That is why having a photo of the object is crucial to my process because it allows me to always look at the original references. After emptying the visual features from the object's image, I associate them with a pictorial technique which I will use to refill the shape in a two-dimensional format. By dividing the scene up into portions, I depict each of them not based on what I directly see, but on which texture would express that portion of the image. One part of the process is to keep a glimmer of the original image, a sort of starting point from where the image can develop visually. With my work, I am re-contextualizing the object through its depiction, and *decontentualizing* its image. By decontentualize, I mean changing the content of the image, and I see this as a form of playing around, to boost the visual potential of an object. It is a back-and-forth of undress-dress the image's features.

The objects consequently appear lacking in significant distinctive characteristics. Therefore, eliminating the "objective" characteristics implies mental engagement on the part of the audience. The association of different painting media and the juxtaposition between elements undoubtedly transmits a specific sensation that can open several understandings of the represented subject. Making strokes brush or the shape the main characteristic of the object depicted can raise a certain sensation regarding that object, and the combination of those helps me to recreate a state of suspension in which the beholder doubts what it is looking at.

My intention is to frame a moment between two moments: between the appearance of the object in space (detection) and its understanding (cognition). I want to capture an instant in

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<sup>21</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (1998b, July 20). *Maurice Denis* / French artist. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maurice-Denis>

which the object is not a physical reality yet, but just a mass of shapes and colours.

Through painting, I started a visual investigation between objects and their pictorial qualities to grow awareness of the variety of cognitive outcomes that a shape can take. It is an attempt to show the subject I come across, uncontaminated by all of the meanings I later assign to it. By highlighting a specific form, I want to make it desirable once again, and not let common sense consequently drive our behaviour towards it.

Many times, I develop an image by not knowing how it is going to turn out. I am just in the process. And if the result is too similar to the actual object my thoughts are stuck on the meaning of that object. Thus, there is no space for me to speculate about it.

My interests are not in the object's essence function or its molecular composition but in the multitude of stimuli which arise from its shape. My position is to show a personal point of view on how meaningful a shape can be, beyond aesthetic or use. Thus, painting is a place where I found the materiality in which the world I see is made and in it, I have found freedom in visually experimenting with this idea through the variety of textures I can create.



Figure 19, Tarelli, P. (2021) *Untitled*, mixed media on paper, 21 x 26 cm.

## Paragraph 6: Abstraction

As human beings always tried to describe the world they live in, reproducing images on two-dimensional surfaces goes along with this attempt. But to me, painting is more of a way to synthesize what I see, because depicting objects likewise would be an end in and of itself.

Technology has progressed with art throughout its history. And for me, technology is merely a tool to imitate nature as quickly as possible, but the outcome does not match because one of technology's advantages is to be instantaneous, which nature lacks. In this sense, the high-definition visual resolution is for sure extremely accurate to reality, but it seems to me that it is most likely made just for human eyes. This is why I assume that translating those pieces of information we perceive into abstract outcomes would be closer to a proper representation of nature<sup>22</sup>.

But what are the conditions to make us re-think one object? Changing the context for instance might alter the cognition we have of it. Recontextualization will lead to decontextualization, in which we will eventually experience the object differently. By little modification of one object, such as changing its colour or size, we can perceive it unconventionally and cope with original approaches. Furthermore, any representation of an object is a new iteration of it, and the exact depiction of it will inevitably make us think of it in its original context. This means that we tend to understand objects by their function or state. This made me wonder if the values of objects are restricted to their function. If it is so, does an abstract object restrict itself in any way? What is an abstract object then?

I believe that the act of abstracting an object means bringing it closer to its primitive form, which has no three-dimensional or high-resolution definition. The personal process of reducing the object to an abstract level aims to set it free from preconceptions, so we can question its value to discover new cognitive potentialities. Abstracting from objects allows me to harness the sensation arising from those daily encounters. By doing so, I want to hold the image in a permanent state of uncertainty which can stimulate an attitude of curiosity toward those day-to-day objects.

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<sup>22</sup> *Piet Mondrian Paintings, Bio, Ideas.* (n.d.). The Art Story. <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/mondrian-piet/>





Figure 20, Tarelli, P. (2023) *Untitled* (detail), clay, 13 x 12 x 15 cm.



Figure 21, Tarelli, P. (2023) *Untitled* (detail), clay, 8 x 14 cm.

## Paragraph 7: Conclusion

What we perceive from the surroundings are invariable arrays of information which are quite difficult to translate into words or images<sup>23</sup>. These are means humans used to make sense of the world, but cognition is fundamentally linked with individual experiences and memories. And so, even though there are some universal circumstances in which we all are involved, expressing what we perceive differs from each other.

Painting, on the other hand, is a means which has features and history. And defining myself as a painter implies the initiation of a specific kind of conversation. Another direction can be taken if I consider what I do under the umbrella of visual art. Painting is what made me start this thesis and it is just one of the mediums that can be used to deceive cognition. Even though it is still the technique I feel more confident with, I do not want it to be something that would restrict my solutions. And painting can be expanded both visually and conceptually.

Using the title is also a resourceful characteristic to consider. It can contextualize the work or can be the work itself. However, it is a tool that involves the spectator in the work, and it is relevant for the work to be addressed correctly.

Currently, my practice requires the viewer to be far enough from the image so that cognitive processes can take place. Nevertheless, this approach can be taken differently. For example, making it difficult to watch the image by intervening in the light or by obstructing the view with purposeful interventions in the showing space. In this way, cognition can be altered by the environment and the audience must be more actively involved in completing the work.

But also, what if the depicted shapes take a three-dimensional form? How would we interact with them? What would be their purpose? Abstracting the object by depicting it, and afterwards abstracting that image into a sculpture, what would be left of the original object?

My research demands an art realm to be well addressed. The everyday object is removed from its original context and elevated so to speak to a more open space of possibilities, and in this way, the viewers would have more chance to reconsider their own experience toward the object once out of the art space. Which then would question how big the difference between the art and non-art realm is. My suggestion is that creating new objects from abstract shapes can lead to more unconventional ways of engaging with our surroundings, by opening original approaches and therefore possibilities. From this perspective, I found a personal way to speculate on unconventional aspects of objects whose planned obsolescence would have been hidden. By having a more direct experience with the abstract object, its abstract function might reveal its hidden agency kept in the dark from people's subjectivity.

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<sup>23</sup> Gibson, J. J. (1979). *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Houghton, Mifflin and Company.

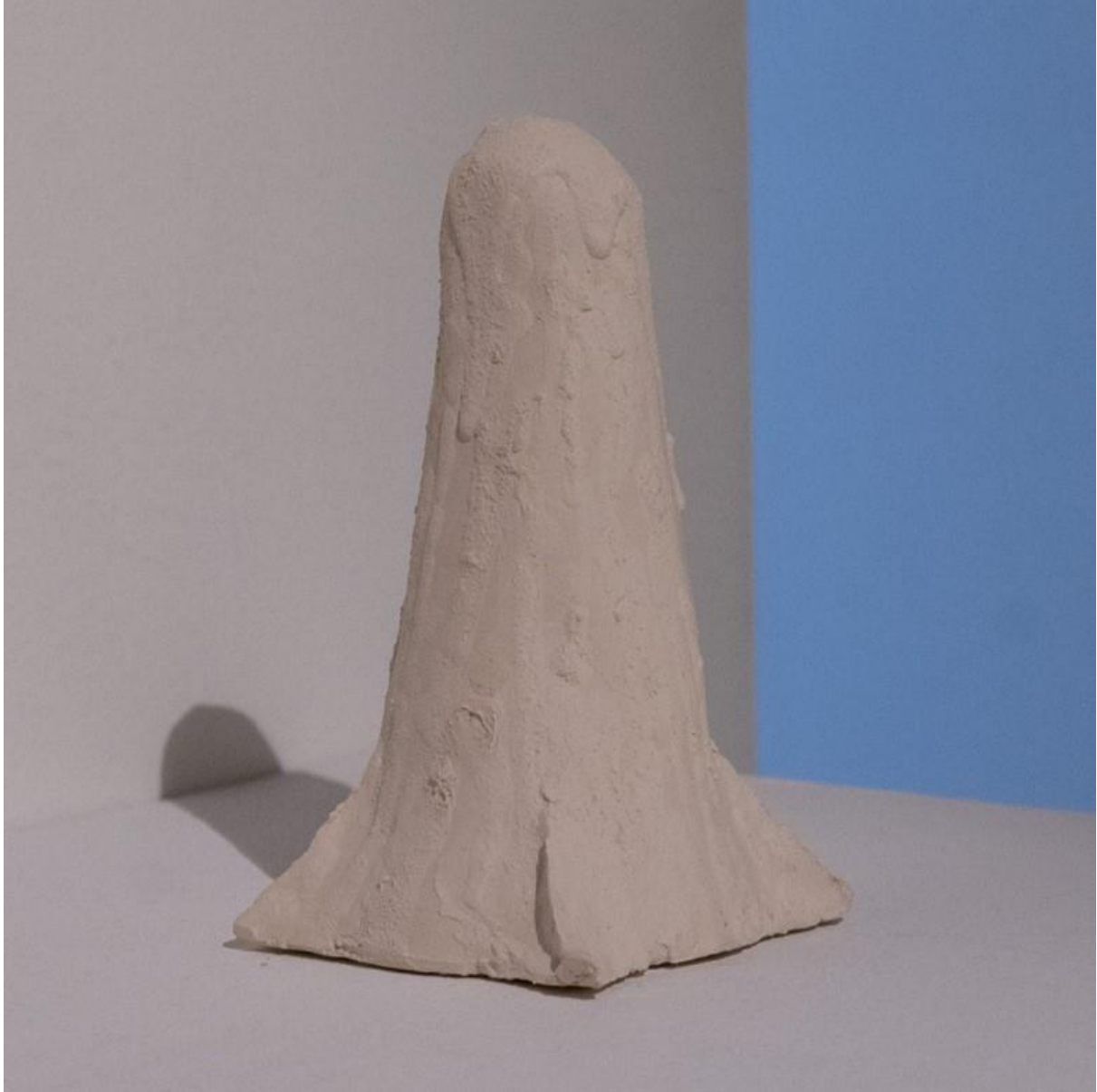


Figure 22, Tarelli, P. (2023) *Untitled* (detail), clay, 9 x 9 x 15 cm.

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