27th Brno Biennial

Append

On the table is a collection of ordinary objects: books, keys, a cup, a wallet, a pen, an empty plastic water bottle. I'll make my point by arranging them into some kind of order. How to sort the objects? By size, color, complexity, or some other material measure? Or according to a functional characteristic; their ability to act as a container; how readily they can be recycled?

As it transpires, even a collection as modest as this resists classification. Consider some elementary experiments. The cup and the bottle have something in common as containers, but measured by weight they are the most different of any pair of objects present. The pen and the book represent forms of writing and reading, but none of the other objects can meaningfully be related in this way. The cup and the wallet are colored a similar pale greyish-brown, but that is hardly the defining quality of either object. Such slippery relations are typical of any random grouping.

How to proceed? Three verbs seem broadly to cover the possibilities: exclude, reconcile, append. Exclusion is the least satisfactory course. I think of these words written by the English designer and educator Norman Potter:

"*For most people, and in most situations, there is no tidy linear sequence leading to an optimal design 'solution'. If this were the case, then all tidy-minded people would be, in principle, gifted designers.*"

It is true that if I removed one or more objects from the table I could simplify the exercise and achieve a more orderly arrangement. But I wouldn't like to meet Potter's disapproval.

Reconciliation I rehearsed at the start. Any of the simplistic arrangements I proposed can serve this function, to gather the objects in a scheme that fits some but not all, forcing the exceptions to conform. To demonstrate, I line the objects up in height order. The result is visually dumb and suggests nothing insightful. This exercise ought to reveal something pertinent about the objects. Otherwise better not to interfere with them at all.

Which leaves appendage. By placing the books, the keys, the cup and the bottle together I can subtly encourage them to speak of openings. This might be the most exemplary, open-ended thought that they can collectively suggest. The wallet and the pen don't belong, so I append them – I slide them over to the other side of the table. Not out of sight, just far enough away to make their not-belonging apparent. This in fact reinforces the arrangement. What I have now doesn't resolve the inconsistencies, it accommodates them. It shows some conviction, and that seems enough to be satisfied with.

James Langdon