Coded Objects: A Material Method

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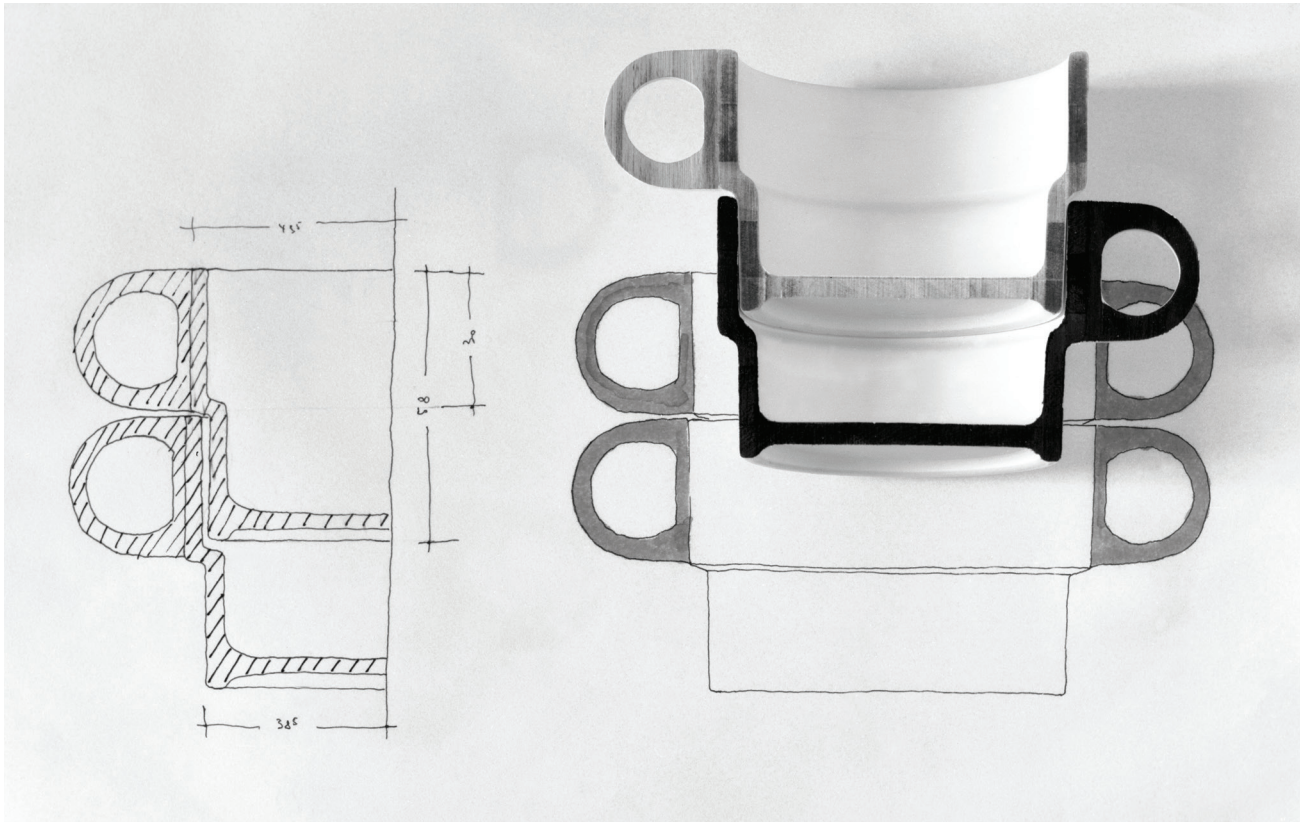Published online: 26 Nov 2024.

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"My framing of coded objects as methods, not categories, aims to carve out discourses of responsibilities, aspirations, and techniques of forming values through aesthetic means."

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The design and distribution of information have become a driver of world politics and the economy. Yet the formal and material implications of "codes" often remain unnoticed or unchecked—as do concurrent shifts of agency and attempts to program society through spatial and formal measures. At the same time, what configures an object can no longer be merely defined through its Enlightenment-framed separation from the (human) subject. Whether something is coded and what that means to our understanding of cod*ing* as practice is at the heart of my current Lise Meitner Research group, Coded Objects, at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz—Max Planck Institute. Given the prevalence of both key terms, it may be helpful to define them for this essay. If we start with objects, I understand them as material, formed things. That means they consist of matter, have been intentionally shaped by someone or something, and are of a scale considered manipulable by humans. For the question of coded-ness, we might ask what it might mean to see it as a material condition as much as the result of a set of parameters and processes—namely, to take it to be a detectable (not necessarily sensorily) trace in said object stemming from either material, formal, or cultural manipulations or contexts. As such, we take "coded objects" not to be an ontological category or quality. Still, as a methodological approach, we do not want to ask whether a given thing *is* or *is not* a coded object, but what is revealed if we look at it *as* the coded object. Moments of becoming, materialization, interaction, or disintegration can reveal embedded coding in a project.

◁   Opening Figure. Diploma thesis project by Nick Roericht at the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) Ulm, 1959. Section drawing and Stackable Dishware Series TC100. (Credit: HfG Archiv, Museum Ulm)

△   Figure 1. Diploma thesis project by Nick Roericht at the HfG Ulm, 1959. Stackable Dishware Series TC100. (Credit: Photo by Wolfgang Siol, HfG Archiv, Museum Ulm)
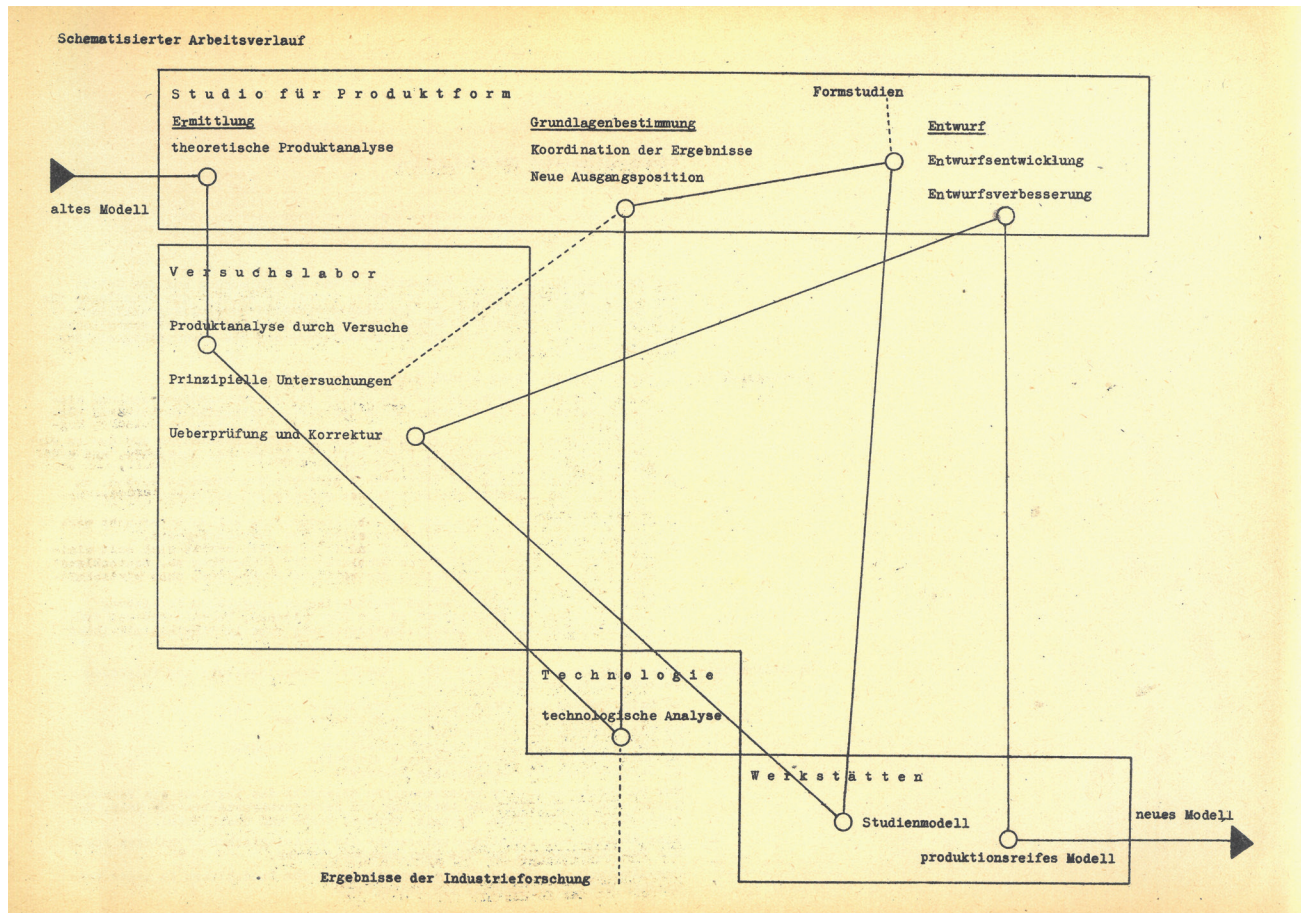
A first step in this search for a processual approach is to look at coding (and the resulting coded-ness) not as abstract technology or remote activity but as the programming of material through design—in short, as part of a process of form-giving. If one looks at the stacked teacups designed by Nick Roericht at the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm in 1959, one might see simple dishware, a staple in German hospitals and canteens ever since (Opening Figure and Figure 1). Design historians might see the TC100 as a foundational product from one of post-WWII Germany's most important design schools.[1] What happens when we see that teacup as a coded object? Then one might look at another object created in the school (or rather, in the wake of its conception), namely a diagram of how everyday products were to move through the different steps of a designed design process, with preconfigured physical feedback loops, to exit the scheme as better designs (Figure 2). Entering the scheme as an "old model" object, like Roericht's teacups were, to exit as an improved "new model" bearing the traces of their process.

Looking at the form of objects not just as genius artwork but rather as deliberately shaped matter will be central for probing into seemingly nonaesthetic processes of the objects that emerge in the focal point of material and data. Taking both "coded" and "objects" not as stable denominators but as questionable epistemic entry points, this multidisciplinary research group attempts to research how things (like teacups, paper sheets, door handles, or window frames) are and were shaped as objects (hence to subjects and subjectivity) and the communities around them. If you will, it might be something like adding "form" as an analytic category to existing approaches. Fields like art history and architecture history have artworks and artifacts at their disciplinary center, and by adding the assumption of formal intent or consequence to other objects, one can add and test methods from different fields. New materialism can help to understand objects as access to communities and practices around them; feminist and queer studies afford objects formerly excluded from canonical constructions, other narratives, or histories; postcolonial studies or anthropology help to identify the reinscription, projection, or appropriation of forms and objects; media studies can assist in tracing aggregational processes and material translations between matter and objecthood (and reverse).[2]

So, counterintuitively, trying to figure out codedness means, first and foremost, to look at objects and at them not as given but as bearing traces. To take the object as a symptom or materialization of coding processes like the teacup and the diagram might be the most obvious approach. And yet objects might emerge from muddled contexts into crisp discreteness in a material, sensorial, epistemological, and ontological negotiation—alas, one with fuzzy edges and cracking seams. Taking this process as a question of figure and ground into three dimensions, the questions of when objects come into being and when they are recognized are central to a materially grounded understanding of code or coding in disciplines that deal with artifacts, such as art history, architecture history, anthropology, history of science or others, as much as for the fields that make them, like engineering, art, or crafts. What throws them into relief? What helps to see, grasp, or make them? By investigating objecthood as a process of formation from (material, cultural, political, or aesthetic) backgrounds and their potential decay or dispersal, one can carve out terms and concepts to describe and discuss objects anew. How they behave, are used, and get culturally coded and reinscribed is the result of exterior, prior processes, and another aspect of coding as a cultural practice.

Concepts like subjectivity and objectivity have long received critical attention, and the categories of their constitutive counterparts—subject and object—are no longer seen as sole agents operating in and on the world. At the same time, understanding the artificial environment goes beyond this dichotomy, understanding that connections and networks exist between humans, objects, matter, and nonhuman beings. The approach I propose here (subject to change, as all attempts) would be a sort of in-between alternative: not quite the dialectical method of thesis and antithesis, definitely not synthetic understanding in the sense of progress or forward movement, but also not a totality of vibrant matter everywhere—and neither a subsequent reenchantment of objects.[3] The object subject entanglement for this purpose might be one like what Maria Puig de la

Figure 2. "Schematized Work Process" in an Information
Brochure Geschwister Scholl Stiftung for the HfG Ulm, ca. 1951.
(Credit: HfG Archiv, Museum Ulm)

Bellacasa describes for her concept of soil, namely where matter, bodies, bacteria, particles, and living beings are in constant touch with one another, transforming one another, but without becoming the same: an intrinsically intermingled compound rather than separable strata—a study of formed objects that might entail makers, materials, processes, spaces to be occupied and negative spaces once occupied, surface and its erosion, traces and imprints, intentions and consequences.[4]

So already one sees that looking at codedness through objects reweaves a series of assumptions about both. Consequently, the idea of codedness as the process of physical inertia bound to friction has its counterpart in the understanding that coding processes are cultural as much as technological. Then, looking again at the diagram, one might read these processes not just as the dawn of the cybernetic ideas that would soon after enter the school, namely a turn away from analog to digital or, even less so, from material to virtual; one might read objects like the teacups and their movement through physical and programmatic space (as I have written about elsewhere) as a physical rehearsal of prescribed, protoalgorithmic processes.[5] When objects are moved through a sort of analog feedback loop, receiving updates, physical alterations, and improvements along their way to becoming the "new model" mentioned above, they are testing steps in a process that would become a cybernetic approach to the entire curriculum and school. They were proxies in the sense of what Dylan Mulvin calls doing the "cultural work of standing in" by going through the motions with all the *stuff* that entails.[6]

By looking at the coded objects surrounding us as a set of human, material, and aesthetic negotiations, I want to focus on the importance of formal intentions (and consequences) in prescribed processes and programs.[7] At the same time, treating it as a material process will consider making objects and giving form as a local and culturally particular practice, be it the deliberate shaping by experts or intelligent solutions for material processes developed by communities. Building on the critical work around "precision," "objectivity," or "technological efficiency," especially its questioning through feminist and queer methods, can build to a study of practices developed by shape-givers together with bureaucrats to create a form (both historically and contemporaneously). Techniques of making will serve not just as tacit knowledge but as skillsets and tools in the operations of (always already) coded objects. Taking the intelligence that resides in a form as a way into a complex set of these negotiations might offer a way in—and out of given disciplinary assumptions.

Offering coded objects as the central refraction lens will question any assumptions of "neutral" technology. Shaping things is often masked by rhetorics of necessity or promise. Still, given the global circulation of images and objects, the embedded design of information, form-giving operations, and the matter of design, these demand closer scrutiny. My framing of coded objects as methods, not categories, aims to carve out discourses of responsibilities, aspirations, and techniques of forming values through aesthetic means.

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Notes

1. For an in-depth school history, see R. Spitz, *Hfg Ulm: The View Behind the Foreground: The Political History of the Ulm School of Design, 1953–1968* (Stuttgart: Edition Axel Menges, 2002).

2. See F. Bray on tuber histories and others.

3. See G. Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. (Chicago: Open Court); T. Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*, New Metaphysics Series (Open Humanities Press, 2013); J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, A John Hope Franklin Center Book (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); and for a critique of the concept see A. Cole, "The Call of Things: A Critique of Object-Oriented Ontologies," *Minnesota Review* 80 (2013): 106–18.

4. M. P. de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*, Posthumanities Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

5. A.-M. Meister, "Processing Models, Modelling Processes for the HfG Ulm ca. 1952," in *Designing the Computational Image, Imagining Computational Design*, ed. D. Cardoso Llach and T. Vardouli (Novato, CA: Oro Editions, 2023), 80–83.

6. D. Mulvin, *Proxies: The Cultural Work of Standing In* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2021).

7. Compare recent work on the cultural implications of coding in the digital realm. See R. Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity, 2020); O. Halpern, *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason since 1945*, Experimental Futures Series (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); and C. D'Ignazio and L. F. Klein, *Data Feminism* (Cambridge, MA; London, UK: The MIT Press, 2020).