One important concern within current design thinking is the growing responsibility of design and, in particular, the call for more emphasis on human(e) values rather than technological ones (Buchanan 2001; D&AD 2001). Within my considerations on design, I have given central importance to the notion of the humane (rather than human) to emphasise moral implications. I use the term humane in the sense of its ‘early use’ where it expresses the “civil, courteous, or obliging [behaviour] towards others” rather than today’s reduced meaning of benevolence (OED 1993). This use implies a respectful and responsible attitude within a status of social equality rather than a social superiority of one side as does the notion of benevolence.

The question of how to translate moral principles into design as raised by Buchanan (2001), leads to the consideration of how in general theoretical concepts can be transferred into and enacted through the practice of design. I propose the concept of the performative object as a possible way of bridging the gap between design thinking and design practice, and of integrating humane values proactively into human life. The performative object may be understood to have a mediating role within social interaction between the users and thus to question social interrelations and beliefs, and to contribute proactively to shaping them as a catalyst for social life. In this way, the performative object may create awareness, understanding, and more responsible (social) action, and hence contribute to enacting the humane dimension.

The starting point of this study arose from my own practice in making drinking vessels. Such objects clearly have a role in mediating social interactions between the persons using them. I developed an interest in the scope of the impact that the object could have on those interactions.

The proposition then of this study is that we can define a class of objects which have certain performative characteristics. In order to investigate and refine the first statement and hypothesis of the performative object and to define its characteristics more clearly, I have explored different concepts from phenomenology (Heidegger 2000; Husserl 1995), sociology (Goffman 1967; Rothenbuhler 1998), and material culture (Miller 1987). These theoretical concepts have subsequently provided a framework for the analysis of existing representative objects.

In the following, I shall first detail and unpack the characteristics as derived in relation to the literature. Subsequently, I shall undertake the analysis of existing representative objects, in order to classify further the performative object and distinguish it from other classes of objects.

The Characteristics of the Performative Object

The main characteristic or aim of the performative object is its mediating role within social interaction between the users. The mediation is understood to take the form of a creative exploration of the self-other-relationship, or objectification. I use the notion of the object and of objectification here in Miller’s understanding of objectification as the “dual process by means of which a subject externalizes itself in a creative act of
differentiation, and in return re-appropriates this externalisation through an act [of] sublation” (Miller 1987: 28). The mediation is achieved as the exploration of the self-other-relationship, because the representation of self within interaction is based upon pride, honour, and dignity as different ways of saving face (Goffman 1967). Goffman (1967: 5) defines face “as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact”.

The effect of this first characteristic of the performative object is to proactively shape interaction interrelations and beliefs. To explore and shape interaction, interaction has to be brought into consciousness. Creating awareness, and in due course understanding and more responsible (social) action – as the second characteristics of the performative object - may be achieved through building up a ‘curve of tension’. The tension-curve progresses through an interruption of (the normal) experience, followed by a stage of questioning, reflection, and creating or re-shaping of interaction. This model follows theories of performance (Schechner 1977) and of creativity (Udall 1996), which at this point seem to converge. They suggest an evocation of reflection and creative action by presenting the person with a situation which contains an unsettling of normative action or thinking.

To achieve this developmental curve of tension within interaction by means of the object, I suggest that a change in function, i.e. in the plan for action (Pearce 1995: 166), may cause this interruption of the normal pattern of action and behaviour and thus evoke reflection. Function, as referring to physical or operational function, is understood to create real action.

With regard to this last characteristic of function, it remains to discuss how to bring in the aspect of the humane that I have proposed. It seems clear that an interruption of experience creates awareness and reflection, but this does not necessarily have to be socially responsible. To achieve this aim, the function would need to be ‘socially thematised’. This means the action created must be clearly socially directed. As a means of realising this, I draw on the concept of ritual for its major importance in the expression of social relations and humane values in human life. My idea is based on the assumption that ritual may be created through the object by means of its function and that this – because ritual is one means of contributing to “humane living together” (Rothenbuhler 1998: x) – may serve to guide the creative exploration. I refer to ritual here in its capacity for structuring human interaction in everyday life as understood by Goffman (1967) and Rothenbuhler (1998), rather than to ritual as a ceremonial expression of religious or spiritual beliefs. My suggestion is based on the observation that object and ritual are closely linked through their performative qualities. The notion of the performative here designates an object or form that effects an action by being used, or by means of which the user performs a particular act. On the one hand, ritual is a form of action with communicative qualities; on the other hand, the object’s function generates action in form of use which, in a social context, may acquire communicative qualities. Through the manipulation of function by design, ritual may become materialised in the object, stimulating the action of the user to the expression of humane values.

In summary, the characteristics of the performative object are that:

- the artefact causes reflection by the users on the nature of the social interaction between users
- this reflection is based upon the function of the artefact
- the reflection causes the user to reshape their perceptions of their interaction both with other persons and with the artefact
- and that this reshaping is aimed at a higher level of consideration and responsible social action, which I have called the humane dimension.
Preparing for the Analysis of Objects

The suggestion of the performative object and the outset of its characteristics in abstract terms raises the question of whether and how the performative object exists in real terms. To approach this question, I undertake an analysis of existing objects. Part of the aim of the analysis is to establish how the performative object differs from other kinds of objects, e.g. a functional object, a ritual, ceremonial, or fetishist object. The need for this distinction arises with the notion of the performative object as linked to ritual. The inquiry is conducted in form of the analysis and comparison of six different drinking vessels. The six examples are a standard water glass, a standard wineglass, a chalice, La Grolla, the ‘Six Social Cups’ and the ‘Breakfast in Fur’ by Meret Oppenheim. They are representative of six different kinds of drinking vessels that I have identified. The examples are discussed within a phenomenological framework, because of the nature of the inquiry, i.e. the philosophical nature of function, which evades a purely semantic or semiotic analysis. The outcome of the analysis points forward to further inquiry, in particular through the practice, which I shall outline in brief in the conclusion. This study is being conducted on drinking vessels but it is conjectured that these principles may generalise to other artefacts that may also be performative.

The investigation of the performative object and its characteristics in ‘real terms’ has to take its focus on function, as the basic constitutive of the performative object. However, the examples will show us that function has its ‘counterpart’ in use. Although function and use are normally assumed to converge, they do not necessarily have to. In particular the investigation into ritual use provide important clarification. The problematic of function–use arises because the reading of function from an object’s form – function as intentionality of the designer – is open to interpretation and willful appropriation as the intentionality of the user within use. And as we shall further see, the interpretation of function is also dependent on the context in which the object is presented.

Establishing the Phenomenological Framework for the Analysis

Because of the intentional and experiential nature of function, use, and meaning, I shall use a phenomenological framework for the analysis of the objects. To develop the framework, I use the text “The Thing” from Heidegger (2000: 157-175), which provides a very short and succinct account of the essential thoughts and understanding of his phenomenological concept in metaphorical form.

The ‘carrier’ for Heidegger’s metaphor and the object of analysis is the jug. Seeking to establish what is nearness in reaction to a time where distance has vanished and yet nearness has not been achieved, he asks for what is near to us. He finds the thing – and as such the jug – to be next to us. Subsequently, he seeks to establish the Wesen (nature, essence) of the thing, which leads him to analyse the thing, i.e. the jug, from different perspectives. Considering the jug under the four perspectives of matter and making, its form in real terms and as representation within consciousness; significantly, Heidegger uncovers the true meaning of the thing as thing foremost out of the experience and perception of its function. In other words he finds the true meaning of the thing, i.e. its world, to result from its generic function as traced within use. In the case of the jug these are the taking/holding/giving of the beverage, which in the jug are synthesised in the giving as gift. However, setting out what is the nature and significance of the gift as found in this specific analysis, Heidegger continues to explain how the gift in general refers to the world of the thing and in this sense is present in any thing in its own way.

I shall now extract the underlying concepts of the text that shall help us to establish the methodological framework for the following analysis.

Implicitly drawing on concepts from Husserl (Husserl 1995; Marx 1987), Heidegger demonstrates the phenomenological principle that the inquired into and sought for can only be discovered through an approach in
the appropriate mode and perspective. Underlying this perspectivalness is another phenomenological principle: that of intentionality, in which consciousness is always directed, is always consciousness of something. It converges with intentionality as principle of function, because function has to be brought into being through action/use, which is always an intentional act.

For the following analysis of examples, I shall then employ a multi-layered description of the three aspects (or: positions) of function; of use and its mode or quality, e.g. ritual; and of context, thereby taking into account the intentionality of the three positions that guides the experience.

**The Analysis of Representative Objects**

The purpose of the analysis is to trace the characteristics of the *performative object* that I have set out above within object examples and to distinguish the *performative object* against other classes of objects. In order to do so, I shall analyse the six selected examples with regard to the characteristics as considered from the perspective of function, use, and context.

I shall start with the object that has initialised my research and which may be regarded as coming closest to my understanding of the *performative object*. Prompted by previous observations of social use of tableware objects, in particular drinking vessels, I developed a set of six silver cups, *Silver for Social Occasions: 6 Cups for Prosecco* (Plate 1). The shape of the cups is that of the cuppa of a champagne glass, yet without the foot. Without the foot, the cups cannot stand on their own. Therefore, they each have a little connector with them that carries two suction pads on each side and by means of which the cups can be connected. At least three cups have to be connected to build a stable unit. In this way, people have to communicate and interact in order to operate and use them. The object thus responds to the three characteristics of the *performative object*: on the level of function, we encounter a change within function which interrupts the normal pattern of action. On the level of use, it requires the user to decide how to work it. This causes questioning, reflection and finally action that becomes socially meaningful, because of the setting within social context, and because of the choice with regard to the action, which creates a symbolic reality that is socially directed.


If we now take a standard water glass (Plate 2): it would probably be cylindrical, of clear glass, and with a firm stand. It is practical-functional and transparent, both visually and with regard to use. Thus it offers little beyond the functionalist dimension. However, its function is so versatile that it can easily be set into different context. Context may refer here to the surrounding or to use, for example as vase or ashtray. Although in exceptional circumstances this ‘inventive use’ may cause reflection and mediate interaction, the form of the action would have been generated entirely by the creative mind of the user.

The wineglass (Plate 3), with its cuppa, stem and foot, shows some cultural significance, but with regard to function nevertheless responds most of all to the practical use-value of providing the drink. Its use however usually is both functional and social through the use of the vessel in drinking rituals. Although the rituals can be seen to mediate interaction, they are neither based on the object as such nor are these rituals reflective. Rather, the object is appropriated by ritual, which in turn is reinstating existing social values.


The chalice (Plate 4), with cuppa, stem, nodus, and foot, features similar characteristics as the wineglass, yet through size and material expresses the heightening of social ritual to ceremonial ritual. Again, the ritual here is prescribed by convention to reconfirm itself. In discussing the ritual object often the fetishist object is brought to mind, which I therefore also want to distinguish from the performative object. The fetishist object is an object which, if it should cause any kind of performative action, would do so by means of the imagination of spiritual powers that are associated with the material. Thus it does not meet the requirements for the performative object.


The next object, I want to introduce, is LaGrolla (Plate 5). It is a traditional drinking vessel from Northern Italy and still in use today. It is commonly used to serve coffee with Grappa, sugar and spices. The body of the vessel is made out of wood and has the form of a shallow ellipsoid. It has a lid and a number of spouts around the body, the number ranging between three and ten spouts. La Grolla is served with the number of spouts according to the number of the diners who pass the vessel round and drink directly from the spouts. The action symbolically links the diners. The question is here to whether this is a ritual or performative object. Here the context might be decisive. Within its traditional context, it might work as a ritual object, reinforcing values rather than causing reflecting, moreover since it seems to offer just one way of use. In a new context however, its functional arrangement might cause reflective use thus questioning interaction and mediating it in a new way.

The reading of the last object is also closely dependent on the context. The Breakfast in Fur (Plate 6) by Meret Oppenheim is a cup that has been fur-coated. Its functional properties have been changed so far that it has lost them and has become a conceptual object. Enhanced by the museum's context, it causes reflection, yet hardly on the mediation of social interaction.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have firstly developed the characteristics of the *performative object* and then investigated a number of representative object examples with regard to these characteristics. The analysis has shown that, with regard to function, there are clear distinctions between the class of the *performative object* and other classes of objects.

However, although function is the motivator, the nature of its impact is also dependent on use, i.e. the intention of the user, and the context. The design object that usually is designed within and for a specific cultural context and a change of context can change the experience of use. Use itself can wilfully subvert the function of an object, but normally we engage at first with an object according to its function. Where ‘inventive use’ occurs, it is usually according to established patterns of use rather than reflective of them and the same is true for ritual.

Ritual in this sense of the *performative object* then becomes a metaphor for the process of objectification, and the *performative object* in its purest form may be understood as a layering of self, other and their relationship from which interaction and reflection evolve as moral space.

**Further work**

Subsequent investigations into the *performative object* will be concerned with the thematising of function with regard to the guidance of the action created towards humane values. This will include: firstly the empirical-experimental exploration of the potential of function through the practice with regard to constituting the *performative object*, i.e. with regard to the interruption of normatised patterns of action. The framework for the analysis of function through the practice is also derived from Heidegger's text. Secondly, to investigate more widely how humane values are or can be thematised through action. And thirdly, how function can be thematised and thus through action evoke humane values.
References
Online Debate. [Online] Available fromURL: <http://www.dandad.org/content/super/index.html>. [accessed 15/01/02].

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY
Kristina Niedderer
69 Killigrew Street
Falmouth
Cornwall
TR11 3PR
Great Britain
Email. kniedderer@hotmail.com

Kristina Niedderer MA(RCA) is a design researcher in the department of research at Falmouth College of Arts, UK.

She is of German nationality, and was originally apprenticed as a gold and silversmith at the Staatliche Zeichenakademie Hanau, and worked as a journeyman for Ulla and Martin Kaufmann, Hildesheim, Germany for a number of years. She then gained a scholarship to study metalwork and silversmithing at the Royal College of Art, London.

Professional experience has included: visiting lecturer in design history, Falmouth College of Arts, UK; visiting lecturer in metalwork, Kent Institute of Art & Design, UK; freelance designer for Paola C., Italy. Principal areas of research interest are: design theory and philosophy (especially on the function of design) investigation into and realisation of design theory through design practice; tableware design.