

Engaging and being engaged. A field report on Béatrice Balcou's Porteurs.

by Klaus Speidel

"People need some way of understanding the product or service—some sign of what it is for, what is happening, and what the alternative actions are. People search for clues, for any sign that might help them cope and understand. It is the sign that is important, anything that might signify meaningful information. Designers need to provide these clues."

(Donald A. Norman)

"You do not need to witness this action in order to imagine it; you do not need to see photos, videos, or drawings of the event in order to more or less visualize what may have happened. This kind of method allows for the free circulation of the product, which is much more effective than any image"

(Francis Alÿs)

We were already well into our meeting when I finally dared to ask her. I had suggested we meet at a traditional Kaffeehaus because after all, she was from France, living in Brussels and would perhaps enjoy it. The first 30 minutes had been spent speaking about, among other things, the consistently bad coffee at most Kaffeehäuser, the series she had decided to include in the exhibition after our online meeting and the relationship of the intention of an artist and the meaning of their work - but all of this wasn't what we were here for. So I finally asked: "Did you bring something?" - "Yes", she replied, and turned to the bag hanging on the side of her chair to pull out an elongated wooden box. The finish of the box was remarkable - and as she carefully removed the layers of protective paper until the object emerged, something shifted: I started to become a little tense. She immediately handed it over, without any excess gesture and much more casually than I had expected. I was first struck by its temperature: It was crystal cold. As I started to examine it, I realized that it contained something that looked like wood splinters. They were small enough to have been enshrined involuntarily, like an insect in amber...

I first read about "affordances" when preparing a class in the history and theory of design I gave for many years at a French design academy. The term has traditionally been used to speak about the "legibility" of objects. According to this, something has "good affordance" if it rapidly tells a user how to use it. A traditional door handle, for instance, makes it clear that you need to push it down to open the door. A door knob we need to turn, on the contrary, gives us little indication about its use. Yet, when the psychologist James Gibson had first introduced the term, it was about possibilities rather than legibility. In this sense, both door knobs are quite similar insofar as they allow us to open the door. Both the possibilities offered by an object and how comprehensible it makes them, are important aspects of design. Yet, beyond their value as decoration, artworks generally afford essentially spiritual experiences. In this respect, the series of "Porteurs" by Béatrice Balcou seems to differ. They have multiple affordances, many of which are not spiritual. Even the fact that they are meant to be held - at least in certain contexts - rather than merely contemplated makes them different from most typical contemporary artworks. And their title calls attention to the contents of the glass objects - or rather to their affordance of being able to contain something.

"These are shards of a Gondola from Venice from the 17th century", she said. "They have been sealed inside. If you wanted to take them out, you would have to destroy the object". Then she showed me how to turn the Porteur to make them disappear. While I had regularly looked at the people around us during the first part of our exchange, I half-consciously avoided looking around since the object had been produced. Retrospectively, I think that I might have felt like we were engaged in something improper. Trying to make sense of this sensation now, I feel that it has something to do with an observation in Robert Musil's Man without Qualities where he writes: "To think without pursuing some practical purpose is surely an improper, furtive occupation..." - something similar seemed to apply to wielding objects without practical purpose - at least in public space. Musil goes on to explain that modern man feels uncomfortable with thoughts that "take wings": "Certain concerns have been taken out of people's hearts. For high-flown thoughts a kind of poultry farm has been set up, called philosophy, theology, or literature, where they proliferate in their own way beyond anyone's ability to keep track of them". It suddenly became clear to me that galleries and museums also were such poultry farms only that it is works without practical application that proliferate there.

Béatrice kept revealing affordances that were not obvious at first sight. Thus, looking in from one side, the contents became larger. Looking from the other: smaller. I myself became obsessed by the object's family resemblances and the relationships it could enter into as a result. The first one I discovered was with the chandelier in the Kaffeehaus. When I held it up to demonstrate my observation to Béatrice, some of the other guests looked at us. I felt like I was now performing. Apparently the object itself had turned me into a performer. During the walk which we took later, I realized a resemblance with the façade of the Leopold Museum in Vienna. There was no audience beyond Béatrice herself. So I took a photo. Some affordances were revealed rather than communicated. Thus, I had not dared to put the glass object down since Béatrice had handed it over to me in the Kaffeehaus, for fear of scratching or worse breaking it. It was only when the artist herself placed it on the marble table that I understood I could have done so myself. After a while - it was now raining lightly - she suggested that we let the object "take some air" to see how it would react to the meteorological conditions.

To a certain degree, Balcou's *Porteurs* could be said to display the "form of purposiveness without purpose" which according to the philosopher Immanuel Kant, is constitutive of beauty. I've always found this definition fascinating in its conciseness and seeming precision. So in which way does this apply to the *Porteurs*? Well, their form is so particular and so well adapted to the human hand that it seems like they must be *for something* - perhaps a ritual purpose, like a scepter or a travel reliquary - yet it is not clear what they are for. Yet, perhaps this is precisely what makes them fascinating: They appear specific enough to not be random, have many different affordances, and yet uniquely suggest none of them more than any other. They are machines for thinking and feeling, companions and conversation pieces, divining rods for the environment and our inner feelings.