

Curation 2 - Ants and Objects

For some time I have had a vague notion that Actor Network Theory (ANT) is something I should know something about, and for this reason I've chosen it over Networks, Control and Affect theory to look at. Perhaps this interest stems from having read about ants (the insects), and the various clever ways they form a intelligent network style superorganism made up of "dumb" largely replaceable part individuals: a sort of swarm intelligence which contrasts so vigorously with the herd thinking which is such a vigorously denounced unforeseen consequence of social media these days.

I have previously tried reading sociological texts on similar theory, and often emerged with the impression of having understood nothing: it seemed like the texts were highly self-referential, and spend their time critiquing ideas rather than offering me much that I could actually do something with, whether as an artist, programmer, concerned citizen or self-aggrandizing egomaniac. Perhaps that's the point: the texts themselves are part of a network of which I am not part.

Nevertheless I have been heartened to find some threads of thinking more tangible. The useful concepts I have so far are:

- a) Apparently ANT theory draws on constructivist ideas, which I roughly understand as the idea knowledge - or the world - consists in relations, and not positivist atoms. I have previous experience of how radically this could change my design work, when given the exercise to produce solutions thinking as a positivist and then as a constructivist. This was probably first time I've become aware that philosophical ideas made real differences in terms of the artefacts produced. So, a reasonable question is to ask how a design problem might be addressed by an ANT-inspired designer as opposed to a something-else-ist one. (Otherwise put, the value of ANT theory should be visible in the kinds of objects it makes more likely)
- b) ANT treats objects and people in essentially the same way: both can have agency. This has interesting consequences. The idea for example that there are certain people who are key nodes in social networks is a familiar one: these are the so-called super-nodes. For example, in groups of friends, there might be people who are pivotal in introducing people to others - and whose absence may be particularly noted when they move away. Given ANT's associations, we might ask the same question of objects: are there key node objects in networks, with which certain networks cease to function? How could we test this? Is an object's keyness a consequence of its context, or of its inherent attributes?
- c) An extension of this idea is that a human agent might look to acquire certain objects rather than others in order to extend their network reach in certain ways. For example, I might buy or make certain items and engage in associated cultural practices in order to extend my friendship network, or to try to become more sexually attractive, or to gain professional advantage, or as a kind of artistic expression, etc.
- d) Another interesting idea is that objects are means of preserving cultural particles across time. Examples might include the objects associated with eating, such as cutlery, or dinner tables.
- e) There's a notion of power being an expression of movement through networks. Inter alia, I think this means that objects that are in use are more powerful than objects that are not: though the nature of this use I think can exist on multiple levels.

Drawing on these themes, I've selected a series of artefacts which I find interesting. Based on these, I hope to produce an intervention whose effects will be seen in a wider network. I am deliberately favouring physical objects as opposed to digital ones, because I enjoy these more, and want to use this as a change to nudge my own networks back towards the local and the physical, because such things make me happy.

Artefact 1: The stone age hand axe.



From the BBC's "a history of the world":

This Neolithic stone axe was found within a prehistoric pit at Clifton (Worcestershire) during an archaeological project in 2006. The axe itself is beautifully made of polished stone and is very smooth and tactile. The axe came from North Wales and would have been traded south, probably along the route of the River Severn. It would have been used to create clearings within the dense prehistoric woodland to provide agricultural land, during a period in British history when people began to significantly alter the environment. The axe was deposited with 5 more axes, numerous flint tools, pottery and a large collection of barley grains and crab apple remains in 2900-2600 BC. It is thought the objects were ritually deposited by a local nomadic community to signify the end to a period of occupation and to guarantee their return.

This description is interesting, because it alludes to the importance of the axe both practically but also in trading networks and in ritualistic activity. In various sites, collections of these have been found in heaps, suggesting that axes were produced ritualistically, in bulk, perhaps for trade, but perhaps also as a means of ingraining the knowledge of how to produce axes: a kind of ritual, perhaps not unlike the rituals of purity (hygiene?) or hunting and sport which many cultures have.

Artefact 2: a public picnic table



During the Creative coding course I studied the occupancy of a public picnic table which is located at the end of my street, in the middle of a small square, which also features a cafe with outside tables. The substandard visualisation I produced from this sought to illustrate the entirely unsurprising relationship between weather and the occupancy of the table: when it rains, fewer people use it.

What is perhaps more interesting is to study the relationships created around the table. It has been present roughly since the Covid-19 pandemic started to affect my country, and has been well used. When I've used it myself, I've been able to make conversations with some of the other inhabitants of the area, and this has increased my sense of belonging to the area. It's also worth noting that the presence of the table in the middle of kerbed square containing trees has to some extent legitimised usage of the area by people: previously it wasn't clear

Another contrast to draw here is with more private table in other locations. The private tables of the cafe opposite are popular too. There are also tables in peoples front and back gardens in the street, but these are much less used. There is a question of public and private ownership here.

Also notable is that some tribes: e.g. skateboarders or cyclists - will use the table, and deposit their vehicles next to it.

Artefact 3: The Portable Pizza Oven



The hearth, fire or oven has long been a focal point in human affairs. In French law, for example, regulation of access to a village's oven was a significant political issue, affecting baronial duties and urban planning. Television has also been understood as a replacement for the fire in more traditional societies, with television replacing the traditional role of story telling (and so cultural transmission).

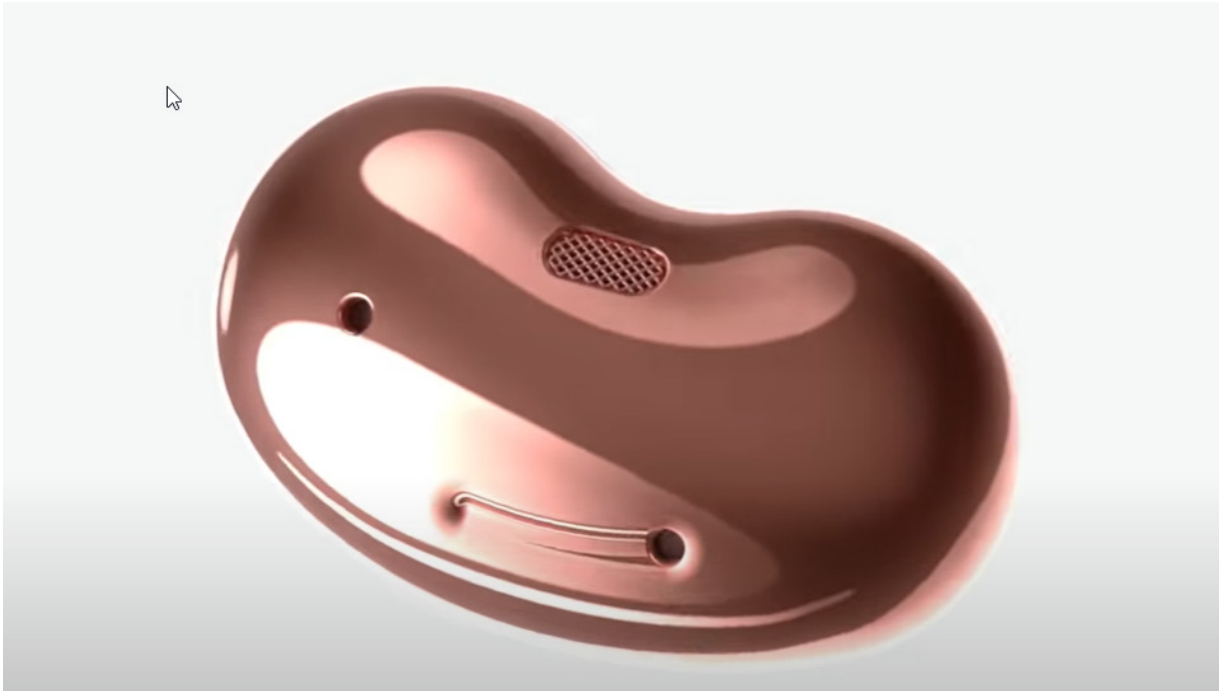
In my own life, I have recently acquired a pizza oven not dissimilar to the above, and since have experimented with its use. At my workplace I made the joke that, at a cost of approximately 250 GBP, it was a better choice of metal box than the 20000 GBP a BMW car might cost. I have subsequently tried to justify this by using it to entertain as many people as I can, more than I could hope to invite to "get out of my dreams / get into my car", as Billy Ocean might have it.

Another explanation for the object is that it's more portable, more effective and more affordable than the stone pizza oven I wanted to build in my back yard at one point. As such it has more power in ANT terms. It should be possible to test this idea!

In terms of ANT theory, we might think of the oven as a device for creating connections, a role long played by both fire and food. It represents a contained return of the flame to interpersonal relations, something much reduced in human experience of late.

<https://uk.ooni.com/products/ooni-fyra>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communal_oven
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNgcYGgtf8M>

Artefact 4: Noise cancelling bluetooth headphones



I recently saw an advert for “Samsung Galaxy Buds Live”, which have the suggestive slogan “Keep the noise out, let the sound in”. This reminded me of the first project I did for this course, where I looked at cybernetics, and questioned the notion that noise is always a negative in human affairs: in short, if noise were bad, we wouldn’t frequent cafes, because cafes are to some extent noisy.

The advert for these headphones suggests that they keep the noise out, and let the sound in. But socially, I often find that noise cancelling headphones are used to keep other people out altogether..... which is perhaps a little contrary to the message of ANT (that objects and people form networks).

Of course, we can easily say that the people we want will still get to us, as in the example on the advert, which includes a friendly voice saying “hey, I’m on my way”. But my own experience of noise cancelling headphones is precisely that they make it harder to communicate with others around us. As a form of social signaling, this has its uses: not least avoiding unwanted attention. But a more general question is why we would want to willfully numb our senses to the outside world systematically. How does this affect the networks we’re involved in? In whose interests do the headphones act?

It may also be interesting to compare this artefact to the bluetooth speaker (or ghettoblaster), which shares its music with people around it.

Artefact 5: Beer adverts



Advertising very often tries to create an association between an object (or product, or brand) and network success. In the example above, from an advert for Australian beer, meeting friends by chance is associated with the beer in question. This is perhaps an expression of the purported network power of the beer, an object, if with think in ANT terms.

Advertising tends to follow money, so we have to assume there's something in this. It's also worth noting that the chance meeting idea is similar to my own experiences of the picnic table object discussed above.

Artefact 6: “Les Invasions Barbares” - abandoned and unsaleable religious icons



Arcand's wonderful 2003 film *Les Invasions Barbares* is concerned with the encounters of an aging group of academic friends with death, and also the lives of their children, in a world where money is increasingly important. At around 54 minutes into the film, there's a scene where a store of abandoned Catholic icons is assessed as having no commercial value by one of these children. The scene I think brilliantly describes how the same object can have radically different value depending on the context of the situation - or time - it is found in. Similar ideas permeate the film in relation to intellectual fashion and convenience.

I've included this as a contrast to the beer advert: a reminder that objects can be powerful and also lose power, depending on our perceptions of them.