

# **A Tunnel Named Value**

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## A Brief Abstract

My work produced for the MA explores the concept of value. In this series, I study how the idea of intention affects our presumptions on an object's value, by theorizing that a better understanding of the maker's intention greatly increases the viewer's appreciation for an object, and, therefore, the perception of value within it. I set out to achieve this goal by producing pieces of cutlery with the express intention of giving the objects little or no practical utility in their assigned function as eating utensils. However, the cutlery conversely displays elements of value from within their material choices, the skill, time and quality put into their creation, the 'one of a kind' nature of the objects, as well as reinforcing the idea of value within the work by placing these objects into an art context. The viewer is then tasked with eating a meal using these essentially valuable tools *without* the knowledge that the work is specifically made to function poorly. The reaction the viewer has to the work without prior knowledge of this contradictory intention is often one of frustration, even though they're holding a valuable object. Once the intention behind these objects is explained, the viewer is able to more accurately assess and hence appreciate the value of the work itself.

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## Introduction

In this MA, I explored the concepts of value and meaning by investigating how the two seemingly separate notions are entwined within object analysis in Western culture. I focused primarily on traversing the realm of value, in an attempt to better understand how viewers might perceive and accurately assess the value of an object. I did this via my hand-crafted works, specifically by looking at how a more informed understanding of the maker's intention affects the value judgement of an object that does not hold any prior sentimental value to the viewer.

This paper discusses and reflects on that journey, by first delving into the conceptual fragments and theories of value behind the work, in which I chiefly identify potential sites of value within an object, and observe how these sites are effectively negotiated and decoded by the viewer using semiotics as a framework. In the second chapter, I consider how the identified sites of value might be applied to my objects during the making process. In the final chapter, I reflect on my produced outcomes and how the work's context — including how the work is displayed — affects the audience's ability to interact with and decode the intention (or meaning) behind the work, ultimately affecting their judgement and understanding of its value.

## Chapter One: Familiar Ground with Uncertain Footing

I am predominately a conceptual artist. I have an idea first, and then look for the best way to communicate said idea through my made objects. Recently, I have used the topography of domestic hand tools as a communication vehicle for exploring ideas on the concept of value.

It could be argued that the primary value of a domestic hand tool, for example a piece of cutlery, is its utility. When you take said utility away from a tool, people automatically begin re-assessing the value of the object. This happens because, even when you drastically change the form of the tool, as long as there are recognizable signifiers of its past life, the previous utility or value of the piece is still *represented* within it; the previous language, imagery and cultural meanings associated with the tool are still able to be signified and negotiated by the viewer while they assess the new meaning(s) and/or value(s) being represented within it (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001). During the MA, I used hand tools to represent and communicate my ideas on certain aspects of value. To do this, I had to identify the sites of value I wanted to discuss.

First I would like to set up the framework for how the value and meaning of an object can be decoded by the audience via the use of postmodern semiotics. At its most basic level, semiotics is the study of signifiers (the material form of a thing) and signifieds (what is contained within the mental concept of said material form) to identify signs i.e. something that conveys meaning within the work (Barthes, 1977). In “image, music text” the semiotician Roland Barthes suggests that a person’s reading of any given work depends on certain aspects, some of which he calls “practical, national, cultural and aesthetic” (Barthes, 1977). All these elements of a reading come together to form what he calls the “language” (Barthes, 1977) of an image; with this language consisting of the “totality of utterances received (referring to cultural, aesthetic etc)” (Barthes, 1977). Simply put, the meaning and value of any object or image can be negotiated and decoded by the viewer via the identification of signs, or the “language” (Barthes, 1977), within the work, consciously or otherwise.

If there is no observable linguistic message to guide the reading of a sign, or if the denoted (literal) signs within the work are paradoxical i.e. at odds with the maker’s intention, or if the audience has no knowledge of the maker’s intention prior to viewing the work, then the viewer is left solely with a second level of meaning, termed “connotative”, in which they rely on information obtained from their cultural background to help them decode the sign. This leads to varying degrees of interpretation to any given sign, based on an individual’s access to specific pieces of cultural information (Barthes, 1977). Depending on the accuracy in which the intended signs of the work are decoded by the audience, the viewer then encodes the work with their own interoperated meanings based on personal subjective experiences, which are in turn guided by the individual’s connotative knowledge, or experience, of the same work.

Subjective and connotative experiences are, I would argue, remarkably similar. The Oxford English Dictionary defines subjectivity as: “[something] based on or influenced by personal feelings, tastes, or opinions rather than fact” (Oxford, 2018). Now, a person can bring a connotative, signed message to a piece, or read a connotation within it, that might actually have the *potential* to be universal to a specific culture; every individual might share the same knowledge of that specific piece of cultural information whether they encode it into/decode it

from the work or not, as connotative meaning is also polysemic (we will define polysemy shortly). However, a person's individual "feelings" and "taste" about that connotation may vary. For example, multiple people who share certain cultural insights can all view the same work in the same context and agree that the work had a particular connotated message that only they, as a specific cultural group, received. And yet the individuals might still have entirely different experiences of the same thing, depending on how said connotation is interoperated by them and by what they are "feeling" towards those connotations at the time. The signs being displayed by the work might be the same each time but the reading of each sign may vary – the experience of the work is subjective.

All the sites of value that I have chosen to include in the work can be decoded by the viewer via the use of signifiers and signifieds to imply a certain sense of value and status about the made objects. I will talk in more detail about what the specific signifiers within the work are in chapter two. In the meantime, let us discuss how one might assess the value of an object.

Often value is observable in and decoded directly from an object; the signifiers of value are attached to objects whose status people have reached a consensus on. These are the primary values of the work (Verhoevan, 2007). Primary value(s) can be observed in an object's material, in the processes of its creation, in the workmanship of the piece and in the traditions surrounding the work's creation. These primary values are predominately negotiated on first sight via visual analysis (they are observable directly within the object itself) and, depending on the denoted and connoted meanings of said values, inform the decoding of the work's secondary values (Verhoevan, 2007).

Secondary values of an object are often more open to interpretation: they are what semioticians call "polysemic" in that "the meanings of each image (sign) are multiple; they are created each time it is viewed" (Struken and Cartwright, 2001). Secondary values often include the uniqueness of the work, the authenticity of the piece, the meanings (intended or otherwise) behind the work itself, and the affective value the viewer undergoes while observing the object (Verhoevan, 2007). Each of these secondary values may change with every new viewing of the work, while a primary value like the workmanship of the piece does not. *Your opinion* of the workmanship may change with multiple viewings, but actual physical qualities will only change over long periods of time; the signified, denoted value of which is more stable. Both these primary and secondary values combine (within Art and Craft), allowing the value of a work to be assessed and decoded on "economic-political, creative-technical and human-social levels" (Nledderer, Townsend, 2011).

I chose to focus primarily on displaying sources of primary value within my work. I very much liked the idea of "shaping and embellishing everyday ordinary reality so that it becomes extraordinary" (Dissanayake, 1982): to add power to the inferior. I would transform mundane pieces of cutlery into valuable works of Art. However, I also wanted to highlight the idea that all sources of value are open to a degree of interpretation, that even denoted, literal signs of value within a work could be polysemic to an individual. Every experience of a work is entirely subjective – the viewer may see something that contains a large amount of perceivable signified primary value and still not value it; the meaning behind the value could be undermined.

As discussed, the value of basic hand tools is, more often than not, associated with their practical utility. Experimenting with a tool's assigned function while having it display elements of primary value seemed a good way to assess how much subjective experience affected value judgement. If I made my tools function poorly in their assigned practical utility, would people still value them even if, for all intents and purposes, the object they held was indeed valuable?

What I propose then is that knowledge of a work's intention is significant when attempting to decode meaning and/or value that might otherwise be polysemic within a piece in terms of guiding an individual's subjective experience. That said, however valuable the maker's intended meaning is in decoding meaning in dialogue, it is only part of the way in which we understand and decode meaning. Certainly, without the guidance of intention, meaning is still derived and decoded, even in instances where the maker has no intention of creating meaning and simply creates for the sake of it. However, in work where the maker encodes an intended signed meaning and value, then knowledge of this intention prior to viewing the work certainly informs value assessment; in other words "Understanding the value of something is not primarily a matter of knowing how valuable it is, but a matter of knowing how to value it, and for what reasons" (Van Willigenburg, 2004). A strong case for this being true is made in the article "*How People's Appreciation of Products Is Affected by Their Knowledge of the Designer's Intentions*," in which the authors state "intention knowledge affects appreciation of a product by enabling either an evaluation of the intention or an evaluation of the product as a means to achieve the intention." (Da Silva et al, 2015). If I could take away intention's ability to act as anchorage for value assessment, then perhaps I could gain more accurate results in working out how subjective an object's value really was. In short, I wouldn't tell people that my valuable cutlery was intentionally made to function poorly, and would then observe their reactions as they assess and try to use my work as they would regular cutlery.

To signify to the audience that my work was valuable, I needed to make sure that my objects were well-made, and that they denoted a certain degree of skill in their production. In *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* David Pye eloquently identifies craftsmanship as follows: "... simply workmanship using any kind of technique or apparatus, in which the quality of the result is not predetermined, but depends on the judgement, dexterity and care which the maker exercises as he works. The essential idea is that the quality of the result is continually at risk during the process of making" (Adamson ed. 2010). Pye goes on to define this craftsmanship as "the workmanship of risk. The risk in these pieces would come from the thinness of the forms, which juxtaposes signs culturally associated with steel i.e. hardness and strength. Instead, the thinness is intended to signify to the viewer an air of preciousness, that delicacy is required for these objects to perform as eating utensils. In terms of their structural integrity too, forging pieces so thin means that they can be easily bent or damaged, even post production. Essentially, care is required when using these pieces: not often a concept associated with steel.

In terms of value within production, the work would be made by hand using only traditional forging techniques; the forging process itself would be stripped back to its most basic and historic form. Each piece would be created using primarily hand, hammer, anvil and fire – the four basic ingredients in forging processes since the smelting of iron was first discovered c1,500 BC (oldfieldforge, 2017). The blacksmithing process itself, especially when stripped completely back, denotes a sense of time and effort in that it is a physically demanding profession which requires access to specialist equipment to complete even small tasks. The word "smith" in

British culture literally means “to strike”, i.e. the exertion of *effort*. To sufficiently forge objects you must continuously strike, or exert effort, over long periods of *time*. You do not simply strike the metal once and have the object form, it is made over time via the continued control of risk. (The blacksmithing community is well aware of how much time and effort it takes to make forged objects, so much so that they repeatedly strive to find methods of increasing the effectiveness and speed with which they forge; forging purely by hand in most cases being too cost-ineffective for them to price their work competitively.) As these signs are contained within the stereotypical Western concept of blacksmithing, a certain aspect of value (one which is commonly associated with all hand-crafted objects) can be safely assumed to be placed upon the work by the viewer, via simple visual analysis of the hand-forged object. This sense of value would be further reinforced due to the nature of hand-crafted objects: each piece of cutlery would be individual, one of a kind, and yet would need to be readable in context with one another if they were to operate like a standard set of cutlery.

Finally, in terms of the material choice for the cutlery, I felt stainless steel alone would not readily signify sufficient material worth to the viewer. After all, the material culture of stainless steel in the West is often one associated with domestic appliances: it is common, it lacks the value (monetary or otherwise) implied by rarer, less functional materials and, very generally speaking, only signifies value to the layman who has some sort of sentimental value attached to the material. That said, my cutlery would need to contain at least some recognizable element of stainless within it if the concepts signed by and associated with standard cutlery were to be readily represented within the work (Struken and Cartwright, 2001).

I decided on a combination of materials. My work would contain literal elements of original pieces of cutlery within their form, while the practical utility of the work would be assigned to the more valuable material of silicon bronze (in terms of the monetary value alone, using bronze would increase the production cost of the work significantly). The tines of the fork would be bronze, the handle stainless steel.

This is not to suggest that the work would contain no secondary values. As mentioned previously, the primary values of a work help to inform the viewer's reading of any secondary values within the work that can be decoded/negotiated. I needed to produce work that appeared to be valuable in order to effectively analyze people's experiences of said value, and to explore the role of intention in value-assessment. This is a conceptual piece of work – part of its value comes from its ability to function in the realm of meaning encoding and decoding, in the realm of communication. This work makes a hypothesis and much like any hypothesis, it needs to be tested. In other words, it is open to *change* and interpretation like any negotiated secondary value would be; it is not simply about producing valuable objects for the sake of it.

This chapter has reviewed the conceptual backbone of the work i.e. its meaning, which is undoubtedly a secondary value in itself! Indeed, primary and secondary values can never be wholly separated; the inclusion of any primary value within a piece informing a perceived secondary value due to the signed meanings within said primary value (that might be connotated or otherwise). From a semiotic viewpoint, the audience is situated within the cyclical world of meaning-creation – as much as information is decoded from the object itself, it is also encoded into it by the viewer.











## Chapter Two: Process; the Creation of Value

I began the process of value-creation by finding and working with the cheapest pieces of stainless-steel cutlery I could find. This showed that sites of primary value could be polysemic; the actual, physical material value of the cutlery would not change with the forging process, only people's perceptions of it would. The forging process itself would reshape the form of the cutlery to imply that "workmanship of risk". This would undoubtedly affect the perception of value within the work via the signed values of skill i.e. risk control, time and effort, but again, the stainless-steel material within the piece would remain unchanged. The grain structure of the work would also change, but, to emphasize the point, the material would still function as you would expect.

When regarding the work's stainless sections alone, there is no difference between the material values of my pieces compared to any piece of standard stainless cutlery. However, through a knowing and considered interaction, the status of the cutlery is elevated from functional object into meaningful Art piece – the way in which we assess the values of objects with practical utility, and objects that contain the "innate formal qualities" (Perry, 2014) required to be Art being very different. In Art, the viewer often finds themselves visually decoding the primary/secondary values and meanings of an object, in functional objects, as I have previously mentioned, value is assessed on how efficiently said object performs its practical utility. If a hammer is very effective at hitting, and fits your hand comfortably, then one might say it is valuable; you do not necessarily analyze the value of a common hammer by attempting to decode its secondary values. With that in mind, simply by using the material of stainless within an Art context, the signified values of the material change even though the monetary value of the material itself has not. People look to the material choice as a source of meaning to derive value, and in this case they would be correct.

In addition, the pieces had to maintain some semblance of practical utility as hand tools, while functioning terribly in their assigned role as eating utensils. Altering the form of the cutlery via the hand-forging process acted as sufficient means of achieving this; this is also where the primary value(s) associated with workmanship and process are most evident in terms of the work's signifiers. So certain information corresponding to the cutlery's prior value of practical utility are retained and represented within the work. For example, even though many pieces are thin, curved and balanced to fight frustratingly against the hand, the fact that the fork retains tines denotes the cutlery's previous existence, even though those tines no longer facilitate the eating of a meal. There is evidence of a process of considered change here, in that the work is recognizably cutlery and yet also recognizable as a work of Art, in turn enabling it to be valued as such. Observing the workmanship and process of change applied to the cutlery aids in this readjustment of the cutlery's primary values.

In instances where the form of the cutlery was altered to the point that it lacked certain signifiers associated with "toolness" and practical utility, specific details associated with Western iterations of cutlery were kept in place. In many of the pieces, etched and patterned sections traditionally found in cutlery were maintained along the handles. The level of detail and workmanship in the patterned sections were traditionally used to denote status: the more intricately detailed, the higher the status and value of the object. Again, this was traditionally associated with the level of time and workmanship required to produce such detail. However, in today's world, the machine has removed the risk or skill involved in highly detailing cutlery; such

pieces are easily mass produced. As such, the patterned sectors of my work are contained in small zones, emphasizing the larger areas of the work that have been produced by hand and involve higher levels of workmanship.

In some of the pieces, the cutlery is also polished to a high sheen to imply a sense of exaggerated material and aesthetic worth, while in other sets, the cutlery is left with a black forge-finish to denote elements of value within the forging process. In both instances the finishes are used to change the signified values of stainless from standard commodity to a higher-status object via simple visual analysis: why would someone spend *time* polishing an object to such a degree if it was not worth polishing in the first place? This again suggests that material value can be polysemic. When polishing the work, it was important to leave certain details within the cutlery that would denote its hand-crafted nature. Little highlighted divots left by the hammer were purposely included, to signify the values associated with a hand-crafted object to the viewer. These are a little harder to observe in the black forge-finished pieces; but here the nature of their creation is implied by the finish itself.

The material silicon bronze was included within the work to signify genuine monetary (material) worth, the status of this material being less open to interpretation. These sections of the work are also highly polished, but the overall finish is much neater and mark-free: the signifier and associated values of hand-forging not needing to be denoted via mark-making as it was evident the bronze was forged from scratch. The bronze sections deconstruct cutlery into its simplest form, containing only vital pieces of information that allow these areas to be representative of the original pieces of cutlery. For example, a fork holds a bronze “fork” with prongs at its peak, a knife a bronze “knife” with serrations along its edge etc. In terms of its monetary worth, using literally the most valuable section of the work as the functioning, utilitarian part helps to reinforce this element of care and preciousness in use, signified by the forms’ handheld uncomfortableness.

These decisions combine to make each piece of cutlery entirely unique, and yet able to be read in context with one another — as they have certain agreed-upon features when read as a set. However, analyze a single piece of cutlery at a time and its uniqueness stands out. An aspect of value is implied here with the work’s one-of-a-kind nature; essentially the objects act to signify status based luxury (Heine, 2012) via the combination and/or change of the aforementioned primary values, in turn informing the work’s secondary values in the culmination of uniqueness. The lecturer Klaus Heine defines luxury as: “products [that] have more than necessary and ordinary characteristics compared to other products of their category, which include their relatively high level of price, quality, aesthetics, rarity, extraordinariness, and symbolic meaning.” Certainly, the characteristics of these pieces are exaggerated and embellished within the forging process when compared to standard cutlery. However, I’d like to point out that the concept of Luxury is extremely broad and notoriously difficult to define. The production of Art and the associated value(s) of Art can be contained as a section within the Western concept of Luxury but does not wholly define it – the status implied by Art objects and contexts often being synonymous with the status implied by luxury counterparts. Even though the work might act to signify the elements of luxury as defined by Heine it does not intend to focus on this; to explore said concept sufficiently, one might have to undertake another MA entirely.

## Chapter Three: The Influence of Context

To begin with, we must briefly look at how context affects an object's ability to effectively communicate. An Art object can be created almost anywhere, but when placed into an intended (Art) context, reinforces (or reduces) its ability to communicate effectively through semiotics. Duchamp's *Fountain* is the perfect example. Take this out of its intended Art context and it loses its ability to create the skilled communication through interpretation (semiotics) it requires to function as an artwork; it reverts to its original state as a urinal. "The philosopher George Dickie said, an artwork is 'a candidate for contemplation,'" (Perry, 2014) and certainly *Fountain* cannot be contemplated as such if we remove it from the gallery and place it into an urinal's more familiar context. The gallery acts as an enabler for contemplation.

As I was producing cutlery, there was one obvious context in which to put the work outside of an Art one. The place setting. Due to Western understandings of the place-setting context, I could really push the forms of the pieces themselves. If the "knife" was on the right, the "fork" on the left, with a plate in between, then potentially I could reduce the amount of denoted signifiers of cutlery within the physical objects themselves. This context would also help to emphasize the intended practical utility of the cutlery. Outside of its intended context, even though my work does indeed have recognizable elements of cutlery represented within it, they are so far removed from obvious, effective functional use that they may be deemed solely objects for visual contemplation rather than objects of physical interaction; their intended practical use and therefore their theory on value assessment being abolished with the loss of their corresponding cultural context. I would have to display my work as if it was genuine cutlery, and in the setting you would expect to find genuine pieces of cutlery within a gallery.

However, placing this context within a wider Art context i.e. the gallery, would reduce the place setting's ability to communicate my intended concepts effectively; the audience may contemplate the entire setting, rather than focusing on using the cutlery within that setting. To combat this, I produced a film in which members of the public used my cutlery to eat a meal without the knowledge that the work was intentionally produced to function poorly, then asked whether they thought the objects were valuable or not. This all took place within the work's intended setting: inside the gallery, sat at the place setting. This film was then projection mapped over one of the place settings inside the gallery, in direct reference to the people who used the cutlery themselves, in order to help guide the audience's interaction with the work.

During the filming, the audience was first presented with the cutlery without the context of a plate to inform their understanding in order to assess their initial reactions to the work. All the participants were able to recognize the objects as cutlery even without the context of the plate. A plate of food was then presented to them and their reactions to the work certainly changed as they assessed how best to carry out the intended practical utility of the pieces. Half way through the meal I explained the intention of my work, and an option to swap my cutlery out for standard cutlery was given to the participants. Every one of them chose to accept the offer of replacing my cutlery with the standard variants; as works of art my objects were appreciated, but as eating utensils the selected candidates were certainly frustrated by them, with some voicing so. The value and appreciation for the standard cutlery appeared to be judged above its usual station in this context while the intended frustration to my works practical utility was playfully accepted post the explanation of my intention. Either way, a judgement on the value of

the work had then been subjectively made regardless of any denotations of primary value within the work itself, suggesting that the value of objects to individuals is highly subjective.

What we are observing then is that knowledge of and/or denoted messages of a work's intended context lock down fields of meaning that would otherwise be polysemic, and often based on the viewers connotated understanding of said context. As Howard Rissatti points out in *"A Theory of Craft, function and aesthetic expression"*, "in all visual art the very possibility of meaning itself (and in this case value) is dependent upon knowing and understanding the conceptual ground upon which the formal object rests" (2007).



## Conclusion

The judgement of any objects value can be a difficult thing to negotiate. Essentially, the given value of any object is a social construct which is influenced by whatever predominant culture you might find yourself situated in (connotative understanding). The nature of an objects value, to the individual, is often defined by their subjective "feelings" towards said value and its connoted meanings at any given time. Even the perception of an objects physical, socially recognized and agreed upon primary values can be heavily influenced based on the context of the work and the manipulation of perceived signifiers of value; the meanings associated with said values becoming polysemic. In such instances, an understanding of a works intention can help the viewer traverse an objects semantic fields in terms of accurately assessing said objects value(s) as I have suggested with my own produced outcomes.





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