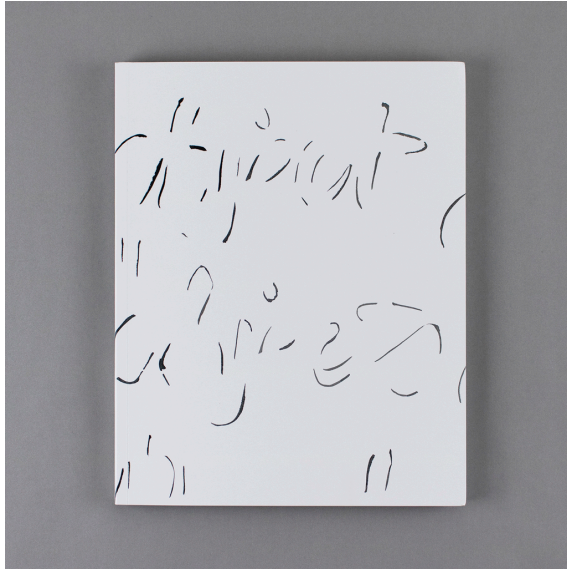


## Object Objects

Artists Book Reviews (<https://artistsbookreviews.com/2021/05/27/object-objects/>)

by Eric Morris-Pusey, May 27, 2021



“I can’t un-know the impact of these massive systems,” interdisciplinary visual artist Shana Kaplow writes on the front flap of *Object Objects*, referring to the underpinnings of capital and exploitative labor that gird our consumerist economy. “How do we extricate from them?” Her final words, on the back flap, provide a possible answer: “It’s Sisyphean—it’s hopeless, but I don’t want to give up.”

Between the covers, Kaplow grapples with further questions posed by the consumerism and mass production associated with global retailers like IKEA: what is the end user’s responsibility for the way in which these everyday objects are produced (and its impact on human lives and the environment)? How and why do we attach meaning to individual mass-produced pieces? She poses and attempts to answer these questions in a variety of forms, often massive ink paintings that dominate entire walls of a gallery or sculptures utilizing a variety of found objects.

Despite its global scope, the experience of reading *Object Objects* is an intimate one. The book blends the artist’s creative process with her finished works. Rather than attempting to replicate the feeling of attending an exhibition, the book puts us in Kaplow’s studio and, to a certain extent, in her head. It achieves this by showcasing Kaplow’s finished installations alongside sketches, notes, and works in progress, along with an essay on her work by New Orleans writer Veronica Kavass entitled “Windows above a Luncheonette” and a conversation between the artist and Sarah Petersen.



The notes, sketches, and contextual writings realize the conceptual side of the artist's practice, while the photographs of works in process remind us of the physicality of that practice. Many of the notes are printed in Kaplow's handwriting on transparent vellum pages so they overlay the work itself instead of appearing alongside it, inviting readers to experience her creative process beside her and enhancing the feeling of closeness to the work.

We witness the evolution of Kaplow's piece *Expansion of Influence* in a series of pages near the beginning of the book: we first see a precarious pile of monobloc chairs in Kaplow's studio, then an elaborate hand-sketched diagram, and finally the completed installation, in which the artist renders the negative spaces in this stack of chairs in 38 ink-on-paper cutouts spread across a 15 × 9 foot wall. A similar pattern is repeated for several other works throughout the text, giving us a sense of what each piece looked like as it changed from a loose idea to a model or diagram to a finished and exhibited piece.

The sense of being alongside Kaplow throughout her process not only makes the work more accessible and sheds light on one artist's experience of the creative act, but also neatly intersects with the concerns of her work. Kaplow's art asks audiences to engage with the mass-produced in much the same way that we engage with art objects: with greater curiosity regarding both the production and the possible meanings of the object in question. Her choice to share the process of creating her own work in such detail encourages us to consider the similar labor involved in the production of the everyday.

The transparent vellum pages throughout the book contribute to this feeling, providing alternate ways to look at finished pieces and demonstrating both Kaplow's thought and labor processes more directly even than the images and main text. Overlaying an installation of images on white canvases (which are themselves mounted on a white gallery wall) with notes

on “the unconscious habits of racial privilege” and poetic lines considering color and transformation in the artist’s own hand demonstrate how research and concepts become works of art, mirroring the ways in which economic theories and furniture designs become physical objects and transactional relations.

Each piece powerfully conveys weight and physical presence, reflecting both the body and domestic spaces, but reimagined in new and often unsettling configurations. One common motif, a seemingly-impossible arrangement of chairs precariously balanced atop one another, speaks to both the fragility and complexity of the systems the artist interrogates.



The chairs’ chaotic arrangement suggests entropy and unsustainability, and also reveals some of Kaplow’s inspiration and personal history: as the child of a physicist, she is interested in revealing the potential energy of objects. She often arranges the chairs in a form that feels like a wave cresting, frozen in the moment just before it breaks. The fact they don’t immediately topple is remarkable, the understanding that they eventually will, ever-present.

In other works, the artist depicts these everyday objects from angles at which we’re not used to seeing them, providing a sharp counterpoint to their clean lines and seeming solidity. A detail from her archival print *Other Things* focuses on the dirty, damaged underside of a white IKEA chair. The rough texture of the unfinished wood beneath the seat, the visible glue holding the product together, and a missing screw rendering one of the chair’s brackets useless all draw the viewer’s attention. The small but prominent black and white label, “Made in Thailand,” invites audiences to imagine the life of the maker or makers and the systems of manufacture and transportation that led to the chair’s presence in a St. Paul studio or Minneapolis gallery; a meaningless-to-most collection of numbers and letters alongside the familiar IKEA logo hint at the intricacy, inhumanity, and ubiquity of those systems.

In conversation with Petersen, Kaplow discusses a factory worker who inserted a note into the pocket of a pair of jeans in hope of reaching their future owner; the same incident is recounted again in an excerpt from “Windows above a Luncheonette.” This small moment is framed in two ways: as a single, poignant reminder of shared humanity and as a “wailing,” a cry for recognition and against the brutality underlying globalized consumer capitalism. *Object Objects* reckons with the same duality with its juxtapositions of beauty and discomfort, permanence and fragility, creativity and futility. This complexity, rendered completely and intimately in both text and image, haunts the reader. As Kavass writes of a “knockoff modernist chair” in “Windows above a Luncheonette,”

*The object becomes a representation of mourning, heartbreak, opportunity, depression, communication, illness, success, revelation. One person asks if he can sit in the chair. Some eyes go wide. Is the chair alive in some way? Or sacred?*

This book distills Kaplow’s thought and creative output into a single object in much the same way that Kaplow shows us seemingly mundane objects hold so much: the dreams and fears of both an individual and the larger world, arranged in complex layers that are deeply rewarding to explore.

*Object Objects* by Shana Kaplow  
Designed by Matthew Rezac  
Smyth-sewn softcover with French flaps

2019  
112 pages  
10.625 × 8.375 in. closed

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