

Trees are machines. Some might be tempted to think of a tree as an object, made of wood, planted in the ground, covered in bark—but it's not. It's a machine, which, depending on light, weather, and many other contingencies, has the ability to produce transformations of various (but limited) types. It can grow leaves. Its trunk can bend towards the sun. It can lose leaves. It can generate oxygen. But it can't turn into a turkey.

The philosopher Levi Bryant doesn't think too highly of *objects*. In his opinion, the notion of the object has too many short-comings and drawbacks—most prominently, it tends to divide the world into subjects and objects.

Building on Deleuze & Guattari's notion of *difference engines*, Bryant's way of talking about objects is to talk about *machines*. A machine is defined by the operations it is capable of performing—by what it *does*, not by what it *has*. To understand a machine is to understand the operations it makes, the inputs upon which it draws, the transformations it performs, and the outputs it produces as a consequences of those transformations. Machines don't express and they don't represent—they produce.

All machines — whether it's a hair dryer, a deer, an atom, or a tree — have powers. They are capable of executing certain operations. Inspired by the metaphysician George Molnar, Bryant characterizes these powers in different ways, but also emphasizes that while a machine's power can be manifested by an outcome, it can also remain unmanifested. For example, matches have the power to burn, but don't need to manifest or exercise this power in order to possess it. Bryant always gives good examples. Here is another particularly good one:

When water is black at night, it really is black. It is not that the water really is blue and we can't see this because of the absence of light, but rather that those operations that produce blue as an effect are not taking place, because wavelengths of light that bounce off the water producing the color blue are not occurring. (Bryant).

Coupled machines, like coupled objects, learn from each other and effect each other. They can gain and lose powers as a result of their own operations, just as they can gain and lose powers via encounters with other machines. The question is not whether the water is blue or black, but how the operations performed by the water-, light-, atmosphere-, and eye-machines manifest themselves.

Haim Steinbach wasn't born an artist, but became that type of machine. Something similar could be said of the objects on his shelves.

Levi Bryant presents an expanded version of his lecture *Difference Engines* on November 14th, 2012.