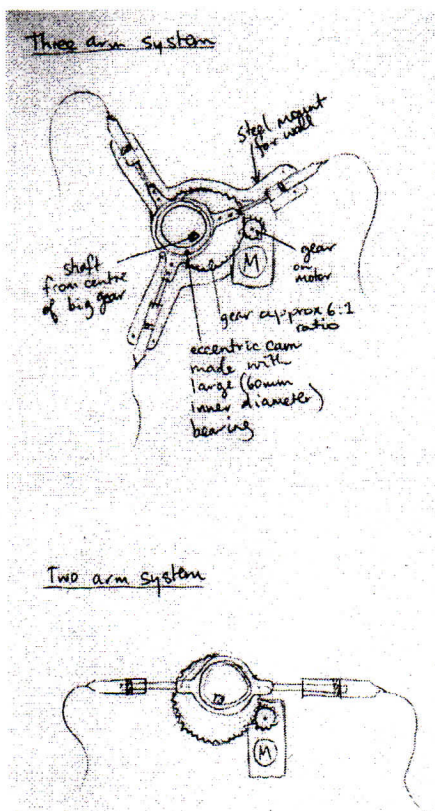


## The lives of things

What is it to see signs of life in the non-living? How do we explain the experience of sensing something ineffably life-like in a thing that is not alive?

To sharpen one's focus on the life of things is to begin to unravel a complex layering of lives.



To begin this unravelling; the first layering of life in things is more like a coating, a varnish. What we often see first in the things around us is the power that we as humans hold over these things. This is the power of humans to use things, to change things, and ultimately reconceptualise things as tools, to help us eat, to work and to play. The evolutionary progression of modern humankind has been a product of our utilisation of things: from the factory machine, to the car, to the computer. When we see things, machines especially, we firstly see this history. Projected onto things is humankind's historical life – the life of humanity as bent and shaped by the use of things.<sup>1</sup>

The second layering, closely related to the first, is the layer of the thing as a life-generating machine. This layer dwells in the gritty materiality of the thing, in its surface, its texture and thickness. It is the dead matter of the thing that allows us to characterise ourselves as alive. We see ourselves in a world of objects from which we stand aloof as more-than-objects, as not-objects. When we look at a thing we look as though into a mirror – the living as the product of the non-living. This is the thing as an anthropological machine.<sup>2</sup>

But finally, and if we look carefully, we can sometimes see that there is always a form of life *in*

*the thing itself*. This is the life that is hardest to explain. It is the life that appears to shake and shimmer in the thing, that communicates itself through a subtle movement or a faltering gesture of the thing – a movement or gesture that seems to pulse with something that reminds us of, but is not, human life. This is the real, and poetic, life of the thing. Perhaps what we are seeing at this moment is a visible shadow of the unseen movements of microscopic molecules and atoms that dance and self-replicate at the heart of all matter – a life that goes beyond the merely human, but is perhaps even more fundamental.<sup>3</sup>

The thing that Laura Woodward most often works with is metal. Almost all metals are made up not of a hard singular surface, but of an array of tiny crystal-like grains, which jostle with each other to form a structured lattice. The series of interfaces formed and negotiated by these crystals, and the free-roaming atoms that escape the layering structure of the crystals is what gives metals their varied properties. This is known as the 'polychrystalline' nature of metal.

With intelligent grace, Woodward negotiates the polychrystalline properties of her things, and with careful hands folds and unfolds the polychrystalline layering of lives that these things always bear with them.

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<sup>1</sup> See Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, Stanford University Press, California, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, Stanford University Press, California, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A political ecology of things*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2010.