

# **The Craft of Things**

## **Object-Subject Relationship in Nowadays Working Tools**

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**Abstract** The research examines the relationship between subject and object through the instruments and work tools currently in use. The objects that we use and that surround us, with which we live and work, act on us and on the collectivity, they shape our habits, they convey our relationships, they structure our personality and the way we recognize and we are recognized within our community. The different usages of working tools and the way we keep, store and share them are useful sources and containers of information and means of representation and classification of the societies where they are in use.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 About why and how. – 3 Body Tools. – 4 Resistance strategies. – 5 The List. – 6 Photography as a tool.

**Keywords** Working tools. Subject-object. Representation.

## **1 Introduction**

This research examines the relationship between subject and object through the instruments and work tools currently in use. What we want to bring out in this research is the subject-object relationship, imagining them in an equal position of complete balance, where the object created by the subject is for once also the creator of the subject.

I try to consider the working tools according to Mario Turci's definition of "mapping of the objects". It means analyse the tools from different points of view: material, sensorial and contextual. The material region analyses the matter, the form and production; the sensory region poses the attention on the sensation, the perception, the use and the function; the contextual region analyses the context, the localization, the creator, the process and the system. Together these three regions give us a comprehensive and satisfactory view of the object and the working tools (Turci 2009).

To do so, however, a particular type of analysis and a specific way of research and writing have been privileged: lists and photography. This means

that the final report of the research converges in lists of work tools which are neat and organized and are, then, enclosed and represented in photos.

Since these objects are still in use and because of this they are inseparable and inalienable, both from their original context and from their owner, photography is useful to ensure the reproducibility of the specific objects outside of the workplace.

The choice to organize lists has come out during the research, because the numerical constraint that is posed by a practical list (Eco 2012) allows the specific professional to be able to tell about and describe himself in a limited and finite way, since every single profession is punctuated by a plurality of objects that are unlikely to set up finite sets. The selection of the objects has taken place by the hands of the worker, so it was him to recognize and list the objects with which he wanted to tell about himself and his particular professional activity. The disposition of the objects within the photo frame is my choice and therefore it follows my own interpretative and representative model.

## 2 About Why and How

Material objects have tendentially always been studied as historical evidence. Generally the focus of interest is slightly shifted towards history, more weight is given to the past rather than to the present. We owe the current state of things to this aspect of material culture studies, and so our knowledge of cultural systems that have currently vanished or are in extinction, this has often been called rescue anthropology and it assumes that the anthropologist and the other do not share the same age, it assumes that the age of the other is over, that it has run out, that it is disappearing. It is thanks to the rescue spirit that we have moved with the haste of finding, collecting and preserving objects of an almost or entirely passed way of acting, with the anxiety and fear that much would be lost and forgotten soon.

To understand the intentions that have characterized early studies of material culture in Italy we can mention Loria and Mochi when in the book *About the collection of materials for Italian Ethnography* they claim that “we should hurry to collect all over what remains of the characteristic documents of local folk life, if we do not want to find only scarce and altered scrap in a very near future; we have to do so because our modern civilization will soon invade the most hidden nooks of the campaigns, the most isolated mountain villages” (1906, 15).

On the contrary, but also in relation to what pushes Loria and Mochi to the action of gathering and collecting, this research poses its focus exactly on our modern civilization.

I asked myself: why should we wait? Why should we take the risk that what is now the result of that very industrious ingeniousness could slip

away? Today we could free ourselves from future anxiety of losing everything, that fear of forgetting, of not being able to display, we could free ourselves from that urge to search, why should we wait for the coming of that which Turci defines obsolescence phase (2015)?

A research on the current working tools proceeds in this direction.

At first it is necessary to look at the tools as they were object of an exposition in a museum. To see things in a museum means to see them from another point of view, it means to believe that they are notable, to believe them credible. Everyday objects often suffer of some kind of ambiguity that does not allow to recognize their cultural value. The objects that surround us build our daily life. The objects that live with us create the reality around us, in our homes, in our offices, in public places we attend, in the rooms where we live, in workplaces where we go to fulfil some of our needs. These objects that fill and are disposed in our environments, sediment and almost fossilize to the point that they become part of the place. The working tools that are spread across the laboratories, on the walls of garages, stacked on tables and desks, stuffed into suitcases and tool boxes claim and shout their history, but they are silent and mute to the ears of whom does not stop to listen, because he is accustomed and immersed in everyday life.

Work tools taken as a whole, but confined to their specific work activity tell their history, the one of the individual worker and the one of the related profession. And if we put these together, different activities can be evidence of a precise historical, economic and working moment.

Therefore starting to consider these tools with a museum-like look means seeing them as if we do not see them every day, trying to be amazed by the obvious things that are not that obvious at the end. This is ultimately the third principle of museography, developed by Pietro Clemente which leaves room to the wonder that reorganizes the willingness to understand the subject (1999).

Laboratories, garages, practices, construction sites, factories and ateliers are places where work tools are collected and displayed in a completely spontaneous and unconscious way. What is missing in these places is the amazement of those who live in these environments and of those who enter them for a variety of reasons; we tend to neglect what is peculiar in these places: the knowledge to act and the knowledge to do, which are substance of real and concrete acting, this because of the speed of technological progress and of the oversupply of information that makes us a bit blind and less sensitive to the ways of learning, of reasoning and of memorization, as well as of the traditional, pre-technological and technical knowledge ways of teaching.



Figure 1. Ferdinando Amato, *Scalpellino*. 2015. Digital photography. © Ferdinando Amato

Bourdieu sheds light on the dynamics of classification and representation which individuals enact unconsciously, working tools and objects serve as distinction and recognition marks in the final definition of social identity (2001).

Tools are needed to make culture categories visible and stable, material goods must be considered as having social meanings and thus analysed not only for their use as technical tools but also as a means for communication.

The relation between tool and worker becomes interesting because the tool does not just make any individual a professional in his job, but it is also builds him on a physical and subjective level. We must therefore consider each working tool both in its singularity and as part of a set of objects which is added to the corporal vision and to the physical and intellectual representation of the individual.

In Sicilian dialect there is a saying *I stigghi fanu u mastru* which translated means working tools form the professional. The Sicilian saying is a legacy of a popular way of thinking, primarily designed to justify the lack of appropriate tools to face the daily maintenances, often because of economic impossibility or backwardness of previous living conditions.

In Sicilian dialect this saying is also used in an ironic and mocking way, as if to say that a professional is so, not because he is the keeper of special

technical or artistic skills, but only because he possess specific tools that allow him to perform his tasks.

Material culture could borrow this saying just to explain how tools are at the heart of a cultural system that tends to represent and describe the society or the communities where it is interested in from time to time.

The objects that we use, that surround us, with which we live and work, act on us, on the collectivity, they shape our habits, they convey our relationships, they structure our personality and the way we recognize and are recognized within our community. In relation to these aspects the object-subject connectivity expands.

This is how those who work in a factory to build cars become labourers, mechanics, technicians, who builds wooden furniture on his own becomes a carpenter, allowing the object to create our personality and to label us in the eyes of society and even in ours.

The availability of the tools ensures that a worker is not just a worker but a specialist, a specific worker, a specific professional figure. Consequently that specific professionalism conveys its social and cultural representation, transitively the tool is linked to different work activities and it interferes in the social and cultural, individual and collective representation.

Thinking in this way we fully enter into that hypothesis to create subjects which we have defined, it means that the objects participates to the creation of the subject, it means that the perception of individuals and communities does not exist by nature, it means to redefine the subjects within a cultural system.

By contrast the definition of creating objects appears very obvious and predictable. To meet their necessities the men strive to build what they need.

According to Cirese, the object exists as a meaning, not only as a physical object; for example it is so that the sickle as an object, is different from the sickle as a tool (1984). What Cirese calls "fabrilità" and "segnicità" are inextricably linked, because the two different dimensions set themselves mutually in motion. A tool finds its fulfilment and its reason of existence only in a local and peculiar use (La Cecla 2013). The relationship with its subject-worker is redefined and is finally recognized in this relationship. Technique and speech are both crucial to the creation of the work tool, in the same way they contribute to the final placement of the thing.

So creating objects does not only mean fabricate them, assemble them and compose them in a physical and material way, but it also means to give them value, to create their meaning and significance.

To explain this assumption the analysis of Kopytoff can help us when it faces the issue of cultural and individual singularization (1986, 88).

When analysing objects as goods Igor Kopytoff points out that the biography of an object is culturally adjusted and its interpretation is open to individual manipulation until a certain level. In fact the object can be moved in and out of the status of good.

In our case the displacement from the state of goods occurs in the moment in which an object becomes a working tool. Workers abstract the object from being simply an object and turn it into a tool. So this is not only a matter of not seeing an object as goods but it also means to recreate it as a tool. The work activity and thus the worker use the object giving a role and a job to it. From that perspective there is no doubt about the creation: it is the subject that creates its own object.

### 3 Body Tools

What distinguish a professional worker from an ordinary person are ownership and practice of specific knowledge that often occur and make themselves clear through the use of a certain tool. But not all professions use specific technical equipment. The system of tools in fact touches mainly only those work activities that require specific and developed manual skills, while many other professions exist without the use of any equipment and without the use of any working tool.

A lawyer, a judge and a notary, a journalist, a writer, a professor and a teacher, a professional educator, a shop assistant, a grocer, an accountant, an employee, a politician, a banker, a representative, an anthropologist, the director of a museum and so on are all jobs that do not require the use and presence of certain tools for which it is necessary to know manual techniques, there is no need to excel in the use of specific tools. The absence of tools, however, does not mean that there is a lack of specialization and expertise. In these cases professionalization must be sought in other aspects that do not match with what Giulio Angioni defines the knowledge of the hand (1986). These are in fact intellectual abilities that show a knowledge that results from study and talent, without the use of special tools.

All those jobs which do not imply specific skills and dexterity have been excluded from this research, even though they make use of concrete objects. Those jobs are the result of progress and industrial revolutions, where machines have taken from the worker the need to excel in the use of special techniques and knowledge, and where the knowledge of the hand has often been replaced by the simple knowledge of a technical artefact.

In such cases the knowledge of the objects does not meet a specific manual ability and strong technical and artistic skills that transfer that specific knowledge from the mind to the hand. Many machines are in fact equipped with automatic and high technical engineering that reduces, and in some cases nullifies, the physical action of man. Technological inventions have actually born with the aim of reducing the work of workers, replacing their skills with those of the machines.

We want to emphasize those activities where the action of man is still

the result of technical and practical knowledge that gives life to the creative act through the relationship between body and things. This distinction follows the path already walked by Pier Giorgio Solinas that distinguishes in work and in technical-constructive processes, between the animated practice and the mechanical execution, between the soma and the automa. The level of skills, of competence, of technical standards of the job require distinction in different orders, both by specific area and operating plan, and both for resistance degree and autonomy (1989).

The work tools that still need the use of human hand are probably situated in an intermediate position between nature and culture since they are contaminated by both factors. They are obviously cultural because they derive from the human mind and from various changes, they derive from human progress and action on nature, but in their own way they remain natural because they are very close to humans and to their bodies. By forcing a bit the definitions, it is as if on the work place many tools act as human appendixes or even as parts of the body, because they still use the body of individuals and their physical and mental abilities, unlike machines.

To remain in the anthropological field and to try to understand on which level the difference between certain types of professions that were examined in this research rests, we can make use of two concepts that are important to our discipline, these concepts are that of 'body techniques' and of 'incorporation'.

With body techniques Marcel Mauss means the ways in which men use their body, conforming to the tradition in different societies (1965). For Mauss technique is the focus of a training or apprenticeship, because he thinks that man's main tool in his own body. Body technique refers to the body's ability to mechanically absorb specific social and cultural practices, to naturalize processes to the point where it does not recognize them because they are so much imprinted in the ways of doing and acting. This follows a kind of independent and instinctive ability in making and acting which brings different ways of working and the different forms of gesture up as natural and spontaneous, while in fact they are naturalized behaviours that result from practice and from a gradual learning process that has taken place through the exposure of our body to external social environment (Pizza 2008).

In our case, to give a central role to the body means to know how to use it and to know how to use the object that needs our body to take life, however by limiting it to the social and cultural environment of professional activity. The body, or more specifically the hand of a certain worker stores the knowledge that belongs to the profession and it is precisely the body that expresses the technical ability in the use of work tools.

All of this is inevitably linked to the concept of *habitus* that Pierre Bourdieu inextricably links to practical gesture. The *habitus* is the set of interiorized and externalized arrangements through which the individual

interacts with the external world, it is the set of all the practices that the subject has stored and that result from the action of the external social and cultural context, and vice versa it is consequence of the individual's acting and ways of doing on the world (Bourdieu 2001).

In the working field it could be synthesized as the ability to use a tool which is primarily acquired by employing that specific instrument.

The other key concept is the process of incorporation of Csordas 2003. The body becomes a product of history, and history can in turn be observed as a body process. So to consider the historical and cultural reality as a product of the acting of the body leads us to say that all of our actions, including daily manual skills and craftsmanship with which each worker sets in motion his own work tools, are based on the incorporated experience of social actors, including dominion and power relations that are expressed through and on the bodies (Pizza 2008, 42).

The concepts of body techniques and incorporation are thus crucially important with regard to the world of work because every worker shapes his own bodily actions according to the use of his work tools. This does not mean that any work activity, that is artisanal or not, carries a variable number of actions that regulate and stabilize our historical and cultural position in the world, but about what concerns the objects some professions require more practice, or at least a more specific ability that is manifested and externalized precisely when using certain tools.

Another interesting matter is the analysis by Csordas about the dominion and power relations that individuals put in place through the incorporated experience (2003). Each subject establishes his own position as a result of his actions and of his own bodily experience of the world, so does the worker, whose actions are a direct result of the use of tools and work objects; he determines his relations thanks to specific tools which activate and regulate the body techniques and the specific way of acting and moving through the world.

This means that if we assume the world of things as made up by the set of artefacts/implants that influence the perception of the world and of our "being in the world", we can look at objects as if they were witnesses/gatherers of existences and therefore of thought, not only as an expression of skills and technical knowledge (Turci 2015).

The body is thus a warehouse of techniques and actions that work shapes by changing and configuring our image in the eyes of ourselves and those of others. This is both a symbolic and a real image since it acts both on the collective imagination and on the physical body.

During the research I met several workers and it often seemed to me to find temper and physical traits that are related to specific professions. Other times, once I had learned about the profession of a person I met, I unconsciously outlined their profile and found in the body and in the image of the individual traits and actions that were in my opinion shaped by



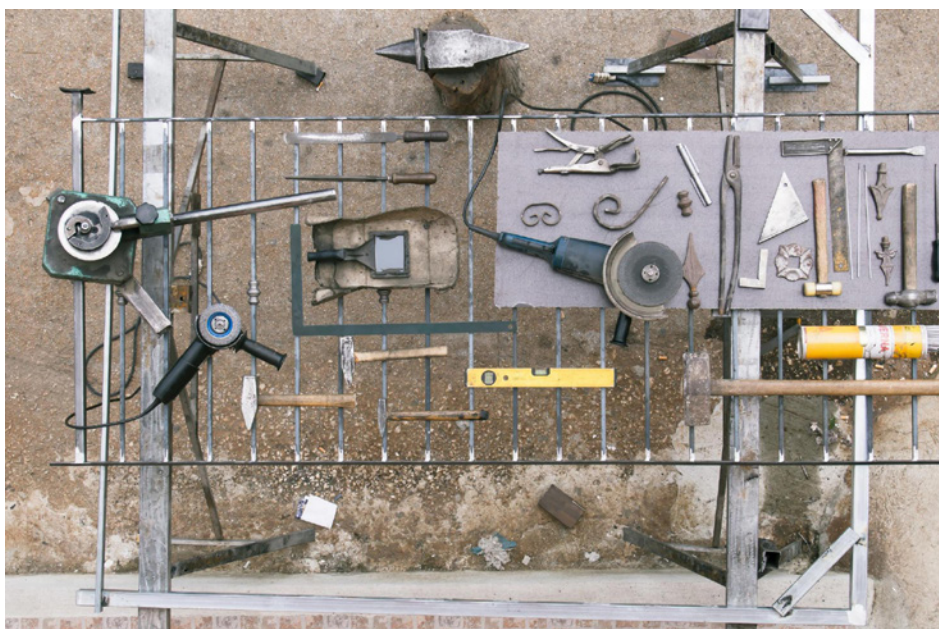


Figure 2. Ferdinando Amato, *Fabbro*. 2015. Digital photography. © Ferdinando Amato

their work activity. Examples can be the corpulence of the butcher or the big and strong hands of the bricklayer. There are two specific events that took place during my observations that may serve to understand what has been said. While I was observing and talking to the shoemaker, I saw him hammer on his thumb by accident while he was pounding with the hammer on the sole of a shoe, but he continued to work as if nothing had happened. On another occasion I noticed that the baker moved a still hot baking tray full of bread with bare hands from one place to another. These adaptations of the body are, in my opinion, not only determined by the rituality and repetitiveness with which every man acts, but they are also determined by the action that objects make on men, especially if these objects require high technique and ability to the point that it is necessary to employ body and hands with high endurance and ability.

According to Jean Pierre Warnier it is even the object itself that is incorporated and not only the dynamics and the action qualities of things “the incorporation of the object is carried out by developing the information that the body has memorized, these manifest themselves through physical algorithms. They are gestures or series of actions which can be accomplished efficiently without a specific effort and attention, through the repetition of actions and make able to economize the means” (2005, 16).

Still according to Warnier, in this way the object is presented as pros-

theses of actions and behaviours that move the individual, so the object shapes the body together with the subject.

If we consider the working tool as a part of the body, the observation of one or more objects that a specific professional uses presents itself as an analysis of the same individual as a worker and an operator. The subject-object relationship, or tool-worker relation, is at this point so strong, physical and bodily that the understanding of the one and of the other necessarily involves both sides. In this regard an individual's final judgment that excludes a part of the body-object would be even insufficient and incomplete, since of course every single component enhances and amplifies the ultimate knowledge. It becomes of great interest to consider any work tool both in its singularity and as part of a set of objects which, individually and together, replace or are added to the corporal vision and to the physical and intellectual representation of the individual.

#### **4 Resistance Strategies**

We could define a certain type of ethnographic museum praxis and material culture as cemeterial. The museums of past things, of the life and work of ordinary people, have the credit of having documented and rescued regional cultures, lower classes, local and material cultures. The cemeterial approach was and still is the humus of new collectors, it is the social and cultural substratum that gave breath and promoted better conditions for the material culture research.

Next to the cemeterial praxis there is what I call the hospital praxis that cares about keeping things alive and not only about their memory.

To observe objects now, in this historical phase, corresponds to make a point of the situation, to understand the state of affairs in which they are now, the historical moment that they are living.

This research has also the aim to understand how and how fast the art of working is changing. Any work activity would deserve specific and sectorial studies, while some jobs resist to social transformations others are dragged away by the power of progress. They become a point of interest and attention regarding which are the logics that determine their resistance condition or their tendency to perish.

The ability to survive or not to progress, to remain connected to its own working function, to persist in its use is determined both by the tool itself and from a particular predisposition of the worker's competence. Some tools can represent an objective and subjective power and position instance, many of them belong for example to work activities that literally remain alive and resist to social and economic changes that push them faster and faster towards total dissolution. In other words, some jobs that maintain a high level of craftsmanship and manuality are part of what



## 5 The List

In the list the objects, taken as a set, show up and express themselves in a new and different way, it is as if the meaning of the objects in a set came out of context.

Take for example the hammer. It is a tool that is used in more than one profession, a naive and untrained eye like mine when in front of any hammer can not attribute it in particular to a specific profession at first look. But if I look at that hammer again and this time I see it next to a file, a welding mask and an anvil, I can understand that this is the hammer of a blacksmith. Seen next to other work tools a single tool is able to explain and to tell us about itself and its field of work.

With list we must intend a set of items. In the list every single object is recognizable and distinguishable from another. The list is conceived as a form of schematic organization in which each object is individually inserted.

Umberto Eco distinguished the poetic list from the practical list in *La vertigine della lista* (2012). The first one is determined by any artistic purpose with which the list is given and from any art form that expresses it. The practical list instead is in its own way a form, because it confers unity to a set of objects that obey to a contextual pressure or to the constitution of the purpose of a certain project. The tools I have taken into consideration are part of a practical lists, but only if related to the worker-owner which they impersonate. After all, if objects have a value, this value should be inserted within the subject-object relationship. Each list of tools tells a history that is intimate and personal but also generalized to the profession to which it belongs to.

Each set of work objects that I have analysed does not contain the complete range that normally spoken a worker should possess, but it only contains those that the worker considers necessary and representative of his activity, the tools that are included are a result of the free choice of the professional.

These personal lists tell a profession with the voice of the specific worker, they are the history of an intimate and subjective profession.

The order and the disposition that the list creates interfere with the way in which we observe and perceive objects. The disposition of the list acts on one hand individualizing the single objects and on the other hand putting them in relation with each other, as if the objects formed a musical choir in which all elements sing simultaneously and in turns each one performs a solo.

The interpretative manipulation of who prepares and sorts the list and the photography is clear, first of all because he selects and places the objects in it. The objects and their distribution inside the photographic frame respond to natural, involuntary and spontaneous processes of classification, although they do not follow logics and prearranged hierarchization paths.



Figure 4. Ferdinando Amato, *Fotografo*. 2015. Digital photography. © Ferdinando Amato

But when the purpose of the listing process is not just about work in general but is instead referred to the person who carries out that activity, the purpose of the list becomes to turn a specific individual into objects. And if the action of transformation is mediated by the subject of the study himself, the quantity and quality of the list are crucial to the subject's story.

To tell something by using objects tells us more than how the things themselves do. Therefore narrative codes are important: the amount of objects, the inclusion of worn or broken items, of new and latest items, of high or low economic value, recycled or repurposed, extraneous to the profession, dirty or clean, cured or ruined, and so on.

All of this brings us back to the fact that the list of objects is already a finished object by itself, to the point that we could look at a set of lists in the same way in which we look at a collection of objects.

This happens when one considers the list as a narration, a story of life, or a work story.

Each list of working tools must be framed and limited to the biography of the working life of the person who it refers to and to which it belongs to; this is as much as one can hope to get from a set of objects that are only and exclusively related to the working world: one can get short ethnographic stories of a specific and precise biography of a person through the voice of its working tools.

## 6 Photography as a Tool

The aim of this research is also to be able to tell the things that are analysed also in a visual way, not only in words. In fact, although they are carriers of stories and physical accumulators of human action, objects do not have a loud voice, they do not physically articulate and emit words, therefore they need to be told or seen. The signs of wear, modifications, repairs, the state of preservation, the placement and so on are what tells us more about each specific object, but these characteristics need to be spoken or seen to have the capability to express themselves.

In this perspective photography presents itself as a privileged means of narration, because a research that has current and still in use work tools as subjects of the study presents several technical and scientific difficulties.

Take a picture of an object or a work tool means recognize them as sources. In fact, the process of selection and choice of the objects gives to each of them an added value. The picture, as an object exposed in a museum, makes the image to become operational (Freedberg 2009).

The problem becomes now epistemological and the question is if we should consider photography as an efficient means in the material culture research. However, there is the need to think about the centrality of a glance as a knowledge and inquiry means in anthropological research.

Cultural anthropology, and in general the whole ethnographic research, surely puts the eye at the centre of the cognitive practice. The eye plays a title role also within a multisensory context.

What we are interested in is exactly the temporal understanding of photographic reproduction. Between the present in which we are observing and the immediate past where photography relegates the present that it captured, there is a time lag that constitutes the basis of all the production that the material culture investigates.

The photography produces a temporal space between who observe the pictures and the subject on it, as it impress what is photographed in a precise and static moment. This is what Johannes Fabian defines as “allochronic”, in other word it is the negation of contemporary (2000).

The photographic means splits the life of things in two parts: photographed object and photography of the object. The photographed working tool, which is the photographed object, remains a work tool in its work context. Its cultural biography has remained unchanged.

The photography of the object represents instead the other identity of the photographed object, but it is an identity that is frozen in the time in which the object was photographed.

So it becomes interesting to note that the photographed object and the photography of the object play almost opposed, but perfectly complementary roles. We have so far argued that personal and intimate objects, including work tools, are objects which are full of meaning. These objects

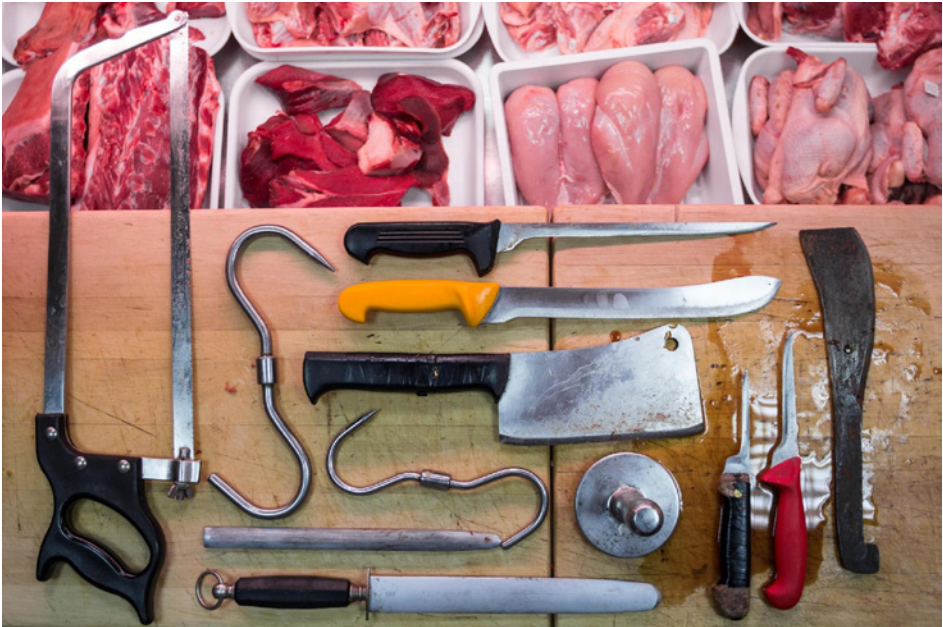


Figure 5. Ferdinando Amato, *Macellaio*. 2015. Digital photography. © Ferdinando Amato

are so close and united to their owner that they can almost be considered in a symbiotic relationship with him, able to resist to the time cycle, outside of the logic of exchange and economics.

On the other side there is the photography of the object which, as just said, is necessarily part of the relationship processes of exchange and circulation, both because of the typical ambition of photography to become evidence and trace of something that exists in physical reality, and on the other hand because its main cultural function is precisely its uncontrollable passion for exposition.

In this research it was the worker that defined his own image. What must be displayed is the intimacy of the subject-object relationship; this intimacy is expressed in the process of representation that each one performs on the other: the object interferes on the representation of the person; instead the subject acts on the object by using it and making it a part of himself. The final product is thus the mingling of the mutual and reciprocal actions and representations.

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