

**AS.389.303**

**A World of Things**

**Spring 2019**

Tuesdays 1:30-4:00pm

Gilman 313

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An intensified concern with materiality and the slippery category of “things” has emerged in the last decade as an explicitly interdisciplinary endeavor involving anthropologists, archaeologists, art historians, political scientists, philosophers, and literary critics among others. Of significance to both academic and museum scholars, the intensity of the interest in these topics has particular relevance to the collection, preservation, interpretation, and presentation of specimens, objects, artifacts, materials, monuments, and historic sites. Course includes hands-on activities to help us think through our course’s main questions: How do museums study and interpret objects today? What questions and problems do objects pose for them, and what theories, tools and investigative approaches can help unpack things in the present and for the future?

This course aims to make the object a focus point for understanding museums and what they do, and to consider the museum as a site for investigating the interaction between humans and things. At the center of the course is a tension between the idea that things are subject to human will, on the one hand, and indications that things can and do evade human attempts to control them, on the other. Readings from different scholars will stimulate our looking, thinking, and discussion.

#### Course Learning Objectives

- describe current approaches to things in different disciplines
- select which approaches best suit the research problem(s) posed by a particular museum objects
- examine and assess subject/object interactions in public display contexts such as museum and gallery spaces.

#### Course Requirements

Attendance and Participation	20%
Weekly Homework	30%
Article Presentations (2)	20%
Researched Project	30%

*Readings:* The readings in this course have been carefully selected to expose you to some prominent scholars and their influential ideas and show you examples of how scholars have applied and/or challenged these theories. The goal is to offer you varied

voices and entry points into each topic. Thus there are multiple articles assigned for each week. Read carefully ie: mark them up: identify main ideas/claims and the points or evidence on which they rely; internal contradictions or potential problems (drawing on your knowledge and that of the other readings assigned). Record your main take-aways and questions – even points of confusion. The readings can be tough and dense, and you may have to do them more than once to really “get” them and their significance, but **I am confident everyone will grasp the key ideas, and we will work through the substance of the readings together as much as is needed.**

*Participation:* You are encouraged to participate in classroom discussion, making comments that have one or more of the following properties:

1. Offer a different and unique, but relevant, perspective based upon analysis
2. Are respectful of others’ contributions and experiences
3. Help move the discussion forward
4. Build upon the comments of other participants
5. Include some evidence or logic
6. Link relevant concepts to other class discussions, readings, or presentations

Class involves lots of hands-on activities - contributing to these and reflecting on what you've learned through these is an equally important aspect of participation.

*Homework:* The homework is listed under the day it is due. It ranges from museum-based work/problem to article prep.

*Article Presentations:* Over the course of the semester you are responsible for presenting two articles in class and preparing a related handout to share with the class – one within the first half of the semester, the second during the second half of the semester. Specific guidelines will be handed out and posted in Blackboard. I will model an example in the second week of class and provide a handout overview of that presentation. **Presenting an article involves more than summarizing it – it also requires analysis and discussion of the significance and implications of the ideas in the article.** Pick from the starred articles.

*Researched Project:* There are two possible tracks for your research project – which as in the class itself, aims to combine the conceptual with the applied. These tracks will be discussed on the first day of class and instructions will be posted on Blackboard. **Please note that your project proposal is due March 5 and the project itself is due May 13.**

## Weekly Plan

### **Week 1 (1/29): Introduction**

*What have been traditional ways that humanists have approached material objects? What is the so-called "material turn"? Where are we today? What particular issues are raised by the museum context?*

- Blake Gopnik, “Unraveling the Alba Madonna” *Washington Post*, October 5, 2008, R10; “More from Leo Steinberg” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/03/AR2008100302267.html>; “Expanded Text of Mary Garrard Interview” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/03/AR2008100302264.html>; “Expanded text of Alexander Nagel Interview” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/03/AR2008100302266.html>

NB – these readings will be distributed in class and worked on during class time

In-class discussion of the final project options.

### **Week 2 (2/5): *Orienting to objects***

*What counts as an object? What does it mean to orient to things? What might be the value of Bennett’s approach for exploring artworks? What might be potential problems? Instructor will model an article presentation.*

- Jules David Prown “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method” *Winterthur Portfolio* 17 (1982): 1-19
- Sandra H. Dudley, “Encountering a Chinese Horse: Engaging with the thingness of things” in *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, ed. Sandra H. Dudley (London, 2012), 1-15.
- Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Chapel Hill, 2010) xiii-xix; 4-13 & 52-61. \* this is the toughest reading you’ll have all semester. Give yourself time to read it slowly and we will spend a lot of time unpacking it in class (and referring back to it over the course of the semester).

Homework 1: List 2-3 key take-aways from the Bennett reading and at least 1 “muddy point” or point of confusion. In-class sign up for article presentations.

### **Week 3 (2/12): *Materiality***

*The notion of materiality emerged in anthropology in reaction to semiotics (the notion that objects communicate like words/signs, at the expense of considering their physical properties). What are the implications of emphasizing the materiality of things rather than what the things signal/express: their ideology and structure (ie: the physical stop sign instead of its expression of the concept “stop” and what it means in our culture). It is one of the most widely used terms, and most slippery to define. Where does the materiality of specific objects lie? Are there levels of materiality? Is materiality relative or absolute? Is it culturally determined?*

- Simon Knell, “The Intangibility of things” in *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, ed. Sandra H. Dudley, 324-335. London: Routledge, 2012.\*
- Fred Myers, “Some Properties of Art and Culture” in *Material Cultures: Why Some things Matter*, ed., Daniel Miller, 88-117. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Homework 2: Inspired by how Bennett opens her book, pick a moment of your day (no

shorter than 15min, no longer than 30 min) to observe yourself engaged in the world. Pay attention to what you are doing and how, to the material conditions and things around you. You can record as you go or write up after the fact. How are material conditions and things (material or “immaterial”) structuring your experience? Also pick either Knell or Myers or write a 1-2 sentence definition of materiality that suits their argument.

#### **Week 4 (2/19): Agency**

*Do objects have agency? As in, can they act in the world as persons are traditionally understood to do? If we allow that objects have agency – what is the nature of that agency?*

- Review: Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Chapel Hill, 2010) xiii-xix; 4-13 & 52-61.
- A Gell, “‘Things’ as Social Agents” in *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, ed. Sandra H. Dudley (London, 2012), 336-343\*
- A Pickering, “Material Culture and the Dance of Agency,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, ed. D. Hicks & M. Beaudry (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 191-208\*
- Richard Brilliant, “Do Art Objects Have Rights?” *The Art Bulletin* 73 (1991): 534-535 (to be distributed & discussed in class)

Homework 3: Create a diagram to represent the way object agency works in EITHER Pickering or Gell’s model. Review your documentation from last week’s self-observation and write a 250 word or so position statement on object agency inspired by the discussion questions listed above.

### Perspectives on Making & Makers

#### **Week 5 (2/26): Materials – Field Trip to Walters Art Museum**

*How does attending to materials change our understanding of objects? How do materials work, physically and socially - in the object as well as in communication with the audience? Are all materials “material” and how might we find the “materials” in seemingly immaterial practices? What is the difference, if any, between materials and materiality?*

- Tim Ingold, “Materials against materiality,” *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 (2007), pp. 1-16.\*
- Ann-Sophie Lehmann, “The matter of the medium: some tools for an art-theoretical interpretation of materials” in *The Matter of Art: Materials, practices, cultural logics ca. 1250-1750*, ed. Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop and Pamela H. Smith, 21-41.\*

Homework 4: this homework will be handed out in class and due the next day.

**Week 6 (3/5): Medium** Visit to Special Collections to see artists' books

*What is an object's medium? How does attending to medium help us understand both the limits and opportunities afforded artists? The expectations of audiences? What is the difference between "medium," "materials" and "technique" for museums, for academic disciplines of art history, archaeology, literature, media studies, for makers? How might we theorize medium? We will explore the limits and rules of the particular medium (really mixed medium) of artists' books, the impact of such "rules" and the impact of "violating" them.*

- Roland Betancourt "Genre as Medium on Youtube," *Journal of Popular Culture* 49.1 (2016): 196-223.
- Marcia Reed, "The Book in General: Some New Definitions," in *Artists and their Books, Books and their Artists* (2018), pp. 1-10.

Homework 5: We will do the homework in-class and you will turn it in at the end of class. **RESEARCH PROPOSAL IS DUE TODAY**

**Week 7 (3/12): Making** Field Trip to Baltimore Clayworks

*What knowledge do artists hold? How might we engage with, understand, unpack and interpret objects in ways that take into account the physical understanding of their making?*

- Sabrina Geschwandtner "Knitting is..." *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, ed. Sandra H. Dudley (London, 2012), 50-56.
- Film: JHU Archaeology Museum, "Mysteries of the Kylix"  
<http://archaeologicalmuseum.jhu.edu/the-collection/object-stories/recreating-ancient-greek-ceramics/film-mysteries-of-the-kylix/> also read the HUB article explaining the project: <http://hub.jhu.edu/gazette/2015/may-june/datebook-ksas-archaeology-project/>
- Matthew Crawford, "Shop Class as Soul Craft" *The New Atlantis* 2006  
<http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/shop-class-as-soulcraft>

**No homework**

**No article presentations**

**SPRING BREAK 3/18-3/22**

**Week 8 (3/26): Conservation**

*How does understanding objects as mutable, constantly changing, alter our perspective on them? What is the nature of the material expertise of the museum? What is at stake in the material choices conservator's make? What can technical examination reveal about the biography/life of an object, about our own culture? Philosophically, ethically, which moment in that life should museums "arrest" or make primary in interpretation – where does the "authentic" object lie under those terms?*

- D. Estop, "Conservation as Material Culture," *Handbook of Material Culture* ed. Tilley (London, 2006), 516-533.\*
- M. Leonard, "The Artist's Voice," *Personal Viewpoints. Thoughts About Paintings Conservation* (Getty Conservation Institute: Los Angeles, 2003): 41-58.\*
- T. Joffroy *Traditional Conservation Practices in Africa* <http://>
- "The Art of Conservation" Onwards and Upwards with the Arts. *New Yorker Magazine* <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/01/11/the-custodians-onward-and-upward-with-the-arts-ben-lerner>

**Homework 6:** Visit the Walters Art Museum – 1 West building, second floor (the exhibition on ceramics) – go through all the rooms and interpretive elements (texts, videos, in-drawers). Reflect on your experience in response to the prompt: How does the work of conservators – their engagement (and interference) in the material lives of objects – affect the meanings we make of artworks? What is at stake in the choices conservators make and what considerations should they take into account? Be specific and use examples drawn from the galleries.

### Encountering Things in the Museum

#### **Week 9 (4/2): Connoisseurship**

*How might close looking answer or raise important questions about objects? What is the value of a connoisseurial approach? What kinds of questions can it investigate? What are the problems and proclivities of this approach for understanding material things? What are its limits?*

- David Carrier, "In Praise of Connoisseurship," in *Museums in the Material World*, ed. Simon Knell, 65-78. London: Routledge, 2007.\*
- David Ebitz, "Connoisseurship as Practice" *Artibus et Historiae* 9 (1988): 207-212
- Anthony Cutler, *Hand of the Master*, excerpts "Power of Ivory: Modern Response" and "The Master in Context: Signs of the Master; The Guidance of the Hodegetria" -> a connoisseurial approach in practice

**Homework 7:** List up to 3 questions a connoisseurial approach can answer or has, historically, been used to answer. For each question list at least one reason the question is important, one type of evidence a connoisseur would look for to answer the question and one related problem or proclivity of the connoisseurial approach.

#### **Week 10 (4/9): Classification**

*How do we group, order, and document objects? What is the impact of taxonomy on how we approach and interpret objects? On how audiences view them? What historical biases are instantiated in taxonomy and what epistemes and ideologies do taxonomies reveal? How might we turn taxonomies on their head?*

- Srinivasan, R. et al. "Diverse Knowledges and Contact Zones within the Digital Museum" *Science, Technology and Human Values* 35(5) (2010): 735-768\*

- B. N. Goswamy "Another Past, Another Context: Exhibiting Indian Art Abroad" in *Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, (1991), 68-78\*
- Susan Vogel "Always True to the Object in Our Fashion" *Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, (1991), 191-204\*

Homework 8: Look around your room and group your possessions into categories. Write down those categories. For each category list a couple of the objects that belong in the category and "tag" them with up to 3 one-word descriptors.

**Week 11 (4/16): Sensing**

*How might museums move beyond sight? Should they? Why or why not? What's at stake?*

- Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) pp. 25-32.\*
- David Cerbone, *Understanding Phenomenology*. Acumen, 2006, repr. London: Routledge, 2014. Opening exercises (pp. 1-11) & chapter 4 on Merleau Ponty (pp. 96-133)
- Constance Classen, *The Museum of the Senses: Experiencing Art and Collections*, 115-136.\*

Homework 9: Visit the Walters Art Museum and spend 30-60 min in the Nepal/Tibet section of their Asian Art gallery (the lower level of 1 West; you'll have to go down the stairs past the introductory installation). Read the first wall panel text and then wander through taking notes on the ways in which the exhibition engages the sense and ways in which it fails to do so. How does this interpretive approach affect your experience of the artworks? Based on those observations and keeping in mind the arguments of the readings - write-up an evaluation of the installation's sensory approach. Aim for around a page.

**Week 12 (4/23): Consumption**

*Things have a market value. How is that value determined? What's at stake? What kinds of questions does attending to consumption allow? What does it mean for interpretation to think of things as commodities? To what extent does an object have a life, a biography?*

- Appadurai, A. (1986) Introduction: commodities and the politics of value. In A. Appadurai (Ed.), *The Social Life of Things* (pp. 3-63). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Kopytoff, Igor. "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, 64-91.\*

Homework 10: Explore the site: <http://significantobjects.com>. Pick two favorite stories/objects. Thinking about Appadurai and Kopytoff's argument, how come the story

added value to the object and what is it about the stories that created that value? Make sure to include the links to the stories you chose.

### Conclusion & Epilogue

#### **Week 13 (4/30): *The Materiality of ISIS***

- Madeline H. Caviness, "Iconoclasm and Iconophobia: Four Historical Case Studies," *Diogenes* 50/3: 99-114.
- Finbar Barry Flood, "Idol Breaking as Image Making in the 'Islamic State'," *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 7 (2016): 116-138.

Researched Project due one week from today.