

## Day 2 - World of Things

## Readings:

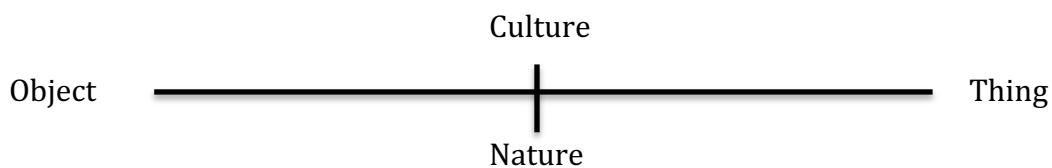
- Jules David Prown “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method” *Winterthur Portfolio* 17 (1982): 1-19
- Sandra H. Dudley, “Encountering a Chinese Horse: Engaging with the thingness of things” in *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, ed. Sandra H. Dudley (London, 2012), 1-15.
- Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Chapel Hill, 2010) xiii-xix; 4-13 & 52-61.

## Goals:

- To probe the challenges of theorizing the world of things
- To identify key aspects of how “new materialism” theorizes the relationship between human and thing / nature and culture versus classic models such as that of Prown
- To apply Bennett’s concept of vibrant matter to things studied in different disciplines: apples (ecology & anthropology), Hurricane Katrina (history), medieval Siena (urban studies and art history), a photograph (art history)
- To debate the relevance of vibrant matter as a concept to inform museum-based object interpretation

**1. Hands-On Activity: Sorting**

Sort a collection in an arrangement intersecting with 4 categories: culture, nature / object, thing (students will need to define thing; is thing “not object” as in some conceptions? Restricted to objects as in other conceptions).



Collection includes: apple, trash collected that morning from my car, ‘nature morte’ composition made of actual flowers and plants, Joshua Meador painting, sea shell, clay cast of a sneaker (made by contemporary artist), postcard, pamphlet “Murder Can Be Fun”, hammer, ivory statuette of Virgin and child

DISCUSSION: *What answers did you come up with? Was it easy? Where were the challenges and the discrepancies? What criteria did you use to make your decisions?*

3) *Can anyone connect this exercise back to the readings and some of their key points/concerns?*

- *Divide between natural and artificial world is not easy—*

- *This divide (or a pretence at thinking there is one) defines some scholarly approaches...maybe it needs to be reconsidered cf: Jane Bennett*

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## 2. Unpacking the articles

### PROWN ARTICLE

1) Re-sort collection according to Prown model -> *different kinds of objects according to function, arranged in a sequence that progresses from more aesthetic to more utilitarian* on p. 2/3 (**problem:** reality is more fluid than Prown presents as we; experienced ourselves because he's trying to make a clean theory – although he does acknowledge some messiness and subjectivity on p. 4 & 9)

- Who is Prown? One of the earlier practitioners of material culture studies and one of the first to offer a theory to explain its practice in disparate fields
- What is Prown's goal? – to define material culture as a discipline and articulate a method for applying it to the study of objects
- How does he do this? – looks at allied “disciplines” that are also “fields” with a long history of working with objects and their practices, especially art history and archaeology (is the difference between discipline and field clear???) ultimately he tries to navigate a path that applies aspects of both; but is also concerned with organizing objects into categories

Basically “...most of us are functionally illiterate when it comes to extracting information encoded in objects”—art history and archaeology are two disciplines that do work from close analysis of objects and we must start THERE in order to build out to other sorts of cultural questions. Like the sciences, working from observation. (33)

DISCUSSION: **Think. Pair. Share.** What is Prown's endgame?

APPLYING PROWN'S METHOD: Hand out Micaela Bedell, “Two Sides to Every Story” about photograph VJ-Day Kiss. Have students read, then discuss her application of Prown's model. What kinds of questions can be explored using this model? What “data” points does it ask you to attend to?

Students practice the method: DO IT YOURSELF. Divide students into two groups. Each group follows Prown's methodology to analyze their assigned thing.

Thing 1. Meador painting

Thing 2. Trash. Students use the fact sheets provided.

SHARE: students share out their findings

## HANDOUTS

### Fact Sheet 1:

Joshua Meador (1911-1965)

Title unknown and date unknown; oil on board; 6 x 8

#### Bio:

- born in Greenwood, Mississippi; Joshua Meador became a painter and animator in California - favored landscapes
- studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, graduating with honors in 1935
- Walt Disney Studio Director of Special Animated Effects from 1939-1960
- there are about 50 of his paintings in the Disney collection
- painted both at larger and smaller scales
- commercial artist as well - drawing posters for the US Forest Service
- one of his paintings made for Lyndon Johnson and at the time of his death he had been commissioned to paint the returning Apollo astronauts
- During his time away from the studio, Josh would pack up the family station wagon, and together with his wife Libby and son Philip, pulled a teardrop trailer throughout California, painting as they went. Josh's favorite medium was the palette knife. (his oeuvre also includes some Oregon coast)
- had an art gallery in Carmel which his wife ran

#### What Critics Say

***The San Francisco Chronicle's Alfred Frankenstein*** wrote, "Joshua Meador's landscapes are free, breezy, vigorous, full of subtle touches of painter-craft to suggest movement and atmosphere and relationships in space."

***The LA Times art Critic Arthur Miller*** wrote "Joshua Meador has the happy faculty of seeing a picture in everything from wharves to hills and paints his scenes with striking realism ... sees the outdoors with fresh eyes and a good sense of what many people can enjoy.

#### What the Artist Says

"I think I'm inclined toward impressionism ... I want to paint and interpret the way I feel and not be influenced by any one school. ... I like to select a subject according to the emotional quality and enjoy painting it emotionally rather than breaking it down to rule, form or dynamic symmetry."

In a documentary showing 4 artists' approach to painting the same tree, we see Josh working quickly to capture his first impression with a large brush. He mixes his oil paint with lighter fluid because it dries fast. Once he has roughed in the main areas, he picks up his palette knives. Using solid swaths of color that he doesn't like to blend too well he hits the canvas with broad strokes. He says that for him the layers of paint applied in distinct directions suggests motion. He also says that for him the

background is a very important part of the picture - the tree itself is not itself without its setting.

### **Fact Sheet 2:**

Anonymous,

Trash collected from inside a Honda CRV on east side of 3900 block of Juniper Rd (Guilford Neighborhood) on February 5, 2019

Item List: 1 yellow top from a Mott's applesauce pouch; 2 wrappers from Plum organics cereal bar; 2 pieces of crumpled paper – one with word "scooter" written in blue; the other a plan marked Level 3 with other words that include Charles Street, Centre Street and Hackerman House; 1 crumpled business card from Clark University

### Location Data

- Guilford neighborhood developed starting in May 1913 by Roland Park Company as one of the earliest suburban developments in America. It is on the National Register of Historic Places and includes 800 houses in a variety of sizes and architectural styles
- Roland Park Papers are in JHU's Special Collections – they include -> original covenants with provisions excluding African-Americans from owning property in the neighborhood. "At no time shall the land included in said tract or any part thereof, or any building erected thereon, be occupied by any negro or person of negro extraction. This prohibition, however, is not intended to include occupancy by a negro domestic servant." AND -> exclusion files that reveal salesmen representing the company sought to identify whether potential buyers were Jewish (or otherwise undesirable types of whites) and would stamp their file "EXCLUSION FILE" in all red caps
  - For more (if you want):  
<https://hub.jhu.edu/magazine/2014/fall/roland-park-papers-archives/>
- Honda CRV is a compact sports utility vehicle and ranks as one of the most popular in the US

### Trash in Baltimore

- Incinerator in Southwest Baltimore is the city's largest single source of air pollution – it burns household waste and releases thousands of pounds of greenhouse gases
  - 2,250 tons of trash disposed of daily
  - 722,789 tons of trash burned in year 2016
  - 416,650 megawatt hours of electricity produced in 2016 (powers 40,000 homes)

- In 2011 lawmakers agreed to classify trash as an environmentally friendly source of renewable power, on par with wind energy. Maryland is one of about a dozen states that treats trash-burning on par with wind energy under the law
- Life expectancy in southwest Baltimore is a decade less than statewide average and residents in Westport are more than twice as likely to die of lung cancer than those living in Guilford

DISCUSSION: What is the relationship between people and things in Prown's model?

- defining object
  - human activity is the defining characteristic
  - art is special but we should be careful not to suggest some works have more cultural VALUE based on our own aesthetic criteria – all objects invoke an aesthetic response and artworks and specimens can be studied using the same method...
- What is the impact of the Prown method? – he states at the end, artifacts are disappointing as communicators of historical fact as compared to documents BUT they are special indexes of culture -> art and artifacts can be treated using the same methods
  - how is this different from Dudley?? -> instructor presents Dudley article as model, then we ask the same questions of Dudley that we asked of Prown

#### DUDLEY ARTICLE

How would you describe the relationship between people and things in Dudley?  
Who is the subject, who is the object in her exercise?

JPK presents Dudley (no more than 10 minutes), then hands out ARTICLE  
PRESENTATION MODEL >

### **World of Things** **Spring 2019 - Jennifer P. Kingsley**

Article Presentation Model (on Sandra Dudley "Encountering a Chinese Horse")

Sandra Dudley is a social and material anthropologist whose research focuses on refugee and museum settings in Southeast Asia and South Asia. Her particular interests are in exile and displacement – not only of people, but also objects, materials and collections. She is both a researcher and a museum practitioner, having worked at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford for over ten years before joining the Museum Studies department at the University of Leicester (UK).

Her article appears in a collected group of essays edited by the author called *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. The volume aimed broadly to

reflect on the nature and definition of “the object” and on the nature of humans’ subjective experience of objects – with an eye towards applying these reflections to interpretive practices in museums.

### **Orienting to Things**

Given the purpose of the book, Dudley’s article naturally enough begins with her own subjective encounter with a bronze figure of a horse made in China around 206-220 BCE. The point of this anecdote (and the article) is to advocate for a more material way of thinking about the relationship between people and things – which, for museum objects, Dudley argues, means focusing on three main things:

1. How do people respond to the object without information
2. Overlooked and particular characteristics of the physical thing and its museum setting
3. The Embodied and full bodied person/visitor herself

Fundamentally this approach puts people and objects (or subjects and objects to use Dudley’s term) into the same category of “thing”

Dudley argues this is a change from earlier practice. She considers how two different fields: material culture studies and museum studies, have treated the object to date. Her main conclusion is that when interpreting objects both fields focus more on “culture” ie: context, than “material” ie: the thing as a thing. This is accurate and persuasive, although done principally through footnotes. Her argument that the museum focuses on context is supported by a more thorough description of exhibition practices.

### **What is an Object?**

Dudley’s conclusion that past studies emphasize culture over material requires her to define what she means by “object” and “thing”. She herself uses the terms interchangeably (although not all areas of scholarship do). To give shape to her own meaning, Dudley looks at meanings in everyday English and in museum settings (collections). For museum settings she considers: the content of collections; how museums treat or interpret things (as the main event or as accessories for example); and how visitors experience things. Indeed a significant premise for her is that objects are not fully objects until they engage subjects (and vice versa). Although she never directly concludes what an object is, her discussion on p. 5-7 establishes a kind of set of criteria for deciding what is an object and what is not:

- Ability to produce experience
- Can be interpreted
- Has material qualities

Telling, and different from what I expected from my own discipline (art-history)'s definition of object, is that nowhere does Dudley consider fundamental to the definition of "object" that it be manufactured / manmade or somehow acted upon by a subject (except for interpretation), much less that it be the result of a creative process. Thus under this definition, an apple can be an object.

## Relevance

As both a practitioner and someone who teaches museum studies, Dudley is particularly concerned about how to apply this more material approach in the museum setting today and what the impact might be for visitors. She concludes with an analysis of the exhibition "Australian Journeys" as a launching point for examining the relevance of a material approach to exhibiting objects and some of the practical considerations. Ultimately she advocates for choices that reduce the distance between visitors and objects and foster affective and sensorial engagement alongside intellectual/cognitive engagement – while of course, being responsible custodians of things

*TO STUDENTS: A note on process for preparing your own article presentations*

- Read through the whole article once
- Go back to the "beginning" and identify the *problem, established view, thesis*
- Read a second time, highlighting ONLY significant concepts and evidence associated with it
- Decide what is significant about thesis (thinking in terms of the day's theme; the other readings, etc...) and highlighted concepts
- Evaluate the evidence – too much, not enough? Best kind for the argument? Relevant? Supports her conclusions?
- What else do I know that helps / challenges the author?
- Then prepare presentation (See Guidelines posted on Bbd and handed out in class) REMEMBER, IT IS NOT REQUIRED THAT YOU CREATE A HANDOUT.

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Unpacking the articles cont'd.....

### BENNETT EXERPTS

Discuss – key take-aways? Muddy points? Lets talk about her terms: "thing" "actant"

Re-sort our collection according to Bennett's concepts

Do the categories of nature, culture, object, thing matter?

What in this collection can be an actant? Under what circumstances?

What are the implications of Bennett's approach for studying things?

SHOW & DISCUSS promo of *Botany of Desire* PBS special (Michael Pollen)

So what on earth is VIBRANT MATTER then? Discuss

- “thing power” / “vital materialism” or “vibrant matter” – DISCUSS THEN
- the “it” in “it rains” IS alive
- materialism and consumerism conceals the vitality of matter and thus is antimateriality p. 5

SHOW SUMMARY SLIDE: ways that new materialism talks about matter

INSTRUCTOR OBSERVATIONS. IMPORTANT – unlike the other authors we read for today, Bennett is not explicitly interested in creating a theory or method for interpreting objects, she is interested in creating a model for understanding society

- Who is Bennett? – a political scientist; she is interested in ethical action and what view of the world is required for that ethical action to occur – to do so she considers how different political scientists have thought about materiality and matter
- As part of coming to her theory she examines philosophical models of what are “things” and also legal models
- in political theory traditionally, materiality refers to human social structures or to the human meanings “embodied” in these structures and their stuff
- Bennett, however, wants to resist *anthropocentrism*

Key issues to bring out in discussion:

- Defining object / thing – WHY DOES BENNETT PREFER THE TERM THING?
  - Object implies a status that still puts humans first / above -> Bennett prefers the term “thing”
  - “things” exceed their status as objects and manifest traces of independence or aliveness, shaping human experience
  - includes organic and inorganic NOT requiring human hand – exists independent of human entirely – which pushes further than Dudley
- use of term Naïve (what does using the term naïve imply? -> subjective, sensory, not intellectual, informed or researched -> willingness to be *struck* by something – trash not debris but a thing)
- alternative to the object as a way of encountering the human world – so pay attention to TRASH as if it were a museum object kind of thing
- reject life/matter binary (so inanimate and non-organic things count too – all one big boat)
- application -> p. 7-8 the story of Odradek the spool of thread -> “ontologically multiple” DEFINE ontological – ***when you encounter an unfamiliar term in a reading you should look it up!! I will always try to prepare definitions of specialized vocabulary but you will remember those better if you already***



***started to try to understand the term ahead of class – plus, hard to get the argument if it depends on an unknown concept, right?***

Solicit reactions to Bennett? Power or usefulness of her approach? Danger?

- Ethics: Bennett points to an objection to conflating subjects and objects – the moral problem of instrumentalizing people, ie: making people things - > what is her answer? p. 12 to raise the status of the materiality of which we are composed (which means?)

Concluding thoughts

New Materialism:

- Does not reject other methods; works with them as well as beyond disciplinary boundaries
- Understands nature and culture as “co-constituted” ie: nature and culture mutually create each other in an equal and responsive relationship