

## AGENCY, BIOGRAPHY AND OBJECTS

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Anthropologists since Mauss (1924/1954) and Malinowski (1922) have asserted that the lines between persons and things are culturally variable, and not drawn in the same way in all societies. In certain contexts, persons can seem to take on the attributes of things and things can seem to act almost as persons. Studies of traditional exchange systems (from Boas and Malinowski to Strathern, Munn and Campbell) have elaborated on this insight by detailing how objects can be given a gender, name, history and ritual function. Some objects can be so closely associated with persons as to seem inalienable (Weiner 1992), and some persons – slaves, dependants – can have their own humanity depreciated so as to approach the status of simple possessions. Within this framework, things can be said to have ‘biographies’ as they go through a series of transformations from gift to commodity to inalienable possessions, and persons can also be said to invest aspects of their own biographies in things.

### AGENCY AND OBJECTS

The recent agentive turn in social theory had led a number of theorists to speak in new ways about the agency of objects. It might be useful to trace the genealogy of this particular usage in order to clarify its antecedents and its currently controversial status. Laura Ahern sees the new interest in agency at the turn of the twenty first century as following on the heels of critical social movements and critiques that have questioned:

impersonal master narratives that leave no room for tensions, contradictions, or oppositional actions

on the part of individuals and collectivities. It is because questions about agency are so central to contemporary political and theoretical debates that the concept arouses so much interest and why it is therefore so crucial to define clearly.

(2001: 109)

Her definition, in which agency is ‘the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act’ (2001: 110), is deliberately not restricted to persons, and may include spirits, machines, signs and collective entities (ancestors, corporations, social groups). It is also deliberately relative, since just as different societies have varying notions of social action, they may have diverse ideas about who and what is capable of acting in a particular context.

An open definition raises the question of exactly what is meant by an agent. Does the capacity to act imply individuality and distinctiveness? Can it also apply to relatively generic classes of objects? Can the agency of objects be dissolved and decentred (as certain structuralists and post-structuralists have argued) or does the notion of agency by itself imply an idiosyncratic power to change the world? Such questions need to be explored in relation to an ethnographic study of objects as agents in the world.

The proposition that things can be said to have ‘social lives’ was developed in an influential edited collection (Appadurai 1986), which drew attention to the ways in which passive objects were successively moved about and recontextualized. Appadurai’s essay in that volume framed this explicitly as a process of commodification and de commodification, although of course ‘commodity’ is only one of a wider range of different ‘identities’ (gift,

talisman, art work, heirloom, ancestral legacy, ritual sacra, memento) that an object can assume. He was concerned with showing how the capitalist spirit of calculation is still often present in the gift (as Mauss was well aware, since he spoke of its coercive power), and in analysing the shifts in object identity created by trajectories that took them through different regimes of value. Fifteen years later, another collection titled *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture* (Fred Myers 2001) tried to carry that notion further by focusing on contradictions among objects' shifting meanings for different constituencies.

Both of these collections emphasize commerce and external constraints over local meanings and internal configurations, in keeping with a broader disciplinary change from 'local' levels to 'global' ones, and from single-sited field projects to multi-sited ones in order to trace persons and things as they move through space and time. The relationship between objects and individual subjectivity was given relatively short shrift, as was the relation between objects and gender or personality. Objects do indeed pass through many transformations, and Appadurai's call for a study of the 'paths' and 'life histories' of things inspired a whole series of new studies which looked at the 'mutability of things in recontextualization' (Nick Thomas 1989: 49). This involves a form of 'methodological fetishism' which looks at the ways in which things may be drawn into significant diversions from familiar paths:

It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculation that enliven things. Thus, even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.

(Appadurai 1986: 5)

Kopytoff's essay 'The cultural biography of things' in the same volume focused these questions on particular objects, asking, Who makes it? In what conditions? From what materials? For what purpose? What are the recognized stages of development? How does it move from hand to hand? What other contexts and uses can it have? In effect, his essay encouraged researchers to ask the same questions of a thing that they would of people.

Christopher Steiner argues (Steiner 2001: 209) that anthropologists who focused on the agentive elements of objects had misinterpreted the

seminal idea of the 'cultural biography of things' articulated in Kopytoff's article in *The Social Life of Things* (1986). The processual model of commoditization that Kopytoff proposed, he argues, had an impact in anthropology because it coincided with a broadening of research paradigms to include transnational movement and connection.

Yet in their zeal to explore the social identity of material culture, many authors have attributed too much power to the 'things' themselves, and in so doing have diminished the significance of human agency and the role of individuals and systems that construct and imbue material goods with value, significance and meaning. Thus, commodity fetishism has been inscribed as the *object* of the model rather than its *subject* ... The point is not that 'things' are any more animated than we used to believe, but rather that they are infinitely malleable to the shifting and contested meanings constructed *for them* through human agency.

(Steiner 2001: 210)

It is perhaps more accurate to see these as two separate directions of interpretation, one stressing the ways in which things are commodified and lose personality, the other looking at the processes by which they are invested with personality and may have an impact. The malleability of objects, and the many different ways they may be perceived, are linked to what Gell might call their 'instrumentality' or even – in his provocative new use of the term – their 'agency', the ways in which they stimulate an emotional responses and are invested with some of the intentionality of their creators. Others have also looked at the ways in which things actively constitute new social contexts, working as technologies (such as clothing) that can make religious change (conversion to Christianity) or political allegiance visible as a feature of people's behavior and domestic life.

Gell has formulated a theory about the creation of art objects that could in fact be a theory about the creation of all forms of material culture. He asserts that things are made as a form of instrumental action: Art (and other objects) is produced in order to influence the thoughts and actions of others. Even those objects which seem to be without a directly identifiable function – that is, objects which have previously been theorized as simple objects of aesthetic contemplation – are in fact made in order to act upon the world and to act upon other persons. Material objects thus embody complex intentionalities and mediate social agency. The psychology of art needs

to look at how patterns and perception have specific effects on viewers, and are designed to arouse fear, desire, admiration or confusion.

His work suggests a more active model of an object's biography, in which the object may not only assume a number of different identities as imported wealth, ancestral valuable or commodity but may also 'interact' with the people who gaze upon it, use it and try to possess it. Gendering objects in itself allocates aspects of agency and identity to things (Strathern 1988, 1992), and Gell's model of the 'distributed mind' which we find scattered through objects has a strong kinship with Strathern's notion of the 'partible person' who is divisible into things that circulate along specific exchange trajectories.

The equivalence suggested between the agency of persons and of things calls into question the borders of individual persons and collective representations in a number of ways. It implies that we need to pay more attention to the phenomenological dimension of our interactions with the material world, and interrogate the objects which fascinate us as well as our reasons for feeling this fascination.

The theoretical frame that he elaborates for making new sense of these objects – both the 'traditional ones' like cloth and the new ones like photographs – comes from Gell's ideas about the technology of enchantment and the enchantment of technology. He defines his concept of technical difficulty as producing a 'halo effect' of resistance (a notion related to, but still somewhat different from, Walter Benjamin's notion of the 'aura'). Works of art make it difficult for us to possess them in an intellectual rather than a material sense, so their effect on our minds is 'magical' – it is a form of enchantment.

In *Art and Agency* (1998), Gell takes this argument further by arguing that anthropological theories of art objects have to be primarily concerned with social relations over the time frame of biographies. He rejects the linguistic analogies of semiotic theories and insists that art is about doing things, that it is a system of social action – and that we have to look at how people act through objects by distributing parts of their personhood into things. These things have agency because they produce effects, they cause us to feel happy, angry, fearful or lustful. They have an impact, and we as artists produce them as ways of distributing elements of our own efficacy in the form of things. Art objects use formal complexity and technical virtuosity to create 'a certain cognitive indecipherability' (1998: 95) which may

tantalize and frustrate the viewer in trying to recognize wholes and parts, continuity and discontinuity, synchrony and succession. He analyses involuted designs intended to entrance and ward off dangerous spirits, tattoos and shields in Polynesia, and idols which are animated in a variety of ways, and able to bestow fertility, sickness, cures or misfortunes.

Gell argues that an object acts as an agent when the artist's skill is so great that the viewer simply cannot comprehend it and is therefore captivated by the image. This notion of captivation asserts that an object is art on the basis of what it does, not what it is. Gell's approach allows him to sidestep the problematic distinction between Western and non-Western art, and to present a theory about the efficacy of an object's appearance – about cross-cultural visibility, in other words – rather than specifically about art. Objects which are often treated as material culture or crafts, rather than art (like textiles, betel bags, etc.) therefore deserve equal attention, since their making is a 'particularly salient feature of their agency' (Gell 1998: 68).

Gell defines captivation as 'the demoralisation produced by the spectacle of unimaginable virtuosity' (1998: 71), an effect created by our being unable to figure out how an object came into being. Many imported objects in remote locations in Melanesia or South East Asia emerge as 'captivating' – the smooth, shiny surfaces of porcelain ceramics (given ritual status as the anchors of the polity, Hoskins 1993), the explosive sounds and fatal bullets of guns, and of course the mysterious lifelike two-dimensional images of the camera. In the 1990s, when tourists began to come to this once remote area in substantial numbers, they were considered predatory voyeurs, 'foreigners with metal boxes' who used the hose-like aperture of their zoom lenses to extract blood from children and take it home to power electronic devices in the industrial West. The cameras that every tourist brings to capture images of headhunters and primitive violence became the very emblems of the exotic violence that they were designed to capture (Hoskins 2002).

Rather than using these stories to produce yet another version of the colonial cliché of the credulous native, Gell's theory provides us with the insight that there is nothing irrational or even particularly 'primitive' in seeing the camera as a technology of enchantment – all forms of visual representation share this trait. Photographs themselves were rarely shared with their subjects in 'tribal' or 'adventure tourism' – instead, people in remote villages

saw a parade of intimidating gadgets which seemed to steal away some aspect of their lives that they had no access to or control over. The story of the bloodthirsty camera encodes a critical awareness of global inequities in access to and use of technology. Gell's notion of captivation helps us to isolate a realm of specifically *visual* power, which – while obviously embedded in a wider political economic context of unequal access to technology – is also enchanting in its own way.

Looking at photographs and paintings in the context of ancestor worship and animism helps us to isolate the 'agentive elements' of certain technologies, and disengage these elements from simple differences in representation between a hand-drawn image, say, and one produced by chemicals working to record lines of light and shadow. Much of Gell's argument builds on what was left unsaid in Walter Benjamin's 'A short history of photography', where he first criticized the 'fetishistic and fundamentally anti-technical concept of art with which the theoreticians of photography sought to grapple for almost a hundred years' (Benjamin 1978: 241).

In fact, Gell acknowledges his debt to Benjamin only through his spectral reincarnation as Michael Taussig, who has seized on Benjamin's insight that 'it is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious' (1978: 243) – which is the secret that shows us how our own eyes work to construct coherent visual images. Benjamin described the new visual worlds produced by photography to 'waking dreams ... which, enlarged and capable of formulation, make the difference between technology and magic visible as a thoroughly historical variable' (1978: 244). Benjamin argued that 'The first people to be reproduced entered the visual space of photography with their innocence intact, uncompromised by captions' (1978: 244). While sitting for long exposures they had to focus on life in the moment rather than hurrying past it, and thus 'the subject as it were grew into the picture' (1978: 245) and felt a sort of participation in the process that is no longer true of the quick snapshot.

Rather than seeing the celluloid image as the 'last refuge of the cult value of the picture', it is possible to see it instead as the wedge of a postcolonial perspective on modernity. Photographs of revered figures from the past, ancestors and heroes, can be used not only to commemorate them in traditional ways, but also to recreate them visually for a new world of globalized imagery. The 'resistance' which

Gell talks about in art objects – their ability to challenge us and captivate us visually – suggests that the 'magic' of mechanical reproduction will not remove the aura of art objects but only enhance it. John Berger makes a similar argument when he notes that 'The bogus religiosity which now surrounds original works of art, and which is ultimately dependent upon their market value, has become the substitute for what paintings lost when the camera made them reproducible' (Berger 1972: 230). The new craze for photography in the Third World stems from a global political economy in which mechanical visibility is restricted to certain peoples and certain institutions, and these lines of access are marked by differences of race and culture as well as class.

### FROM AGENCY TO BIOGRAPHY

Asking questions about the agency of objects has led to the development of a more biographical approach, particularly in Melanesia, where Malinowski (1922) first described the distinctive 'personalities' of shell valuables. The *malanggan*, an intricate wooden carving produced for mortuary ceremonies in New Ireland, is the most widely collected object in the global world of 'primitive art'. They are laboriously produced, then displayed for a few hours at the end of a ceremony. It is only the internalized memory of the object which is locally valued, so it can be 'killed' with gifts of shell money – and then made available for sale to collectors. Gell describes this process as making the *malanggan* 'an index of agency of an explicitly temporary nature' (1998: 225). By providing the 'skin' for a deceased relative, the process of carving objectifies social relationships and brings together the dispersed agency of the deceased – visualizing his social effectiveness as 'a kind of body that accumulates, like a charged battery, the potential energy of the deceased' (Gell 1998: 225). Küchler, in the most detailed ethnography of *malanggan*, says it serves as a container for ancestral life force, which mediates and transmits agency from one generation to another (2002), as a visualized memory which is publicly transacted. The 'cognitive stickiness' of art works, which allows them to be the vehicles of a technology of enchantment, lies in their ability to absorb death and represent it as a new form of life.

Küchler's work finishes with the observation that *malanggan* themselves are memory objects which work in the opposite way to our

own museum displays. She notes that 'the extraordinary theatre of memory that we have enshrined in our museums is the result of a laborious and systematic work of displacement of objects by images' (2002: 190). While we value objects because of the memories attached to them, the people of New Ireland value them instead for their work in detaching memories, undoing and displacing relations between persons and things. In this way, 'surfaces can be vehicles of thought in ways that we ascribe to living kinds only' (Küchler 2002: 193). The 'animated skins' of New Ireland are made deliberately to affect the thinking and feeling of those who look upon them.

Gell argues that consciousness is a mental process through which subjective temporality is constituted through transformations over time. Nancy Munn's (1986) work on Gawa canoes and wealth objects describes this as 'value creation' over a biographical cycle, in which the canoes start life as trees grown on clan land, are then transferred to other clans to be carved, then sailed and traded against yams or shell valuables. The canoe itself is dematerialized but still 'owned', although in another form, and it is ultimately converted into what Munn calls 'sociotemporal space-time'. A famous *kula* operator is able to 'move minds' at great distances and becomes so enchantingly attractive and so irresistibly persuasive that the exchange paths of all the most desirable valuables converge in his direction. His personhood is distributed through a series of objects linked by his strategic actions and calculated interventions, which anticipate the future to guide each transaction to the most useful end.

Gell's review of the politics of Melanesian exchange leads him back to the idea that the *oeuvre* of a Western artist can be seen as a form of distributed personhood, a way of collecting 'a life' through collecting representations which cull the memories of that life and give them visual expression. His argument recalls the distinction made by French sociologist Violette Morin (1969) between a 'biographical object' and a 'protocol object', or a standardized commodity. Though both sorts of objects maybe produced for mass consumption, the relation that a person establishes with a biographical object gives it an identity that is localized, particular and individual, while those established with an object generated by an outside protocol are globalized, generalized and mechanically reproduced. Morin distinguishes three levels of mediation as characteristic of biographical objects – their relation to time, space and the owner or consumer.

In relation to time, the biographical object grows old, and may become worn and tattered along the life span of its owner, while the public commodity is eternally youthful and not used up but replaced. In relation to space, the biographical object limits the concrete space of its owner and sinks its roots deep into the soil. It anchors the owner to a particular time and space. The protocol object, on the other hand, is everywhere and nowhere, marking not a personal experience but a purchasing opportunity. The biographical object 'imposes itself as the witness of the fundamental unity of its user, his or her everyday experience made into a thing' (Morin, 1969: 137–8), while the public commodity is in no way formative of its user's or owner's identity, which is both singular and universal at the same time. People who surround themselves with biographical objects do so to develop their personalities and reflect on them, while consumers of public commodities are decentred and fragmented by their acquisition of things, and do not use them as part of a narrative process of self-definition.

## OBJECTS AS THE SUBJECT OF BIOGRAPHIES

Thinking about objects as in some ways similar to persons has led to several experiments with biographical writing about objects. These various experiments have taken two dominant forms: (1) those 'object biographies' which begin with ethnographic research, and which thus try to render a narrative of how certain objects are perceived by the persons that they are linked to, and (2) efforts to 'interrogate objects themselves' which begin with historical or archaeological research, and try to make mute objects 'speak' by placing them in a historical context, linking them to written sources such as diaries, store inventories, trade records, etc. The first has been primarily the domain of anthropologists (MacKenzie 1991; Hoskins 1993, 1998; Keane 1997; Ferme 2001), the second primarily the domain of art historians (Arnold 2002), historians (Saunders 2002; Ulrich 2001) and archeologists (Bradley 1990; Meskell 2004; Fortijn 2002; Tilley 1996, 1999; J. Thomas 1996, 1999). Breaking up that comfortable symmetry has been the work of a few anthropologists who have worked extensively with archives (Edwards 2001; Stoler 2002) or with museum collections (Errington 1998; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998).

Among the first anthropologists to explicitly take a biographical approach to the study of objects was Maureen Mackenzie in *Androgynous Objects: String Bags and Gender in Central New Guinea* (1991). She explicitly focuses on the 'the lifecycle of an object' in order to 'uncover the relations and meanings which surround it' (1991: 27). The objects she examines, bags made of looped twine from bark fibres (*bilum*), are used to hold young children, vegetables, fish, firewood, and carried by both men and women, with women carrying them from the head and men carrying them from the shoulders. As 'the most hard-worked accessory of daily life' (1991: 1) in Papua New Guinea, the string bag mediates and manifests a whole series of social relationships for the Tekefol people – nurturance, decoration, supernatural protection, spirit divination, gift exchange, etc. A new tourist and export market has also given the string bag value as a trade commodity, and it can be spotted on the shoulders of teenage girls in American shopping malls as well as Melanesian villages. Particular styles of string bags are badges of regional identity, initiatory grades and ritual status. By looking at this 'seemingly insignificant domestic carryall', MacKenzie concentrates 'on the different types of agency and the different competences which gender demarcates' (1991: 22), rejecting an earlier suggestion from Annette Weiner (1976: 13) that the string bag represents a domain of female control and autonomy. Her theoretical contribution is to present a case study of an object which crosses over from male to female worlds: 'My biographical focus on a single artefact ... as a complete object made by women and men, will give me a technological and sociological understanding of its combinatory symbolism, and reveal spheres of activity that an analysis of either female work or male cult activity would miss' (1991: 28).

The approach taken in a series of studies of material culture, history and exchange on Sumba is also ethnographic, but it focuses more on narrative elaboration than variations in physical form (Hoskins 1993, 1998; Keane 1997). The Kodi people of Sumba, eastern Indonesia, have a series of named 'history objects' which demarcate and preserve a sense of the past and collective memory. These are called the 'traces of the hands and feet' (*oro limya oro witti*) of the ancestors, and consist of heirloom gold valuables, porcelain urns, spiritually potent weapons, and musical instruments used to communicate with the spirit world. *The Play of Time: Kodi Perspectives on Calendars, History and Exchange* (Hoskins 1993)

examined the use of prestigious objects in the annual cycle of ritual ceremonies, and their significance in preserving and authenticating memories of ancestral exploits. Recent encounters between traditional objects like a supposedly unmovable urn containing holy water and the colonial 'staff of office' bestowed by Dutch invaders on local leaders (*rajas*) were traced to show local perceptions that prestigious objects could help to make history by 'choosing' their proper location and exerting a mysterious influence on their human guardians to assure that they ended up there. Certain ritual tools – the 'possessions of the ancestors' – were believed to be repositories of magical power which could affect the processes that they came to represent: 'Power objectified in a concrete object preserves an impression of stability even when the object comes into the possession of a rival; thus, it can legitimate usurpation while maintaining a fiction of continuity' (1993: 119).

In more private, domestic spheres ordinary objects like a spindle, a betel bag, and a woven cloak also used as a funeral shroud illustrate connections between people and things that are less ritualized but equally intimate. In *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives* (Hoskins 1998) six women and men narrate their own lives by talking about their possessions, using these objects as a pivot for introspection and a tool for reflexive autobiography. The metaphoric properties are deeply gendered, and established through the conventional use of paired couplets in ritual language, which portray the betel bag as containing the fertile folds of a woman's body, or the spindle and the spear as the probing force of masculine penetration. The desire to possess another person in a sexual sense may be deflected on to the possession of a beloved thing, often a surrogate companion or spouse (sometimes actually buried with an unmarried person 'to make the grave complete'). Pervasive themes of dualism and the search for the counterpart are projected on to the object world, where fantasies of wholeness and completion are more easily fulfilled.

Webb Keane's *Signs of Recognition: Power and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society* (1997) examines similar themes in the exchange transactions of Anakalang, another Sumbanese domain. His approach is less biographical – in that it does not address many individual lives – and more processual. He looks at the ways in which words and things are invested with social value as they are transacted in tandem, introducing an economic dimension to speech events, so that verbal descriptions are part of a complex political

economy in which things are not always what they seem. He argues that agency should not necessarily be located in biologically discrete individuals, but is instead most salient in formal ceremonial contexts, which 'display and tap into an agency that is assumed to transcend the particular individuals present and the temporal moment in which they act' (1997: 7). So agency on Sumba can be located in disembodied ancestors, lineage houses, inter-clan alliances, and even heirloom valuables, all of which are subject to ongoing construction and transformation.

Material objects can be used to both reveal and conceal secret histories, as explored in Mariane Ferme's *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History and the Everyday in Sierra Leone* (2001). Looking at the connections between cola nuts, cloth, palm oil, clay, houses and hair styles, she finds a hidden history of slavery and oppression, which has left its mark on gender relations as well. As 'the material bearers of collective memory' (Ferme 2001: 9) these everyday objects are inscribed with biographical and historical resonances. Clay and oil, for instance, are 'biographical substances that inscribe temporality on the body' (Ferme 2001: 17), producing heat or coolness in various life-cycle rituals which socially construct gender and maintain its force through bodily memories. Ferme argues, 'the material world matters, but ... the life that objects and substances take on, from circumstances not of their own making but of their made-ness, produces unstable meanings and unpredictable events' (2001: 21). The circulation of everyday objects takes place within not only a visible political economy but also 'an occult economy' in which hairstyles and clothing patterns fix the significance of historical events in time and act as 'mnemonic clues' to secret strategies developed by people used to living close to death. An 'aesthetics of ambiguity' has developed as a way to live with permanent danger. The civil war that has raged throughout the country since 1991 has created new narratives around objects linked to pain and violence, objects which hide their real meanings underneath the surface. Ferme suggests that there are stories in the shadows of this African nation which need to be retrieved and understood in relation to many different levels of concealment and circulation.

Ferme's study is inspired, in part, by the micro-history of Carlo Ginzburg, which focuses on tiny details as clues to wider social processes and transformations, constructing a complex social reality from apparently insignificant material data (Ginzburg 1989). A similar agenda lies

behind historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (2001). Shifting from studying the lives of ordinary people, through wills and diaries, to studying their artefacts, Ulrich looks at baskets, spinning wheels, needlework and cloth to interrogate a total of fourteen objects and uncover details about their makers and users and the communities they built. She portrays eighteenth-century New England as a battleground of Indian, colonist, slave and European cultures, each leaving its mark on the design of these 'surviving objects'. Ulrich also examines the construction of cultural memory, by quoting the work of theologian Horace Bushell and examining the perennial American nostalgia for the 'good old days', when clothing and other necessities were mostly made at home by family labour. Aiming to study 'the flow of common life', in order 'to discover the electricity of history', Ulrich identifies many individuals involved with these artefacts. But it is objects themselves that emerge as the strongest 'personalities' in the book. We learn that American Indians (like Ferme's Sierra Leone women) saw wigwams and house construction (as well as hair plaiting) as forms of 'weaving', that French stitchery inspired needlepoint framed in Boston homes, and that wealth objects were displayed in coveted Hadley cupboards to document and preserve family prestige. Questions of provenance are explored in a series of detective stories, which then lead to further linkages of geography, genealogy and history.

Dana Arnold brings together a series of essays in *The Metropolis and its Image: Constructing Identities for London, c. 1750–1950* (2002) that present the biography of a city on the model of a human life story. The collection looks at key moments in the emergence of London as a metropolis and different ways its image has been conceived and represented. The complexity of London's different identities is revealed in the tensions and contradictions between manifestations of civic and national pride, the relationship between private and governmental institutions and urban planning issues. Specific questions of architectural style are examined in the context of the relationship between the City of London and London as a metropolis. Urban identities are explored with a methodology which looks at how the city has been anthropomorphized as it is pictured in the visual arts, planned by the architects and urbanists, and studied by historians who interpret its various *alter egos* and former identities.

Archaeologists have also adapted biographical methods. Lynne Meskell's *Object Worlds in*

*Ancient Egypt: Material Biographies in Past and Present* (2004) looks at how excavated objects reveal ancient Egyptians' lives and preoccupations. What do Egyptian burial practices tell us about their notions of the person, gender and bodily experience? Do giant pyramids and the preservation of the body through mummification signal a particular concern with embodiment and memory, so that the physical body is required for the social legacy? Meskell's notion of the 'material biography' brings together questions of personhood and the meanings of objects in relation to an ancient culture that is heavily documented but still incompletely understood. She also asks comparative questions about why Egyptian antiquity has been of such great popular interest, from Parisian landmarks to the modern temples of commerce that are Las Vegas casinos. The mysteries provoked by this vanished world suggest ways in which ancient objects are used to mediate between past and present, and to summon up an alternative cultural space to explore contemporary concerns with mortality and materiality.

David Fontijn's *Sacrificial Landscapes: Cultural Biographies of Persons, Objects and 'Natural' Places in the Bronze Age of the Southern Netherlands* (2002) looks at elaborate metal valuables which were left behind in various watery locations. Why did the communities that buried them never return to retrieve them? Controlled excavations of local settlements and cemeteries have revealed few of these objects, while more remote streams and marshes have them in great abundance. The selective deposition of these bronze objects is related in his argument to the construction of various forms of social identity, such as male or female, or of belonging to local or non-local communities. He then discusses the 'cultural biographies' of weapons (axes, spears, daggers), ornaments and dress fittings, and tries to reconstruct the social contexts in which these objects once 'lived'.

Somewhat further afield, a recent collection on the history of scientific knowledge looks at the *Biographies of Scientific Objects* (Daston 2000) and asks, Why does an object or phenomenon become the subject of scientific inquiry? Why do some of these objects remain provocative, while others fade from centre stage? Why do some objects return as the focus of research long after they were once abandoned? Dreams, atoms, monsters, culture, society, mortality and the self are among the objects addressed, and the book ranges from the sixteenth century to the twentieth, exploring the ways in which scientific objects are both real and historical. Marshall Sahlins has a

contribution entitled 'Sentimental pessimism and ethnographic experience: or, Why culture is not a disappearing object'. While the notion of 'biography' here is obviously to some extent a rhetorical conceit, it is used deliberately to suggest a life trajectory, a process in which a concept or diagnosis can have a 'youth', a period of 'mature development' and even a 'death', so that its life span resembles that of an individual. Objects of inquiry are discovered and invented, become popular for a period and then may experience a waning of their influence, and they grow more 'real' as they become entangled in webs of cultural significance.

Cloth has attracted particular attention as a biographical object, because it is worn on the body and is often a marker of identity. *Between the Folds: Stories of Cloth, Lives and Travels from Sumba* (Forshee 2001) begins each chapter with a photograph of a textile, and follows it with a description of the individual who designed and wove the textile, showing how motifs and colours can reflect the creator's personality. The new development of trade, tourism and a commercial market on the island reviews how these cloths have travelled as commodities as well as expressions of artistic inventiveness. *Clothing the Pacific* (Colchester 2003) looks less at the issue of authorship and more at shifting social and historical contexts, particularly influences from missionary and colonial authorities who had their own ideas of how Pacific Islanders should be dressed. Conversion to Christianity is often marked by changes in dress, and new composite styles are prominent in diasporic communities, suggesting that a new way of dress is also a new fashioning of the self, a biographic process of changing the inner person to fit new outer garments. Clothing is analysed as a technology that 'recreated certain contexts anew' (Colchester 2003: 15) in the hybrid forms of modest 'Sunday best' costumes in Tahiti and Samoa, Cook Islands appliqué quilts and even T-shirts in Polynesian Auckland.

## CONCLUSION

Anthropologists have long argued that things can, in certain conditions, be or act like persons: they can be said to have a personality, to show volition, to accept certain locations and reject others, and thus to have agency. Often, these attributes of agency are linked to the anthropomorphizing process by which things are said to have social lives like persons and thus to be appropriate subjects for biographies. Gell's



challenge to anthropological theory came from a phenomenological perspective. In an earlier reflection on theories of the occult (Gell 1974: 26) he argued that 'magical thought is seduced by the images it makes of something that by definition cannot be represented', but ritual acts try to represent it anyway. In a similar fashion, his theories of the technology of enchantment suggest that objects that challenge our senses or our comprehension have their most powerful effects on our imaginations.

His approach has proved controversial. While some collections have obviously been inspired by its challenges (Pinney and Thomas 2001), others have been more critical (Campbell 2002), or have seemed to react by largely ignoring it (Myers and Marcus 1995; Phillips and Steiner 1999). In *The Art of Kula* (2002) Campbell examines the layers of encoded meaning on the carved and painted prow boards of Trobriand canoes, arguing that colour associations and other formal elements 'speak' to the islanders about emotional and spiritual issues. This would seem close to Gell's arguments about the agency of art objects, but Campbell finds his approach ultimately too restrictive. While she applauds the interest in intention, causation, result and transformation that is part of seeing art as a vehicle for social action, she hesitates to cast aside 'those approaches that examine the way formal elements encode meanings and the processes of representing significant relationships and the context in which these communicate' (2002: 8). Art has long been investigated as a visual code of communication, and the problem of indigenous aesthetics is an important component of this. She does say that the biographic elements of art, and the ways in which it may provide an abstracted or indirect 'visual biography', must remain central to the discipline.

Gell argued that a biographical approach to the study of objects is also a particularly anthropological approach, because 'the view taken by anthropology of social agents attempts to replicate the time perspective of these agents themselves' (Gell 1998: 10). In contrast, history or sociology could be described as supra-biographical and social and cognitive psychology as infra-biographical. Because anthropology tends to concentrate on 'the act' in the context of 'the life' – or a particular stage of 'the life' – it is necessarily preoccupied with the life cycle and the individual agent. The specifically biographical depth of focus defines a methodology that works best in the spaces traversed by agents in the course of their biographies. Anthropology studies social relationships

over the life course, and its approach to the study of art objects should, accordingly, focus on their relations to the persons who produce and circulate them.

The large number of works which have tried to present cultural biographies of objects or to talk about the social lives of things testifies to the fact that it is not only anthropologists who have been inspired by the biographical frame. But they also show that the notion of biography – borrowed from literary theory – has provided new perspectives on the study of material culture, and prompted new questions about how people are involved with the things they make and consume. While anthropological research has expanded beyond the study of small societies to larger global contexts and connections, the emphasis on the individual agent and stages of the life cycle remains important in the discipline, and is perhaps a trademark of even multi-sited fieldwork. When historians, philosophers of science and art historians borrow certain methods and concepts from anthropology, they are paying homage to insights developed in a biographical context and expanded to account for wider social and cultural movements. The agentive turn which has become prominent in various forms of practice theory requires attention to biographical frames of meaning and individual relations established through things with other persons. Future research will continue to question the cultural contexts established for whole classes of objects (clothing, jewellery, body parts, etc.) and the assumptions that their contexts entail. Objects themselves may not be animated, but their relations have certainly animated many debates about the ways to understand society, culture and human lives.

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## SCENES FROM A TROUBLED ENGAGEMENT

## Post-Structuralism and Material Culture Studies

*Bjørnar Olsen*

As signified by their common prefix, post-structuralism belongs to the number of oppositional intellectual projects that emerged in the (late) twentieth century. Despite the fact that most of these enterprises were united in opposing dominant regimes of power/knowledge and associated essentialist conceptions of truth, their differences should not be underrated. This even counts for post-structuralism's relations to its closest relative, postmodernism, with which it is often confused. Although postmodernism as a concept has proved extremely elusive (which may actually be seen as representative of the very condition it is meant to signify), some identifying distinctions can nonetheless be noted. Writ large, postmodernism can be conceived of as an epistemic rupture that has shaken the foundational pillars on which modern life was built, announcing a new condition tellingly signified by the numerous 'ends' it became associated with (of grand narratives, the nation state, universal reason, authenticity, history, etc.). Probably more conspicuously, however, postmodernism has surfaced as a new aesthetic or 'style' characterized by a playful allusiveness that stresses irony, genre mixing, eclecticism and ambiguity (Connor 1997; Jameson 1984; Lyotard 1984).

Although clearly related to the wider orbit of postmodernism (like fish to water, to paraphrase Foucault), post-structuralism is distinctive in being confined mainly to academic discourses and more firmly located within a defined body of knowledge. As an intellectual project, it became heavily marked by its close (although

oppositional) relations with the structuralist programme which constituted the breeding ground for most early dissenters. Moreover, the fact that post-structuralism emerged within a niche of French post-war intellectual environment, and (directly and indirectly) was conditioned by the anti-essentialist philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger (whose thoughts it effectively inherited), contributes further to its confinement within academic communities.

The 'post' added to structuralism by a new generation of intellectuals should not be understood in any antithetical or purely negative way. Post-structuralism shared several basic conceptions with its 'relational other'. Firstly, a non-essential conception of how meaning is constituted: that it is a product of the difference between entities rather than some inherent quality of the entities themselves. Second, that language (or texts) constitutes a 'model world' for any system of signification; and third, a distaste for the dominant Cartesian ontology, identifying being (and self) with consciousness.

The post-structuralist revolt, however, was grounded in a much more far-reaching critique of Western metaphysics, a metaphysics that was still supposed to infiltrate structuralism. More specifically, Western thought was claimed to be dominated by a 'metaphysics of presence', in which truth, knowledge and being were argued and secured by reference to some foundational essence, a transcendent originary instance or centre located outside discourse and practice (Derrida 1977, 1978). While the structuralist credo of meaning as a product of