
Key-Terms

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Object Ethnographies

The study of material culture has been at the origin of several cognate disciplines (archaeology, anthropology, art history, museum studies), all of which have developed related and, at times, competing interpretations of and theorizations for dealing with objects, broadly defined. Two major and still influential theoretical directions were outlined in 1986 by Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff in a collected volume that

introduced the idea of "the social life of things" as a means of going beyond Marxist understandings of commodities and goods intended for circulation. By focusing on "things-in-motion," Appadurai sought to illuminate the processual nature of value-creation, as well as the potential of all things to be commodified (1986, 5, 13). Kopytoff's "cultural biographies" were similarly process-oriented, aiming to illustrate the contexts and cultural processes through which objects became invested with various registers of meaning and value. In Kopytoff's view, in order to be able to understand these registers it is necessary to examine the biographies of "things" beyond moments of production and exchange.

Building on this conceptual work and analytical conclusions, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's "ethnographic objects" helped spur further ways of thinking, particularly about the construction of museum objects and practices as part of processes of detachment (1991). Similarly, in recent decades, scholars of material culture, art historians, and anthropologists have produced crucial theoretical reflections and nuanced accounts of "things" ranging from ethnographic objects to performance art (Buchli 2002; Henare et al. 2007; Schechner 2003). Associated with the "material turn," these approaches engaged for the first time directly with the "thingness" of objects, allowing for a sustained focus on the sensory and material properties of artefacts. This recent and growing body of work has made it possible to research and write about objects in a way that fleshes out social history, culturally constructed meanings, aesthetic aspects, and politics of engagement.

While this body of work acts as a necessary corrective for the methodological imbalances produced by earlier commodity-focused approaches (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1995), it continues to be divided along either object-focused or biography-focused lines of inquiry (Hahn and Weiss 2012; Hoskins 2006, 78). Moreover, dealing with objects, especially ones whose

histories of production, provenance, circulation, and display are entangled in what might be termed “politically inexpedient” contexts (Smith 2007)—which is frequently the case with transcultural art histories—requires further rethinking of the methodological tools at our disposal.

A move from object biographies towards object ethnographies can help balance previous display and performance-centered approaches with the methodological apparatus and self-reflexive stance of the ethnographer. Such an ethnographic approach to the study of material culture would not simply add ethnography to already established methods of dealing with objects, but instead synthetically and symmetrically combine two methodological practices and traditions. Within this framework, objects and their histories are understood as contingent, context-bound, co-produced, and co-productive of dynamic social, cultural, aesthetic, economic, and political relations. This approach aims to balance a focus on the material properties of an object with a close attention to the micro-histories, mundane processes, and constellations of actors engaged and entangled with the object or objects in question.

In the context of transcultural object histories and trajectories where the “things” in question exist in a complex web of relations of production, circulation, and meaning, such ethnographic approaches to object biographies have the ability to make visible previously hidden processes and relations, while making room for ambiguity and ambivalence. As such, they do not preclude aiming for deep and “holistic contextualization” (Miller 2016) that can work against tendencies to fetishize and fix the meaning of material culture. By requiring that objects always be considered through their placement within relationships and networks of production and engagement, bio-ethnographic analyses can help foster much-needed nuanced and critical accounts of material culture.

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