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## Things

### *Material Turn, Transnational Turn*

Around the year 2000, it was beginning to become apparent that the study of material culture (American and otherwise) had a startlingly large array of new approaches at its disposal. What had been a field of study carried out largely in the back corridors of art history and anthropology departments was coming to be seen as an area of radical innovation throughout the humanities and sciences. The literary historian Bill Brown coined the term “thing theory” and published his famous special issue of *Critical Inquiry* titled “Things,” which announced that literary criticism, with all its prestige and theoretical firepower, was now going to take up the challenge of topics like gloves and coffeemakers.<sup>1</sup> The work of Bruno Latour on the agency of objects was beginning to break out of science studies and

become widely known in the arts and humanities.<sup>2</sup> In philosophy, there were intimations of a radical new focus on the ontological dignity of material things.<sup>3</sup> Gift and commodity theory, which had been percolating in anthropology for decades, was surfacing in other disciplines as a way to understand the role of objects in the shaping of social relationships.<sup>4</sup>

We are now firmly in the grip of the “material turn” that these earlier shifts augured. It seems that virtually every discipline is worrying through questions of materiality and hosting panels and conferences about things. The expansion has been so rapid and multifaceted that it has become disorienting. We are now not even sure what to call what we used to call material culture: Thing Theory? New Materialisms? Speculative Realism? Assemblage Theory? It seems as if every day new acronyms sprout up, like OOO and ANT (object-oriented ontology and actor-network theory, respectively), with their own websites, anthologies, and scholarly networks.

These networks are international and fully interdisciplinary; these days, material culture does not have a country, and it does not have a department. What has this material turn meant for the study of American art and material culture? In this brief essay, I have two primary aims: first, with apologies for the inevitable generalizations, to provide an overview of some of the essential features of the new material studies; and second, to argue that although most of the defining scholarship has not been written by art historians, much less Americanist art historians, these latest developments in material studies have provided strong imperatives and critical resources for the transnational turn in American art history that is under investigation in this series of articles. In short, the material turn has helped produce the transnational turn.

#### Four Keywords for the New Material Studies

##### (1) Agency

The defining characteristic of the new material studies, the core claim from which all their multifaceted positions flow, is the assertion that things have agency. As outlined in different ways in the work of Latour, Alfred Gell, Jane Bennett, Bjørnar Olsen, Graham Harman, and many others, things should no longer be dismissed as inert lumps waiting to be acted on by intelligent, sovereign human agents.<sup>5</sup> The claim is not that things have free will or intentionality in the traditional sense, but that they do have properties and affordances that powerfully shape human subjectivity and activity.<sup>6</sup>

This represents a drastic shift away from the reflectionism of earlier material culture thinking, Americanist and otherwise. One of the galvanizing arguments behind the rise of material culture studies in the 1980s was that objects can reveal the “patterns of mind” (Jules Prown’s phrase) of the cultures that produce them.<sup>7</sup> For all that it relies on this pioneering work, recent material theory does not treat objects as subordinate carriers of more profound immaterial beliefs; it does not stare at objects as if to bore through them to the “ideas” lurking behind. The objects *are* the cultural patterns; the matter *is* the mind. The art historian Michael Yonan has memorably described this as getting “out of the cave”—a rejection of Platonic habits in which we imagine the material world as a mere projection of something more meaningful beyond it.<sup>8</sup>

Another important implication of agency theory is its attempt to refuse any absolute ontological distinction between humans and things. Objects are not and never have been separate from and subordinate to humans but something closer to collaborators in what Latour calls the “collective of humans and nonhumans.”<sup>9</sup> Material things are folded in with humans in a vast network of distributed action and intelligence.<sup>10</sup> The transnational implications of this approach are considerable. Subscribing to the notion of the distribution of agency through objects demands that we imagine things not as isolated beings in a single place, but as active nodal delegates linking and coordinating distant entities and forces.

Moreover, this embrace of “thing-power” (as Bennett terms it) has the potential to correct forms of global cultural subordination that sustain themselves on the hierarchy of human/thing dualism and on the derogatory function of the term “fetish.”<sup>11</sup> As William Pietz demonstrated in a landmark set of articles in the late 1980s, the very idea of the fetish emerged as a result of cross-cultural contact.<sup>12</sup> Just as sixteenth-century European Christians were beginning to understand themselves as transcendental subjects defined by abstract thought and “unhampered by fixation upon objects,” the charge of fetishism emerged as a way of subordinating non-Europeans as primitive and irrational.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, agency theory posits that all subjectivity is inalienably bound up in material things, that objects have real power over everyone. It thus contradicts that persistent mode of modern subordination in which people of color, women, workers, or indigenous peoples are deemed inferior by virtue of their greater proximity to base matter and their supposedly greater dependence on material things.

## (2) Making

The focus on material agency and its attendant remapping of the human subject has also occasioned a renewed investigation of process and making. This is a shift from the strong emphasis on consumption studies in the 1990s to a focus on production that builds on the craft scholarship that flourished in the 1970s. Scholars like Glenn Adamson and Pamela Smith have opened new ways of articulating the qualities of artisanal forms of knowledge in both the early modern and modern worlds.<sup>14</sup> This has included a renewed attention to the meaning of skill and the notion of tacit intelligence, in which the intelligence of making resides not solely in the mind of the craftsperson but somewhere in the kinetic interface between mind, body, tools, and materials.<sup>15</sup> According to these authors, the knowledge of how to make something is partially stored in the body, out of reach of abstract thinking or verbal communication, and is best transmitted through practice and imitation; it cannot be fully captured in instruction manuals or pattern books. This raises important questions about the transnational transmission of artistic knowledge. The movement of object-knowledge around the world cannot be dissociated from the movement of makers, and objects can never be fully alienable from their makers. There are huge potentials here for thinking about the immigration and emigration of artists and artisans. What, for example, did the practice of American lithography gain from the intelligence of immigrant German lithographers in the mid-nineteenth century? It is also a way to think about transnational communication that does not rely solely on verbal translation.

## (3) Exchange

The new material studies have also profoundly impacted transnational studies in their investigation of exchange practices. Among countless examples, the seminal essays by Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff in Appadurai’s edited anthology *The Social Life of Things* have provided an especially subtle and precise vocabulary for understanding what happens when an object is sold, bought, moved, or gifted, and the strategies by which its value is assessed at any point in its perambulations.<sup>16</sup> Drawing on the work of Karl Marx and Marcel Mauss on commodities and gifts, these studies offer powerful models for understanding how the exchange of objects shapes social life (a coffee mug purchased from a salesperson at a counter, for example, creates an entirely different form of social relationship than does a coffee mug received as a gift from a distant friend). This exchange perspective has been highly productive for thinking transnationally and transculturally, because it presumes that objects are most significant not when they are sitting still within an environment soaking up its local context of everyday use (the perspective taken by

the vernacular ethos of many studies of American material culture from previous years) but, rather, when they are moving between contexts or localities.

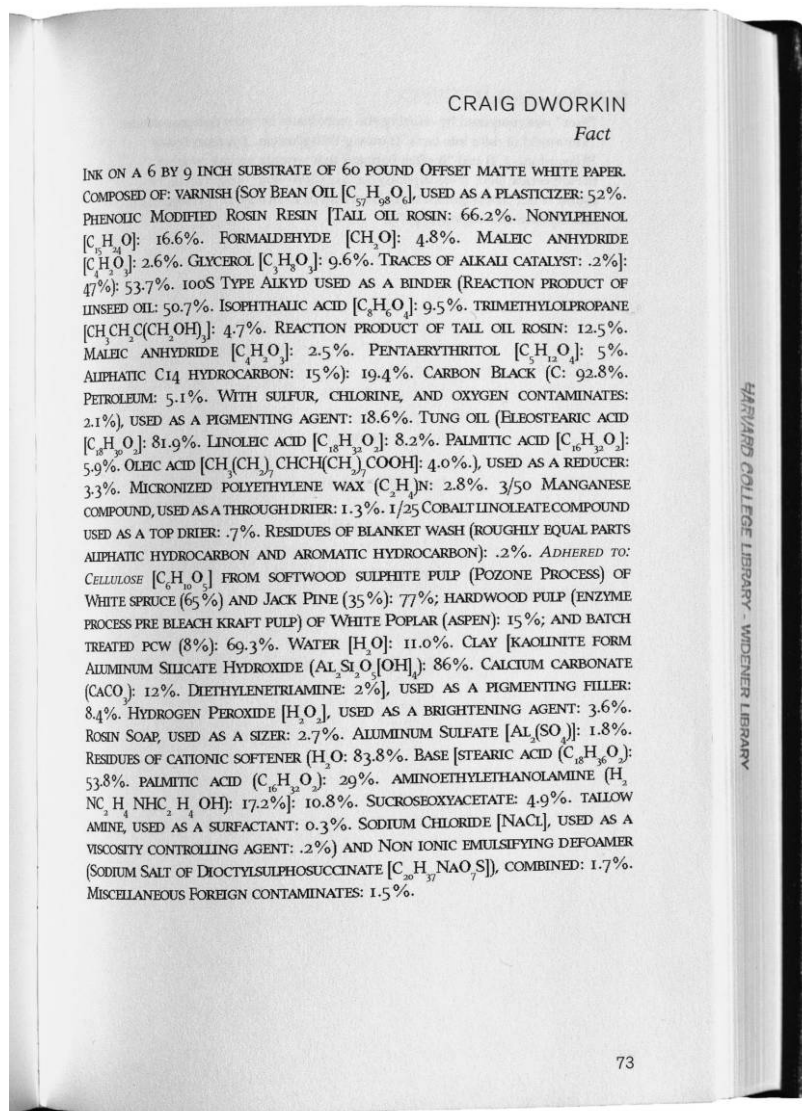
With its elaborate vocabulary of movement (it speaks commonly of the “pathways” and “trajectories” of things), exchange theory has made possible the surge of scholarship in our field around “objects in motion.”<sup>17</sup> In addition, it has enlivened boundary studies of all kinds. It highlights the complexity of exchange across different cultures, where the challenge of commensuration (figuring out what is equal to what so that exchange can take place) often requires negotiating differences between incompatible “regimes of value.”<sup>18</sup> And it gives us the tools to recognize that such negotiations are more often than not uneven or coercive, and that any study of objects in motion must acknowledge the power dynamics inherent in its very premise—a point made beautifully by Jennifer Jane Marshall in the essay following this introduction.

- 1 Craig Dworkin, *Fact*. Published in *Chain* 12 (Summer 2005): 73. Reprinted in Dworkin, *12 Erroneous Displacements and a Fact* (Information As Material, 2016)

#### (4) Matter

Finally, I would note a recent shift in the kind of material that material studies study. Whereas material culture used to be interested almost exclusively in finished, fabricated things—a.k.a. “goods”—now it follows flows and stuffs and unbounded

matter of all kinds. It is interested in tenuous objects like bubbles and clouds and gelatin; sludge and slurry and dirt and mold. When approaching, say, a colonial silver teapot (that great emblem of American material culture historiography), scholars are now less likely to ask about its style than they are to ask about its substances. What can we learn about the ebony forest that yielded the teapot’s handle? What geopolitical and ecological machinations yielded the tea inside the pot? Where did the silver come from? (Answer: almost certainly a mine in Peru or Mexico, extracted by forced indigenous labor). These questions extend equally urgently to less obviously hefty things like drawings or photographs. As Robin Kelsey has recently asked, what can and should we say about the silver in the emulsion of a photograph of a man mining silver?<sup>19</sup> What about the ink and paper that silently support so much of our material culture scholarship (fig. 1)? Such questions demand a transnational perspective because they view material culture as the play of global resources: not just the exchange of “objects” but also the flows of oil, or corn, or cadmium. This approach also assumes that localized objects as we know them are only temporary configurations of global flows of matter and energy. As Tim Ingold insists, objects don’t simply exist, they occur.<sup>20</sup> They are geo-eco-political events.



## Three Horizons for the Future of Transnational Material Studies

### (1) The Ecological Horizon

If one strain of recent scholarship burrows below the level of the object to the various materials that constitute it, another zooms out to address forms of material organization that are too big to fit comfortably within current analytical frames. Timothy Morton has recently introduced the notion of “hyperobjects” to denote material agencies like global warming that exceed our usual understanding of bounded objecthood.<sup>21</sup> As Morton’s work exemplifies, the new flow studies bring material culture within the range of rigorous ecocritical thinking; they inherently take the “global” perspective that we need most desperately to adopt now. “Global” here meaning the actual globe, the earth—the “materiality” on which all material culture (American and otherwise) depends.

### (2) The Horizon of Virtuality

Of course, along with our increased focus on objects has come, to borrow a phrase from Joshua Shannon, the “disappearance of objects.”<sup>22</sup> The great drivers of global connectivity today are the less obviously material ones: the flows of capital and information. Not goods but digital and financial abstractions. How do we understand the interplay of the material and the virtual in the making of global culture? Does our fascination with global material culture ultimately differ from neoliberal globalization? If so, how? This is a defining challenge in our field for the decades ahead.

### (3) The Horizon of Western Dualism

For all of the transnational thinking that the latest material studies have encouraged, the fact is that the theoretical structure of this thinking is still overwhelmingly Western. It is still trying to break out of the trap set by Plato of a dualism between materiality and ideality. Much more needs to be done to bring other philosophical traditions of matter and objecthood to bear on these conversations. Over the past ten years, American art history has explored an astonishing range of Asian, African, indigenous, and other “non-Western” objects, but there is still much more to do in terms of exploring the divergent philosophies of objecthood that accompany these objects, and letting those viewpoints frame the questions we ask of things.<sup>23</sup>

## Notes

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- 1 “Things,” ed. Bill Brown, special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001).
- 2 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005).
- 3 See esp. Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002).
- 4 For an excellent summary, see Alan D. Schrift, “Introduction: Why Gift?,” in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. Schrift (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1–22.
- 5 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*; Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2010); Bjørnar Olsen, *In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects* (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2013); and Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester, U.K.: Zero Books, 2010).
- 6 On affordances, see James J. Gibson, “The Theory of Affordances,” in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986), 127–43.
- 7 Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 1–19, at 6. Also published in Prown, *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2001), 69–95.
- 8 Michael Yonan, “Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies,” *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 18, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 2011): 232–48, quote at 244.

- 9 Bruno Latour, "A Collective of Humans and Nonhumans," in *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 174–215.
- 10 On distributed intelligence, see Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).
- 11 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 2–19.
- 12 William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 9 (Spring 1985): 5–17; and Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 13 (Spring 1987): 23–45.
- 13 Peter Stallybrass, "Marx's Coat," in *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. Patricia Spyer (New York: Routledge, 1998), 186.
- 14 Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); and Pamela H. Smith, "In the Workshop of History: Making, Writing, and Meaning," *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 19, no. 1 (2012): 4–31.
- 15 Michael Polanyi, "Skills," in *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (1958; repr., London: Routledge, 1998); and Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (1966; repr., Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009).
- 16 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), 3–63; and Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*, 64–94.
- 17 See, for example, "Objects in Motion: Visual and Material Culture across Colonial North America," ed. Wendy Bellion and Mónica Domínguez Torres, special issue, *Winterthur Portfolio* 45, nos. 2–3 (Summer–Autumn 2011); and Jennifer L. Roberts, *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2014).
- 18 An outstanding anthology in this vein is Fred R. Myers, ed., *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture* (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: School of American Research Press, 2001).
- 19 Robin Kelsey in Martha Rosler et al., "Notes from the Field: Materiality," *Art Bulletin* 95, no. 1 (March 2013): 21–23.
- 20 Tim Ingold, "Toward an Ecology of Materials," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): 427–42, at 431–35.
- 21 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, *Posthumanities* 27 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2013).
- 22 Joshua Shannon, *The Disappearance of Objects: New York Art and the Rise of the Postmodern City* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009).
- 23 Some good starting points: Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2010); and Jessica L. Horton, "Ojibwa *Tableaux Vivants*: George Catlin, Robert Houle, and Transcultural Materialism," *Art History* 39, no. 1 (February 2016): 124–51.

Jennifer Jane Marshall

## Nashville, New York, Paris, and Nashville

### *William Edmondson, Mobilized and Unmoved*

A major figure in the history of American art, William Edmondson was a prolific sculptor during the 1930s and 1940s. He began by making gravestones but quickly expanded his practice to include stand-alone works that he summoned from stone—angels, boxers, horses, church ladies, birds, and rams. In histories of folk art, Edmondson holds forefather status; he was “discovered” by white aficionados during an era in which self-taught art gained critical and curatorial attention. He is best known as the first black artist to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA): *Sculpture by William Edmondson* (1937).

Edmondson's sculptures have been gifted, trafficked, and exchanged through an international art-world economy. In 1938 MoMA included one of his *Mary and Martha* pieces in