The Evocative Object: why objects matter

Julie Downie
The Evocative Object: why objects matter is an exhibition based upon the idea that objects matter to us – but what makes an object evocative may not necessarily be about value, use, aesthetics or ownership. This is a discussion about how objects participate in the way we live out our lives: as enrichments to our interiors, as aids to remembering personal histories, provocations for intellectual thinking, signals to who we are as people, and in essence, how they help us locate ourselves within the world.

Objects often go unnoticed, framing our lives with such constancy and familiarity that we no longer see them. Daniel Miller wrote about this in 1987 in relation to social anthropology and called this process “the humility of things.” Objects (or the larger realm of things in this context) have the capacity to “fade out of focus” and remain in the background. Through their presence however, they ensure “normative behaviour” and “determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so”.  

Miller’s later book The Comfort of Things (2009) is a field study of ordinary households on a South London street. He interviewed many of the residents over an extended period of time; each chapter in the resulting book he considered to be a portrait. Described by one reviewer as a type of “micro-ethnography” each person’s life and connections were revealed by and through their objects. Miller was able, after many visits, to build up these portraits through how the residents talked about their objects - how they cared for them, their placement and arrangement, and the value they bestowed upon them. Miller’s book begins with two portraits - “Empty” and “Full” - that in a way signal the extremes of the homes he encountered on this street. Objects became a vehicle for the way in which a resident could reflect upon their lives and talk about relationships through the presence of these mute objects.  

It is thought that people who are able to make meaningful relationships with their things (the word “things” here encompasses a wider spectrum of objects and includes a pet and even a house itself) are therefore more likely to be able to maintain meaningful relationships with people. Objects are an integral part of all our relationships; what or whom they represent often supersedes their actual material qualities and even monetary value.

In her essay The Color of Shadows, the Weight of Breath, the Sound of Dust (1998) Rebecca Solnit builds on Dante’s idea that like a text an object can also be read on many levels. Solnit begins by saying that the first reading could be about the object’s substance, its physical properties, and this narrative could be entirely about its materials: where they came from, their qualities, or their rarity. A second level of meaning could be found in relation to the object’s making, whether by machine or by hand, and the framing for this discourse could be art historical, political or even technical: “this layer of history is not of the materials but of their shaping”.

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3  Ibid., 195.
5  Ibid.,
6  Ibid., 113-114.
A third reading is one of ownership. This Solnit calls “a narrative of desire,” and here there is talk of aesthetics, values, tastes and acquisition. A fourth level Solnit describes as being “both intrinsic and transcendent;” this is where the object has ceased to talk about itself and “begun to talk about others”. It is no longer purely about the object’s narrative, as the biography of the object has now become intertwined with that of its current owner; on this level the object now points toward an “absent or immaterial condition”. Solnit expands on this by stating that the object itself starts to disappear and thereby comes to stand-in for an event, and by this route “the material becomes the means by which the immaterial of the past is recovered”. A gift can be an exemplary example of this fourth level of object for it becomes a sign of the giver. Julie Downie’s Untitled (LadySpider), 2012, for example, represents a friend’s thoughtfulness and humour and its value is both emblematic and associative.

The museum in particular is seen as a repository charged with the safekeeping and preservation of a vast array of objects. Displayed within its walls the object becomes an artefact with a singular status, each diligently catalogued with its provenance. But what of those other less fortunate objects that congregate in places of exchange, untethered to their original owners? The space of the second-hand shop provides a site for encountering “tides of misplaced” objects where more often than not nothing is known about their past or what they may have meant to someone, their history is not so easily decipherable. Downie’s Untitled (Fishing Flies), 2012 is an object acquired in such a place holding its own secret as to how the box and contents came to be. When purchased the box already showed signs of the passage of time in its worn corners and carapaces of its legless occupants. Solnit describes this process as mysterious because an object’s time is never synchronized with ours. Yet a photograph can hold them both in stasis because a photograph is also an object that can “partake in the mysteriousness of the material”. For Solnit the process of photography has an inherent ability to alter our relationship to both objects and time.

In his essay The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes (2002) Jacques Rancière brings in the image of the “old curiosity shop”, in reference to both Balzac and Baudelaire’s writing, in his discussion about art objects and the permeability of their boundaries. He says: “For Baudelaire loitered not so much in the arcades themselves as in the plot of the shop as a new sensorium, as a place of exchange between everyday life and the realm of art”. For Rancière the old curiosity shop had made the fine arts museum equivalent to that of the ethnographic museum - the commodity or any object from ordinary life could “become a poetic object”. In this context he is speaking directly to the physical object itself making this transition.

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7 Ibid., 114.
8 Ibid., 9
9 Ibid., 10
10 Ibid., 11
13 Solnit, “The Color of Shadows, the Weight of Breath, the Sound of Dust”, 118.
14 Ibid., 15
15 Ibid., 119
16 Ibid., 17
18 Ibid., 145.
19 Ibid., 144.
In Downie’s *Untitled (Hanging Bird), 2012* the photograph of the object as its referent partakes in aspects of the object’s materiality. I would suggest that through the act of photography, and to borrow Rancière’s words, the object has become “reaestheticized in a new way”. This reaestheticization is through photography’s “photographic codes” as Umberto Eco has called them, referring to a photographer’s use of light, focus and so on. Whereby an object’s materiality is made more manifest.

Haruhiko Sameshima’s two photographs *Buddha, 2012* and *L’Amour, 2012* depict objects that were received as gifts and are perhaps more representative of the “vain indulgence” category of object (or commodity). Appadurai says a commodity is always seen in terms of multiples and can never achieve singularity even in the act of becoming a gift. Yet through the act of photography these objects of consumption (one still intact, the other a moulded shell of its packaging) have been fetishized in the process not for the commercial world but as objects that “could be featured as a phantasmagoria: a thing that looks trivial at first sight, but on a closer look is revealed as a tissue of hieroglyphs and a puzzle of theological quibbles”. For any object has the capacity to “cross the border” from our ordinary lives and into “the realm of aesthetic experience” so that the “the prose of everyday life becomes a huge, fantastic poem”.

In *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (2007) Sherry Turkle writes that we are on familiar terrain when we view objects in relation to their “useful or aesthetic” values or as “vain indulgences” but says “we are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought”. Turkle’s book is a collection of autobiographical essays written by people from different fields and what connects them is not the type of object but how “the object brings together intellect and emotion”. Turkle proposes that it is the power or roles that objects have in our lives that allows us to connect objects both “to ideas and to people”. For Turkle, “some objects are experienced as part of the self” while others are about people who are no longer present and are often marked by the moment they entered a person’s life. One contributor to the book writes about a suitcase that contained specific items of her grandmother’s saying that: “It feels dangerous to open it. Memories evolve with you, through you. Objects don’t have this fluidity”.

The object portrayed in Marie Shannon’s work *Medical Portrait (1,2,and 3), 2011* I would imagine has special status for the photographer - an evocative object that serves “as a marker of relationship and emotional connection”. A cast made from the body of a loved one - this is an object unlike most others because of its unique properties and associations that place it closer to a “physical relic”, a term used by Susan Stewart in her book *On Longing* (1984) in which she describes a relic as an object that directly references and is of the body. In reference to Marcel Proust’s writing about the subject of loss and possession, Solnit argues that Proust wrote about how an object could become a sign that was imbued with that which had been lost and could contain the past hidden within its materiality. She puts forward the idea that:

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Perhaps Proust has it slightly wrong, however. It is not the object that is saved in the moment of recognition, but the onlooker. The object restores to the viewer lost memory, experience, emotion; it is one’s own inner life, not the object, that comes back to life in this act of recognition.\(^{33}\)

If we now consider a photograph as an object or thing - itself open to the vagaries of time, loss and decay in the work of the F4 Collective: Susan Jowsey and Marcus Williams’ *The Keeper, 2012*. Williams speaks about a photograph as being unique because it can both evoke the thing that it represents and at the same time can be an evocative object; and none more so than the image of a loved one, for these seem to naturally carry an evocative charge. A family photograph’s value is associative rather than intrinsic as they are tethered to our own personal histories.

For Turkle some objects seem “intrinsically evocative” and she calls this quality uncanny, in reference to Sigmund Freud’s use of this word. “Freud said we experience as uncanny those things that are ‘known of old yet unfamiliar’”.\(^{34}\) Yvonne Todd’s *Clammy Pipes, 2006* is an image consisting of plumbing pipes: objects that seem to fit within a category of objects that mark a “complex boundary that both draws us in and repels”.\(^{35}\) In Freud’s writing about the uncanny he investigated the German words *heimlich* and *unheimlich* that are “roughly the homelike and familiar and the eerie and the strange”.\(^{36}\) However within the definitions of *heimlich* is a meaning that is the opposite, which is “concealed or kept out of sight”.\(^{37}\) Plumbing pipes are literally that type of object usually in the background part of the “things” that contribute to a functioning home and only fore grounded once something is not quite right. Turkle suggests that: “uncanny objects take emotional disorientation and turn it into philosophical grist for the mill”.\(^{38}\) These pipes possess emblematic qualities that easily sit within Todd’s lexicon of objects wherein they come to possess potent meanings that exceed their known boundaries.

Daniel Miller’s recent book *Stuff* (2010) begins by laying out a territory of enquiry into a theory of things. He starts this process from the perspective that things “work by being invisible and unremarked upon, a state they usually achieve by being familiar and taken for granted”.\(^{39}\) Krystina Kaza’s *Auckland Buildings 4300 – 4212, 2012* is an image made up these types of things – buildings that shape our everyday landscapes often unnoticed until something alters or disrupts the appearance of this visual field, especially those of a seismic nature. Miller feels that “much of what makes us what we are exists, not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us”.\(^{40}\) Miller’s humility of things: “gives shape and form to the idea that objects make people”.\(^{41}\) We grow up and walk amongst things “whole systems of things” that have been made by other people: road systems, buildings, housing, parks and gardens.\(^{42}\) Miller says these “unconsciously direct our footsteps, and are the landscapes of our

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33 Ibid., 116.
37 Ibid.,
38 Ibid.,
40 Ibid., 51
41 Ibid., 53.
42 Ibid.,
imagination, as well as the cultural environment to which we adapt”.43 And here Miller is drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of “the underlying unconscious order our habitus”.44 Allan McDonald is interested in these systems that make up our cultural environment. In *1927: Otahuhu; (pinstripe suit), 2012* we see an example of the type of encounter with the exterior landscape that McDonald is drawn to photograph. He is a kind of flaneur: not the bourgeois stroller or the detective (that Walter Benjamin was discussing in his book on Baudelaire) but more a keen observer of our cultural practices, noting things on the margins that look to be of both the past and present simultaneously, yet also capable of vanishing.

During the nineteenth-century in Europe the middle-classes were partaking in the modern practice of consumerism in order to decorate and furnish their home interiors. Benjamin wrote about this period, and in particular the arcades of Paris, in his book *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (1973) and used a quote from an 1852 illustrated guide that described the arcades as:

> glass-covered, marble-panelled passageways through entire complexes of houses whose proprietors have combined for such speculations. Both sides of these passageways, which are lighted from above, are lined with the most elegant shops, so that such an arcade is a city, even a world, in miniature.45

In Kim Meek’s *Ornamentalia Melancholia III, 2007* we see an encyclopaedic plate of objects having been made as a result of new technologies of the nineteenth-century that began to be displayed in places like the Paris arcades and the Great Exhibitions of this time. Benjamin wrote that: “for the private citizen, for the first time the living-space became distinguished from the place of work,” as the latter “took reality into account” while the former “should support him in his illusions”.46 In this way the interior began to represent the private citizen’s “universe” and his drawing room became “a box in the world-theatre”.47 This extended into the notion that a private citizen’s personality could be expressed by their house when Benjamin wrote, “ornament was to such a house what the signature is to a painting”.48 In this way the objects act as ornament to the interior of the house. The illustrated catalogue for London’s 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition stated that: “Ornament is not a luxury, but, in a certain state of mind, an absolute necessity”.49 And here we have the beginnings of a commodity fetishism.50

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43 Ibid.,
44 Ibid.,
46 Ibid., 167.
48 Ibid., 168.
50 This is in reference to Karl Marx’s use of this term.
Benjamin speaks about the collector as “the true inhabitant of the interior. He made the glorification of things his concern”.  
For the collector’s possession of his objects was not about their “use-value” he in fact freed things “from their bondage of being useful”. And perhaps it is here where all objects might truly be equal in status unaffected by labels or an art world’s distinctions.

It seems fitting to close with a quote from Miller’s anthropological field study of the street in South London whose residents both surprised and delighted him in how they revealed their ability to make sense of their lives and relationships through their objects. The arrangement of the residents’ interior-display of objects were studied as a whole by Miller and his research assistant, and the resulting “aesthetic” as Miller came to call it was based on a pattern or “overall organisational principle”. While not conforming to an interior designers idea of a relationship between things this was always about a relationship to things.

So, although the objects in this room look quite extraordinarily diverse and unrelated in theme and form, actually, compared to most people’s living-room, this one has exceptional integrity and homogeneity. Because she has consistently refused the gifts of others, everything ultimately relates to her own personal taste in things. This collection is an uncompromising expression of herself and the personal integrity she feels she has preserved. Ornaments, unlike people, reflect back directly the care you give them. ‘It’s a lot of hard work but I always do it. When you see lots of dust you take it down and you shine it. And then you wipe the place down and then you put back the furniture. I wipe it down and then you feel happy’. 

51 Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism, 168.  
52 Ibid., 169.  
54 Ibid., 176.  
55 Ibid., 270.
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