

Thingness: The Collection

What role does the 'materiality of things' play in our relationship to the objects we create and consume?

The above question was the starting point of the *Thingness* exhibition and symposium, held at Camberwell College of Arts in 2011. Second in series, *Thingness: The Collection* presents a group of objects selected from the Camberwell Collection. Along with an accompanying series of workshops and talks, the exhibition explores the 'affective' potential of objects, as well as a range of approaches by artists and designers working in response to archives and collections.

The Camberwell Collection originates from a circulating collection of the London County Council and later the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), that were brought together for educational purposes, and circulated in schools between 1951 and 1976. The collection was acquired by Camberwell College of Arts in 1990, following the disbandment of the ILEA.¹

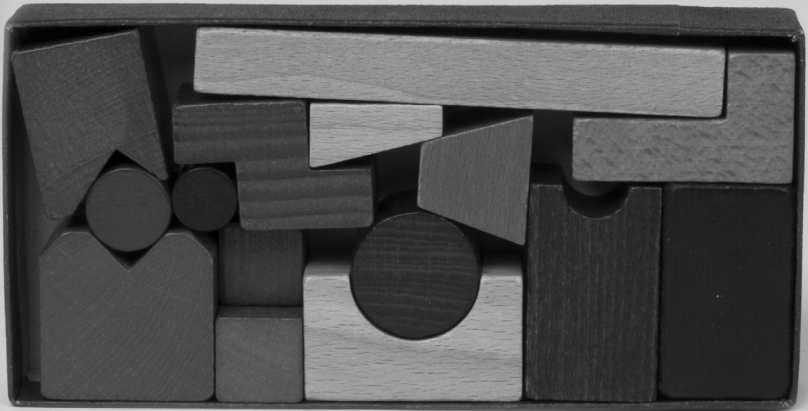
Thingness: The Collection will begin with a selected group of objects. Invited artists and designers will respond to the characteristics of the objects; what they infer as their 'presence' in a materialist sense, or their 'physiognomic appeal'.² By shifting our attention from the intended function of the object to the 'thing itself', we hope to bring to light the space between the intended meaning of objects and where the projected meanings and narratives may begin to emerge. Using the eclectic mix of design and craft objects, the exhibition explores the relationship between the agentic potential of the thing and its physical features, such as the materials and the trace of its construction process, as well as its symbolic and associated meanings.

¹ For more information on the history of the ILEA Collection please see: Jane Pavitt, ed., *The Camberwell Collection: Object Lesson* (London: Camberwell College of Arts, 1996); Jane Pavitt, 'The Camberwell Collection of Applied Arts, Camberwell College of Arts, The London Institute,' *Journal of Design History*, 10(2) (1997): 225–229.

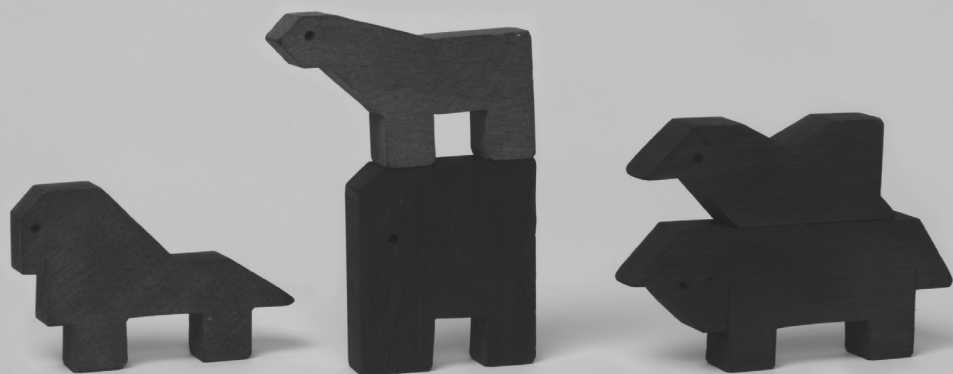
² Alfred Gell. *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998).





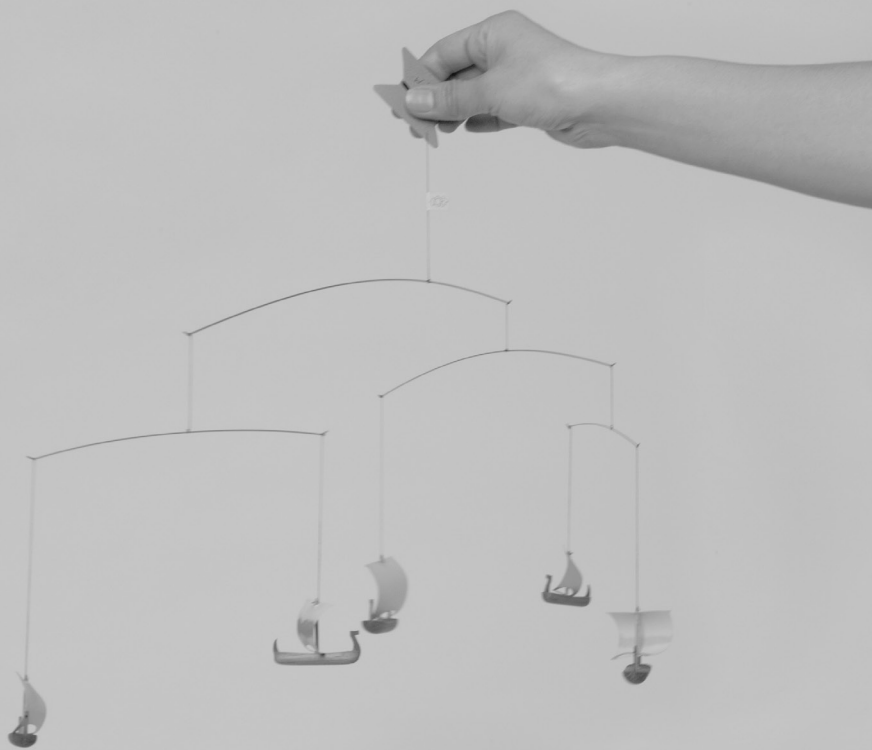












Thing Agency and the Porous Space

Maiko Tsutsumi

*This block of granite, for example, is a mere thing. It is hard, heavy, extended, bulky, shapeless, rough, colored, partly dull, partly shiny. We can take note of all these features in the stone. Thus we acknowledge its characteristics. But still, the traits signify something proper to the stone itself. They are its properties. The thing has them. The thing? What are we thinking of when we now have the thing in mind?*¹

The scenario described above by Martin Heidegger, suggests the moments when a thing begins to claim its place in one's mind. Although an object like the block of granite can never materialise in the mind as a physical thing, things seem capable of asserting their presence by emanating a rather *real* feeling in the mind.

In his essay 'Thing Theory', Bill Brown quotes Leo Stein's remark 'things are what we encounter, ideas are what we project', in an attempt to explain how the 'suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power'. Brown argues that, this power of things is evident in such encounters; 'the chance interruption – that disclose the physicality of things'.² One may wonder how this sense of 'encounter', and a 'calling of things', in the experience of things are facilitated, and whether such an encounter to an object and the projection of ideas could occur in one place simultaneously.

The political theorist Jane Bennett argued in her book *Vibrant Matter*, that inanimate objects possess a capacity, or *vitality* as she put it, 'to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own'.³ Bennett extends this view further to the origin of affect as an attribute of inanimate objects:

*Organic and inorganic bodies, natural and cultural objects... all are affective. I am here drawing on a Spinozist notion of affect, which refers broadly to the capacity of any body for activity and responsiveness.*⁴

Here one needs to take note that, what Bennett calls *impersonal affect* or *material vitality* is not 'a spiritual supplement or "life force" added to the matter said to house it'. She equates affect with materiality, rather than 'a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body', stressing that the affect and the very materiality of the thing are not separate entities.⁵ Bennett calls what John Dewey described as the ambiguity in distinction between the human body and its out-side, 'porosity'.⁶ Perhaps this 'porous' space is where the affect of the thing like Heidegger's granite comes into force.

So what is the role of materiality in the formation of affect or agency of objects? In his book *The Materiality and Society*, Tim Dant argued that the agency of objects originates from the agency of human actions – from the processes of both production and use – and thus it is 'essentially human agency transferred to material objects'.⁷ What Dant is suggesting here is not the idealist view that perceives matters and inanimate things as an empty vessel. Instead, he points out how material culture is mediated in 'its embodied, non-symbolic mode'.⁸

Dant's view, in which materiality plays the mediatory role in the human-object relationship, echoes Alfred Gell's anthropological study of the art object in *Art and Agency*. Gell's interest was in the object's 'practical mediatory role... in the social process, rather than with the interpretation of objects "as if" they were texts'.⁹ It could be argued that what enables material objects 'to begin to take on something of the status of human agents', is the emotional and practical aspects of human relationships to material objects.¹⁰ As Gell also wrote, it is 'a congealed residue of performance and agency in object-form, through which access to other

persons can be attained, and via which their agency can be communicated'.¹¹

Bennett proposed that the materiality – or *vital materiality* – of matter and inanimate things plays an equally important role as human agency. Her litany for 'would be vital-materialists' with which she concludes *Vibrant Matter*, explains well the porous space between the thing and us:

*I believe one matter-energy, maker of things seen and unseen... I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests.*¹²

- ¹ Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 2011), 93.
- ² Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory' in *The Object Reader*, ed. Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (New York: Routledge, 2009), 140.
- ³ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, xii. Bennett is referring to Baruch Spinoza's notion of conative bodies.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 102. Also see John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Perigee, 2005), 87.
- ⁷ Tim Dant, *Materiality and Society* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005), 60.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ⁹ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.
- ¹⁰ Dant, *Materiality and Society*, 69. In this passage, Dant is referring to the work of French Psychoanalyst Serge Tisseron.
- ¹¹ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 67.
- ¹² Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, 122.

David Garnett is Conservation Technical Staff, and Use Manager for ILEA Circulating Design Collection (Camberwell Collection), Camberwell College of Arts. Observing the effects on others and himself of the sometimes mysterious and often evocative qualities imbued in some objects and collections has guided David's professional interest and practice towards investigating the creative possibilities of encounters with such things. Tempering this with his own studies in paper conservation and his role in supporting the education of the same, has given him a flip sided view of the needs to preserve and protect, combined with the desire to enquire and create.

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Thingness: The Collection was facilitated
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thingnessofthings.wordpress.com

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