

The Object Reader

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The Object Reader, Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 2009.

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The Object Reader is a weighty collection of things. Comprised of twenty-eight previously published pieces of writing on the material world as well as twenty-five specifically commissioned “object lessons,” short meditations on specific objects/artefacts/things, the reader brings together scholarship on objects from art history, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, psychology, science and technology studies—such a wide array of approaches and theoretical nuances that it is often difficult to disentangle their trajectories. But this is precisely the point. As the editors point out in their introduction, the logic of an “object reader” as opposed to an “object studies” one is that it preserves some of the discordance between different lineages, providing “epistemological vantages” (2) instead of constitutive methodologies. These vantages are organized thematically into seven sections—“Object,” “Thing,” “Objects and Agency,” “Object Experience,” “The Objecthood of Images,” “Leftovers,” and the “Object Lessons”—which, for the most part, are loosely chronologically arranged. Candlin and Guins are clear that they have not privileged the social historical over the philosophical, the discursive over the embodied, nor the technological over the psychoanalytic in their selections, in the interest of generating “productive frictions and the problems and pleasures each may pose” (6)—a playful evocation, from the outset, of essays as (sensuous) objects that may be positioned in relation to one another enabling resonance or collision. In this self-conscious provocation, the collection is most successful, coaxing out tensions between different ways of knowing about objects through its juxtapositions—a most dramatic example of which, also identified by the editors, is Maurice M. Manring’s cultural and American studies unpacking of the material conditions of “the slave in a box” imagery of Aunt Jemima brand pancake mix (343) sharing thematic space in the section entitled “The Objecthood of Images” with Michael Fried’s classic indictment of theatricality in art (“Art and Objecthood,” p. 307) on the grounds that “objects” are tied to precisely the materialities that Manring and others see value in exploring.

Yet in spite of its interdisciplinarity—which one is tempted, using the object metaphor, to call “formal”—The Object Reader is also inevitably implicated in forming the field of “object studies,” shaping its contours, valences, and attachments specifically in relation to the present moment in “visual culture.” Indeed, the collection itself is part of In-Sight, a visual culture series edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff, and was conceived at Penn State’s ‘Objects in/of Visual Culture’ Conference in 2004. As such, it enters into debates around the ambivalence of “the object” itself, and its (possibly undesirable) mediation through art writing and other discursive practices—an important theme that resonates with other contemporary collections on material culture, in which the problem of the relationship between language and object is more explicitly raised, and one that I want to return to in exploring how, as a collection, the reader shapes theory and method in the study of objects. Such an exercise seems very much in the spirit of the reader, leading to questions about

its form, meaning, and role in the production of knowledge in excess of its own thematic categories. First, in terms of genealogies, the specter of Marx but even more so of Freud necessarily loom large in the collection in perspectives such as George Lukács' explication of Marx's notions of reification and self-objectification ("The Phenomenon of Reification") and D.W. Winnicott's psychoanalytic charting of transitional objects, or early childhood possessions that are recognized as somewhat external to the self without fully solidifying the boundaries of interiority and exteriority ("Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena")—both classic essays that are significantly not Marx or Freud themselves. Indeed, while commodity fetishism and repressed desire continue to be important issues with which many authors in the reader grapple, the positioning of theoretical weight on more recent theorists seems to be a deliberate choice, and one that is clarified in Elizabeth Grosz's "The Thing," in which she articulates the need to construct "an altogether different lineage"(124) for studying things that is not predicated on the rigid separation between self and other. An emphasis on affect and experience, another common thread in such contributions as Elizabeth Edwards' analysis of photographs as relic-like conduits of memory and practice ("Photographs as Objects of Memory") and Vivian Sobchack's incisive critique of the recent use of "the prosthetic" as a category of theory divorced from experience ("A Leg to Stand On: Prosthetics, Metaphor, and Materiality"), extends such a lineage, tacitly clarifying why a concern with affect and trauma build naturally upon Marxian and psychoanalytic perspectives and continue to seduce the study of visual and material culture.

Building upon these liminalities between persons and things, another possible and promising lineage for object studies that the collection articulates is that of science and technology studies (STS). From Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory account of our delegation of tasks to non-human door grooms in solving the "wall-hole dilemma" of how to provide access to a building while ensuring that the door remains closed when it is not in use ("Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts") to Julian Bleeker's analysis of virtual "blogjects" or objects that make meaning through the internet such as pigeons with GPS trackers who are the "Web 2.0 progeny of the Canary in the Coal Mine"(167) ("Why Things Matter: A Manifesto for Networked Objects—Cohabiting with Pigeons, Arphids, and AIBOs in the Internet of Things"), the inclusion of these perspectives usefully grounds the insights of Thing Theory and pushes the study of specific technologies that matter right now into more consequential and rigorous arenas. Indeed, it seems no coincidence that seven of the twenty-five "object lessons" contributors chose to focus on technological objects, ranging from iPods to AIBO the robotic dog to changing war games counters to pixels—clearly, the materialities of the virtual worlds we inhabit are worthy provocateurs of thing/us affinities, displacing the "methodological atheism"(210) that Alfred Gell criticizes in his analysis of the enchantment of technologies and their roles as agents in social reproduction ("The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology").

The possibilities of "following the actors" through the STS paradigm are deftly illustrated in historical perspective by Wiebe E. Bijker's "King of the Road: The social construction of the safety bicycle," in which Bijker reconstructs social history through the narratives of contemporaneous users of the defunct nineteenth century high-wheeled bicycle. This methodology is intended by Bijker to avoid Whiggish accounts of historical progress that would ignore such objects (273), and resonates strongly with the other historical pieces in the collection, such as Paige Dubois' rigorous

analysis of the meanings of olisbos or dildos in classical antiquity (“Dildos”) in which she invokes textual analysis, asking “what is the web, the cultural and semantic field, the syntax in which the dildo figures in ancient discourses?”(99). Likewise, Barbara Penner’s “A World of Unmentionable Suffering: Women’s Public Conveniences in Victorian London” persuasively unpacks the arguments around class and gender that pervaded discussions of toilets and women in the public sphere in the nineteenth century through a close reading of public discourse. These, along with other historical accounts, are the most methodologically satisfying in the book, possibly because they make use of tools honed over four decades of social art history to craft careful, well-reasoned, nuanced arguments about the relations between social and material worlds. And yet if Candlin and Guins have their way, this should perhaps cause us to pause. Indeed, all of these historical pieces unconsciously posit a particular relationship between language and objects in which the former almost seems to engulf the latter, which is good for empiricism, but of course not for everything. Two entries from the collection, both “object lessons,” help to clarify this point: first, Griselda Pollock’s “Maternal Object: Matrixial Subject,” which is, on one level, a reading of Belgian artist Chantal Akerman’s video installation *To Walk Next to One’s Shoelaces inside an Empty Fridge*, in which the filmmaker and her mother talk over the diary of Akerman’s grandmother who was killed in Auschwitz, and the complex desires and traumas embodied in the work. But the same time, Pollock’s critique is also a kind of refusal to engage with “the object,” but instead with the multiple affective attachments and subjectivities that obtain around it—echoing and intervening productively into the moment of art writing that Pollock identifies as “the end of the object”(483)—an intervention into “visual culture” in which the collection is thoroughly entangled. In a similar way, Fiona Candlin’s concluding contribution “Yesterday Upon the Stair” recounts the authors’ struggles during graduate school to produce an artwork representing the experiences of the ghost of Lady Sneyd, the specter that haunted Keele Hall, within the confines and tensions of the authors’ theory-practice programme. Candlin concludes that her struggles embodied the (gendered) fractures in understanding produced by her programme: “I wanted to experience something other than rationalism but I was too trained to realize that I could, that I already did” (532). Both of these pithy object lessons articulate a key tension between the object and its textual, visual, rational properties and its material, embodied, affective dimensions.

It seems to me that this tension, along with Marx and Freud, is the specter haunting this collection—indeed, there is something delightfully sly about the editors’ commissioning and displaying textual object lessons in the first place, when the relationships between objects and language has been raised and hotly contested in other recent collections that focus on materiality. Like Pollock, many of the object lesson contributors come up with creative solutions to these problems of representation, embodiment, and object agency. For example, Ruud Kaulingfrek’s “The Broken Mug” is told as a story in the third person, in which both author and coffee mug are characters in the morning breakage drama whose catalyst is the mug’s inconvenient “cry for attention”(455), and Carolyn Thomas de la Peña argues that the only way to understand the meaning of the “Saccharin Sparrow,” a bird-shaped sugar substitute dispenser implicated in American women’s complex meal-time performances of self-denial in the 1950s, is through enactment of the self-absorbed drama of meticulously dispensing the saccharin tablets (508). These accounts resonate well with Tim Ingold’s essay “On Weaving a Basket,” in which the

author inverts typical accounts of process-based agencies by giving primacy to the materials in determining a woven objects' form (89), and assert the possibilities of taking materiality seriously in even short analytical pieces.

However, in spite of the originality of the contributors' attempts to negotiate the limits of textual analysis, the collection's relationship with the tensions between the visual and the material and, even more notably, the dynamics of production and consumption, is not as satisfyingly explored as it could have been. Specifically, the editors' attempts to differentiate their collection from other recent material culture readers listed in the final section of *The Object Reader*, "An Object Bibliography," are quite palpable—and commendable—but lead to problematic exclusions. For instance, the tensions in objectification and consumption explored by Lukács and quite brilliantly elaborated in Anna Beatrice Scott's analysis of both the sensuous pleasures, represented aurally and visually as a film treatment, and the exploitative labor congealed in Havaianas flip-flops ("Bouncing in the Streets: A Performance Remix"), could have been complimented by recent anthropological work on consumption that mitigates these tensions from a slightly different vantage point through its commitment to local definitions of objectification and inalienability (see, for instance, Daniel Miller's *The Comfort of Things*, or Jennifer Kramer's *Switchbacks: Art, Ownership, and Nuxalk National Identity*). Indeed, it seems that the "object lessons" and a brief introduction to the detritus of consumption, "Trash" by Julian Stallabrass—which, interestingly, also attempts to interrupt the textual "neatening" of object relations through photographs of discarded commodities—are the only nods to the problematic (and constitutive) dynamics of consuming objects.

Related to these issue of local mediations of the tensions of modernity is the problematic positioning of non-Western objects in *The Object Reader*. When taken together as non-Western examples, Gell's analysis of the enchanting qualities of Trobriand canoe-prows, Michael Taussig's account of Cuna curing figurines that depict European colonizers ("In Some Way or Another One Can Protect Oneself from the Spirits by Portraying Them"), and even Marcel Mauss' famous piece on inalienable property possessing the spirit of the giver in Polynesia and Native North America ("Gifts and the Obligation to Return Gifts") tend to essentialize non-Western objects as necessarily bound up with ritual—in sharp contrast to the emphasis on the mundane in the Western objects considered. A notable exception to this is Celeste Olalquiaga's "Holy Kitschen," which traces the re-contextualizations of Latin American Catholic iconography in a range of kitschy forms in New York, to the important effect of calling the boundaries and movement of ritual and non-ritual objects into question. However, for the most part these West/rest distinctions remain firmly in place, largely, I think, as a result of the choice of original contributors—overwhelmingly North American and British artists and theorists—and possibly due to the "visual culture" orientation of the collection. Indeed, the specters of Marx and Freud seem to lead to lineages that exclude non-Western ways of knowing, even when rationalism and vision are themselves called into question. All of this, however, is not to undermine the significance of what the reader does do particularly well through its grounding in visual and cultural studies. Specifically, Western anxieties over modernity are successfully articulated in ways that preserve their contradictions and tensions, as in Jean Baudrillard's account of the inhumanities of the narcissisms and regressions revealed in (constructive) origin stories told by collections of non-functional objects ("Subjective Discourse or

the Non-functional System of Objects”) and in Curtis Marez’s object lesson on the Homies, small plastic figurines representing Chicana/o “barrio types” whose predicaments mimic and critique racialized labor relations of Silicon Valley dot-com crisis while concealing, through commodification, the alienated labor that goes into their production (475, “The Homies, or the Last Angel of History in Silicon Valley”). These, and even the predicaments of representation, are struggles of modernity, and the strengths of the juxtapositions effected in the reader is that silences, limits, and ruptures of different vantages become apparent as pleasure, loss, alienation, and playfulness exist in tension with one another. It is in these tensions that the stakes of object study come into view—or being.