

Manifesto for the unmanifest

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There is nothing there, yet it is a sculpture" Michael Heizer on his artpiece "Double Negative" 1969
Source: http://eyday.blogspot.com/2008_05_25_archive.html

Dan Hicks' call for "[manifestos for materials](#)" " at this year's [Theoretical Archaeology Group](#) meeting in Bristol is an apt occasion to discuss perspectives on material culture as objects of study within the genre of manifestos – even if it also aims to discuss the utility of this written form. In this entry, we wish to briefly share an approach to the material world, which we find is often omitted. In the following, rather than offering a new perspective on the different ways things can be manifested in social lives, we wish to direct our focus to those things that are not materially at hand; the unmanifested material culture. We have explored this topic at length in the volume "An Anthropology of Absence. Materializations of transcendence and loss", Springer, 2010, which forms the basis of this brief entry.

Paper clips, hats, salt, shoes, denim, cars, telephones, and architecture have been scrutinized for their meaning, agency, and role in social life. Looking through the articles in Journal of Material Culture there is a seemingly unlimited amount of things to be studied, showing both the pivotal role of things in human lives and the creativity of scholarly observation. Yet, for all its ingenuity, there seems to be a profound bias in these studies for the things manifest, i.e. the things at hand. While intangible aspects of material culture, such as sound, light, or smell have gained some attention, less has been said about those things that have not yet materialized, have been lost, or are absent in other ways, and yet still play a role in people's lives. Studies focusing on the unmanifested things too often seem to be missing from the mainstream material culture literature.

What is absent is often only remarked on in passing, whereby the implications of absence are rarely the object of study in their own right. The focus on the meaning, agency or sensuous encounters with some present object or other ignores the significance of absence. Take the example of a picture prohibition; certain images are deliberately not materialized, and this very material absence constitutes political or religious identities. One might ask whether a material culture study would be more likely to focus on instances when the prohibition is violated than on the everyday engagement with such absence?

The omission of attention toward the unmanifest, we argue, is something we need to take seriously, and not just as a reversal of established perceptions of material culture studies. It is an omission of importance, in that by not studying the things not there, one risks ascribing to a presentist bias that obscures the understanding of human-thing interaction. Japanese aesthetics has a concept called *ma*, which roughly means negative space or gap. In thinking about things in this way, the essence of things is not “behind” the material surface. Rather, the point with the concept of *ma* is that what is not there is as central a part of the design as what is. The material absence creates the thing at hand and is inherent in its ontology.

One aspect of a study of the unmanifested is time. What role do the things that people do not have, that are not yet available, or are expected to materialize in a near future, play in human lives? Things may, or may not, materialize in the future and exactly because of this indeterminacy of material constitution, anticipated objects may play a central role. This is both the case when members of religious communities such as Heaven’s Gate commit collective suicide in anticipation of a spaceship tailing the comet Hale-Bopp, and in the case of the global hype when Apple presents their iPad. The keyword here is the desires and expectations emerging from the absent. In short: The absent things matter.

What about things lost or destroyed? The New York skyline after the destruction of the Twin Towers is a well-worn example of the presence of absence. Things may be destroyed or lost, but they clearly, as also often stated, live on in social life. In the case of the Twin Towers, part of the steel from the buildings live on in the ship USS New York. Lost or destroyed things rarely simply disappear.

We open our volume on the anthropology of absence with the account of Lord Nelson’s sensation of pains in his physically missing right arm, which he had lost in battle. The experience points to the very sensuous immediacy of the unmanifest hand, later medically referred to as “phantom pains”. While of different character, such phantom pains may be found beyond the strictly physiological realm, as in the emotional pain that may be occasioned by involuntary childlessness. In this sense, absence is not simply a matter of creating a “meaningful” loss, but entails the sense of encroachment from the unmanifest. What is missing may force itself upon one as a sensuous and emotional confrontation arising through the disruption of bodily habits or expectations. Missing things may hurt.

Presence and absence are not antonymic categories. They rely on and enforce each other. Yet, what is there, and what is not, may indeed be a matter of perspective. In some cases, tactility may not be considered the proof of presence, just as lack of measurable material property may not be proof of absence. We do not argue for a rejection of the process of objectification by stressing the importance of what is not there; instead, we want to refine the oppositions between the manifest

and the unmanifest, the present and the absent. Ghosts, spirits, and other seemingly immaterial phenomena may exist in various ontological states, just as solid phenomena may be considered immaterial by spiritual references. The point is that the relationship between the manifest and unmanifest emerges from concrete worlds, where the material and immaterial, the present and the absent are anything but mutually exclusive. We may refer to this as the presencing of absence; the sensuous immediacy of things not manifest, the desires the unmanifest incites, and the need for material culture studies to take this into account. In light of this, this brief entry is intended as a manifesto for the unmanifest.