

## **The Power of Objects: Materiality - Forms - Ritual Action**

**Date :** December 23, 2012

International Conference, Toulouse: May 30th – June 1st 2013

[Université de Toulouse](#)-Le Mirail Maison de la Recherche 5 allées A. Machado 31058 TOULOUSE  
CEDEX 9 Téléphone 05 61 50 24 30

Ethnographers, whether their research results in producing texts or in curating museum collections, seem to share an interest in material artifacts whose symbolic and social functions might be easier to describe than to find their common denominator. Among such artifacts, some are written about as ritual, magical, or power objects, or “idols,” “relics,” and “fetishes,” and given, by the cultures that create them, specific names: agalmata and xoana in ancient Greece, churinga in Australia, boli and basi among the Mande, etc. Others might, despite the strangeness of their power, pass almost unnoticed, like so many materials consecrated by the early Christians, for example, or as certain objects and substances used both within religious contexts and in everyday life as well. Indeed, in analyzing rites, one may observe an ordinary knife becoming the instrument for sacrifices, water the liquid for ablutions, a pan the indispensable receptacle for the communal meal, and a shirt the outfit for the priest. Truly great, then, is the number of elements necessary for the transformation of the universe, for the transition from the day-to-day into this different realm, which is generally saturated with religious meanings. In this realm and in the spaces of transition, things seem to possess more power than a reasonable mind would normally allocate to them. What makes them so potent and how do they attain such a status? How are these powerful artifacts produced? And how exactly does one manipulate or interact with them in order to affect such a transformation?

The aim of this conference is to reinvigorate the discussion of these topics.... These insights point toward four main axes of interrogation upon which the participants will be invited to further elaborate, thus opening the way for comparisons:

1. The importance of context, particularly of the ritual frame, for the staging/ production of the power object. To what extent does the object’s potency depend upon the effectiveness of the ritual in which it is used, and its cognitive and relational specificity? To what extent is it independent of any ritual situation?
2. The role that aesthetic factors play in the construction of the objects’ efficacy: the influence

of certain forms soliciting an enchantment or to the contrary, cognitive troubling, intimidation inspired by the splendor of the performance or the abundance of rich material. In this last respect, the choices surely rely on culturally pre-existent hierarchies. Yet, more than symbols of some political or metaphysical power aren't aesthetic forms its crystallization or means indispensable to achieve it?

3. The significance of figuration: both mimetic accuracy as well as voluntary distortions guiding the act of representation towards hybrid combinations that figure the monstrous or towards an absolute aniconicity. Does such aniconicity suggest, as certain authors argue, that the power of the objects lies in their irreducible "thing-ness"? What, then, could be said about the role of anthropomorphism?
4. Recognition by social actors of the personhood or agency of objects leading to the denunciation of the inconsistency of all binary categorizations (object/subject; substance/object, surface/volume; animate/inanimate; thing/concept, matter/idea, etc.).

All the aforementioned topics, which partially overlap, will be addressed within an interdisciplinary (anthropology, art history, and history) and comparative (Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia, medieval and modern Europe, and Antiquity) framework which should permit a confrontation of various theoretical and methodological viewpoints with diversified field and historical material. As a result of sharing our research and 'thinking together through things', we expect the emergence of new hypotheses in respect to the types of objects et substances under discussion and of the eventual sources of their power.

PROGRAM

Opening of the Conference: Vice-Dean of the Scientific Counsel of the University of Toulouse Le Mirail

The welcome speech and presentation of the program: Agnès Kedzierska Manzon (CAS- LISST)

14:30–15:15 pm

Inaugural lecture

Michael Taussig (Columbia University, NYC, USA)

Coffee break

15:30–18:30 pm

PANEL # 1

Humans and Things: Bodies and Matter; discussion moderated by Marlène Albert-Llorca (UTM, CAS-LISST)

- Catherine J. Allen (GWU, Washington DC, USA)

Stones Who Love Me: Dimensionality, Enclosure, and Petrification in Andean Culture • Marika Moisseeff (EHESS, LAS)

Churinga and Bodies as Exemplary Ritual Objects

- Agnès Kedzierska-Manzon (CAS-LISST)

Life Matters: Or (Mande) Fetishes and Their Need for Blood

Friday, May 31st

9:00 am–12: 00 pm

PANEL # 2

Effectiveness 1: Esthetics and Politics of Modernity; discussion moderated by Anne Bouchy (EFEO, CAS-LISST)

- Jean-Paul Colleyn (EHESS, CEAF) The de facto Strength of Things

- Michael Houseman (EPHE, CEMAF)

Why Are the Material Aspects of New Age and Neo-Pagan Ceremonial so Kitsch and Contrived?

- Sally Promey (Yale University, USA)

Material Objects and Spiritual Sensations in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park

Lunch break

14:00–18:00 pm

PANEL # 3

Effectiveness 2: Where Does Power Come From?; discussion moderated by Corinne Bonnet (PLH-ERASME, UTM)

- Anne-Caroline Rendu Loisel (Université de Genève)

Voice and Radiance of Mighty Copper in a Ritual of Ancient Mesopotamia • Adeline Grand-Clément (PLH-ERASME, UTM)

Colors, Rituals, and Religious Norms in Ancient Greece

- Cécile Guillaume (Queen's University of Belfast, UK)

Healing, Charming, or Killing: The Power of regam among the Soras (A Tribe from Central Eastern India)

- Jean-Pierre Albert (EHESS, CAS-LISST)

The Roman Catholic Eucharist and the Host: from Virtually Nothing to Infinity (and Back)

Saturday June 1st

9:00 am–12 pm

PANEL # 4

Transcendence and Immanence: Concepts and Things; discussion moderated by Nicolas Ellison (EHESS, CAS-LISST)

- Webb Keane (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA) Rotting bodies: Semiotic ideologies in conflict

- Morten Axel Pedersen (University of Copenhagen, Denmark) Unthinking Things: Keeping Spirits Avisible in Northern Mongolia

- Martin Holbraad (University College London, UK)

On pragmatology: from things to concepts

Lunch break

## **Material World**

A Global Hub for Thinking About Things

<http://www.materialworldblog.com>

---

15:00–16:30 pm

Closing session

Roundtable of all the panelists moderated by Jean-Pierre Albert (EHES, CAS-LISST)