

CUMMA PAPERS #19

CUMMA (CURATING, MANAGING AND MEDIATING ART) IS A TWO-YEAR, MULTIDISCIPLINARY MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMME AT AALTO UNIVERSITY FOCUSING ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS PUBLICS. AALTO UNIVERSITY IS LOCATED IN HELSINKI AND ESPOO IN FINLAND.

NORA STERNFELD

THE OBJECT-EFFECT

WHAT IS THE THING
ABOUT MATERIALS
IN EXHIBITIONS?

“In the museum objects are aestheticised, which means nothing more here than that they are stripped of their practical function and used solely as symbols. The chance that lies within this aestheticisation—or in historical materialist terms, the objectification of musealised objects—is that it allows the museum, a space where we learn to recognise and reflect on things, to start critiquing its own praxis.”¹

Michael Fehr (2015)

As a matter of fact, objects have always been at the heart of debates within and around museums and exhibitions—after all, they are what has been on display for centuries now—presented to appreciate and to educate. What changes, then, when objects themselves emerge as actors with agency? Discussions around things having their own power of agency have taken place in many different contexts, making it appear as if the objects could act of their own accord, rising up to cut away at the sovereign power of institutional narratives. As a consequence, curatorial discourses must now explain why they not only get tripped up by their own tellingly unconscious narratives, but also by their material, as they literally fall over things that stand in their way. In this text, I am interested in examining the thing about the objects from an exhibition theory perspective, and in asking: what do these things do with us; and what can we do with them?

THE RIGHTS OF THINGS

Let's begin by trying to understand how it came to be that things as such have suddenly become a massive challenge to their own order. Enter sociologist Bruno Latour, who refuses to conceive of society as only constituted by people. In a world that he sees as increasingly precarious, he points to the moments when things assume a life of their own. Latour examines the interplay between humans and things, showing that categorical historical narratives cannot only be pressed onto things, but that things are also capable of narrating history themselves. According to Latour, things create difference, affects and effects that give them the capacity to push forward developments, challenge narratives and impede actions. Following this, he advocates for a Parliament of Things,² where things are decisive for politics. Humanism that views itself as the measure of all classification has also been a subject of criticism for postcolonial theorists who see the history of Enlightenment as a period in which slavery and colonialism are made legitimate. While the

¹ Fehr, Michael. "Museum." *Künstlerische Forschung. Ein Handbuch*. Ed. Jens Badura et al. Zurich/Berlin: Diaphenes, 2015. 315–317. Print.

² Latour, Bruno. *Das Parlament der Dinge*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009. Print.

distinctions established during this time (such as nature and culture, humans and animals) led to the development of human rights, they simultaneously gave brutal legitimisation to violence against and exploitation of those denied human rights. Following this, Claude Lévi-Strauss writes “The one boundary, constantly pushed back, would be used to separate men from other men and to claim—for the profit of ever smaller minorities—the privilege of humanism corrupted at birth” (qtd. in Tible 471).³ In response to this, among other things, Manuel de Landa and Rosi Braidotti came up with the notion of post-human “new materialism” in the second half of the 1990s.⁴ This approach presents a “new ontology” where “former distinctions between human and non-human, materialism and idealism or subjects and objects no longer apply, as they are intricately entwined with one another.”⁵

WHAT IF WE ALL WERE THINGS?

In 1998, Donna Haraway made it clear from a feminist perspective that there is nothing “neutral” about “objectivity,” because it is always a *position* in the literal sense: it is a situated knowledge⁶ that, for one, speaks from a specific position (from a certain perspective, or body). Secondly, it also assumes a specific position, one that is either more or less consciously located on the side of (and thus consolidating) or vis-à-vis (and thus questioning) the established relations of power. Haraway thus laid bare the fact that the neutrality and objectivity, which had afforded science with certainty for so long, are in effect powerful positionalities. The feminist demand within her argument is not to reject the object character, but rather to appropriate it. In this way, we are able to situate ourselves and appear as objects—as matter within matter. This not only led to arguments for new perceptions of categories and of how we engage with objects, but also opened up a new approach to the old and often problematised Marxist discussion of things as commodities.

³ Tible, Jean. “Marx and Anthropophagy. Notes for a Dialogue between Marx and Viveiros de Castro.” Ed. Pedro Neves Marques, *The Forest and the School. Where to Sit at the Dinner Table?*, Köln: Archive Books, 2014. 457–483. Print.

⁴ Cf. Dolphijn, Rick, and Iris Van Der Tuin. *New Materialism Interviews and Cartographies*. Open Humanities, 2012. Print.

⁵ Coole, Diana. “Der neue Materialismus: Die Ontologie und Politik der Materialisierung.” Ed. Stakemeier, Kerstin and Susanne Witzgall. *Macht des Materials/ Politik der Materialität*, Zurich/Berlin: Diaphenes, 2014. 29–46. Print. 457–483. Print.

⁶ Haraway, Donna. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (1988): 575. Web.

While Marx describes the transformation of a thing into a commodity as a magical and impressive process through which a thing assumes a life of its own as a “fetish,” Bruno Latour calls this a “factish”, a combination of facts and fetishes that makes it obvious that both have a common element of fabrication.⁷

At first glance, all this may appear as a step forward, because it is indeed exciting to think about and work with something that lies outside the parameters of control. Even if this were to infringe upon our curatorial power of interpretation, at the same time we still feel empowered as we act as objects among objects. Following this, during the past ten years, curators and artists have been experimenting with materials, reformulating old questions, seeing what were to happen if plants were to grow over borders, or substances were to challenge walls, or stones were to block pathways—in other words, what would happen if materials were to overthrow and subvert concepts. The enthusiasm around this, however, fades quickly: against the backdrop of growing precarisation and the valuation of our work as a human resource, we are no longer simply matter, but we are now capital as well. We see ourselves displayed daily on the market—we appear as objects, as actors endowed with the power of agency, dancing in the chorus line of competitiveness, getting ready for the race for our future exchange-value that should pay off as a return on investment. For this reason, I would like to take a few steps back and ask myself as a “human resource,” educator and curator, what this means when objects take on a life of their own as commodities.

TRICKY THINGS

Despite the advantages of these new perspectives on things, we all know that with openings come closings. Hence it appears that the boom of discussions about the materiality of things is often accompanied by skepticism towards poststructuralist discourses, frequently by explicitly taking distance from

⁷ Latour, Bruno. *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. Print.

deconstruction.⁸ For me, this skepticism leaves the bitter taste of yet another skepticism. Could this be a new trend, a paradigm shift, that is eager to make critical approaches to discourses—and to the power of curatorial narratives—look outdated? So now, at a time when Jacques Derrida seems passé, I wish to turn to him. Derrida’s dissident loyalty to Marx (his book *Specters of Marx*⁹ appeared in the 1990s, a time when nobody was interested in reading him) helps me to engage with the discussion surrounding things as commodities.

Derrida takes a very close look at the magic effect of the commodity fetish in Marx’s work. It is such a close look that it underhandedly becomes increasingly more exciting and complicated. Marx began with a fairly simple thing: a wooden table made by live labour. But then, in the process of it becoming a useful object, something remarkable happened. In *Capital*, Marx describes the magical moment when the table transforms from a simple thing into a commodity as follows:

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those properties are the product of human labour. It is as clear as noon-day, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, everyday thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than “table-turning” [as the tables start to dance—*wenn er aus freien Stücken zu tanzen begänne*] ever was.¹⁰

⁸ Rosi Braidotti, for instance, writes “the posthuman subject is not postmodern, because it does not rely on any anti-foundational premises. Nor is it poststructuralist, because it does not function within the linguistic turn or other forms of deconstruction.” Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity, 2013. 188. Print.

⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

¹⁰ Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *Capital; Critique of Political Economy*. Chicago: C.H. Kerr, 1907. Print.

By examining this section of Marx's text and showing how haunting and compelling his chosen descriptive words are, Derrida deconstructs the logic of the binary between the "good use value" and the "evil exchange value", laying bare the spectral interplay between both sides.¹¹ The way Marx describes it, the commodity appears to be extremely attractive: who wouldn't want to see a table start to dance? Derrida sees that there is desire the moment Marx's fetish becomes embroiled in use value, which carries along with it the competitiveness inscribed in capitalism.

Let us, as curators, try to stay in this magical moment a bit longer. What could the power of this spectral magic be that suddenly makes a thing exciting and desirable? At first glance, it seems to be the possibility that it can be endowed with a new different value. Does anyone recognise this magic?

IT'S MAGIC! AURA AND FETISH

In reference to Marx's historical materialism, Walter Benjamin presents his idea of the aura, which proposes a no less exciting object effect. In his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), he calls the astonishing phenomenon that can be found in nature, in the museum and on the art market the effect of the aura. In nature, he famously describes it as "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be."¹² If we apply this to the museum, then it is arguably the staging of uniqueness through the use of glass cabinets and frames, exciting words, suggestive displays and dazzling rituals that allows this effect to take hold. Indeed, a thing's magic functions both as aura and fetish, emerging simultaneously on the market and within the museum; the display of things in nineteenth century museums and department stores emulate one another. Werner Hanak recounts the history of this development in the following:

¹¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 188.

¹² Benjamin, Walter. *Benjamin, Walter, and J. A. Underwood. The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. London: Penguin, 2008. Pdf.

Along with the emergence of department stores in modernity, we also witnessed the birth of temples of consumption. Shortly thereafter, and during that era time, numerous national museums were erected. Enormous buildings were built in order to present the sumptuous multitude of the new world of industrial and handmade commodities. The architectural design details of these grand structures echoed those of ancient temples. A formative example is the Parisian grand department store Bon Marché built by Aristide Boudicault in 1852, to which Gustave Eiffel and Louis Charles Boileau added extensions in 1876. It exhibited a dome, temple pediments and columns that were supported by a monumental vaulted portico (...). In terms of their architecture and set up, the early grand department stores around the world—such as Galerie Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan (1877), Harrods in London (1894), Gum in Moscow (1894), Herzmansky in Vienna (1898) or Galeries Lafayette in Paris (1912)—bore a great resemblance to the contemporary interior and exterior architecture of the museums of that era.¹³

There is therefore a kinship between what happens when an object is presented in a museum and its transformation into a commodity. This transformation is a powerful special effect whereby one value comes to stand in for another. This is how cult value and exhibition value are created in the bourgeois art market. Daniel J. Sherman describes the museal object in relation to the commodity fetish as “(...) the way how museums tacitly ratify, even while ostensibly standing apart from, the ideology of the marketplace,”¹⁴ thus emphasising—with reference to Quatremère, Benjamin and Marx—how this magic trick drains the object of its life¹⁵—and gives it a new life. Here, the object effect is again ambivalent, at which Benjamin takes a critical look. Contrasting the eliminatory tradition through which an aura stages authenticity with the progressive power of the collective film experience, Benjamin demands a politicisation of art. What his famous depiction of the aura shows is that its exceptional power for creating uniqueness and connecting proximity to distance allows for a fascination to grab hold of the spectator that not even they themselves can escape.

¹³ Hanak-Lettner, Werner. *Die Ausstellung als Drama. Wie das Museum aus dem Theater entstand*. Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2014. 169-174. Print. Werner Hanak-Lettner also writes about the history of SoHo in New York City, tracing the emergence from squats to white cubes to new flagship stores there. He is generally interested in the manifold interconnections in the ways displays of art, objects in museums and commodities are developed.

¹⁴ Sherman, Daniel. ‘Quatremère/Benjamin/Marx: Art Museums, Aura and Commodity Fetishism’. Sherman, Daniel and Irit Rogoff. *Museum Culture, History, Discourse, Spectacles*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. 123. Print.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

PETRIFIED CONFLICTS

What do these object effects, which make things so attractive, have in common? In both cases, one value is transformed into another. The magic commodity and the auratified museal object are at once filled with life—vibrant and full of desire and dreams—and utterly void of life, like ghosts. After having gone through the theories of the amazing actions of things, I would now like to suggest a re-reading of the magical effect as a sedimented conflict: the magic of revaluation silences something that could not be simply removed from the world. My theory entails the notion that things carry within themselves the memory of revaluation. They carry within themselves the histories of conflict and violence that led to this magic effect in the first place: histories of exploitation (in the case of commodities) and histories of artistic challenges, revolutions, colonial violence, dispossession and pillaging (in the case of museal objects). It is likely that the contained and hidden violence particular to the magical thing is a key aspect that makes it so attractive. Behind this magical appearance and within this desire lies the history of violence. We are indeed familiar with the violence involved in creating ethnographic collections. We are also familiar with the conditions under which the shoes and clothes we wear are produced. Yet, at the same time, this knowledge is made harmless within the object effect. And so the specters of the conflicts continue to live on inside the things that silenced them. And through the magic of de- and re-contextualisation within the museum and the market, these things become both condensed and completely dethematised. However, the histories of violence and their corresponding conflicts have left traces—not only because they could not simply be eradicated, but mostly because the magic of the aura and of the fetish would be of no value whatsoever, if it were not valorised by rendering the traces of violence harmless. Following this theory, the things carry within themselves the conflicts in which they are embroiled, and through which they emerged. They are part of their sediment; they are petrified within the object. And this, I contend, works in parallel to the struggles that have been made impossible, which have turned curators and educators into human resources.

My suggestion is therefore not to disavow but instead take seriously the power of desire and the agency of things, which is obviously integral to their attractiveness and that of their encountering within the museum. What would happen if—within this fascinating transformation process—a carrier of potential agitation would lie within, that, as with Marx's tables, would make the relations turn and start to dance? Insofar as the things, and us too, embody sedimented struggles, can they too be brought to light in the museum? If the museum is then a place full of petrified conflicts, how do we awaken them—and how do they awaken us—with a kiss?

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The Object Effect:
What is the thing about
materials in exhibitions?
By Nora Sternfeld

EDITORS

Nora Sternfeld
and Henna Harri

EDITORIAL WORK

Darja Zaitsev

TRANSLATION

Erika Doucette

PROOFREADING

Katie Lenanton

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Laura Kokkonen

DEPARTMENT OF ART
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