



MATERIAL CULTURE

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CULTURE

- What is Culture?
- The arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively
- The customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group

Different Ideas About Culture

- Kopytoff argues that “culture serves the mind by imposing a collectively shared order upon the world **which, objectively, is totally heterogeneous** and presents an endless array of singular things”
- Reddy (1986) analysed the nuances of the cloth trade and how the tensions between ‘technical knowledge, taste, and political regulation’ played a role in the fall of the ancien régime. According to Reddy, **a distinctive culture means that the people would have been made aware of how their cultural choices mark them as either members or non-members of the community**
- Reddy notes: “to act coherently, persons must organize vast numbers of **detail according to simple, overarching categories and principles**” culture is a “profound structure of social thinking”

Conceptual connotations of Culture

- Paul DiMaggio (1997) noted that “thirty years ago, most sociologists viewed culture as a “seamless web”, unitary and internally coherent across groups and situations”
- Research in the 1990’s illustrated that culture was “fragmented”, “inconsistent” and that people used culture “strategically”
- DiMaggio argued that there was a clear division in how culture was approached, one school of thought perceived culture as “a latent variable” which was constituted of a structured network of abstract central themes which correlated with symbols, rituals and practices.
- This view is contrasted with thoughts outlined by Tilley (1992) and Swidler (1986) who presented culture as a “repertoire” or “toolkit”
- DiMaggio favoured: “a grab-bag of odds and ends: a pastiche of mediated representations”

MATERIAL CULTURE

- Material culture refers to the physical objects, resources, and spaces that people use to define their culture. These include homes, cities, schools, churches, synagogues, temples, mosques, offices, factories and plants, tools, means of production, goods and products, stores, and so forth. All of these physical aspects of a culture help to define its members' behaviors and perceptions.



Why do we do this?

- Through this study of things we can understand the priorities and preoccupations of people in the past.

Object or Thing

- Object or Thing?
- Carl Knappett: they are 'relational registers'
- Status of entity is partly contingent upon the perceiver.
- Culturally specific terms.
- Material Engagement Theorists argue that the when we classify something external to us as a thing, object or artifact there is an intellectual process taking place through either perturbation, objectification, intentional use or modification.
- An artifact is an object that has been qualified and quantified and likely to be understood in terms of value, where as a 'thing' is enigmatic it is likely to be the material that we understand least of all as a 'thing' is "ambiguous and undefined"



MET: Object or Thing?

- An object, according to Gosden, is “named and quantifiable” Thus, the classification thing, object, or artefact is described as “gradations or ontological moments in the cognitive life of things.”
- According to METs these ‘gradations’ are not internal, instead, they argued that when we engage with material culture the mind is extended beyond the body.
- The idea that the mind is not bounded to the body and can actually supervene on environmental events is based upon a philosophy of mind theory called externalism.

Commodities and Possessions

- Commodities function in a system of value that is also occupied by possessions and the two are interlinked in the network.
- 'Commodity': social process involved in the object; there is a 'buyer' and 'seller' and the object is the interface between these two social agents.
- 'Possession': object is unavailable to more than one individual or collective at that time.
- Possessions and commodities are both characterized by their ability or inability to engage in a system of exchange.
- Possessions are owned, commodities are exchanged, and an object can be either at any one time.

Things change?

- An heirloom painting (possession) might be sold (therefore, commodified) during a time of financial difficulty whilst a mickey mouse watch, formerly a commodity of the 1970's, might become a much-loved possession. What we choose to possess and what we choose to commodify changes with time and fashion.
- Kopytoff (1986) notes how exchange spheres: "shifts contextually and biographically as the originator's perspectives, affiliations and interests shift." Thus, an object's status is historically and culturally dependent.

Commodities

- How do we define a commodity in relation to these objects and possessions?
- Marx describes the commodity as: “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another.”
- Emphasizes that the commodity satisfies a ‘human want’.
- By acknowledging that an object’s existence relies upon human desire we can begin to understand how the object functions in a system of value.
- Miller writes: “consumption, like kinship, is simply a domain through which diverse projects of value are objectified.”

Commodities and Exchange

- The relationship between commodity and culture is detrimental to the exchange system; too many commodities and cultures become 'homogenized', too few and everything becomes singular, valuable and possession-like, and this inhibits exchange.

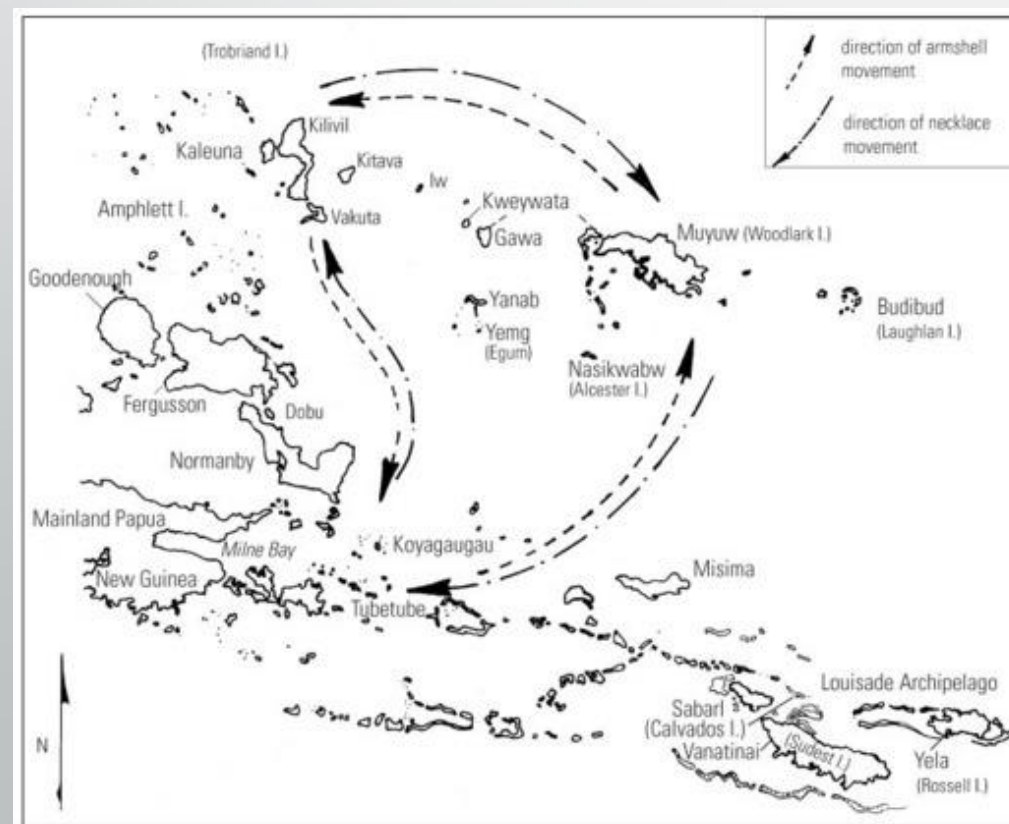
The Kula Exchange

- Papua New Guinea
- Malinowski: Why risk it all for a trinket?
- The Kula valuable accompanied by trade goods
- Melanesians

KULA

Kula Exchange

- The line between people and 'things'?
- People are 'partible': Marilyn Strathern 'Gender of the Gift'
- Person becomes metaphorically partible and multiple



Gift v Commodity

- Mauss uses Kula to highlight the difference between gifting and commodity exchange
- Reciprocity is implicit
- The objects embody the reputation of original owner

Weiner: Inalienable Possessions

- SUBJECTIVE VALUE
- Weiner's discussion of possessions emphasises the idea that some objects resonate with power which is attained from their original owner's
- According to Weiner there are some: "possessions that are imbued with the intrinsic and ineffable identities of their owners which are not easy to give away."
- objects are the 'material agents' in the reproduction of social relations



VALUE

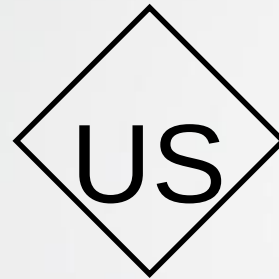
Mauss (1954): The Gift

- Emotional value
- When the producer is also the exchanger they feel like they are 'giving a part of themselves away'.
- Value based upon the 'spiritual essence' of the producer being imbued in the object.
- The Taonga of the Maori, Mauss discusses how the 'Taonga' (a gift) has 'hau' (spirit) and that the Taonga is "alive and often personified, and strives to bring to its original clan and homeland some equivalent to take its place"
- The Taonga binds the different clans into a social process of giving and receiving objects.

The Value of Objects

- Economic value: the objects ability to be sold in an open market.
- George Simmel: Value is never an inherent property of an object, but is a judgement made about them by subjects
- Marx: the object is a 'depository for value' that is based upon the human labour required to make the object.
 - "human labour, creates value, but is not itself value. It becomes value only in its congealed state, when embodied in the form of some object"
- Value is ascribed by society at large or it may be intensely personal and subjective.
- Bourdieu 'Taste' 1979 "value of an object may derive from the social status of its previous owners"
- We ascribe value, and this value can be in constant flux.

VALUE EXPLAINED



WE ASCRIBE VALUE

SPIRITUAL

OBJECT

AESTHETIC

EMOTIONAL

KNOWLEDGE

VALUE

VALUE IS CULTURALLY CONTINGENT

How can we locate 'value' in the archaeological record?

- Ascribed value(s) may be identified through an examination of how an individual or group treats or reacts to an object.
- By looking at the contexts in which these objects do or do not exist, move, and operate.
- We might assume that an object found in a grave was accorded a higher level of value than something found in midden.
- If a particular type of object is only found in the graves of certain individuals, then it is assumed that the object was given a particular associative value with these individuals (identity).
- By locating the effects produced, one can infer values ascribed to an object.

VALUE

MARX

US

Human Labour creates
economic value

MAUSS

US

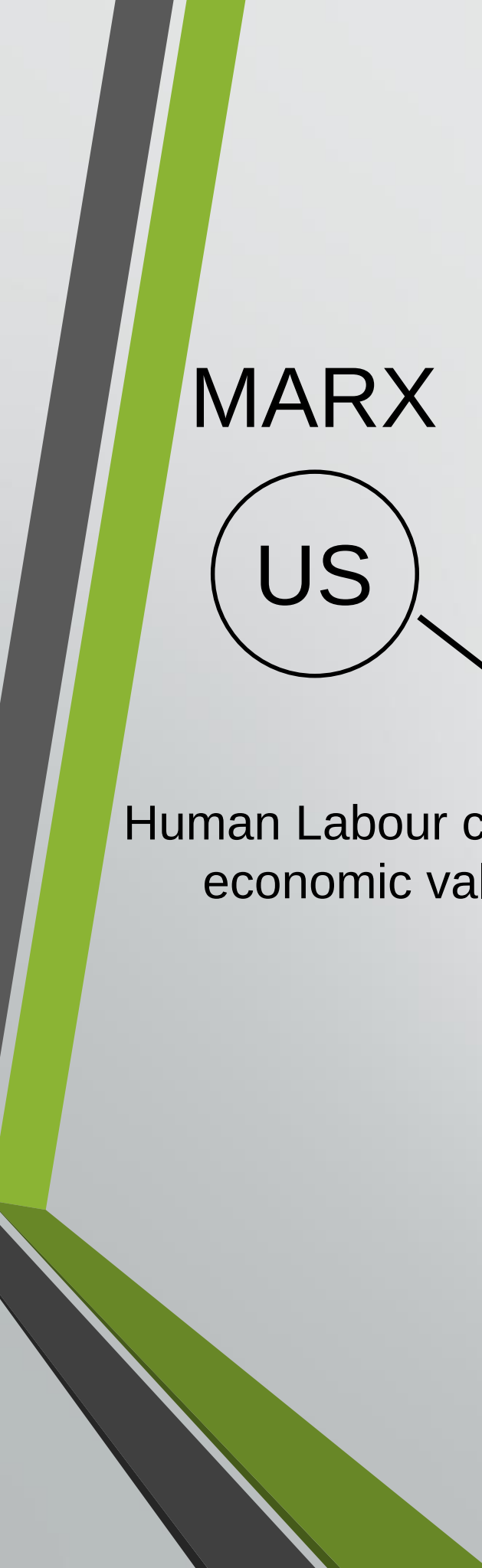
Spiritual essence of producer
imbued in object ∴ emotional value

Object

QUEEN

BOURDIEU

Value



Social Life of Things

- Objects are not fixed entities, they have trajectories, they have social lives.
- Arjun Appadurai's (1986) The Social Life of Things
- Social no longer only about interactions between persons, now between persons and things
- Appadurai's book pointed out the various unnoticed ways in which things, like persons, have social lives.
- Things have 'trajectories' commodified, de-commodified, taken through different regimes of value.
- Theoretically view: human actors encode things with significance.
- Methodological view: 'Things in motion' illuminate their human and social context.



BIOGRAPHY OF THE OBJECT

Kopytoff (1986): The Cultural Biography of Things

- Encouraged readers to ask the same questions of a things as they would a person.
- Values given to objects change over time.
- Things go through a series of transformations:
 - Gift to commodity to inalienable possession.
 - We invest certain aspects of our own biographies in things.
 - Objects may have multiple biographies: cultural, social, economic.

What would a cultural biography of the object account for?

- Look at the object as a culturally constructed entity.
- Look at cultural-specific meanings endowed in the object
- How it became classified and re-classified into culturally constituted categories.

Different Biographies

Cultural

Social

Economic

My Little Pony



Biography of the Object

- Gosden and Marshall (1999): Cultural Biography of Objects.
- People and things have mutual biographies that unfold in culturally specific ways.
- Objects begin in one cultural context and shift into new circumstances.
- Biographies are multiple: histories are composed of shifts of context and perspective.
- Biography of the object leads us to think comparatively about how objects accumulate meaning and the changing effects these have on people and events.
- Hoskins (1998): Biographical Objects
- The object is not only a metaphor for the self but a pivot for reflexivity and introspection, a tool for autobiographic elaboration, a way of knowing oneself through things.

Actor Network Theory

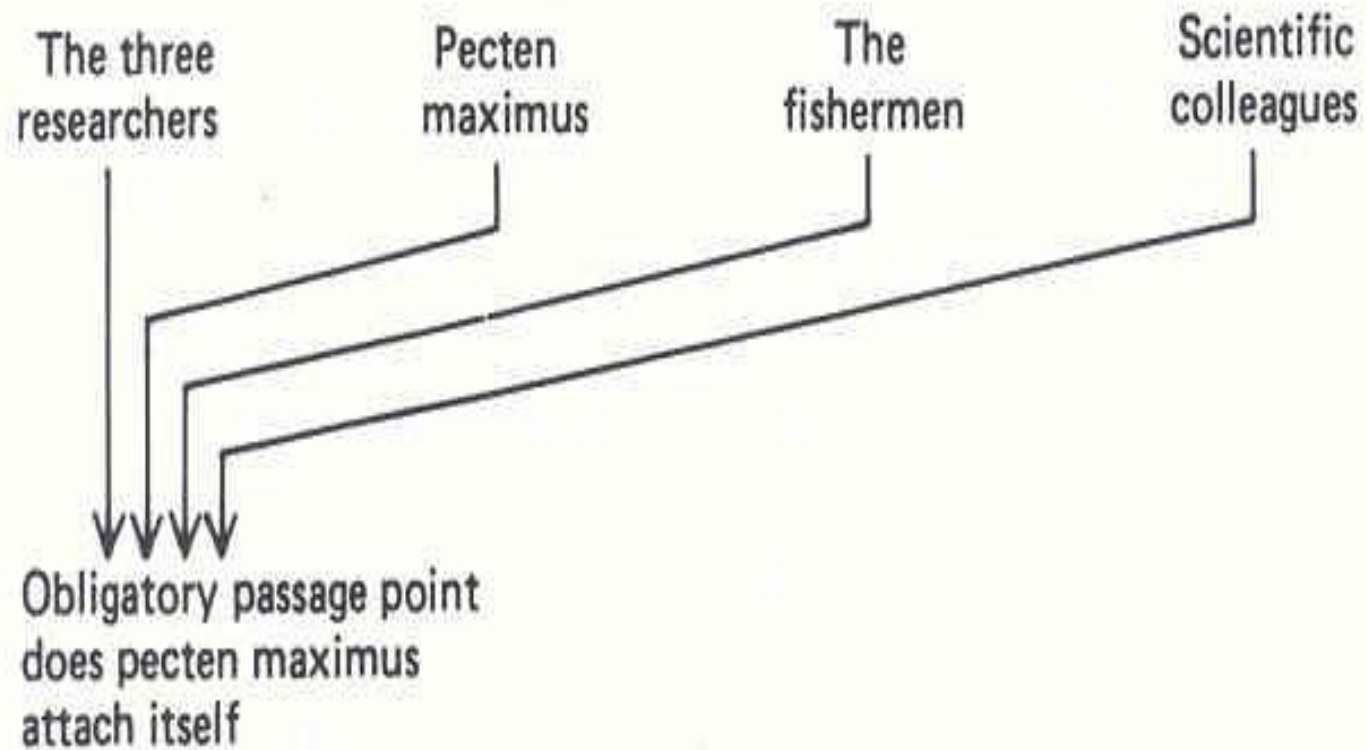


Figure 1

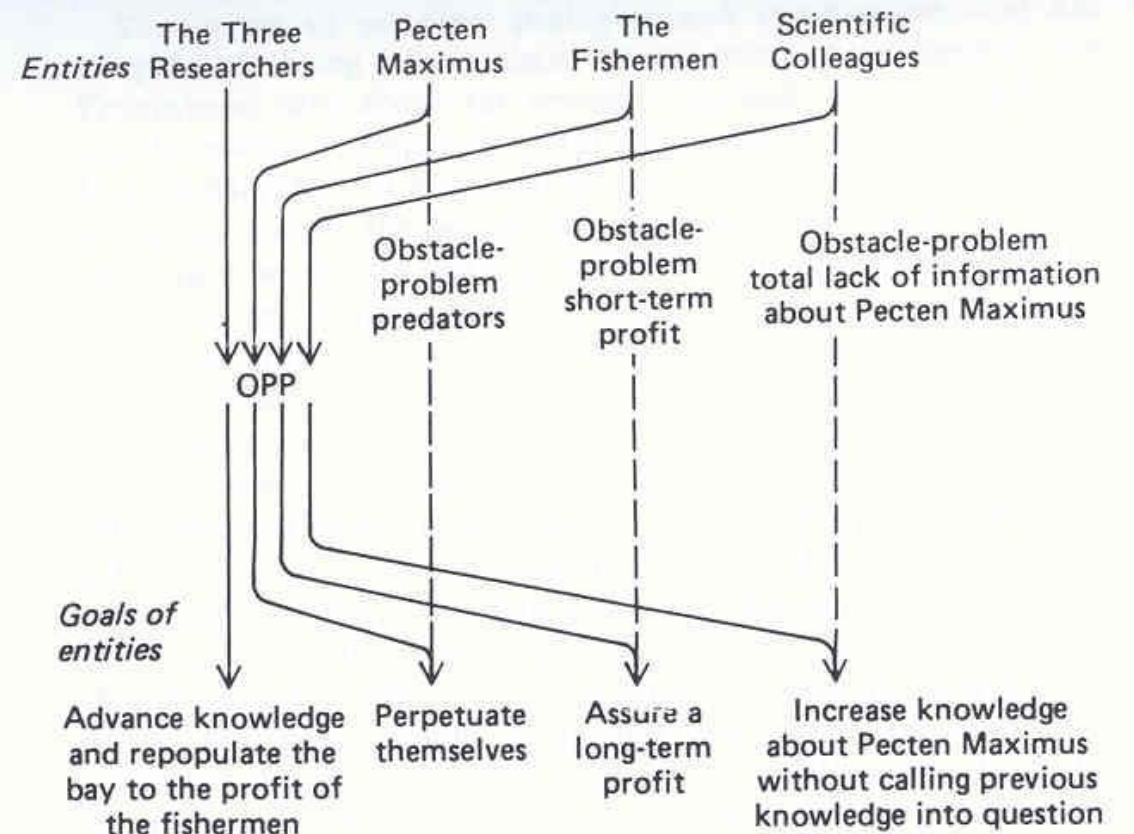


Figure 2

HOW ACTIONS HAPPEN

UNIQUE TO ANT

- Bruno Latour: Symmetry between people and Things
- Fixed essentialist dualisms: a separate object world?

Cognitive Archaeology



Cognitive Archaeology

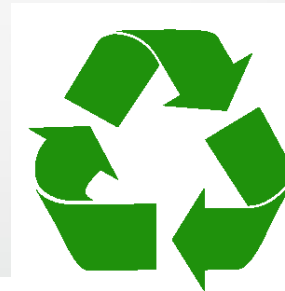
- Extended Mind: We think through things
- Renfrew: Material Engagement
- Malafouris and Renfrew: “material culture shapes the manner in which people act, perceive and think. As a consequence, it is becoming of paramount importance to come up with new cross-disciplinary synergies, capable of transforming our understanding of the relation and co-evolution of brains, bodies and things.”
- Objects invested with the capability to create or enhance cognitive processes are described as ‘active’ and Malafouris and Renfrew argued that there was “action potential” in the relationship between mind and object and that this interaction could “shape us”.

How we engage with 'things': Carl Knappett

- The agent possesses cultural information of actual function of this form of post box.
- This understanding of function may not be accessible from its physical form alone.
- Derives from numerous associations held by the agent



Objects and Persons are linked



AGENCY

- Agency is about the acts or actions of an agent.
- These actions can be:
 - Unconscious/involuntarily behaviour
 - Purposeful or goal directed
 - Intentional action
- Actions of self-consciously active human agents

Gell: Agency of the Object

- Art objects are not extensions of human agency, instead they have have their own form of agency because they function in a network of people and things: “I am more concerned with the kind of second-class agency which artifacts acquire once they become enmeshed in a texture of social relationships”
- Objects become a part of a ‘network of ‘primary’ intentional agents in their ‘secondary’ artifactual forms’.
- The object’s agency is more than an extension of human agency because they have the potential to impact on people who were never part of their planned biography.
- Gell’s description of the agency of artworks is even more likened to a discussion of personhood, according to Gell: artworks “come in families, lineages, tribes, whole populations, just like people. They have relations with one another as well as with the people who create and circulate them as individual objects”.

Gell: Agency of Objects

- Key text: Alfred Gell (1998), *Art and Agency: An anthropological theory*, Oxford University Press.
- Gell's theory is based upon the notion that someone becomes an agent when they disturb the causal milieu in such a way as can only be attributed to their own agency.
- Agency is realised 'ex post facto'.
- Therefore, 'things' as well as people have agency.
- The immediate other in a social relationship need not be a human being.

The Artist's Oeuvre



'Myra' 1995



'Myra', Marcus Harvey, 1995

Art critic Richard Cork:
"the sense of menace
becomes overwhelming"

- ◉ Attacks force Hindley portrait to be removed

- ◉ Times, The (London, England) - Friday, September 19, 1997

- ◉ Author: Dalya Alberge, Arts Correspondent

- ◉ THE controversial **portrait** of the Moors murderer Myra Hindley in the Royal Academy of Arts Sensation exhibition has had to be removed from display **after being attacked and damaged by two protesters** when the show opened yesterday.

The painting, Marcus Harvey's Myra, which could take up to a week to restore, **was withdrawn** from the exhibition temporarily last night as experts assessed the damage.

The first incident occurred **when a man walked into the gallery with two small canisters containing red and blue Indian ink. He threw them at the portrait and was arrested.**

About an hour later, a second man was taken into custody after **four eggs were thrown.** "We hope to return the painting to the exhibition within a week. It depends entirely on the **assessment provided by our conservators,**" a spokesman said.

The academy sent out tea and sandwiches to protesters and offered her the chance to be shown around the exhibition by David Gordon, the secretary. Mrs Johnson refused.

James Robinson, the academy's deputy secretary, said he regretted her decision, but added: "We've had **loads of letters** from academicians. Not all are against it."

Protesters outside the show included members of Mothers Against Murder and Aggression. Using a loudhailer, they **urged visitors** not to "waste Pounds 7" on a ticket.

Among yesterday's visitors, the actor and singer Ian Dury said it was clearly not intended to be about pleasure. **Some 200,000 people are expected to visit the exhibition** over the next few weeks.

Animated Commodities: The Northern Japanese Bride Doll

- Reject object as an inanimate thing.
- Objects can instigate causal events
- Animated commodities, to a degree, are considered sentient forms that can embody the soul of another being or God.
- Schattschneider (2001) identified complex relationships between families and dolls in which commodities were adopted and embraced in mortuary practices in the Far East.
- Schattschneider notes that the practice emerged during World War II when a family would buy a doll to commemorate the death of a child. The doll becomes “an animated commodity, neither conventionally dead nor living, the doll effectively fixes and grounds the restless child spirit, providing a tangible home that may be visited periodically by the bereaved living.”

Animated commodities

- She identified a similar practice in China where the dolls become more than mementos of the former child, but were actually used to facilitate unions between families and gain financial support through the union of two dolls of the opposite sex which housed the dead spirits of the youths, and this spiritual union created extended family in the physical.
- In the examples she studied in the Korean, Taiwanese, and Okinawan locales, a spirit marriage took place between a doll and a living person and the living 'spouse' received financial aid from the family of the deceased.
- Illustrate complicated relationships that can form between humans and objects
- Gell's notion of agency as a plausible means of analysing and understanding real relationships that can form between objects and human beings.

Summary

- Object, artefact, commodity or thing?
- Biography or agency?
- Are you being shaped by 'things'?
- How do you identify value? Marxian?